

Chicago Tonight: Elites, Affluence, and Advertising

A report by Chicago Media Action

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
<i>Communication in a Democratic Society</i>	6
I. Chicago Tonight and PBS History.....	7
<i>PBS – Origins and Funding Structure</i>	7
<i>The Funding Structure</i>	9
<i>WTTW and Chicago Tonight</i>	12
II. Quantitative Findings	16
<i>Methods</i>	16
<i>The Story Topics: News vs. Entertainment</i>	17
<i>Guest Characteristics</i>	19
<i>Race</i>	19
<i>Racial diversity across all story topics</i>	20
<i>Gender</i>	23
<i>Gender diversity across story topics:</i>	24
<i>Occupation</i>	25
<i>Occupational Diversity Across Story Topics</i>	28
- <i>The Public: Marginalized on Public and Commercial Television</i>	28
III. Qualitative Findings	32
<i>The need for a qualitative analysis</i>	32
<i>Good News</i>	33
<i>Hypercommercialism</i>	34
<i>Promotion as Content, Targeting the Affluent</i>	37
<i>War</i>	43
<i>Elections</i>	45
Conclusion	48
Suggestions For Action.....	49

Executive Summary

This study aims to expand the debate over how well public TV is serving the public interest. Congress established the Public Broadcasting System in 1967 as “a forum for controversy and debate,”¹ a “responsive...expression of diversity and excellence... [An] alternative...that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities.”² Over three decades later, our research finds that public TV in Chicago still falls far short of fulfilling these important democratic goals.

The range of our study covers twenty episodes of *Chicago Tonight* – the flagship news program of Chicago’s main PBS affiliate, WTTW – aired in September 2003, as well as ten episodes between January 27 and February 10, 2004.

Our study found that 45.45% of the stories covered on *Chicago Tonight* concerned entertainment or lifestyles, an average of over eleven stories per week. Combining that with sports stories (10.39%) shows that a majority of all stories carried by the show (55.84%) were not news at all. The second most covered topic was local/city politics/elections at 11.04% or an average of 2.8 stories per week.

The disparity between news and entertainment is striking: entertainment stories were 68% more frequently covered than business/economy, local/city politics/elections, Illinois politics/elections, national politics/elections, crime, and media *combined*.

In terms of who is allowed to speak, *Chicago Tonight* guests are overwhelmingly white, male and affiliated with major corporations. In other words, *Chicago Tonight* showcases the same elites whose voices already dominate the mainstream commercial news media. Over 79% of all guests appearing on *Chicago Tonight* during our study were white. White guests outnumber all other guests combined by a ratio of almost 4 to 1. Only 12% of the guests were African American and just under 3% were Latino. Roughly 1.4% of the guests were Asian or Asian Americans, 1% were Arab. In contrast, the Chicago Metropolitan Area population is 19.2% African American, 17.4% Hispanic, 4.7 % Asian, and 1.9% Arabic. While white guests appeared on *Chicago Tonight* more frequently than do whites in the larger community, guests from all other races appeared at a rate far below their actual proportion of the community.³

The racial disparity indicated by the overall figures is carried through all categories of story topics. In all categories of story topics, whites dominated.

- Only white guests were chosen to speak on business and economic topics.
- White guests constituted over 90% of all guests chosen to speak on topics of national politics and elections.

¹ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York, Bental, 1967.

² Public Broadcasting Act, Subpart D – Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Sec. 396. [47 U.S.C. 396]

³ Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2; Office of the Municipal Reference Collection, Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington Library, Chicago, Illinois.

The largest proportion of *Chicago Tonight* guests (27.9%) were professionals from the media industry, the overwhelming majority employed by large media corporations. This is not a surprise. According to WTTW CEO Dan Schmidt, *Chicago Tonight*, “is populated by journalists, media professionals who really believe passionately in the status quo.”⁴

The fact that the general public made up 16.5% of all guests, ranking as the third most often represented group, is misleading unless one considers that the majority of these appearances were limited to the innocuous topics of entertainment, sports, and weather. Excluding the topics of sports, entertainment, and weather, the percentage of guests from the public slips to 6.5%, ranking fifth, behind professional media, government officials, other professionals, and corporate representatives.

The public was allowed no voice on business/economic news, crime, national politics/elections, media stories, or even religion.

Approximately 50% of all guests were directly or indirectly representatives of corporations or the institutions of academy or government. Adding in non-media professionals, representatives from elite social segments constituted almost 73% of all guests.

Guests articulating interests and perspectives from outside the political establishment or corporate institutions were almost non-existent. Public interest representatives made up only 1.9% of sources, citizen activists were 0.7% of sources, and organized labor was a mere 0.5% of sources, for a combined total of 3.1%.

On stories about business or the economy, 90.48% of sources were corporate representatives or members of the professional media; thus, elite perspectives enjoyed a virtual monopoly over discourse on this topic of tremendous impact for all viewers.

The use of *Chicago Tonight* content to promote corporations, products, or other WTTW programs was a recurring pattern throughout the episodes we studied. In almost all cases, the beneficiary of this promotional coverage was industry or corporations. Some *Chicago Tonight* segments were unbalanced in a way that directly favored entities financially connected to WTTW, indicating at least the appearance of conflict of interest.

For example, The Tribune Company is an advertiser on *Chicago Tonight*. During the study period, in reporting on an issue of tremendous financial importance to The Tribune Company – changes to Federal Communication Commission rules on media ownership – *Chicago Tonight* chose only one source for reporting and analysis on the FCC: a reporter employed by *The Chicago Tribune*, David Griesing.

Across the four segments that specifically addressed the topic of war, the sources chosen to speak on *Chicago Tonight* were all white, none of whom were from citizen activist or public interest groups.

⁴ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

Worse still, in a 9/11/03 segment *Chicago Tonight* failed to disclose to viewers that all three guests (Clinton Defense Secretary William Cohen, former Sen. George Mitchell, and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Joseph Ralston) represent clients in the defense industry,⁵ and boast of having “Advised and assisted U.S. company in working with U.S. Government officials and the Coalition Provisional Authority in securing major contract related to Iraq reconstruction.”⁶ These are not “objective” sources, but rather they are self-described “advocates”⁷ working for the very corporations directly benefiting from both the US occupation of Iraq and US war policy generally.

These examples also demonstrate another pattern found on *Chicago Tonight* programming. Corporate and government elites were given a forum insulated from critics and the challenging analysis such sources would bring to the discourse.

By even the most charitable measure, *Chicago Tonight* fails to provide a meaningful alternative to the mainstream commercial TV news. Its elite-dominated guest list, its fixation with entertainment and sports, its heavy use of content designed to promote underwriters, and its reliance on corporate journalists all indicate that the show shares the basic worldview of its commercial counterparts. Far from being the forum for underrepresented voices and viewpoints that Congress envisioned public TV would be, WTTW’s signature public affairs program is in many ways indistinguishable from the news shows carried on commercial TV stations.

⁵ <http://www.cohengroup.net/clients.html>; See also http://www.piperrudnick.com/Aerospace_and_Defense

⁶ <http://www.cohengroup.net/success.html>

⁷ “Piper Rudnick’s and The Cohen Group’s joint Iraq Task Force...is recognized in numerous publications as one of the most influential advocates in the nation’s capital.”
http://www.piperrudnick.com/Iraq_Reconstruction

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Introduction

Our intention for this study is to expand the debate over how well public TV is serving the public interest. Congress established the Public Broadcasting System in 1967 in order to create “a forum for controversy and debate,”⁸ a “responsive...expression of diversity and excellence... [An] alternative...that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities.”⁹

But close to four decades later, “public” TV in this country has still failed to live up to these goals. Our study of the topics covered, sources used and views aired on PBS affiliate WTTW’s flagship public affairs program, *Chicago Tonight*, finds that the show consistently caters to the interests of advertisers, underwriters, and the white affluent Chicagoans whom they seek to reach, while ignoring news and perspectives of interest to other constituencies. Indeed, our study finds that, far from providing a genuine alternative to the local TV news shows aired on commercial stations, *Chicago Tonight* tends to cover the same sorts of stories, privileges the same elite perspectives and relies on the same elite opinion makers as it’s commercial counterparts.

The range of our study covers twenty episodes aired in September 2003, as well as ten episodes between 1/27/04 – 2/10/04. Because the sample includes a full four weeks of *consecutive* programming we are able to account both for unpredictable segments driven by breaking news as well as regular segments planned in advance by producers. This should allow a broad documentation of producer’s efforts to account for diversity and balance across time. Because we have supplemented this four-week sample with an additional two-week sample taken four months later, we have minimized any temporary imbalance arising from a unique news cycle.

The study is divided into three inter-related sections.

First, we offer key facts on the history of PBS/WTTW and *Chicago Tonight*. Second, we apply established quantitative methods to examine the demographic characteristics of guests and story topics presented by *Chicago Tonight* during the study period. This quantitative analysis offers an empirical view into the demographic and ideological diversity of the sources *Chicago Tonight* relies on to tell its stories.

The third section of the study is a qualitative analysis of the contents of the actual discourse. Qualitative analysis is more vulnerable to subjective perspective, but is an essential means to examine the nuances in communication that would otherwise be lost. In other words, we offer solid data revealing which social segments are represented and served by *Chicago Tonight* and – in

⁸ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York, Bental, 1967.

⁹ Public Broadcasting Act, Subpart D – Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Sec. 396. [47 U.S.C. 396]

Section IV, “Suggestions for Action” – we present ways to address these shortcomings.

Recalling that the public owns the broadcast airwaves, we hope that the information documented in this study is helpful to the viewers of WTTW in identifying the forces that shape the programs produced with their money and carried on their airwaves.

Communication in a Democratic Society

Communication matters. Who speaks, and who does not, matters in a democratic discourse.

US Supreme Court Justice Brandeis wrote in his concurrence in *Whitney v. California*, “Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the State was to make men free to develop their faculties; . . . that the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people; that public discussion is a political duty; and that this should be a fundamental principle of American government.”¹⁰

Because television is the number one source of information for most Americans,¹¹ the perspectives and analysis offered by TV are the most likely source for citizens to encounter opinions and analysis on topics beyond their personal experience.

Professors David Croteau and Williams Hoynes, in one of their many studies on sources in public and commercial media, wrote, “If citizens are to be active participants in the democratic process, they need information from a wide range of sources, from a wide range of people and events.”¹²

To adequately serve the interests of a democratic society, the television discourse must include the perspectives of the varied interests across that society. As the Supreme Court has ruled, “assuring that the public has access to a multiplicity of information sources is governmental purpose of the highest order, for it promotes values central to the First Amendment.”¹³

For this very reason, Mark Cooper, Director of Research at the Center for Internet & Society at Stanford Law School writes, “it is not acceptable for citizens to be turned off by the poor quality of civic discourse, and then have no comparable alternative to which they can turn.”¹⁴

The problem is that commercial media simply does not offer the range and depth of analysis necessary to support an informed citizenry. According to a comprehensive 2001 study, “Network news demonstrated a clear tendency to showcase the opinions of the most powerful political and economic actors, while giving limited access to those voices that would be most likely to challenge

¹⁰ Cited in Mark Cooper, *Media Ownership and Democracy in the Digital Information Age - Promoting Diversity with First Amendment Principles and Market Structure Analysis*, Center for Internet & Society, Stanford Law School, 2003. (Hereafter Cooper, 2003). P. 14

¹¹ Nielsen, *Consumer Survey on Media Usage*, Federal Communications Commission, Media Ownership Working Group, September 2002. Cited in Cooper, p. 119; “How Americans Get Their News,” Gallup Poll, December 31, 2002

¹² Cited in David Croteau and William Hoynes, *By Invitation Only How The Media Limit Political Debate*, Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine, 1994. (Hereafter Croteau and Hoynes, 1994) p. 21.

¹³ *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1, 20 (1945). Cited in Cooper 2003, p. 21.

¹⁴ Cooper 2003, p14

them.”¹⁵ Making specific who these “powerful political and economic actors” are, the study found that “source selection favored the elite interests that the corporate owners of these shows depend on for advertising revenue, regulatory support and access to information.”¹⁶

PBS was specifically founded to provide an alternative to the commercial media system. In 1967, the Carnegie Commission determined the founding mission for PBS: “to provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard,” “to provide a forum for controversy and debate,” and “to help us see America whole, in all its diversity.”¹⁷

The empirical evidence we have gathered regarding *Chicago Tonight* indicates that, far from attaining or even approaching these goals, these same “elite interests” dominate programming while the interests of other groups are rarely, if at all, addressed.

I. Chicago Tonight and PBS History

PBS – Origins and Funding Structure

The problems observed on *Chicago Tonight* are symptomatic of problems throughout PBS – problems resulting from a funding structure that fails to provide funds sufficient for operation, blocks journalistic independence, and lacks democratic accountability. If the goal is to create the conditions needed for democracy then we must have programming that informs the citizenry and helps the voice of the powerless to be heard beside the powerful. It is the sources of funding that will determine whether such programming will be allowed to exist in anything more than name alone.

In most mainstream analysis of Chicago public broadcasting this understanding is obscured behind the prior assumption that ratings are the “natural” means of measuring service and viability. As described in one of the more in-depth articles of recent Chicago press, “Public television exists to provide programming that is deemed important and beneficial to society but that might not otherwise survive in a commercial market. Of course, that’s no excuse for putting on a broadcast few care to watch.”¹⁸ By this analysis, if few care to watch programs that empower them politically, then there is no need to broadcast any such programs. Of course, once such programs are eliminated from the supply there is no way to gauge any future demand. The analysis generally displayed in the commercial press fails to acknowledge the “crucial tension that lies between the role of the media as profit-maximizing commercial organizations and the need for media to provide the basis for informed self government”¹⁹ – instead the only measure for survival is the corporate profit

¹⁵ Media Tenor, Ltd. *Power Sources*, 2002. Commissioned by FAIR.

http://www.fair.org/extra/0205/power_sources.html

¹⁶ Media Tenor, Ltd. *Power Sources*, 2002. Commissioned by FAIR.

¹⁷ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York, Bental, 1967.

¹⁸ *Chicago Magazine*, 10/2002

¹⁹ Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media – US Communication Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press, New York, 2004. (Hereafter: McChesney, 2004). p. 17

margin. In this way, the demands of democracy become subordinated to the demands of the market.

In the standard commercial analysis, market rule is seen as “natural” and overriding: requirements for informed self-government are “no excuse” for low ratings. Subjecting public broadcasting to market discipline is thus also natural and inevitable. In accepting commercial principles as sufficient for determining programming, the demise of WTTW as a noncommercial channel is also inevitable.

Far more primary than ratings, however, it is government policy choices favoring the commercial environment that overwhelmingly determine PBS content, which viewers will watch PBS programs, and even if public broadcasting will be allowed to survive this latest phase of media consolidation.

In contrast to the market discipline required of PBS, the systems of telephone, television, radio, print media, and internet have all developed from direct government promotion. According to Professor Timothy Cook, “far from being free from government involvement and intervention, the evolution of the American news media have always been and continues to be tied to various versions of political sponsorship, subsidization, and protection.”²⁰ This direct form of government subsidy extends all the way back to the Postal Act of 1792, which provided heavily discounted postal rates to newspapers, thereby encouraging the rise of a reading public.²¹

The principle supporting such government action is that “Active promotion is necessary for the universal distribution of public information to competent citizens.”²² This understanding is conveniently absent in the commercial analysis of public broadcasting in the US. With this fundamental democratic component made visible, the real situation can now be seen. Lack of sufficient public funding makes PBS dependent upon corporate funding; because PBS is dependent upon corporate funding, programming must appeal to the audiences required by corporate advertisers and underwriters.

The audience sought by advertisers does not encompass the broad diversity of America, but rather merely those who have the money to buy the products and services of underwriters. As advertising scholar Sut Jhally explained nearly twenty years ago, “The drawback of the mass audience for broadcasting is usually thought to be that the programme may attract a mass audience without necessarily attracting a mass *market* for certain commodities.”²³ This is undoubtedly a powerful force behind the scenes at PBS. As the Southern California Public Television alliance promised to advertisers, “These premium consumers are affluent...while many consumers may want to buy your products or services, the PBS audience is most likely to have the necessary purchasing power to do so....”²⁴

²⁰ Timothy Cook, *Governing with the News*, University of Chicago Press, 1998. p. 14

²¹ Timothy Cook, *Governing with the News*, University of Chicago Press, 1998. p. 37

²² McChesney, 2004. p. 29

²³ Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising*, Routledge Press, New York, 1990. p. 91. Italics original.

²⁴ KOCE-KOVE, “Audience Data & Demographics,” <http://www.ptvalliance.org/auddata.html>

A public broadcasting system funded by corporate largesse and advertising clearly does not and will not serve the interests of the public. The solution for PBS must include sufficient funding that is also independent of governmental or corporate restriction.

Supporting evidence is provided by long time PBS insiders, such as producer Peter McGhee, who described the lack of a “well and securely financed public broadcasting system” as a “huge disadvantage” in the ability of PBS programmers to be “a more powerful voice as an alternative to commercial television.”²⁵ Even former WTTW CEO Bill McCarter’s argument *in favor* of advertising on PBS is based on the premise that there is a “flaw in the funding” which advertising revenue would solve.²⁶

If, as Robert McChesney and others have concluded, “the funding system is the primary culprit,”²⁷ then we can choose to change it. Altering the funding policy for PBS so as to provide sufficient long term funding could create the conditions for a truly independent public broadcasting system serving all Americans – not just those preferred by advertisers. *Placing funding outside of the yearly appropriations process would increase independence from the manipulations of politicians. Providing funds actually sufficient for PBS operations would increase independence from the manipulations of corporations.*

Many have proposed ways of creating the structure of independent non-corporate funding essential for independent broadcasting. Despite or perhaps because these proposals would quite likely create a truly independent communication channel, they continue to be overlooked by policymakers. (See Section IV, “Suggestions for Action.”)

The Funding Structure

The current funding structure for public broadcasting in the United States was formalized in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

The language of the legislation itself declares the CPB a “nongovernmental corporation” that is “not to be an agency or establishment of the United States government.”²⁸ This legislation followed the famous report from the Carnegie Commission that both strongly recommended the creation of a national public broadcasting system and defined the PBS mission. The Carnegie Commission report specifically rejected funding through “the ordinary budgeting and appropriations procedure followed by the government” stating that such a process was “not consonant with the degree of independence essential to Public Television.”²⁹ The policy chosen by lawmakers, however, rejected this

²⁵ “Q and A with Peter McGhee,” *Current*, 8/19/02. <http://www.current.org/people/peop0215mcghee2.html>

²⁶ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

²⁷ Robert McChesney, cited in James Ledbetter, *Made Possible By... The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States*, Verso, New York, 1997. (Hereafter: LedBetter, 1997) p. 4

²⁸ Roger Smith, *The Other Face of Public TV – Censoring the American Dream*, Algora, New York, 2002. (Hereafter: Smith, 2002). p. 87

²⁹ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York, Bental, 1967. Cited in Ledbetter, 1997, p. 26

“essential” recommendation and provided funding through the yearly federal appropriations process.

As retired PBS executive Roger Smith concludes, “Self sufficiency for PBS was not to be.” Smith – a veteran of WGBH, WNET, and WTTW – writes, “The competitive use of the appropriation and authorizations process of the legislative and executive branches demanded, over time, ideological submissiveness from Public Broadcasting.”³⁰

Reserving all seats on the nine-member Corporation for Public Broadcasting board to be presidential – therefore political – appointments, has ensured doctrinal discipline on public broadcasting channels.³¹ The first President of the CPB was Frank Pace “who had no broadcasting or media experience, but was Secretary of War from 1950-1953...and who also served as chief executive officer of General Dynamics, a major manufacturer of military fighter planes and bombers.”³² Recent CPB presidents include Robert Coonrod, who spent 25 years working in US overseas propaganda agencies USIA and VOA, while his predecessor, Richard Carlson, was the Director of those same agencies.³³ The political use of appointments to manipulate programming content continues to this day. In December 2003, President Bush appointed to the CPB board two longtime Republican supporters. According to *Common Cause*, “Cheryl Halpern and Gay Hart Gaines and their respective families have contributed more than \$816,000 to Republican causes over the past 14 years.”³⁴ Halpern, a critic of Bill Moyers’ *Now* program, seeks to allow CPB trustees to directly intervene in program content.³⁵

Corporate underwriting, often presented as a solution to the pressures on PBS from government, directly shapes content according to its own interests. Corporate representatives have been quite open about their intentions in funding public broadcasting. We have a wealth of primary source information from public television stations and underwriters themselves describing the goals and techniques employed by corporations to shape public broadcasting to their own needs.

For instance, Herb Schmertz – Mobil’s vice-president for public affairs – pioneered a method to reach audiences that had become immune to the usual sales approach. According to Schmertz, the notion is to enhance the image of one’s company and product by associating it with the cultural values of that ‘hard to reach’ PBS audience who avoid (or are even hostile to) traditional advertising. Thus, “the underwriter purchases an image of prestige and civic mindedness by being associated with the ‘good cause,’ or the content of public broadcasting – the donation is a form of reputation laundering.”³⁶ In addition, “the underwriting

³⁰ Smith, 2002. p. 87

³¹ This too was a rejection of Carnegie Commission recommendations. *Smith, 2002. p. 87.*

³² One of Pace’s first projects was “how public television might be used for riot control.” Erik Barnouw, *The Tube of Plenty, The Evolution of American Television*, p. 399, cited in Ledbetter p. 30.

³³ *Smith, 2002. p. 88*

³⁴ *Common Cause*, press release, 12/23/2003

³⁵ *Common Cause*, press release, 12/23/2003

³⁶ Ledbetter, p. 142

grant carries with it the clout to influence debate and to help guide the terms used by America's policymaking elite."³⁷

In the 1970's, for example, Congressional hearings disclosed that oil corporations and other multinationals "had lavished millions of dollars in bribes to political parties in Italy, Canada, Bolivia, and South Korea." At that same time, millions of dollars in Mobil donations to PBS were regularly associating the company with high quality cultural programming such as "Masterpiece Theater."³⁸ Mobil executives understandably described the beneficial PR use of public broadcasting as a "halo effect."³⁹

The PR drives motivating corporate underwriting is openly acknowledged in communications from public television stations to potential advertisers. For example, on a website created especially for underwriters by California PBS affiliates KOCE and KOVE, the following question is posed: "Why invest your advertising dollars in public television?" The answer is: "Halo Effect of Positive Brand Association." Also offered are graphs declaring, "93% of PBS viewers believe that PBS sponsors perform a public service."⁴⁰

The arrangement is clear and acknowledged by all parties. As indicated by underwriter testimonials on a Georgia Public Television website, PBS advertisers seek "to reach the right audience at the right time with the right message," to "bond with the heart of our target demographics – clients who are difficult to reach with traditional advertising."⁴¹ Public television programmers, for their part, pledge to advertisers a "message environment"⁴² that is "safe civilizing and credible"⁴³ in order to provide to advertisers an affluent and elite audience. "WTTW's Prime Time Viewers are Affluent, Cultured and Educated," was how WTTW promoted their viewers in a communication package for underwriters obtained by CMA.⁴⁴

Wealthy viewers garner a higher advertising rate. "Advertisers pay less for programs that garner non-white audiences, in a widely acknowledged policy called 'discounting.' Some flatly refuse to buy ads on stations or shows that reach primarily non-white audiences, the so-called 'no urban/no Spanish dictate.'" ⁴⁵ Summing up this practice in an internal memo, media representation firm Katz Media Group urged their staff against placing ads on "urban" stations, because businesses want "prospects, not suspects."⁴⁶

Clearly, the goals of advertisers are in opposition to the notion of "universal service" that PBS is charged with providing - advertisers do not want

³⁷ Ledbetter, p. 142

³⁸ Mintz and Cohen, *Power Inc.* Cited in Ledbetter p. 146.

³⁹ Ledbetter, p. 145

⁴⁰ Stations KOCE and KOVE make these claims and more on their underwriter oriented website at:

<http://www.ptvalliance.org/why.html>

⁴¹ <http://www.gpb.org/gpb/underwriting/tour/page7.asp>

⁴² <http://www.ptvalliance.org/why.html>

⁴³ <http://www.ptvalliance.org/auddata.html>

⁴⁴ WTTW Promotion Kit for Advertisers. Document labeled, "092303_influential_affluent". Attached in Appendix 12.

⁴⁵ "Anything but Racism," *Extra!* January/February 2000.

⁴⁶ "Anything but Racism," *Extra!* January/February 2000, citing *Black Enterprise*, 7/31/99

all viewers. In this very direct manner, corporate money forces PBS away from its core mission: “to provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard,” “to provide a forum for controversy and debate,” and “to help us see America whole, in all its diversity”⁴⁷ and to address “the needs of unserved and underserved audiences....”⁴⁸

Advertising influence has also been documented to restrict coverage of certain stories and issues that may affect advertisers or the parent corporation of the news outlet. This is widely understood among media professionals. In 2001, *Columbia Journalism Review-Project for Excellence in Journalism* surveyed 118 news directors from around the country. Findings include:

- [M]ore than half, 53 percent, reported that advertisers pressure them to kill negative stories or run positive ones...
- News directors also reported that TV consultants (outside companies hired by stations to critique newscasts and improve ratings) issuing blanket edicts about what to cover and what not to cover in order to attract the most advertising dollars.⁴⁹

Such advertiser control over content also occurs at PBS. *Bill Moyers Journal* is one of many PBS programs that have lost funding because of “sponsorship objections to program content.”⁵⁰ “I should have been able to air controversial views,” reported Moyers, “I wasn’t.” He concludes, “The system leaves no room for an independent journalist or a serious inquiry into our society.”⁵¹

Such direct intervention, though rare, instills an awareness of consequences for public broadcasting professionals. Likewise, as Moyers has more recently pointed out, “Self-censorship comes unintentionally and even unknowingly to the person who is aware that he is obligated to the government, but this is one of those times when journalism needs to get as close to the verifiable truth as possible.”⁵²

WTTW and Chicago Tonight

The history of Chicago’s PBS affiliate WTTW demonstrates local consequences of the federal funding policy. Present here – most notably in the form of a funding scheme called *Network Chicago* costing millions of dollars⁵³ – is a process of commercialization made inevitable by federal funding policies that force dependence upon corporate money for survival. In such a circumstance, service to the public interest is marginalized, or cut out entirely, as station priorities shift to the battle for basic survival.

⁴⁷ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York, Bental, 1967.

⁴⁸ Public Broadcasting Act, Subpart D –Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Sec. 396. [47 U.S.C. 396]

⁴⁹ *Columbia Journalism Review-Project for Excellence in Journalism*, November/December 2001, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Smith, 2002. p. 191

⁵¹ Smith, 2002. p. 191

⁵² Evan Smith, interview with Bill Moyers, *Texas Monthly*, 10/04

⁵³ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

One of the crucial political actors whose work set the stage for the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act was Newton Minow. As FCC Chair under Kennedy, Minow strongly criticized commercial television, famously calling it “a vast wasteland.”⁵⁴ By 1971, Minow headed the WTTW Board of Trustees and it was he who hired Bill McCarter to be president of WTTW. Under McCarter’s leadership WTTW hired journalist John Calloway to host a nightly news program called *Public News Center*, from which *Chicago Tonight* eventually evolved some nine years later.⁵⁵ Calloway’s style was highly regarded by many critics, “Calloway debriefed, deconstructed, and debated the city’s newsmakers, pitting argument against argument in a way that made public policy issues—and politics—easily understood by viewers.”⁵⁶

By the time Calloway retired in 1999, Dan Schmidt had replaced McCarter as WTTW president. WTTW under Schmidt embarked on a major multimedia expansion project called *Network Chicago*, which would combine newspaper, internet, radio and television. *Chicago Tribune Magazine* reporter Jim Kirk described the project as “Schmidt’s showcase of synergistic programming.”⁵⁷ According to a 2000 report by the Benton Foundation, *Network Chicago* served “to enable [WTTW] to program multiple channels for digital broadcasting by 2003” through “local partnerships and collaborations.”

The commercializing effects of the *Network Chicago* project goals are unmistakable: corporate “partnerships” built on “mutual advantages” are a priority over “nonprofit interests.”

“[R]eal success...will be gauged by the ability of *Network Chicago* to bring on board partners from the business, commercial, and government sectors of the community, where funded (as opposed to unfunded) partnership is most often to be found. What can they contribute to *Network Chicago*? And what can *Network Chicago* contribute to them? ...What is unclear, at this early stage, is whether it will be able to include the extensive nonprofit interests...or whether they will have to continue to go their own independent way.”⁵⁸

Bill Reed, President of Kansas City PBS affiliate KCPT, described these partnerships in the Benton report. Though admitting that “In this kind of partnership, some control is lost” by PBS stations, Reed still views this “fundamental change” as necessary. “It’s got to be a real partnership, a mutual collaboration, where control and responsibilities are shared by the participants.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Smith, 2002. p.66

⁵⁵ *Chicago Magazine*, 10/2002

⁵⁶ *Chicago Magazine*, 10/2002

⁵⁷ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

⁵⁸ *Public Media in the Digital Age – Connecting Communities*, Benton Foundation Communications Policy Program, 2000. (Hereafter: Benton Foundation, 2000). p. 30.

<http://www.benton.org/publibrary/publicmedia/pubmedia.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Benton Foundation, 2000. p. 4

Plainly put, any “collaboration” where “control” is shifted to “partners from the business, commercial, and government sectors” at the expense of other constituents is a departure from public service.

Such a “fundamental change” would also require public relations efforts to realign public opinion with the new realities. Accordingly, in the months prior to the release of the Benton Foundation report, WTTW management was attempting to reposition the public image of the station away from notions of “public broadcasting” and its associated requirements of universal service and towards a more elite target audience. “It’s a misnomer to call us public television,” Dan Schmidt told *Chicago Tribune Magazine* in 1999. “It implies that we’re like...the public library system. We’re a non-profit cultural institution, like the Chicago Symphony.”⁶⁰

Extending this new frame, some in the Chicago press erroneously concluded that, “PBS is a nonprofit version of a typical network like NBC or CBS.”⁶¹ Like a large media conglomerate, WTTW tried to utilize many of the techniques of “synergy” and “cross-platform promotion” through *Network Chicago*. However, there were “problems persuading media buyers to purchase underwriting and advertising across multiple platforms – a key to the vaunted revenues *Network Chicago* was to produce.”⁶² For WTTW, the result is the worst economic situation in the fifty-year history of the station.⁶³ In context, Robert McChesney’s 1999 warning seems prescient, “Once public broadcasters begin to operate on commercial terms, and notions of public service are forgotten, they may well find the water is deep and they are swimming among sharks.”⁶⁴

WTTW’s financial crisis and an ensuing series of layoffs evoked some investigation and critical reporting in the Chicago press, most notably a July 2003 cover story in *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, “Running WTTW into the Ground – The Rise and Fall of Network Chicago.” However, the major issue raised in the article is that *Network Chicago* failed to bring in advertisers. The possibility that *Network Chicago* inherently makes WTTW more subject to commercial influence was not even considered. The idea that structural funding issues play a role in the endemic financial struggles of public broadcasting was acknowledged, but only in the context of a call for advertisement as a solution. As the headline also declared, “Schmidt’s vision for WTTW had only two problems: staff didn’t understand it, and advertisers didn’t buy it.”

A look at some recent policy changes in staffing and programming at WTTW reveals that advertisers are actually buying influence over content. In the midst of the financial crisis of 2002, plans were announced to hire former rock radio DJ and Fox affiliate morning show personality Bob Sirott to host *Chicago Tonight*. It was hoped that the new host, and some other changes in format, would boost ratings. This sparked some minor debate in the Chicago press. The

⁶⁰ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 6/6/99

⁶¹ *Chicago Magazine*, 10/2002

⁶² *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

⁶³ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

⁶⁴ Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1999. (Hereafter: McChesney, 1999) p. 253.

concern – among WTTW “insiders” no less – was that *Chicago Tonight* would be “dumbed down” becoming “fluff”⁶⁵ like Sirott-hosted program on the Chicago Fox affiliate (“Fox Thing in the Morning”). Sirott is not the only Fox veteran recently hired by WTTW. In 2002, WTTW hired Randy King as executive vice president for television. “King, who comes to WTTW after eight years at Fox/News Corporation, will oversee all creative and operational aspects of Channel 11’s television programming and will be responsible for developing content that can be distributed nationally.”⁶⁶ King quickly issued a mandate that no programming would be made that lacked an underwriter. According to anonymous sources cited by *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, “King’s policy means programming at the station will be guided simply by cash and that corporate underwriters will therefore dictate what gets aired and what doesn’t.”⁶⁷ Beyond this explicit charge, however, *Chicago Tribune Magazine* presented no additional information on underwriter influence over content.

There is a strong reason why the Tribune would avoid examining charges that WTTW content is shaped to suit advertisers. The Tribune Corporation is itself an advertiser on *Chicago Tonight*. As this report details in the qualitative section below, Tribune Corporation employees were also the only sources provided by *Chicago Tonight* for analysis on FCC media ownership rules – an issue directly effecting Tribune financial interests.⁶⁸

It seems advertisers may understand what they are buying after all.

Recall the Benton Foundation’s highly approving report on corporate partnerships with *Network Chicago*, “What can they contribute to *Network Chicago*? And what can *Network Chicago* contribute to them? There have to be mutual advantages....”⁶⁹ Such ideological consistency may be the real “synergy” at work between WTTW and corporate funders. Unfortunately, few journalists have connected the dots between corporate funding and program content. “Surely, there is corporate money to be raised for ideas,” wrote Phil Rosenthal in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.⁷⁰

A look at the board of Trustees at WTTW demonstrates that there is already a great supply of corporate ideas and money at the helm of the station. Original research on the WTTW board⁷¹ reveals a calliope of corporate establishment connections and mainstream charity ties, also including a small number of socially conscious trustees and a small number of people of color.

The self-elected WTTW board has sixty (60) trustees.

- Twenty-six are executives, partners, trustees or officers of a financial firm.

⁶⁵ *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7/8/02

⁶⁶ Daily Herald, 3/17/02

⁶⁷ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

⁶⁸ See the Qualitative section of this report for more information.

⁶⁹ Benton Foundation, 2000, p. 30.

⁷⁰ *Chicago Sun-Times*, 5/30/01

⁷¹ See Appendix 10. *A Window to the World of the Board of Trustees of WTTW-TV: An Examination of Positions of Influence Held by the Sixty Directors of Chicago “Public” TV Station WTTW Channel 11.*

- Thirty-nine are top executives, officers or principal partners of a corporation.
- Three are retired executives, trustees, officers or partners of a major business concern.
- One is an executive, trustee, or officer, of a neighborhood organization.
- Two are executives, trustees, or officers of an ethnic support organization.
- None is an executive, trustee or officer of a trade union.
- None is an executive, trustee or officer of a peace organization.
- None is an executive, trustee or officer of a human rights organization.
- One is an executive, trustee or officer of a membership environmental organization.
- None are independent filmmakers.

The overwhelming corporate presence on the WTTW Board of Trustees raises serious doubts as to their ability to deal with the damaging effects of commercialism on the station.

Writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Laura Washington stated, “If WTTW wants to prove it’s truly ‘public television,’ it should finally reach out to some long-neglected audiences. The Channel 11 viewers I hear from most are not the Winnetka white hairs, but the regular working-class folk who value news and information about their everyday lives. The bus and taxicab drivers, the office workers and block club presidents ask me when they will see more of their faces and issues.”⁷²

Two years later we can answer these concerns with solid empirical data. Chicago’s “regular working class people” are highly unlikely to see their faces in any discussion on *Chicago Tonight* about the news and information that most affects their everyday lives. Instead, as we shall see, WTTW is using *Chicago Tonight* as a sponsor driven vehicle catering to the interests of the “Affluent, Cultured, and Educated”⁷³ target demographic sought by advertisers.

For further information on the history of efforts to reform WTTW, please see Appendix 11.

II. Quantitative Findings

Methods

All guests and news sources appearing on *Chicago Tonight* during the six weeks of the study were categorized according to race, gender, occupation, and political party affiliation where possible. Using this method, the racial, gender and occupational diversity of guests in the sample is revealed. In addition, whether the guests appeared as part of an off-location taped report or as part of a “live” in studio discussion was also recorded.

⁷² Laura Washington, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7/8/99. Also see her article of *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8/19/02.

⁷³ WTTW Promotion Kit for Advertisers. Document labeled, “092303_influential_affluent”. Attached in Appendix 12.

The story topic for each program segment was documented and categorized by subject matter. This measurement indicates which issues were most emphasized in program content, and which issues were neglected or ignored.⁷⁴

The demographic data tells us *who speaks on Chicago Tonight*. The story topic data tells us *which issues are discussed on Chicago Tonight*. Combining the two data sets tells us *who speaks on which issues*.

The Story Topics: News vs. Entertainment

News is expensive. Thus, as media have grown more concentrated we have seen an increase in the number of news outlets but a reduction in the number of newsrooms across the country. This means that the news information on more and more radio and TV stations is produced by an ever-smaller number of people.⁷⁵

News is also a problematic medium for commercial enterprises that depend on the very advertisers who may, at any time, become the subject of unwelcome reporting.

Both public and corporate broadcasters are increasingly turning to entertainment to draw audiences while avoiding the kind of controversial news stories that could drive away advertisers or 'underwriters.' In addition, PBS has the added burden of government officials regularly tying funding to content complaints. In his extensive research on PBS, James Ledbetter concludes that the result of financial constraints from government and corporate underwriters is that PBS "cares less about programming of high-quality than it does about programming that can not be assailed."⁷⁶ PBS luminary Jim Lehrer acknowledges this pressure, as least implicitly, "There is an increasing tendency to see news as entertainment, not information. ...the purpose of news is to inform."⁷⁷

These concerns underline much of the debate regarding whether *Chicago Tonight* has become "news lite," the term used by Professor Pat Aufderheide of

⁷⁴ We did not include the many brief topics read at the beginning of the program in the "Update" segment, because the format of this segment lacks guests and because the format (a sentence or two on each issue) is rarely more than announcement and as such is not relevant for this study. Likewise, we did not include the topics of the "One More Thing" segment because the segment lacks guests and often is just a vehicle for Sirott.

⁷⁵ "Notice of Proposed Rulemaking," *In the Matter of Implementation of Section 11 of the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992 Implementation of Cable Act Reform Provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 The Commission's Cable Horizontal and Vertical Ownership Limits and Attribution Rules Review of the Commission's Regulations Governing Attribution Of Broadcast and Cable/MDS Interests Review of the Commission's Regulations and Policies Affecting Investment In the Broadcast Industry Reexamination of the Commission's Cross-Interest Policy*, CS Docket No. 98-82, CS Docket No. 96-85, MM Docket No. 92-264, MM Docket No. 94-150, MM Docket No. 92-51, MM Docket No. 87-154, September 13, 2001, p. 6; Vernon Stone, *News Operations at U.S. TV Stations*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2000 Tables 2, 37, 932; Annual Almanac, Editor and Publisher*, various issues. ; Lisa George, *What's Fit To Print: The Effect Of Ownership Concentration On Product Variety In Daily Newspaper Markets* (2001). Cited in Cooper, 2003. p. 134

⁷⁶ LedBetter, 1997. p. 12

⁷⁷ Chicago Magazine, 10/02; <http://www.chicagomag.com/stories/1002wttw.htm>

American University.⁷⁸ WTTW CEO Dan Schmidt has long denied that *Chicago Tonight* is lessening its news focus, “The core value of the show has always been, and will continue to be, an in-depth news analysis of a single topic.”⁷⁹

Schmidt’s claim, however, is not supported by evidence.

Our study found that 45.45% of the stories covered on *Chicago Tonight* concerned entertainment or lifestyles, an average of over eleven stories per week. Combining that with sports stories (10.39%) shows that a majority of all stories carried by the show (55.84%) were not news at all. The second most covered topic was local/city politics/elections at 11.04% or an average of 2.8 stories per week.

The consequence of WTTW’s heavy emphasis on entertainment and sports can easily be noticed in the programs themselves. Only three episodes (9/23, 9/25, and 2/04) of the thirty examined presented more news than sports and entertainment.

Fairly typical was the 9/4/03 program where 4 of 6 segments (67%) were entertainment or sports. The “news” on 9/4/03 consisted of a segment on new building codes from the Chicago City Council and a segment on the “Leopold and Loeb” murder case from 1924. The 9/1/04 program was 100% entertainment, included only one person of color out of 26 guests,⁸⁰ featuring a lengthy piece on white Chicago Metropolitan Area rock bands from the sixties and an equally long interview with oldies DJ Dick Biondi.

The disparity between news and entertainment is striking: entertainment stories were 68% more frequently covered than business/economy, local city politics/elections, Illinois politics/elections, national politics/elections, crime, and media *combined*.

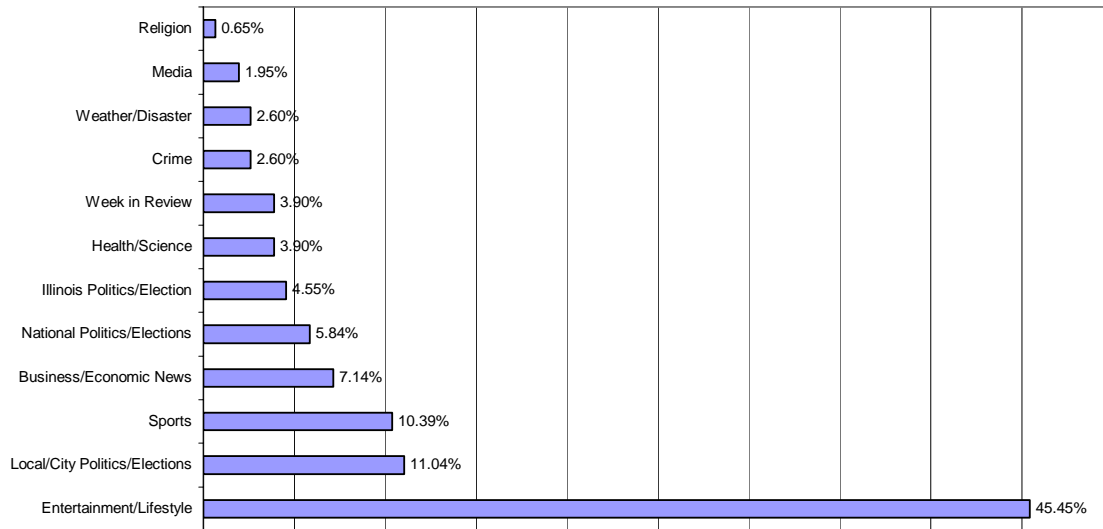
⁷⁸ Chicago Magazine; <http://www.chicagomag.com/stories/1002wttw.htm>

⁷⁹ Chicago Magazine; <http://www.chicagomag.com/stories/1002wttw.htm>

⁸⁰ The guest was WVON DJ Herb Kent, who stated that the white, largely suburban, rock scene was not a significant part of the black experience. *Chicago Tonight*, 9/1/03.

Chart 1. Story Topics

Topics Covered on Chicago Tonight



Guest Characteristics

Demographic diversity is an important, though not totally conclusive, sign of substantive diversity.⁸¹ In terms of who is allowed to speak, *Chicago Tonight* guests are overwhelmingly white, male and affiliated with major corporations. In other words, those most consistently appearing on *Chicago Tonight* are the same set of political actors who already dominate the source lists across commercial news media. As the following evidence demonstrates, rather than providing broad analysis from a diverse range of sources, it is the views of one race, gender, and class that dominate reporting at *Chicago Tonight*.

Race

The Chicago Metropolitan area served by *Chicago Tonight* shows tremendous racial diversity but also tremendous racial division. A key question to ask in determining how *Chicago Tonight* serves the interests of the community is to determine which races are chosen to appear on *Chicago Tonight*.

Over 79% of all guests appearing on *Chicago Tonight* are white. White guests outnumber all other guests combined by a ratio of almost 4 to 1. African American guests numbered 12%, Latino guests were just under 3%, Asian guests were 1.4%, and Arab guests were 1%. In contrast, the Chicago Metropolitan Area population is 19.2% African American, 17.4% Hispanic, 4.7 % Asian, and 1.9% Arabic. While white guests appeared on *Chicago Tonight* more

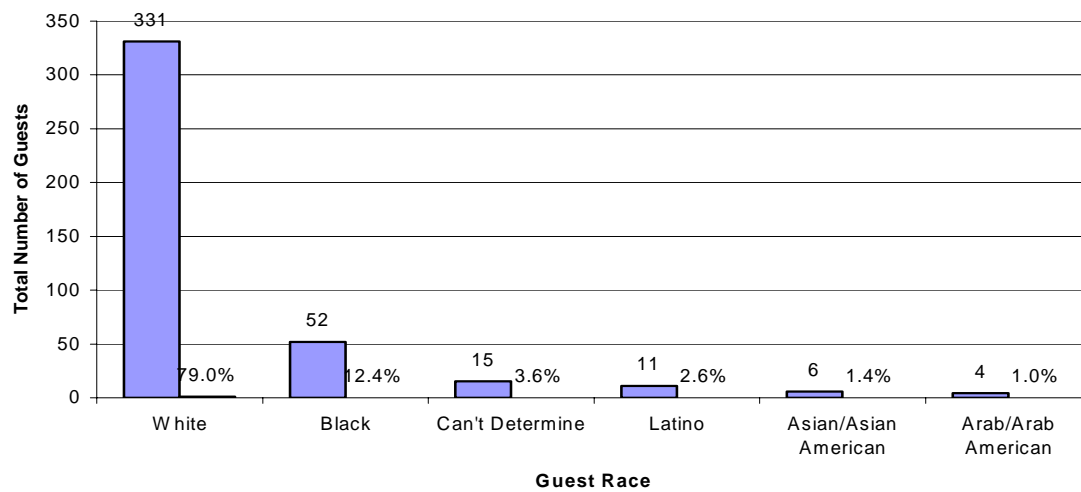
⁸¹ Croteau and Hoynes, 1993. p.111-112

frequently than do whites in the larger community, guests from all other races appeared at a rate far below their actual proportion of the community.⁸²

The disparity is even worse when compared to the racial demographics of the City of Chicago – the titled subject of *Chicago Tonight*. Whites make up only 42% of Chicago, whereas the city is 36.8% African-American, 26% Latino, and 4.3% Asian. Demographic data is not available on the Arab population in Chicago.⁸³

Chart 2: Race of Guests

Race of Guests on Chicago Tonight



Racial diversity across all story topics

We have used US Census Bureau documents as our source. Still, The process of assessing race is unavoidably subjective. For example, many Latinos are biracial, thus surveying across multiple categories.

The racial disparity indicated by the overall figures is carried through all categories of story topics. In all categories of story topics, whites dominated.

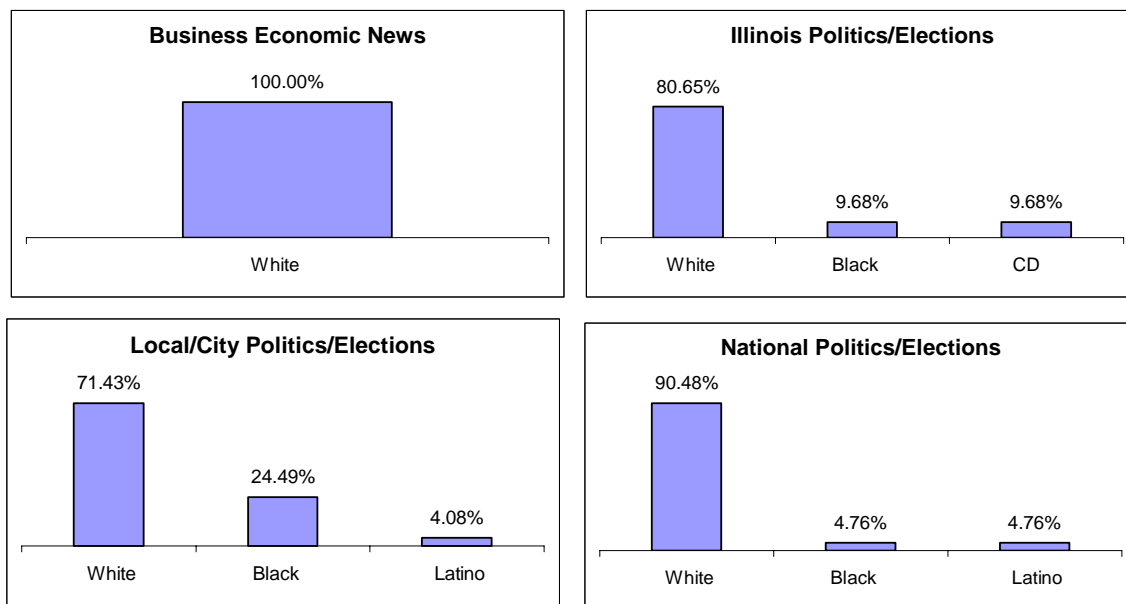
- Only white guests were chosen to speak on business and economic topics.

⁸² Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2; Office of the Municipal Reference Collection, Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸³ US Census Bureau, 2000. Table DP-1. Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000. Geographic Area: Chicago city, Illinois.

- White guests constituted over 90% of all guests chosen to speak on topics of national politics and elections.
- White guests made up at least 80% of all guests for topics of crime, health/science, Illinois politics and elections, media, and even sports. White guests also dominated the regular Friday “Week in Review” segment, constituting over 87% of the guests.
- There were only 8 segments (out of 154 total) where non-whites were a majority of guests, only three of which were news segments: the discussion on the retirement of W. Deems Muhammad from leadership of the Nation of Islam (9/3/03), the selection of a new Chicago Police Superintendent (9/8/03), and Chicago public housing (9/16/03).⁸⁴

Chart 3: Racial Diversity by Story Topic (For complete charts, see Appendix. 4.)



Chicago Tonight: Week in Review is an approximately 30 minute Friday segment identifying and analyzing “major stories” of the previous week. By allowing participants to identify what stories are the most important, and therefore the most deserving of further review, this segment provides a classic example of “agenda setting” or “agenda priority” effects. “Agenda setting” occurs when “the press suggests to audience members the important topics to think about and how long to think about them.”⁸⁵ As has been long noted in communication research, “by directing people’s attention toward some issues and away from others, elites

⁸⁴ Of the remaining five, three were arts segments (9/11/03, 9/16/03, 2/4/04) and the last two were from a segment on unusual houses on the south side that was played twice during the study period (9/25/03, 1/29/04).

⁸⁵ Ann Crigler, ed. *The Psychology of Political Communication*, University of Michigan Press, 1998. p. 3

may be able to shape public debate.”⁸⁶ In these segments, non-white journalists appeared less than one-tenth as often as their white counterparts. This means that of the twenty-five journalists selected to participate in these “agenda setting” segments, the three non-whites consisted of one African American, one Latino, and one person of indeterminate race. Unarguably, whites are the elite group accessing the agenda setting resources of *Chicago Tonight: Week in Review*.

Given the over nine-to-one advantage that whites receive on *Chicago Tonight*, the issues of concern to and the interests of non-white viewers cannot possibly be adequately served – unless one believes that whites can adequately speak for African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Arabs.

Importantly, we must note three consequences that flow from WTTW’s choice to overwhelmingly feature white guests:

First, lack of racial diversity among guests diminishes the quality of coverage. According to a 1994 Northwestern University study, “The choices TV journalists make appear to feed racial stereotypes, encouraging white hostility and fear of African-Americans” and a “tendency to depict Latinos as foreign to America and its values.”⁸⁷

Second, this lack of racial diversity decreases the value of the program for those viewers whose race is generally excluded from participation, thus discouraging them from watching. As a 1998 NU study of African-American and Latino perspectives on local Chicago news TV found, “Almost two-thirds say their race or ethnic group is portrayed inaccurately on the news... Latinos also object to the lack of coverage of their communities.” This was given as “a major reason” by Latinos as to why they seek alternate news sources.⁸⁸

Third, while of less value to *communities of color*, WTTW’s overemphasis on wealthy white people and their interests *increases* the value of the program and the channel to advertisers. As we noted in the section on PBS history, “advertisers pay less for programs that garner non-white audiences.”⁸⁹

Constructing programs to meet the preference of advertisers to reach specific audiences is a standard practice known as “narrowcasting.” This practice extends to news content. “Competition for socioeconomically defined market segments increasingly takes the form of altering the subject matter and shape of news content, delivering the types and forms of information that persons in the socioeconomically defined market prefer.”⁹⁰

These characteristics can also be observed in WTTW management. A look at a promotional package created by WTTW for potential underwriters

⁸⁶ Ann Crigler, ed. *The Psychology of Political Communication*, University of Michigan Press, 1998. p. 3

⁸⁷ *African-Americans According to TV News*. Media Studies Journal (Vol. 8, No. 3, Summer 1994). Pg. 29-38. New York: Media Studies Center. Cited in *African American and Latino Views of Local Chicago TV News*, Cynthia C. Linton and Robert K. LeBailly. Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, 1998

⁸⁸ *African American and Latino Views of Local Chicago TV News*, Cynthia C. Linton and Robert K. LeBailly. Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, 1998

⁸⁹ “Anything but Racism,” *Extra!* January/February 2000.

⁹⁰ Cranberg, Bezanson and Soloski, p. 89; *The Business of News, the News About Business*, Neiman Reports, Summer 1999. Cited in Cooper, 2003. p. 84.

reveals management promoting the financial elitism of its audience to underwriters:

“WTTW11’s Prime Time Viewers are Affluent, Cultured, and Educated.”

“Compared to the general Chicago population WTTW11 primetime viewers are:”

- “77% more likely to own a home with a market value of \$350,000 or more.”
- “77% more likely to have IRA/KEOGH account”
- “107% more likely to have used a full-service stockbroker during past year.”
- “116% more likely to have taken 10+ domestic overnight business trips in the past year.”⁹¹

Though this study is the first to bring forward specific data on race for *Chicago Tonight*, the lack of representation for people of color is obvious and apparent in the program episodes. Nonetheless, almost all Chicago journalists writing on the program overlooked this issue. An excellent exception was Laura Washington, who pointed out problems in the racial makeup of staff across WTTW. “Can WTTW overcome its shortcomings on diversity? For example, Ponce is not only the station’s ‘only on-camera Latino professional.’ He’s the only person of color in that role, period. ... *Chicago Tonight*, which once included three African-Americans, now has one. Chicago’s commercial stations have a far better track record.”⁹²

Gender

Research on sourcing in commercial and public programming has shown that males dominate news programming.⁹³ *Chicago Tonight* offers no exception to this tradition. Though women are 51.1% of the population in the Chicago Metropolitan Area,⁹⁴ on *Chicago Tonight* male guests (72.6%) are nearly three times more likely to appear than female guests (26.7%). While this is slightly higher than was found in a 1999 study of all PBS news programs, where women averaged 21.1% of the guests, it still falls far short of full gender parity.⁹⁵

⁹¹ WTTW Promotion Kit for Advertisers. Document labeled, “092303_influential_affluent”. Attached in Appendix 12.

⁹² *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8/19/02.

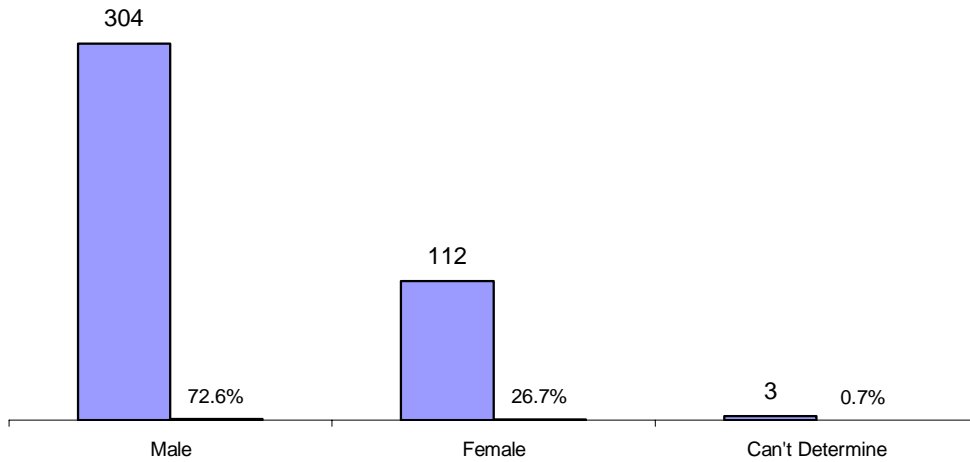
⁹³ *Power Sources*, Media Tenor, 2001.

⁹⁴ US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, Geographic Area: Chicago city, Illinois, p. 13, Table No. 11. Resident Population by Age and Sex: 1980-2002.

⁹⁵ William Hoynes, *The Cost of Survival: Political Discourse and the New PBS*. Vassar College, Dept. of Sociology, 1999. (Hereafter: Hoynes, 1999). <http://www.fair.org/reports/pbs-study-1999.html>, Table 7.

Chart 4: Gender Diversity

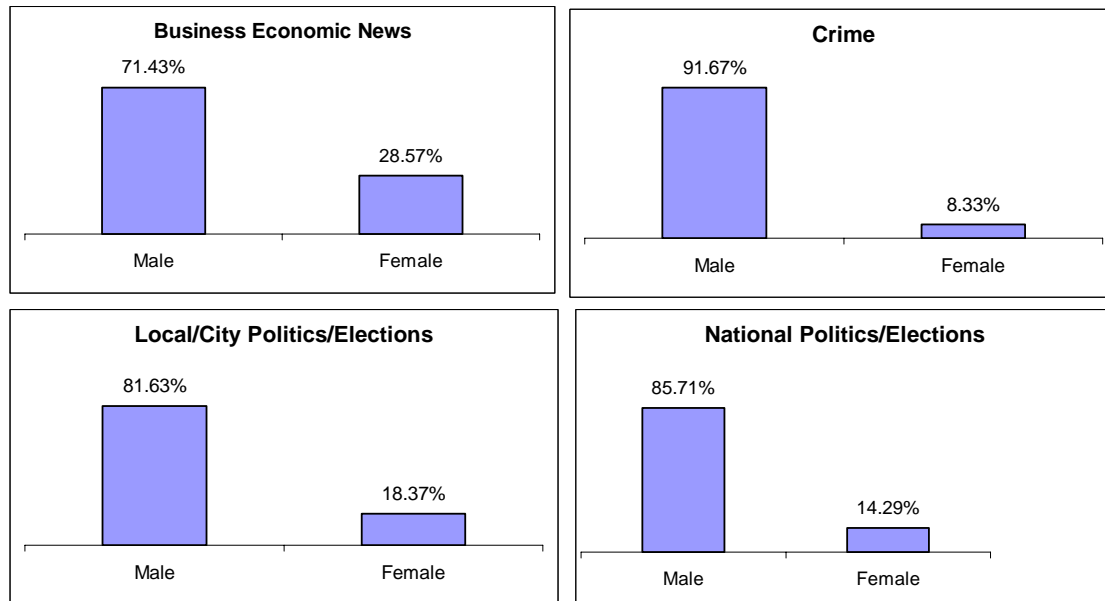
Gender Representation on Chicago Tonight



Gender diversity across story topics:

Looking at gender diversity across story topics, we find men appearing more in all story categories. The topics women were least likely to appear on were media, crime, and sports, with women represented 0%, 8.3%, and 8.1%, respectively. The topics where women were chosen most frequently to speak were health/science (40%), entertainment (36.2%), the weather (27.3%), and religion (25%).

Chart 5. Gender Diversity by Topic (For complete charts, see Appendix. 5.)



Occupation

The examination of guest's occupation is crucial to discovering which interests are represented across programming. Occupational status, as prior research on media sourcing has shown, "gives us insight into the social position of those who are given access to the public airwaves."⁹⁶

Ledbetter has concluded that PBS commentators "may be free to tweak a president or legislator for a particular policy, but those with more sweeping, damning criticism – from any perspective – will simply not be invited to appear."⁹⁷

This hypothesis is supported in our findings. Data on the occupational status of guests on *Chicago Tonight* indicates, as was also found to be true in both commercial TV news media and past studies of public broadcasting news, "a clear tendency to showcase the opinions of the most powerful political and economic actors."⁹⁸

The largest number of *Chicago Tonight* guests (27.9%) were professionals from the media industry, the overwhelming majority employed by large media corporations. This is not a surprise. According to WTTW CEO Dan Schmidt, *Chicago Tonight*, "is populated by journalists, media professionals who really believe passionately in the status quo."⁹⁹

The second most often represented group (22.2%) were professionals from industries other than media. People in this group may be stockbrokers, attorneys, medical doctors, athletes, musicians, actors not employed by large media firms, writers, or other technical specialists. People in this category may at times articulate perspectives challenging dominant elite viewpoints, as did

⁹⁶ Hoynes, 1999.

⁹⁷ Ledbetter p. 11

⁹⁸ *Power Sources*, Media Tenor, 2002.

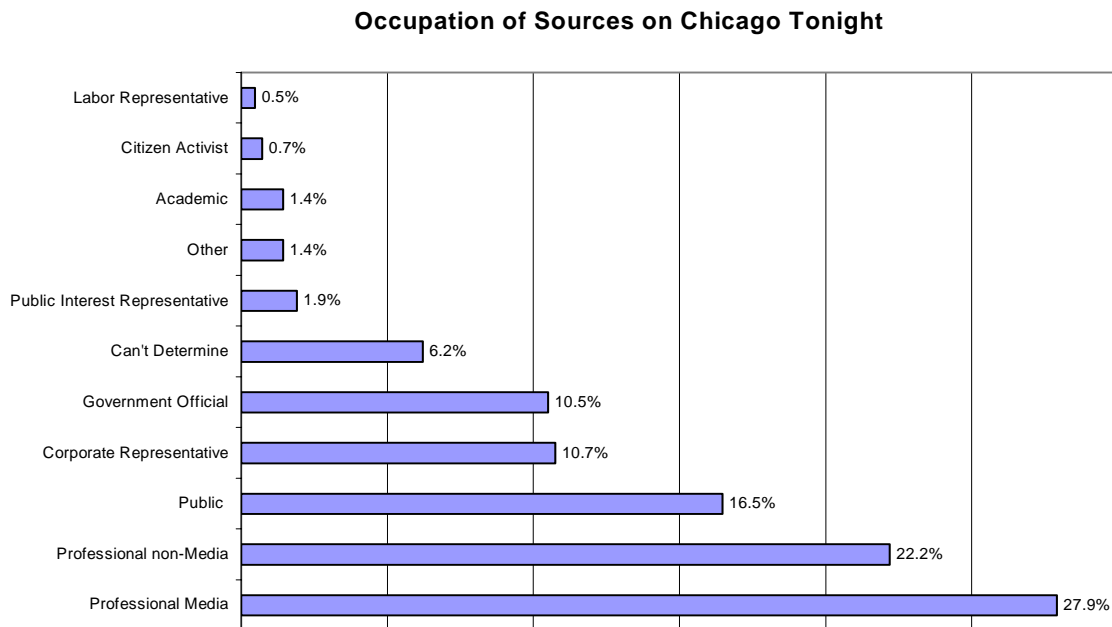
⁹⁹ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

playwright Loren Crawford in discussing slavery in relation to African folktales (2/9/03) or they may advocate strongly for the interests of elites already heavily represented in broadcasting, as did professional architects when advocating for construction of luxury housing (9/23/03). First and foremost, however, these sources are representatives of their industry and their expertise.

The term “public,” as used in this study, refers to those outside of institutional or corporate power and who’s interests are not represented through a particular industry or expertise. This is the definitive “non-elite” majority who, in a functioning democracy, fulfill the ultimate role of accountability through informed participation and voting. Underlying the examination of media in a democracy is the question of how such a group – which includes minimum wage and blue collar workers, the unemployed, the uninsured, etc. – can fulfill their democratic role when their voices and concerns are kept out of the debate.

The fact that the general public made up 16.5% of all guests, ranking as the third most often represented group, is misleading unless one considers that the majority of these appearances were limited to the innocuous topics of entertainment, sports, and weather. These findings are similar to the 20% of all quotes that were attributed to average Americans on commercial network news in 2001.

Chart 6: Guest Occupation: All Topics



To accurately estimate the range of diversity on *Chicago Tonight*, the shared interests of these groups need to be addressed. Corporate and institutional power is represented directly by the guests who are corporate representatives and indirectly by those employed as professionals in media, and academics. 50.6% of all guests were thus directly or indirectly representatives of corporations or the institutions of academy or government. Adding in non-media

professionals, we see that the representatives from elite social segments make up 72.8% of all guests.

Guests articulating interests and perspectives outside of government or corporate institutions were almost non-existent. Public interest representatives made up only 1.9% of sources, citizen activists were 0.7% of sources, and organized labor was a mere 0.5% of sources, for a combined total of 3.1%. Combining this with the general public (who mostly appeared in entertainment segments) brings the total of guests outside of corporate or institutional power to 19.6%.

As is the case for *Chicago Tonight*, on network news the general public was marginalized outside the policy debate. "While it's valuable to hear the voices of ordinary citizens on the nightly news, the context in which most of their soundbites appeared makes it unlikely that their viewpoints did much to shape the nation's political debate: They were more often presented in human interest stories, crime reports and entertainment news than in all 'hard' news topics combined, leaving discussion of most policy issues to 'expert' political and economic elites."¹⁰⁰

Excluding the topics of sports, entertainment, and weather, the percentage of guests from the public slips to 6.5%, ranking fifth, behind professional media, government officials, other professionals, and corporate representatives. This is comparable to findings from 1998 showing the general public as 5.7% of all sources on PBS public affairs programs.¹⁰¹

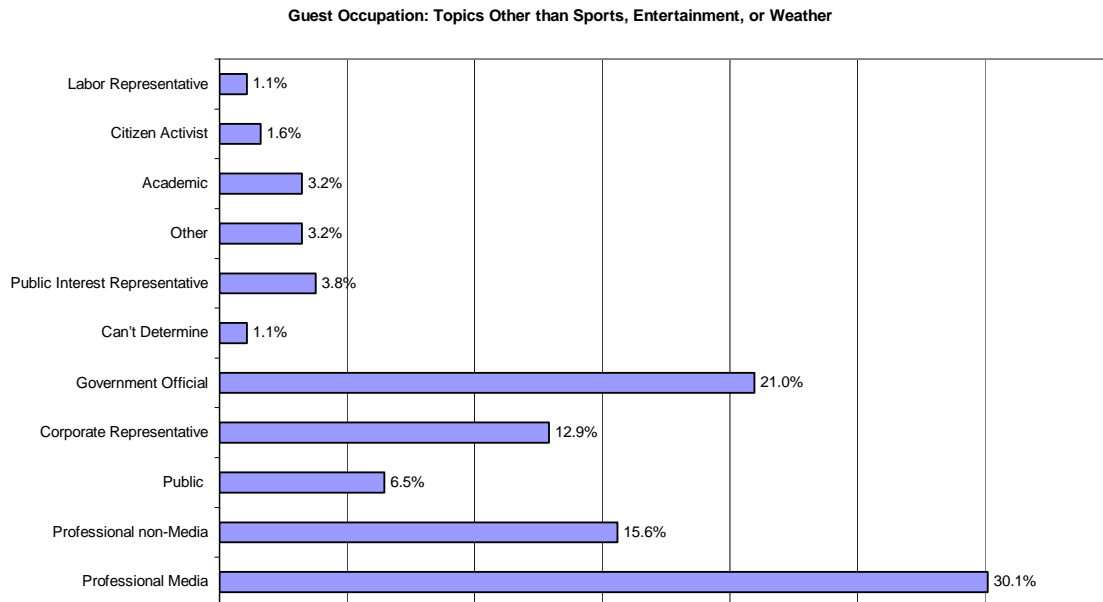
It is posited in some notably conservative circles that representatives from academia are overwhelmingly active challengers of corporate and government power. Such a view would suggest that academics should be categorized as an independent or pro public interest force. However, the dependency of universities and departments on government and corporate support for survival indicates a direct pressure for academia to reinforce rather than antagonize the hand that feeds them. In this case, however, the issue is entirely moot, as academics made up a mere 1.4% of sources on *Chicago Tonight* and thus have no significant balancing effect.

Government officials were 10% of all sources. Corporate Representatives such as CEO's and other high-level executives were also 10% of all sources.

¹⁰⁰ *Power Sources*, Media Tenor, 2001.

¹⁰¹ Hoynes, 1999. Table 4.

Chart 7: Guest Occupation: News Topics



Occupational Diversity Across Story Topics

As we have seen regarding race and gender, patterns of deference to interests of corporate and institutional power are also strongly evidenced in the data on overall occupational diversity.

- The Public: Marginalized on Public and Commercial Television

As Chart 8 indicates, the voices of the general public were significantly marginalized to topics of entertainment/culture, and sports. Less than 10% of the sources from the general public appeared in stories on local city politics or health, and less than 3% of sources from the general public appeared in stories on Illinois politics/elections. The public was allowed no voice on business/economic news, crime, national politics/elections, media stories, or even religion.

Of the 69 guests from the public who appeared on *Chicago Tonight* during the study period, only 8 appeared on segments that were related to their political or economic interests. These 8 appearances were contained in three segments, one on problems in public housing (9/16/03), one on the scandal at Maryville Youth Academy (9/22/03), and the other on politically active high school students (2/3/04). In addition, a 1/29/04 segment on a downstate nuclear power plant also showed two citizen activists (a related but distinct category). These pieces provided welcome exception to the general programming practices of *Chicago Tonight*. Crucially, these pieces prove that WTTW management is fully aware that members of the general public are social actors in their own right who are capable of articulating their interests and perspectives as well as taking action to further these interests. In light of these facts it is even more egregious that *Chicago Tonight* so consistently eliminates the general public from the discussion of issues that are of central concern to their own lives.

All three of these pieces feature the public on taped segments, while (on 9/22 and 2/3) a live in-depth discussion continued in the studio with experts analyzing the issues. The distinction of which guests are chosen to participate in “live” studio discussion and debate is highly significant. Guests who appear on tape are subject to the total editorial control of program producer’s. “Live” guests, on the other hand, are largely beyond editing control and able to spontaneously participate, interact, and respond with the perspectives and attitudes expressed by the other guests.

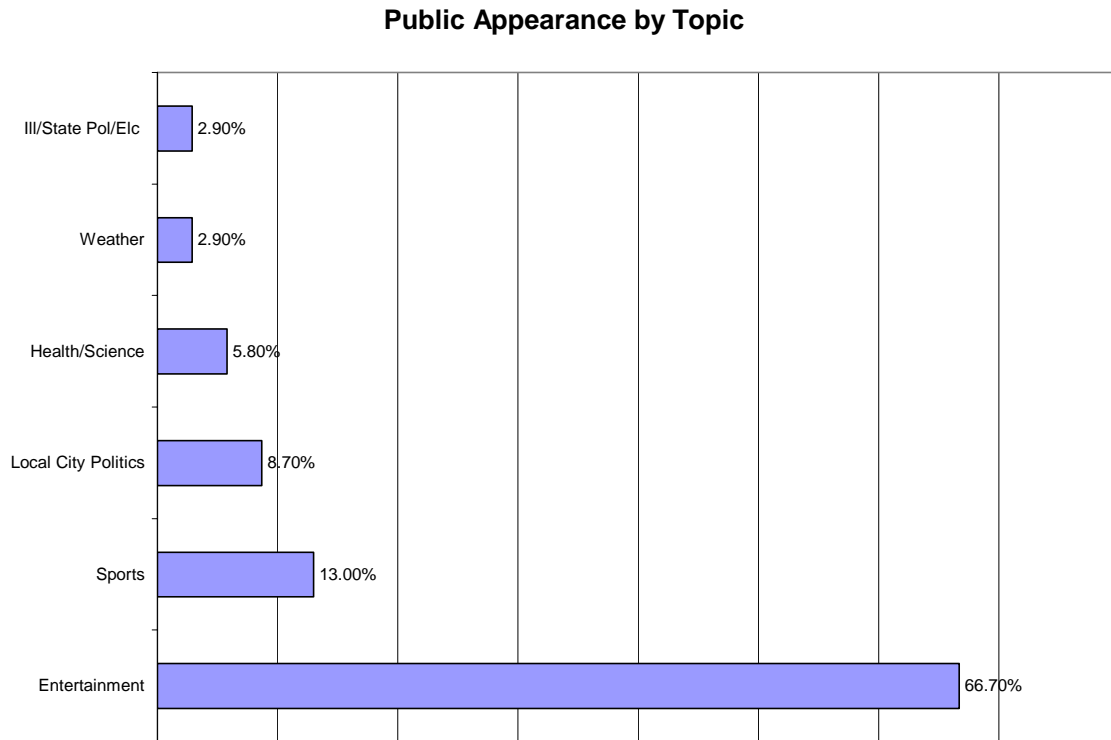
This was a position that was entirely denied members of the general public. 100% of all appearances by the general public were pre-recorded. There were no instances where members of the general public participated in “live” studio discussions with other guests.

Thus, even on the rare occasion when the political views of low-income people or students were actually represented on *Chicago Tonight*, it was still left up to professionals to “tell us what these voices really mean.”¹⁰² As professors Croteau and Hoynes found in their 1992 study of news sources on PBS, “The repeated focus on professional analysis of the poor and black youth in inner cities suggests that these groups are unable to articulate their own views about the social conditions they confront. Paradoxically, the coverage itself often silences the very groups who are defined as powerless by the journalists, politicians, and academics who regularly dominate public television news programming.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² Croteau and Hoynes, “The Broken Promise of Public Television,” *By Invitation Only*, 1993. p.160.

¹⁰³ Croteau and Hoynes, “The Broken Promise of Public Television,” *By Invitation Only*, 1993. p.160.

Chart 8. Public Appearance by Topic

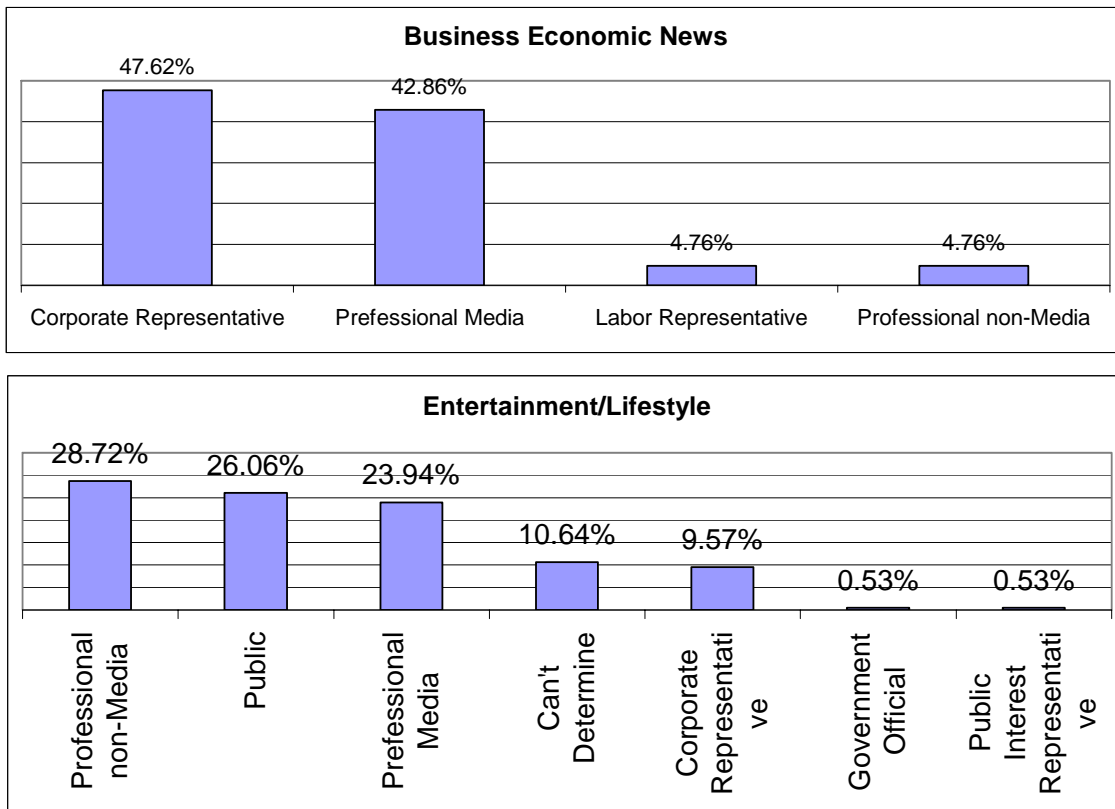


The Usual Suspects

Data on occupational diversity across story topics also confirms the now familiar pattern, showing corporate and government interests dominant in five of the six topics involving policy debate: business/economy, local/city politics/elections, Illinois politics/elections, national politics/elections, crime, and media.

On stories of business/economy, corporate representatives and professional media were 90.48% of sources and thus enjoyed a virtual monopoly over discourse on this topic of tremendous impact for all viewers. The only other voices on economy were author Herb Cohen, promoting his book, *You Can Negotiate Anything*, and a single labor official on a segment about “The Best Bosses in America.”

Chart 9: Guest Occupation Across Topics (For complete charts see Appendix 8.)



Government officials were the most frequently appearing source on topics of politics and elections whether local/city, Illinois, or national.

For stories on local/city politics/elections or Illinois politics/elections, we found elite sources (government, all professionals, and corporate representatives) account for nearly 80% of sources, while the public, public interest representatives and labor accounted for just over 20%.

Elites provided over 95% of the sources on national politics/elections, the only potential exception was a survivor of the World Trade Center (9/11/03) whose occupation could not be determined.

On the topic of crime, elites (government officials and all professionals) again held over 90% of all sources, the only exception here was a single public interest representative, Dr. Gary Slutkin of Project for Violence Prevention.

As WTTW management wrote in a promotional communication to potential advertisers, analysis on *Chicago Tonight* is “provided by carefully chosen panelists on news and public affairs issues important to Chicago.”¹⁰⁴ “Carefully chosen” is an accurate and welcome description, as it sets aside the false claim that those who are chosen to appear on the news naturally reflect the “real world” of those elected to office, as Robin MacNeil and Ted Koppel have claimed.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ WTTW Promotion Kit for Advertisers. Document headed, “News & Current Affairs – Fall 2003”. Attached as Appendix 12.

¹⁰⁵ Croteau and Hoynes, “All the Usual Suspects.” *In By Invitation Only*, 1993. p.’s 53, 106, 178

Our quantitative data on *Chicago Tonight* also shows that the guests appearing most often are *unelected* 'experts' – such as corporate journalists, professionals, and corporate representatives. Reviewing findings on PBS sources in 1992, Hoynes and Croteau wrote, the "narrow guest list is not just a reflection of conservative administration 'decision makers.' Instead the boundaries of these guest lists are actively constructed...."¹⁰⁶

III. Qualitative Findings

The need for a qualitative analysis

Some responses to the quantitative findings in this report may be predictable. When confronted with an empirical analysis of the kinds of guests on his PBS News Hour, Robin MacNeil stated that researchers "think that everything can be quantified and that they can analyze by quantity." Similarly, Ted Koppel criticized a study of *Nightline*, saying one can't conclude "that simply by looking at the guest list you know what the substance of the program was."¹⁰⁷

It is certainly true that a host may assume an adversarial role with parties interviewed, by asking "tough questions" to reveal the conceptual frames of statements and to expose any hidden interests and agenda's. "You don't bring on the opponents of US foreign policy and let them speak their minds," explained Koppel. "You bring on the architects of US foreign policy and hold them to account."¹⁰⁸

But lacking guests critical of these "architects of policy," the tough questions are rarely asked. First, journalists are not omniscient. They cannot raise arguments of which they are unaware, nor can they effectively raise arguments that they do not understand. In addition, they may not fairly represent arguments with which they disagree.

The crucial fact, however, is that asking "tough questions" is not practiced with any consistency in modern professional journalism.

According to *Columbia Journalism Review*, "media norms don't allow reporters to say 'this is a charade' even when they know it is...because it cuts too close to the bone for reporters to admit they are often tacit conspirators in such hoaxes."¹⁰⁹ In the lead up to war in Iraq, media failures to "question" administration claims are undeniable. The *New York Times* issued two editorials, 5/26/04 and 5/30/04 describing problems with their own reporting. *Times* editor Daniel Okrent wrote, some "stories pushed Pentagon assertions so aggressively you could almost sense epaulets sprouting on the shoulders of editors."¹¹⁰

In addition, the Knight Ridder newspaper chain announced on March 21, 2004, "over 100 articles appeared in leading newspapers, news agencies and magazines based upon exaggerated or fabricated information." Other newspapers have made similar announcements.¹¹¹ Jeff Gralnick, while executive

¹⁰⁶ Croteau and Hoynes, "All the Usual Suspects." *In By Invitation Only*, 1993. p.106

¹⁰⁷ Robert MacNeil, cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 1994. p. 174. Ted Koppel, p. 176.

¹⁰⁸ Croteau and Hoynes, 1994. p. 180

¹⁰⁹ Matthew Miller, A Tyranny of Symbols, *Columbia Journalism Review*. Issue 6, Nov.-Dec. 2003.

¹¹⁰ *New York Times*, 5/30/04

¹¹¹ Failing the "Lie Detector" test, *Editor and Publisher*, 3/22/04

producer at *ABC World News Tonight*, put it bluntly enough, “The evening newscast is not supposed to be a watchdog on the government. Never was, never will be.”¹¹² The above evidence strongly indicates that reliance upon official sources – corporate or government – is insufficient for the purposes of discovering truth.

In his classic work on the philosophy of democracy, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill wrote that we must “hear the arguments of adversaries... from the persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and who do their utmost for them.” Failing to face those who think differently from ourselves, according to Mill, leaves us unable to know whether or not our own doctrines are truthful.¹¹³

Recognizing the potential for fallibility in ourselves, let us test these conclusions against the actual discourse presented on *Chicago Tonight*. Were tough questions asked of the “architects” of policy? Or did the limited range of sources also define the range of analysis and perspective? Is *Chicago Tonight* providing an alternative to commercial news that brings important information to those Chicagoans least served by commercial television?

Good News

The news about *Chicago Tonight* is not all bad. A 1/28/04 segment on award winning high school radio and a 2/3/04 segment on politically active high school students presented youth articulately discussing communication and political issues. However, the segment on politically active youth only included students involved with the two major parties and ignored a broad range of other groups despite their high levels of public activism in the time range surrounding this segment.

Importantly, the piece did not represent original reporting by *Chicago Tonight*. The interviews were actually drawn from a different WTTW program (*Chicago Matters*) and this segment of *Chicago Tonight* was serving the purpose of promoting it. This use of *Chicago Tonight* time to cross promote other WTTW and PBS programs is a consistent aspect of the show. Though such cross promotion in this case expanded the range of topics and sources, there were many other examples where such promotional content did not provide a beneficial contribution. Promotion also extended to companies and products, as will be discussed in detail later on.

Two segments on housing (both on 9/16/03), and one on downstate public opposition to a nuclear power plant (1/29/03) demonstrated the *ability* of *Chicago Tonight* decision makers to present original high quality information providing a meaningful alternative to commercial news.

The first housing segment, “Chicago Public Housing Woes,” was presented by Elizabeth Brackett and included several members of the public affected by public housing policy – 3 CHA residents and one squatter – as well as a public interest representative from the Urban Institute. This particular segment would have been greatly improved if it had included African American

¹¹² Hertsgaard, Mark. *On Bended Knee*, Schocken, New York. 1989.

¹¹³ JS Mill, *On Liberty*, WW Norton, New York, 1975. p. 37, 38

community leaders, if it had allowed for live in-studio discussion rather than including the public only in sound-bites, and if it had been aired at a time when it could have affected the public housing plans now being implemented.

“Chicago and Western,” the second 9/16/03 segment on housing, presented residents of the Humboldt Park neighborhood articulately describing the effects of gentrification upon the Puerto Rican community. Again, this piece did not represent original reporting by *Chicago Tonight*, but was promoting a short film to be shown later on WTTW. Consequently, rather than focusing directly on the issue of gentrification, the focus was often on the filmmaker or on the film making process and was marked with the casual personal style of an entertainment/lifestyle piece.

Another piece from Elizabeth Bracket did an excellent job of covering public opposition to Exelon Corporation’s nuclear power plant in Clinton, Illinois (1/29/04). This piece presented citizen activists as well as former employees of Exelon – “whistleblowers” – who charged the company with intentionally compromising safety in order to increase profit. Whereas the segments on housing and gentrification left the negative role of commercial interests largely implicit, the segment on opposition to the power plant prominently featured evidence adversarial to corporate interests.

The above segments demonstrate the following:

1. Citizen activists and the general public are capable spokespersons *for themselves*.
2. Inclusion of these people and the issues of concern to them, though adversarial to government or corporations, is entirely newsworthy and suitable content for coverage.
3. WTTW is completely aware of points one and two.
4. The lack of segments of this caliber is by choice.

These potentials stand in contrast to five patterns of bias found on segments throughout the sample period:

1. Public interest marginalized or excluded from discourse, while corporate interests were consistently represented.
2. Near total failure to examine commercialism critically.
3. Blurring of news and entertainment.
4. Blurring of programming content and promotional content.
5. Catering to affluent viewers.

Hypercommercialism

Patterns of bias found in *Chicago Tonight* broadcasts are symptoms of what University of Illinois communications scholar Robert McChesney has termed “hypercommercialism”: “the expansion of commercialism into every nook and cranny of social life.”¹¹⁴ This process can be readily seen in marketing towards children¹¹⁵; commercial expansion into sports, entertainment, culture,

¹¹⁴ McChesney, 1999. p. 47

¹¹⁵ The issue of commercialization of PBS children’s programming has been widely documented. “Teletubbies,’ the groundbreaking children’s series based on extensive research with children, is available

and education; and “the decline, if not elimination, of notions of public service within our media culture.”¹¹⁶

Because WTTW is so dependent upon funding from major corporate entities, critically examining commercialism presents a host of problems for *Chicago Tonight*. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that such topics are avoided.¹¹⁷ In such an environment, corporate values increasingly merge with production values. Reporting, in turn, easily becomes promotion.

To see this directly, compare the 9/16/03 housing stories to the 9/23/03 segment on Donald Trump’s proposed downtown high-rise construction project. The 9/23 Trump segment featured a live discussion between host Phil Ponce, three architects and one corporate representative from the Trump Corporation. All the sources were white, all were professionals or corporate representatives. There were no guests representing views adversarial to these elites.

The segments on CHA and the downstate nuclear plant ‘balanced’ the sources and statements of the general public, citizen activists, and corporate critics with government and corporate representatives on the ‘other side.’ In contrast, the segment on the Trump project featured no such balance, the Trump Corporation and the industry professionals enjoyed a free reign over the conversation.

According to Koppel’s thinking, we should expect Ponce to hold these powerful sources “to account,” but this did not happen. Ponce did ask the question of who would buy these extraordinarily expensive condominiums during a recession. One of the guests responded that the “very rich” were actually doing quite well during the recession and, for them, affordability would not be a problem. Ponce made no further examination of this issue.

Absent in the 9/23 Trump segment were the very issues raised in the 9/16 public housing segment, such as the lack of affordable housing in Chicago and the lack of funding for public housing. The discourse would undoubtedly have been enriched by the inclusion of a public interest representative such as Mary Cunningham of the Urban Institute, who appeared on the 9/16 public housing segment.

Because wealthy elites spoke live and without adversaries, they were provided a freedom to control and shape the discourse that less empowered sources were simply denied. This pattern was found throughout coverage.

The extent to which the public interest is sacrificed to commercial values can be seen in the 2/2/04 segment on Super Bowl commercials. The live studio panel was composed only of white advertising industry representatives. This panel included a representative from DDB Chicago – a producer of some seven

for sponsorship by your company. Teletubbies has earned the unanimous support of parents, children, and industry leaders, an audience that is right within your grasp!" -- <http://sponsorship.pbs.org>, an official PBS website. Cited in *Mother Jones*, 3/30/01. See also: Georgia Public Television’s website: <http://www.gpb.org/gpb/underwriting/tour/page7.asp>, as of 11/4/03; Kimberly Pohlman, The Commercialization of Children’s Public Television: PBS’s ads sell toys, drugs and junk food to your kids, *FAIR Extra!* May/June 2000, <http://www.fair.org/extra/0005/pbs-ads.html>

¹¹⁶ McChesney, 1999. p. 15

¹¹⁷ See section I. in this report, “*Chicago Tonight* and PBS History,” for more information on encroaching of commercialism on WTTW and PBS.

of the Super Bowl commercials in question. Undisclosed to viewers was that DDB Chicago is also a major WTTW business partner since at least 1999.¹¹⁸ The panel did not include any critics of advertising or of commercialism. This profound imbalance was made worse by the host, Bob Sirott, who completely and utterly failed to provide for any alternative perspective.

The segment itself was explicitly promotional, playing several commercials in their entirety. While these commercials would probably not pass PBS guidelines on advertisements, they were not here presented as advertisements but as “news” or “entertainment.” Not only does this blur the line between “news” and “entertainment,” it also demonstrates a profound inability to distinguish advertising from program content.

Though this segment was specifically focused on the huge corporate investment into sports advertising, there was no mention of the commercialization of sports or any critical thinking about advertising. There were many opportunities to raise such issues however. For example, the practice of marketing to children could have been raised when one of the ad executives stated “eleven year olds love that spot.”¹¹⁹ Organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association have condemned the practice of marketing to children. Citing research spanning several decades, APA researchers wrote “Such advertising efforts, in our view, are fundamentally unfair because of young children’s limited comprehension of the nature and purpose of television advertising, and therefore warrant governmental action to protect young children from commercial exploitation.”¹²⁰

Such groups could have provided invaluable perspective to this discussion and should have been included. Lacking such important perspectives, “in-depth” discussion did not take place. For example, following the showing of a Pepsi ad that appropriated the image of musical/cultural hero Jimi Hendrix, guest comments like “pop culture and humor really paid off” went unexamined. Sirott himself reinforced the industry viewpoint, stating, “Seems like that would get to the baby boomers and younger.”¹²¹

Considering that WTTW’s “target audience” is also “Baby Boomers and their children,”¹²² it is apparent that WTTW and the advertisers whose commercials are on display are both trying to reach the same audience. This “shared interest” also extends to the subject at hand – the Super Bowl. Sports programming is appealing to advertisers because, “the audience for sports includes a large proportion of adult males whom advertisers of high price consumer articles (such as motor cars) are anxious to reach.”¹²³ Indeed, one of the commercials shown in this segment is for a new Chevy muscle car.

¹¹⁸ “In 2000, DDB was the station’s biggest contractor at \$456,000.” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/2003

¹¹⁹ *Chicago Tonight*, 2/2/04.

¹²⁰ REPORT OF THE APA TASK FORCE ON ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN Section: Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood, 2004. <http://www.apa.org/releases/childrenads.pdf>

¹²¹ *Chicago Tonight* 2/2/04

¹²² *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 6/6/99

¹²³ Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising*, Routledge, 1990. p. 78.

According to the guests themselves, good advertising “sells the brand, it creates a really positive feeling towards the brand which I think is the point.”¹²⁴ Advertisers “want people talking about their advertising...and *feeling good about their brands*.”¹²⁵ Accordingly, this very segment of *Chicago Tonight* functioned in many ways as a commercial itself. The advertisers associated their brands with the “good cause” of public broadcasting and showed their commercials to that “hard to reach” PBS audience, all while enjoying complete insulation from troubling ethical questions that might raise doubts about their brands.

If “the point” is not in-depth journalism, but merely creating “a really positive feeling towards the brand,” then this segment certainly fulfilled its purpose. The absence of critical analysis in this segment suggests to viewers that these controversial issues are not controversial at all – a false conclusion to be sure, but one that serves the needs of advertisers perfectly.

A further example of *Chicago Tonight* programming serving as a promotional vehicle can be found in a 9/5/03 Bob Sirott interview with Chicago White Sox Executive Advisor Roland Hemond and Chicago Cubs President and CEO Andy McPhail. The only guests were white male corporate representatives, and again the bounds of discussion matched the need of the corporate guests to promote their corporation. Bob Sirott never offered more than softball questions like “Is the first title that you win as an executive always the best?” In doing so, *Chicago Tonight* thus ensured these two sports corporations an ideal forum to present their brands without the risk of fielding any difficult questions about the corporation’s responsibility to those who subsidize them.

Such questions are, however, a major issue to the public, as was expressed by angry fans at a 1/24 “Sox Fest” PR event. Interestingly, this issue did break through in a 2/6 Week in Review segment. WBEZ’s Carlos Hernandez Gomez asked Mike North of SCORE Sports Radio “Isn’t the entire White Sox organization the epitome of Joe Sixpack being sold out to the big sports interests?” “There is no question,” responded North. “They’re sold out...” North’s further response was cut off by host Joel Weisman, “What should sports be? ...Is an owner supposed to lose money?” This may be a fair question, challenging North to explain his reasoning, and in the two-minute discussion that followed, critical views of the Sox management were briefly expressed. In contrast, during the thirty minute interview with a White Sox top executive, not one single such challenging question was asked. As in the segment on Super Bowl commercials, the interview with Cubs/Sox executives was of great promotional value to the subject but of minimal, if any, value to the public interest.

Promotion as Content, Targeting the Affluent

¹²⁴ Jonathan Hoffman, Leo Burnett. *Chicago Tonight* 9/23/03, 31:20

¹²⁵ Bob Scarpelli, DDB Chicago. *Chicago Tonight* 9/23/03, 37:43

Academics have long identified the blending of advertising with programming as a characteristic of “narrowcasting” (programming targeted to a narrow audience). According to University of Massachusetts at Amherst Professor Sut Jhally, “Because of the specialized nature of the audience, the point of reference upon which both advertisements and programmes draw is very similar.” Consequently, the ‘blurring’ of news and ads “is enormously *intensified* by the move to narrowcasting.”¹²⁶

The use of content to promote corporations, products, or other WTTW programs was a recurring pattern throughout *Chicago Tonight*. In almost all cases, the beneficiary of this promotional coverage was industry or corporations. This content often featured services that only the wealthy can utilize.

A welcome exception to this pattern were the numerous theater reviews, always featuring local productions, and often featuring theater companies with little, if any, corporate funding. Such coverage provides a way for local people to know more about local independent cultural activities, and goes beyond the limited coverage given by mainstream commercial media, especially television.

Film reviews, on the other hand, almost always showcase the products of major corporate conglomerates. In addition, film reviews are widely available in the commercial media, so there is no reason to use scarce public media space to duplicate it. Similarly, restaurant reviews on *Chicago Tonight* duplicate content available in commercial media. Considering that WTTW already has a weekly prime time restaurant review program, *Check Please!*, including such content on *Chicago Tonight* only further limits the time available for important information that viewers are unable to get elsewhere.

Explicitly promotional content on *Chicago Tonight* included several segments that simply showcased businesses. Typical was a 9/3/03 segment where viewers were introduced to the products and services of an advertising photography company that makes and uses “fake food” in its photos. A 2/10/04 segment profiled “Selective Search,” a dating service for the ultra-affluent. Business owner Barbie Adler explained that her service will “screen out the riff-raff.” Clients are people “of substance and style. You have a tailor and a personal shopper.”¹²⁷ This second example also shows us programming designed to cater to the needs of the wealthy, as obviously no one else can utilize the service promoted.

We also found instances where segments purporting to focus on more important issues devolved into business profiles. On 9/17/03, a serious news story covering the recent flux of movie theater closings around Chicago blurred into a profile of a new upscale suburban theater. The segment included photographs of the suburban Woodridge theater, which is also a restaurant and bar. While *Chicago Tonight* host Bob Sirott observed, “this is pretty plush!” issues relevant to the public interest were apparently beyond his vision. For example,

¹²⁶ Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising*, Routledge, 1990. p. 91. Italics original.

¹²⁷ *Chicago Tonight*, 2/10/04

though guests on the panel reported that it is the corporate film distributors who determine which theaters will be allowed to show which films and that “the major chains” are pushing “the big megaplexes,” Sirott never asked about issues of media concentration and cross-ownership.¹²⁸ Again the lack of public interest representation was accompanied by the blurring of news information with corporate promotion.

Even worse, a 2/10/04 story occasioned by the closing of the Brach’s candy factory skipped the issues of local job losses and economic analysis to instead offer a nostalgic look at the art of candy making. With sources limited to three white men who own candy factories, and content including locations where viewers can buy candy, promotion seemed to be the unabashed purpose of the segment.

Other episodes of corporate promotion include stories on the Emmy awards (9/22/03), the Grammy awards (2/5/04), and the above-mentioned Super Bowl commercials (2/2/04).

The depth that promotional information has integrated into programming on *Chicago Tonight* is profound. Sometimes programming with strong promotional aspects served specific parties repeatedly. Coverage that served strongly to promote “big sports interests” was endemic throughout the study period. As noted in the quantitative section above, ‘sports’ was the topic of 16 segments during the study period, an average of 2.7 segments per week – much of which functioned entirely or partially as promotion. The Chicago Bears were even the subject of a regular *Chicago Tonight* feature “Bears Alumni Club.”¹²⁹ On 9/22, the exciting ‘Bears-Packers rivalry’ was the subject of two back-to-back segments. While of obvious promotional value for the upcoming Bears-Packers game and the Bears brand in general, the coverage also promoted the WTTW show “Rivals” (again on the Bears-Packers rivalry) that aired on WTTW later that same night.

Among the most disturbing examples of promo and corporate service in *Chicago Tonight*’s sports coverage can be seen in reporting on Soldier Field, the new publicly funded Bears stadium. Two segments in the same week focused on the opening of the controversial new stadium. Amazingly, neither segment mentioned that two thirds of the total \$606 million construction was paid with public funds.¹³⁰ The first story (9/15/03), according to Bob Sirott, was on “the good seats, the really good seats” – meaning luxury skybox seats costing between \$250,000 - \$300,000 a year. Despite relevant ongoing public debate, there was no examination of the ethics involved in using public funds to create luxury entertainment, nor were there critics or outside perspectives invited to speak. In this instance, we have a program designed to reach the affluent, uncritically presenting a commodity that can only be utilized by the affluent.

¹²⁸ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/17/03

¹²⁹ Another corporation receiving a regular weekly segment is the business magazine *Crain’s Chicago Business*.

¹³⁰ *Associated Press*, 9/4/03

Critics were again not invited to the 9/18/03 “Hello Soldier Field” segment. In fact, the only source cited was the Bears Corporation. In this inexcusably promotional segment, reporter Elizabeth Brackett gushed over the new stadium, calling the park “lovely” and “beautiful” and repeatedly stating that people will be “blown away.” “Once people get inside they’re really going to like it,” said Brackett, sounding more like a representative of the Bears Corporation than an objective journalist. By the end of the piece, all objectivity was lost as Brackett presented unexamined promises from the Bears Corporation as fact, “they really are going to have this stadium for all the people of Chicago and not just Bears fans.”¹³¹

Controversy surrounding the new Soldier Field was presented as if it had only been an issue of “sight lines” and exterior aesthetics. “You know, there’s been so much criticism, and legitimately so, of the exterior, but once you’re inside it is pretty spectacular,” said Brackett.

With this level of service is it any surprise that the Bears Corporation has ongoing ties to WTTW? While WTTW has not released a complete list of corporate contributors and advertisers, WTTW’s own website credits the Bears support for the children’s program *Money Farm*.¹³² In addition, former Bears president and CEO, Michael McCaskey, is a member of the WTTW Board of Trustees.¹³³

As this example indicates, some *Chicago Tonight* segments were unbalanced in a way that directly favored entities financially connected to WTTW, indicating at least the appearance of conflict of interest.

Other instances where programming benefited parties with financial connections to WTTW include a 9/16/03 segment on the opening of Eurex – a new futures exchange directly competing with the Chicago Board of Trade. There was no disclosure to viewers that two of WTTW’s trustees are professionally connected to the Chicago Board of Trade. More disturbing, while Eurex executives appeared in taped statements, the live discussion was reserved for the Chicago Board of Trade and Mercantile Exchange representatives. Not surprisingly, the ensuing discussion was totally unbalanced.

On the positive side, despite a WTTW trustee with professional connections to Exelon Energy Delivery corporation, on 1/29/04 *Chicago Tonight* did present a critical segment regarding public and professional opposition to Exelon’s downstate nuclear facility.

The most glaring example of advertiser influence over content involves The Tribune Company.

¹³¹ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/15/03

¹³² <http://www.wttw.com/moneyfarm/credits.html> - *Money Farm* was also underwritten by BankOne Corporation.

¹³³ <http://www.wttw.com/about/trustees.html>

The Tribune Company is an advertiser on *Chicago Tonight* and also has received extremely favorable treatment from *Chicago Tonight*. The Chicago Cubs, a Tribune holding, were the focus of at least four stories during the survey period.¹³⁴ More importantly was how *Chicago Tonight* covered an issue of tremendous value to The Tribune Company, namely changes to Federal Communication Commission rules on media ownership. Announced in June 2003, these rule changes would allow a single media corporation to reach 45%¹³⁵ of a given market area, whereas current rules place the cap at 34%. The rule changes would also lift a bon on cross-ownership of radio and TV stations. As Chicago Media Action reported, the Tribune has been heavily promoting these rule changes. “[O]ne key reason is because the Tribune is already violating the rule in Los Angeles, New York, South Florida, and Hartford, Conn. In Hartford, the Tribune owns the Hartford Courant and two Hartford TV stations. The Connecticut Attorney General has publicly threatened to bring an antitrust suit against the Tribune.”¹³⁶ As of 2003, Tribune holdings includes 22 television stations, 3 cable stations, a radio station (WGN), 12 newspapers, 4 syndication companies, 20 magazines, The Chicago Cubs, 10 publishing companies, 9 internet companies, and millions of dollars invested across more than a dozen other companies.¹³⁷

The rule changes are highly controversial and have generated between 2 and 3 million letters and emails of opposition from the public. Far from a highly active minority, polls indicate that 77% of the public is opposed to rule changes that would allow big media to get bigger.¹³⁸ *Chicago Tonight*, however, chose only one source for reporting and analysis on the FCC – *The Chicago Tribune*.

Deferring analysis to a single entity whose interests are directly involved in the topic of coverage would seem to be an obvious violation of journalistic standards of balance and fairness. But that is exactly what *Chicago Tonight* did. On a 9/5/03 Week in Review segment, host Joel Weisman asked *Tribune* reporter David Greising to “explain the FCC ruling and how it affects media in Chicago.” The panel of professional journalists acknowledged the conflicted position of the *Tribune* reporter by laughing when Griesing momentarily tripped over his own words, “...Tribune Company, my owner, well, my employer...” The panel laughed again when *Chicago Tonight* host Weisman asked, “So, would you say...the Tribune Co. is like an oligopoly? Because they control a TV station, a radio station, a cable station and a newspaper?” Greising, himself laughing now, responded, “Your words, Sir, not mine. They’re a good public service, er, institution.”

¹³⁴ 09/05/03, 09/08/03, 09/11/03, 02/09/04

¹³⁵ Additionally, an exception for UHF may actually allow up to 90% of US viewers. *New York Times*, 5/13/03, and FAIR Action Alert, 6/18/03, <http://www.fair.org/activism/rollback-fcc.html>.

¹³⁶ Mitchell Szczepanczyk, *Third Coast Press*, January 2004

¹³⁷ Caslon Analytics, <http://www.ketupa.net/tribune1.htm>

¹³⁸ Cooper, p. 30.

Presenting a conflict of interest as a laughing matter cannot be described as serious journalism – nor can we describe relying on a single source with a large financial stake as in-depth journalism.

The hard fact is that all newspaper markets, including Chicago, are already highly concentrated,¹³⁹ and Chicago TV markets are moderately concentrated.¹⁴⁰ Any change in ownership that does not bring in new owners only increases the monopoly power of the existing firms. The issue of concern is obvious, “[m]edia monopolists can use their market power to influence content or policy directly.”¹⁴¹ In addition, we know that this power is used. Systematic research of local news content has found, “objectivity violations” consistently “serving the self interest of the news organization or its parent corporation.”¹⁴²

In just this same way, the *Chicago Tribune* used its editorial page to advocate in favor of FCC rule changes that would directly benefit the parent corporation.¹⁴³ While it is no surprise that *Chicago Tribune* sources failed to raise this issue, *Chicago Tonight* hosts also failed to disclose this fact to viewers. Chicago Media Action submitted a response to the Tribune’s 8/3/03 editorial, stating, “If the FCC’s rule changes were implemented, a single corporation would be allowed to own two TV stations, eight radio stations and the dominant newspaper in a city the size of New York or Chicago. And since many radio stations and an increasing number of TV stations no longer maintain their own news operations, that means just one company--indeed, one staff--could end up providing the majority of local news for a city of millions.”¹⁴⁴ *The Tribune* chose not to print this letter.

While *Chicago Tonight* could not find the space to examine the actual details of the FCC rule changes, let alone the questionable ethics of the *Chicago Tribune* editorial, they did find space for an entire segment on the ethics of sportscasters wearing team logos during broadcasts.¹⁴⁵ Fortunately, it was during this segment that *Daily Herald* journalist Ted Cox pointed out the obvious. Regarding the “journalistic ethics” of sportscaster jerseys, Cox concluded that “a much bigger problem” was “the *Tribune* using their editorial page to argue for FCC reforms that clearly benefit the Tribune Company....”¹⁴⁶ Fitting the pattern we are now familiar with, rather than examine this issue, Bob Sirott made a joke.

The “unmistakable impact” of media concentration, according to professor Mark Cooper, is loss of information of local importance, and the loss of local

¹³⁹ Cooper, p. 178

¹⁴⁰ *Key Facts About Media Markets in America*, Consumer’s Union, Consumer Federation of America, May 2003.

¹⁴¹ Cooper, p. 39

¹⁴² McManus, J., “How Objective is Local Television News?,” *Mass Communications Review*, 1991. Cited in Cooper, p. 47

¹⁴³ “Big Media Confusion Reigns,” *Chicago Tribune*, 8/4/03

¹⁴⁴ Letter to Chicago Tribune Editors, Stephen Macek, Mitchell Szczepanczyk, Unpublished. <http://www.chicagomediaaction.org/news.php?id=75>

¹⁴⁵ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/17/03

¹⁴⁶ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/17/03

voices in the media discourse.¹⁴⁷ *Chicago Tonight's* coverage of FCC issues during our study demonstrates this process powerfully: the only source chosen to address how FCC ownership issues affect the local Chicago Metropolitan Area were representatives of a national media conglomerate with major Chicago holdings and a direct financial stake in the issue.

War

Few topics could be of greater importance to the functioning of a democracy than the decision of going to war. It is crucial that the public understand the issues and the evidence so as to weigh the truth of claims raised by politicians and opponents. The choice of sources on this topic must also be broad enough to include a wide range of analysis and evidence. However, this simply did not happen on *Chicago Tonight*. The source list was exclusive of critical voices, "tough questions" were not asked with consistency or pursued to the depth necessary to make alternative perspectives understandable.

Across the four segments that specifically addressed the topic of war, the sources chosen to speak on *Chicago Tonight* were all white, none of whom were from citizen activist or public interest groups. The sources were Clinton Defense Secretary William Cohen, former Sen. George Mitchell, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Joseph Ralston (9/11/03), Sen. Joseph Lieberman (9/18/03), NPR Baghdad Correspondent Anne Garrels (9/24/03), and Clinton Secretary of State Madeline Albright (9/25/03). Cohen and Ralston are both part of "The Cohen Group," a firm providing consulting service to international business. Mitchell is a partner at Piper Rudnick. *Chicago Tonight* failed to disclose to viewers that Piper Rudnick and The Cohen Group enjoy a "strategic alliance"¹⁴⁸ and have clients in the defense industry.¹⁴⁹ In addition, The Cohen Group boasts of having "Advised and assisted U.S. company in working with U.S. Government officials and the Coalition Provisional Authority in securing major contract related to Iraq reconstruction."¹⁵⁰ These are not "objective" sources, but rather they are self-described "advocates"¹⁵¹ working for the very corporations directly benefiting from both the US occupation of Iraq and US war policy generally. Indeed, Ralston, Mitchell and Cohen were all in Chicago for a meeting with the American Corporate Counsel Association, a fact that *Chicago Tonight* did disclose to viewers.

Fulfilling the pattern already described, corporate and government elites were given a forum insulated from critics and the challenging analysis such sources would bring to the discourse. The unsurprising result is a monotony of

¹⁴⁷ Cooper, p. 53, 54.

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.piperrudnick.com/about/home.html>

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.cohengroup.net/clients.html>, http://www.piperrudnick.com/Aerospace_and_Defense

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.cohengroup.net/success.html>

¹⁵¹ "Piper Rudnick's and The Cohen Group's joint Iraq Task Force...is recognized in numerous publications as one of the most influential advocates in the nation's capital."

http://www.piperrudnick.com/Iraq_Reconstruction

similar analysis. Though there was some disagreement of whether the US was “safer” after the war on Iraq, the sources all presented a remarkably similar analysis. Mitchell justified the war on the basis that Iraq under Hussein “was a brutal regime that should have been changed” but “there was inadequate planning” in the post invasion phase.¹⁵² Though “disappointed and surprised at how unprepared President Bush was...after Saddam Hussein fell,” Leiberman concluded, “I think we did the right thing...this was a brutal dictator.”¹⁵³ Albright also supported “getting Saddam out of there” while criticizing “the timing of the war” and “lack of preparation for the post-war situation.”¹⁵⁴

Among the sources there was also agreement that the lack of weapons of mass destruction, upon which the war policy was based, is not an important issue. According to Cohen, “the finding of the weapons will not be particularly important to the American people, it will be very important to the international community in terms of if we seek to take action in the future.”¹⁵⁵ This was the boundary of critical examination given to popular discontent and opposition to the war.

Though Saddam Hussein’s atrocious criminal acts were of course mentioned, the documented support of the United States enabling those very crimes was not mentioned.¹⁵⁶ Also beyond the bounds of discussion was the large number of Iraqi civilian casualties – at the time of the discussion, between 5,000 and 10,000 civilians had been killed in Iraq.¹⁵⁷

All the sources share a common set of basic interests. The only source not directly connected to the government or to corporations profiting from the war was NPR reporter Anne Garrels. Amazingly, *Chicago Tonight* did not ask Garrels about missing WMD, popular discontent, or civilian casualties. Right in line with the assumptions of government and corporate representatives, however, Garrels also justified the war on the basis of Hussein’s brutal (“Stalinist”) regime while criticizing the lack of post war planning in regards to Iraqi infrastructure.¹⁵⁸ This interview did little or nothing to provide additional context, perspective, or evidence that would help viewers understand the cause or effects of the war and the occupation.

Capable sources from public interest or citizen activist could certainly have broadened the range of analysis and perspective in these discussions. These sources were available, their exclusion was purely the choice of *Chicago Tonight* producers.

¹⁵² *Chicago Tonight*, 9/11/03

¹⁵³ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/18/03

¹⁵⁴ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/25/03

¹⁵⁵ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/11/03

¹⁵⁶ For an example regarding US support of Hussein’s Iraq even during his use of chemical weapons, see Patrick E. Tyler, “Reagan Aided Iraq Despite Use of Gas,” *New York Times*, 8/18/2002.

¹⁵⁷ *Guardian*, 6/13/03. See also *Independent*, 2/9/04, *Associated Press*, Thursday, December 11th, 2003

¹⁵⁸ *Chicago Tonight*, 9/24/03

Elections

There is significant academic consensus about the functions media fulfills for democratic elections. First, media needs to provide a two-way flow of communication, “a conduit of information between citizens and Candidates....”¹⁵⁹ Second, media sets the agenda for the public discourse. As Cooper describes it, “the press structures the discourse of political campaigns by emphasizing certain topics over others.”¹⁶⁰

In regards the two flow of communication between citizens and candidates, commercial media is failing to bring forward the information needed by citizens to understand the issues. For example, a study of print coverage leading up to the 1988 presidential elections found that two-thirds of coverage was devoted to campaign strategy and only one-third devoted to issues. The study also found *The New York Times* “filling less than 20% of its campaign ‘news hole’ with issues by November.”¹⁶¹ In addition, a 2002 study of televised news across the fifty biggest media markets found only 37% provided any coverage of elections at all.¹⁶²

Candidates are reluctant to address issues. The choices reporters make in deciding which topics to emphasize in election coverage often makes this problem worse. Contemporary election coverage marginalizes political issues and politicizes peripheral issues. The reason is understandable enough: to maximize profit. Commercial news needs “to find and maintain the audience’s attention” and thus drives the reporting style away from making issues understandable and towards “exaggeration and emotionalism at the expense of analysis.”¹⁶³ The priorities become “scandal” and “horse race” elections. As Cooper concludes, “Who wins and loses is much easier to portray than the complexities of what is at stake.”¹⁶⁴

This is now a consistent characteristic of election journalism, as evidenced by a 2000 study finding that 93% of presidential news stories across 49 major television stations “were about the horse race or the tactics of the campaign as opposed to what the candidates stood for [or] how their proposals might affect people locally.”¹⁶⁵ Inevitably this disengages voters from participation in politics –

¹⁵⁹ Cooper, p. 56. Sources cited include, Graber, Doris, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1997); Paletz, David L., *The Media in American Politics: Contents and Consequences* (New York: Longman, 1999); Just, Marion R., Ann N. Crigler, Dean F. Alger, Timothy E. Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West, *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kahn, Kim F. and Patrick J. Kenney, *The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁶⁰ Cooper, p. 56. Sources cited include Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); McCombs and Shaw.

¹⁶¹ Marjorie Hershey, “The Campaign and the Media,” in Gerald M. Pomper ed., *The Election of 1988*. Chatham NJ, Chatham House Publishers, 1989. Cited in Bennett, *The Governing Crisis*, p. 25-26.

¹⁶² *Washington Post*, 11/2/02. *Electronic Media*, 10/21/02, p. 2. Cited in McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, p. 126.

¹⁶³ Cooper, p. 87

¹⁶⁴ Cooper, p. 87

¹⁶⁵ *Brill’s Content*, 2/2001. Cited in McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, p. 126.

specifically “diminish[ing] their desire to vote.”¹⁶⁶ Voter turnout has fallen from 70% in 1960 to just over 50% in the 2000 presidential election.¹⁶⁷ The 2002 congressional turnout was just over 30%.¹⁶⁸

Coverage of the Illinois Senate race on *Chicago Tonight* strongly displayed these characteristics associated with commercial media. This is not surprising considering that all on-camera sources in the Senate race segments surveyed were professional journalists, nine of eleven from the commercial press. Further encouraging an elite perspective, nine of eleven sources were white and eight of eleven were male.¹⁶⁹ Coverage of the Senate race generated only one full segment, and two discussions during Week In Review segments. The topics consistently emphasized were scandal, strategy, and horse race – issues were never explored for more than a sentence or two.

During the 1/28/04 segment covering a debate by democratic candidates, issues were strongly marginalized. While candidate Joyce Washington was criticized for having “no specifics on the major proposals” by candidates, at no time did *Chicago Tonight* inform viewers as to what these “major proposals” actually were. Even more glaring, though two guests stated that candidate Nancy Skinner “has ideas that just jump out of her” such as “concrete ways to increase funding for schools” the actual contents of the ideas and “concrete” plans were not discussed at all.

Campaigns “where there’s not a lot of difference on issues,” reasoned guest Greg Hinz from *Crain’s Chicago Business*, “focuses the race on issues of personality.”¹⁷⁰ However, according to guests in that same segment, candidates had presented “major proposals” and at least one candidate had “concrete” ideas for funding schools. Contrary to Hinz’s conclusion, in this instance it was the choices made by reporters that “focuse[d] the race on issues of personality.” Demonstrating this, *Sun-Times* reporter Lynne Sweet offered agenda setting advice to candidate Maria Pappas during a 9/5/03 Week In Review discussion. More important than reaching out to base supporters at “ethnic picnics and organizations,” Sweet advised, “go out and leverage what you have to sell, which in your case is...personality.”

For their part, *Chicago Tonight* hosts did nothing to bring the discourse around to the actual issues. Here are some of the questions asked: “Can we expect to see some dirt start coming out?,” “Tell us a little more about the dirt...,” “Does anyone have traction at this point?”¹⁷¹ Rather than detailed consideration

¹⁶⁶ Cooper, p. 90

¹⁶⁷ McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, p. 125.

¹⁶⁸ Cooper, p. 91

¹⁶⁹ Sources for senate coverage: 09/05/03: Lester Munssen - *Sports Illustrated*; David Greising - *Chicago Tribune*; Lynne Sweet - *Chicago Sun-Times*; Linda Lenz - *Catalyst Magazine*. 01/28/04: Craig Delaware - WBBM Radio 780; Kirsten McQuery - *Daily Southtown*; Greg Hinz - *Crain's Chicago Business*. 02/06/04: Carlos Hernandez-Gomez; WBEZ Public Radio; Andy Shaw - ABC 7 News; Steve Johnson - *Chicago Tribune*; Mike North - SCORE Sports Radio.

¹⁷⁰ *Chicago Tonight*, 1/28/04

¹⁷¹ Phil Ponce, *Chicago Tonight* 1/28/04.

of the contents and effects of candidate proposals for the lives of voters, *Chicago Tonight* hosts guided the discourse towards a detailed examination of “who’s come out on top?” as host Joel Weisman asked on 2/6/04, or “Picking a Contender” as the discussion was labeled on 9/5/04. As Professor Matthew Miller wrote in *Columbia Journalism Review*, “if the press doesn’t create the unseriousness that pervades public life today, it doesn’t do nearly enough to challenge it.”¹⁷²

Since this type of coverage does not bring forward much information about how any candidate proposals will really affect the lives of voters, there is really little incentive for voters to pay attention. After all, while voters were regularly discussed in *Chicago Tonight*’s regular election coverage, they never participated in the discussion.

Lacking input from members of the public and marginalizing issues facing voters, journalists leave the election – and therefore the character of government – to be determined by those with the most money to spend. As ABC TV 7 journalist Andy Shaw put it, “Money is virtually everything in perceiving who future leaders are.”¹⁷³ Journalistic practices that exclude basic issues from discussion can only encourage such a trend.

If instead of creating segments that only show the views of journalists on matters of elections, *Chicago Tonight* also regularly included members of the public and representatives from public interest organizations, this situation could actually be improved in several key ways. First, seeing people like themselves discussing issues that matter to them is an obvious incentive for people to pay attention. Second, public interest representatives could bring forward challenging and relevant information that helps the public to understand the issues. Third, programming of this type would raise public perspectives and crucial issues to the attention of candidates and to greater prominence in the broader public and media discourse. This is undoubtedly closer to the way that media *needs* to work in a democratic society. As Edwin Baker wrote, “given the practical gap between citizens and policy makers, the press should make policy makers aware of the content and strength of people’s demands.”¹⁷⁴

At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that *Chicago Tonight* coverage of the Illinois Senate race was undoubtedly the most extensive of any local television station. This fact was honestly stated by ABC’s Shaw during the 2/6/04 Week In Review segment. “Local TV, we haven’t been covering the Senate race. We’ve been too busy with the trucking scandal,” said Shaw referring to a local patronage scandal involving the Mayor’s office. However, the Senate race also took a back seat to the trucking scandal on *Chicago Tonight*. The already widely

¹⁷² *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2003

¹⁷³ *Chicago Tonight*, 2/6/04

¹⁷⁴ Baker, C. Edwin, *Media, Markets and Democracy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. Cited in Cooper, p. 41

reported trucking scandal was the topic of seven *Chicago Tonight* segments compared to one segment dedicated to the Senate race.¹⁷⁵

Of critical importance, though outside of the range of our study, *Chicago Tonight* dedicated two consecutive episodes in their entirety to live in studio candidate debates, moderated by host Phil Ponce.¹⁷⁶ This type of coverage is totally distinctive from that of local commercial television, which is typically averse to long form, political debate. In 2000, for example, “60% of candidate debates were not televised at all, and almost half of those that were televised appeared on public broadcasting stations.”¹⁷⁷

Considering that the majority of the vast funds spent on elections go to purchase advertising on those same commercial media broadcast outlets – increasing from \$210 million in 1982 to \$1 billion in 2002¹⁷⁸ – there is no incentive for commercial stations to offer such coverage for free. More and more it is up to public broadcasting to present this important information. These facts strongly indicate the *need* for public broadcasting, and that the form of funding for public broadcasting must be independent of corporate or governmental manipulation.

Conclusion

By predominantly featuring white males from the institutional and corporate sector *Chicago Tonight* fails to provide a significant alternative to commercial TV news. By presenting more entertainment and sports than hard news, *Chicago Tonight* fails to provide a real alternative to programming available on commercial channels. By heavily promoting specific companies and their products on WTTW, the show exhibits yet more similarities to commercial news. Lastly, the fact that the largest number of *Chicago Tonight* guests are themselves corporate journalists indicates commonality with corporate media and not independence.

One place where we do see a significant difference from commercial news is that *Chicago Tonight* does not significantly offer stories on crime and violence. According to a study of local news in 52 metropolitan areas, stories focusing “on violent events that can elicit powerful reactions from the audience” make up over 40% of the average news broadcast.¹⁷⁹

Another distinguishing feature of *Chicago Tonight* is the long format of segments. Whereas in commercial news most topics are dealt with in a matter of two minutes or less, *Chicago Tonight* will devote up to thirty minutes on a single topic. It is vitally important to have long form discussions on public affairs. Democracy is founded on the process of open deliberation. However, long-format

¹⁷⁵ Segments dedicated to the senate race appeared on 1/28, and within a 2/6 Week In Review segment. Segments dedicated to the “Hired Trucks Scandal” appeared on: 1/27, 2/2, 2/3, 2/4, 2/9, 2/10, and within the same 2/6 Week In Review segment.

¹⁷⁶ *Chicago Tonight*, 3/4/04 and 3/5/04.

¹⁷⁷ McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, p. 127. Citing *The Political Standard*, 7/02, p. 6.

¹⁷⁸ *Brill's Content*, 2/2001. Cited in Cited in McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, p. 126.

¹⁷⁹ *Not In The Public Interest*, Executive Summary, Rocky Mountain Media Watch, 1998.

televised discussion is of little value to a democratic society if the debate is restricted to conventional or official wisdom.

What is the viewer's experience in watching *Chicago Tonight*? How does an African-American woman feel when presented with a panel of white reporters and white businessmen discussing the economy? Does she change the channel? Where else could she turn for a substantive long format discussion? She may notice that she hears most often from these sources in the news and she may very well suspect there is a truth beyond their words. Her suspicions deserve to be considered. Even more so, her interests deserve to be represented on the airwaves that belong to her as a citizen of the republic whose regulations and subsidies determine the very form of broadcasting.

The question of who is allowed to speak through media provides an undeniable indication of whose interests are served by media. Democratic media must articulate the interests of the people. Jon Russwurm and Rev. Samuel Cornish, the founders of the first African-American owned newspaper in the United States, eloquently addressed this point in 1827. "We wish to plead our own cause, too long have others spoken for us. From the press and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrectly represented."¹⁸⁰

The First Amendment has little meaning if we indulge ourselves by thinking that one group can speak for another, that corporations can speak for the interests of the people. As the Supreme Court ruled in 1945, "Freedom of the press from governmental interference under the First Amendment does not sanction repression of that freedom by private interests."¹⁸¹

Suggestions For Action

The effort to reform public broadcasting must be rooted in the communities of the poor and working class - communities which are not served by mainstream, commercial broadcast media outlets.

There are several existing models we might use as examples for action, including:

1. The independent public TV station WYBE in Philadelphia. It is heavily oriented toward serving various ethnic and racial groups. Its schedule includes independent film airings and call-in shows. The station has twelve advisory boards, each representing a different group - African-Americans, Arab Americans, GLBT, Jews, Asian Americans and so on. These boards are called the World Heritage Council and have direct input into what goes on the air. The station receives some funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, but is not a member of PBS. Commercialism on WYBE-TV is negligible.
2. The Pacifica Network has recently heavily revamped its bylaws; now, audience members, in combination with station management, elect the members of the national Pacifica board.

¹⁸⁰ Cited by Juan Gonzalez, President of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. <http://play.rbn.com/?url=demnow/demnow/demand/2004/july/audio/dn20040702.ra&proto=rtsp&start=13:24.18>

¹⁸¹ *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1, 20 (1945), Cited in Cooper, p. 18.

3. San Francisco station KQED-TV has had a member-elected board since its inception in the fifties.

Chicago Media Action expects that the information contained in this study will be a catalyst for change. Hopefully, it will stimulate ideas that will lead to much-needed reform.

Submitted below for the reader's consideration are several suggested areas where future attention should be focused:

Creating a WTTW accountable to the poor and the working class.

To create a regular conduit for public opinion and input, it has been proposed to WTTW that there be a monthly series of live town hall meetings, which may include documentaries, on WTTW during the prime time evening hours. People from the community whose views have, up to now, had little or no representation on WTTW would organize these programs.

Creating financial accountability

WTTW has been asked by representatives from the Chicago community to submit to a regular government audit because the public has the right, and the obligation, to inquire when public money is being spent.

Creating an elected Board of Trustees

Currently the WTTW Board of Trustees elect themselves with no public input or accountability. The proposed WTTW Board of Trustees would be elected by the entire population of the Chicago area which should be served by WTTW, rather than by just the relatively small and non-representative group of people who are currently subscribing to WTTW.

Creating independent sources of funding for public TV

A national public television trust fund has been suggested. Several ideas have been proposed - including the idea of charging the commercial TV stations for their use of the public airwaves and then using that money to pay for public television. The objective would be to eliminate advertiser and government control over the program content on public television. Most importantly, the issue of advertising to children on public television should be addressed by this funding solution. A carefully chosen commission could be created to investigate and recommend specific reforms on a national basis.

Solving WTTW's funding problems on a local level

It has been recommended to WTTW that a completely independent commission evaluate and make recommendations regarding the following proposed solutions to WTTW's funding dilemma:

- a) Creating more diverse programming which serves the communities now being underserved by WTTW, thus creating a NEW and wider pool of viewers who will financially support the station. It has been proposed to WTTW that there be regular

Chicago Tonight segments and/or a half-hour political commentary/talk show produced by WTTW and co-hosted by local African-American journalists Cliff Kelley and Salim Muwakkil.

- b) Establishing a WTTW Board of Trustees which is elected by the public, in order to increase public participation and support of the station.

Public television was originally intended to be commercial-free. Public television was founded to represent the interest of the public and is obligated to do so. We believe that the proposed solutions listed above will help to resolve some of these conflicting obligations.