Local TV news: Sharing agreements mean less original content and possible monopoly violations

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University of Delaware professor Danilo Yanich analyzed the content of newscasts in eight American media markets. Credit: University of Delaware

Watching local TV news can lead to déjà vu. During the past decade, a growing number of local television stations have entered into agreements together – to share video footage, reporters, anchors and even full newscasts. A new report by the University of Delaware's Center for Community Research and Service looks at the impact of these possibly monopolistic agreements on local media markets and on the principles the federal government uses to regulate the broadcast industry: diversity, competition and localism.

Danilo Yanich, author of the report and associate professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration, filed his findings with the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC is in the process of making decisions about media ownership and consolidation. Yanich says he hopes what he found will inform the federal body's decisions.

Yanich and his students conducted a content analysis of newscasts from eight American television markets. In each market, at least one sharing agreement exists. These agreements are known, depending on their conditions, as shared services (SSA) agreements, local marketing/ management (LMA) agreements or local news sharing (LNS) agreements. Purportedly, they help relieve some of the economic burdens shouldered by local stations in gathering and presenting news content.

Yanich found the agreements "had a profound effect on the local news broadcasts in the markets," resulting in the broadcast of "a sizable proportion of stories on a combination of their stations."

Service agreements have resulted in a loss of diversity and localism at local news operations and have eliminated quality jobs, says Jim Joyce, president of the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians-CWA, which represents about 8,000 workers at local and national television operations. The CWA partially commissioned the report.

Combining resources through these agreements resulted in a significant number of stations in the same markets using the same anchors, reporters, scripts and graphics.

In Denver, for example, stations with service agreements shared the same script and graphics about two-thirds of the time. In Peoria, Ill., consumers, despite having five local news stations, were viewing identical stories on several channels.

The combination of newsrooms also resulted in job losses. In Peoria, 30 employees were laid off and 16 were transferred to another station within the market.

"Local television news still holds a pre-eminent position as a news source for the public," Yanich says. He added that while the movement toward shared services agreements undoubtedly will continue, stations retain public interest responsibilities.

More information: Read the full report: www.udel.edu/ocm/pdf/DYanichSS … NALReport-102411.pdf

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