

Chicago Tonight: Elites, Affluence, and Advertising

A report by Chicago Media Action

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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

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 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.

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

⁴ *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 7/27/03

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.

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