



# IN THE PRESS

## Radio Journalism in North Carolina: Listening for Less News

by Jack Betts

*This regular feature of Insight examines how the news media—newspapers, television, and radio stations—cover public affairs in North Carolina. In this issue, Insight examines radio journalism and how it has fared in an era of deregulation and intense competition within the commercial radio industry.*

In the waning days of Jimmy Carter's presidency, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) handed down an order that is still reverberating throughout the broadcasting industry—and which has had a dramatic effect on the amount and, some say, the quality of news that America's citizens get via the radio. Just a week before Ronald Reagan took over the White House, the FCC adopted an order scrapping its long-standing requirements for a minimum amount of news and public affairs programming for any commercial station licensed to do business in the United States.<sup>1</sup> For years, AM radio stations had been required to air at least 8 percent such "non-entertainment" programming; FM stations had been required to commit 6 percent of their air time to news, information, and other public affairs material.

But all that changed on Jan. 14, 1981, when the FCC deregulated radio. In the ensuing six years, radio stations across the country have cut back on their news operations—paring down the number of daily newscasts, cutting the length of newscasts, cutting newsroom budgets, and all too often, cutting news entirely. Other stations have dropped a once-proud tradition of strong local reporting in favor of "rip 'n read" journalism—saddling disc jockeys and announcers with the job of reading wire copy right off the Associated

Press or United Press International teletypes, or subscribing to "canned" news networks that may be played over the airwaves without further effort by local stations. The long-standing tradition of radio news excellence—what Edward R. Murrow called "that most satisfying and rewarding instrument"<sup>2</sup>—is in jeopardy in North Carolina. "Deregulation was the culprit that is doing us in," says one prominent Raleigh radio journalist, who asked not to be identified for fear of losing his job. "We've had a wholesale decline in the number of self-operated radio news staffs, and no one knows how far it's going to go."

John Wheeling, a veteran of WCBS in New York and now news director of Raleigh's WRAL-FM and the N.C. News Network (NCNN), says of the industry in general, "We lost that hole card (the minimum news requirement) and the predictable happened—there no longer was a real reason to keep news programming at the same level. And since then, we have seen a significant if not alarming decrease in the amount of resources committed to radio news."

Even WRAL, which has a professional staff, has trimmed its newscasts, concentrating mainly on the "drive-time" during morning and evening rush hours. "Even though we've reduced the number of scheduled broadcast minutes," adds Wheeling, "our commitment is still there. We try to provide as broad a cross-section of news as we can."

---

*Jack Betts, associate editor of North Carolina Insight, is a former Washington and Raleigh correspondent for the Greensboro News & Record, a regular panelist on UNC-TV's "North Carolina This Week," and an occasional guest on various radio public affairs programs.*

What has happened in North Carolina mirrors a national trend. "Once the backbone of electronic journalism and the first source of live reporting, radio news is on the skids," reported *The New York Times* in December 1986. "Its decline in many cases reflects a deliberate retreat by station owners who see cutting news as an easy way to reduce costs. In other instances the trend reflects acquiescence to ambitious television stations that have used video and satellite technology to gain the edge in local news. Whatever the reasons, the number of all-news radio stations is dwindling, and many other stations that have maintained news staffs are eliminating or reducing them and the air time allotted to news."<sup>3</sup>

Does it make a difference whether radio covers the news? Consider: When the nuclear accident occurred at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979, 56 percent of the local residents found out about it from radio news—compared to about 14 percent from television and fewer still from newspapers. When Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was shot in 1968 while campaigning for the presidency, nearly 57 percent of the public heard about it on radio, while 20 percent got the word from television and 6 percent from newspapers. When Alabama Gov. George Wallace was shot while campaigning in Maryland in 1972, radio beat television by a four-to-one margin.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is no other medium on earth that can get the word out as quickly and to as many people as radio.

Yet, with fewer resources going to radio news, the public stands a greater chance of going without substantive coverage of dramatic, critical events. But what if there were a serious nuclear accident at the new Shearon Harris Nuclear Station near Raleigh? Or at the Catawba Station near Charlotte? Or a chemical spill in a critical watershed of Asheville? An oil spill off the coast of Wilmington? In those instances, radio news would play a critical role, but stations without a competent news staff might only confuse its listeners.

But emergency news is hardly radio's only role. The fact is that radio news operations also are important cogs in the reporting of many other types of stories—weather, school board, city council, courthouse, politics, and the entire range of public affairs. The same expertise that newspapers and television stations require is essential to an effective radio news operation. Yet few stations commit these types of resources to covering the news daily. There are, of course, major exceptions. In Raleigh, for instance, WPTF-AM, which always has had a strong commitment to news and public affairs, and WRAL-FM both regularly cover state government, the General Assembly, and other

important news. In other major radio markets, old-line stations like WBT and WSOC in Charlotte, WSJS in Winston-Salem, and WDNC in Durham remain committed to covering *local* and *regional* news, but only a few stations make a serious effort to cover state government news beyond the headlines. And in 1986, one of the oldest radio stations in the state, Greensboro's WBIG-AM, for years a mainstay of radio journalism in the Piedmont, went off the air when its owner, Jefferson-Pilot Communications, decided to staunch the flow of red ink.

The cutbacks in news operations around the state concern serious journalists who view the state's far-flung scattering of small radio stations as reporting *assets* as well as *outlets*. Sue Wilson, broadcast editor for the Associated Press Raleigh Bureau, puts it this way: "What scares me about this is that there are parts of the state where we don't know what is going on on a daily basis. There may be some giant story out there that we don't know about because there is no news reporter in the area."

North Carolina's journalistic community reflects its population—dispersed, traditionally more rural than urban, and concentrated in small towns. The state has literally scores of small newspapers—dailies, biweeklies and weeklies—but it has hundreds of radio stations scattered from the coast to the mountains. The 1986 Broadcasting Cablecasting Yearbook lists 361 radio stations operating in the state—225 of them AM stations, 136 of them FM stations.<sup>5</sup> But of these stations, how many have active news operations? No one knows, because the FCC no longer keeps statistics on radio news operations, nor do other industry groups.

John Harris, broadcast sales manager for the Associated Press in North Carolina, says the number of radio stations going without even a state wire service has increased over the years, partly because of deregulation and also partly because many old-line AM stations have been squeezed financially by the proliferation of FM stations. "A number of AM stations have gone dark (off the air) in recent years and I fully expect more to succumb in the next 10 years," he says. The AP now has 136 radio clients in North Carolina—a little more than a third of the radio stations operating. By contrast, the AP has as clients more than 90 percent of the television stations and the daily newspapers operating in North Carolina. These clients are AP members who exchange news stories and who pay a fee for AP services based on the size of circulation or audiences.

While the decline in radio journalism has cut the number of newscasts and of professional radio

journalists in the state, it has also strengthened one segment of the profession—the radio news network. The sole radio audio network operating in North Carolina is the N.C. News Network, a for-profit venture of Capitol Broadcasting Co. (Other audio services—from AP and UPI, and the Southern Farm Network operated by Durham Life Broadcasting Co.—are available, but they are not specifically designed *solely* for North Carolina listeners.) The N.C. News Network, says Wheeling, has nearly doubled its list of clients in the past three years, to about 100 users, although only about 30 stations carry every item that NCNN transmits. “We protect those stations which don’t have a wire machine or their own news staff,” says Wheeling. NCNN clients receive the service for free, save for the cost of transmission devices. NCNN revenues come from advertisements that client stations must broadcast along with newscasts.

Ernie Shultz, executive secretary of the Radio/Television News Directors Association in Washington, says the NCNN reflects another national trend—more regional newscasts. “There has been a swing from local radio news to regional news,” he says. But Shultz also says local radio news is in for a renaissance. “It may be that local radio news is about to be rediscovered,” he ventures.

Schultz may be whistling in the graveyard, but if he is, he’s got a lot of company: “I think the pendulum is starting to swing back,” says Wheeling of WRAL, “maybe not to the extent that we will be regulated again and required to have a minimum amount of news, but I think the news will reach an equilibrium.” Says Margaret Murchison of Sanford’s WWGP-AM, “Some stations perhaps had too many reporters originally, and some of them are still having trouble.” A veteran reporter, former president of the Associated Press Broadcasters Association, and currently secretary-treasurer of the Radio and Television News Directors Association of the Carolinas, Murchison senses that “radio news is on its way back.”

There are some encouraging trends. Harris of the Associated Press finds a new willingness on the part of FM stations—traditionally the stations which concentrate more on music than public affairs—to operate their own news departments. “For 10 years, most of these stations were in a strictly music-box format,” says Harris. “But now the FM stations, even the rockers, are going back and doing newscasts and two-man teams in drive-time with a lot of news and information.” Often this programming content includes “soft” news and lifestyle features—what the stations call “news you can use.”

Radio experts have long debated whether radio

news—like its television counterpart—can be a money-maker. Increasingly, industry officials have pointed out how radio news not only can make money, but also can help hold an audience for the station’s other programming. In an age where the populace is demanding more information about a variety of subjects, radio stations might well profit by beefing up their news and public affairs operations.

One way to help ensure that more—and better—information goes across the airways is to insist that local radio reporters do more digging. Tim Pittman, press secretary to Gov. Jim Martin, notes that his office gets regular calls from radio stations. But instead of asking hard questions of the Governor, or independently pursuing a news story, they usually call for an audio feed from the Governor’s weekly press conference. “They call to take whatever we can give them,” says Pittman. One reason for that is that too often, one-person news staffs must do everything—research, report, write, produce, and announce the news. And even at the larger radio stations, there rarely are “beat” reporters who cover one or two fields exclusively, as there are on newspapers and on television. There often is little time for a radio reporter to become an expert on, say, public education, or hazardous waste disposal.

Beefing up news staffs and newscasts, as well as insisting that radio reporters dig harder for the story, requires a renewed commitment from radio station owners and operators. And it will cost some cold, hard cash. But freeing up reporters to pursue difficult stories, with no guarantee that the story will pan out, has long been the mark of successful newspapers and, increasingly, of successful television news departments. When radio has re-committed itself to original newscasts and begins to assign reporters to probe behind the headlines and the blue smoke and mirrors, we’ll know that Edward R. Murrow’s “most satisfying and rewarding instrument” is indeed back where it belongs.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Report and Order of the Federal Communications Commission,” Broadcast Docket 79-218, Deregulation of AM and FM Radio, Jan. 14, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>“This Just Might Do Nobody Any Good,” address delivered by Edward R. Murrow to annual convention of the Radio/Television News Directors Association in Chicago, Oct. 15, 1958. This was Murrow’s major career speech on the broadcasting industry.

<sup>3</sup>“Fewer Radio Listeners Are Hearing the News,” by Reginald Stuart, *The New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1986, p. 12E.

<sup>4</sup>*Radio In The Television Age*, by Peter Fornatale and Joshua E. Mills, The Overlook Press, Woodstock, N.Y., 1980, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup>*Broadcasting Cablecasting Yearbook 1986*, Broadcast Publishing Inc., Washington, D.C., 1986, pp. B-200–B-212.