

News for the White & Wealthy

"America's most-watched public TV station" dominated by elite viewpoints

By James Owens & Scott Sanders

The flagship news and public affairs program of Chicago's PBS affiliate consistently caters to the interests of advertisers and underwriters, and the white affluent Chicagoans whom they seek to reach, a new study has found. Meanwhile, WTTW's **Chicago Tonight** ignores news and perspectives of interest to other constituencies, such as communities of color and the working class.

The overwhelming slant toward elite viewpoints calls into question the station's claim to be a "public" broadcaster. But WTTW has a long history of battling viewers who object to increasing commercialism.

The study, "**Chicago Tonight: Elites, Affluence and Advertising**," released on July 19 by Chicago Media Action, found that WTTW, like commercial news outlets, emphasizes stories on entertainment and sports over political and social news that directly impacts viewers' lives. Forty-five percent of **Chicago Tonight's** stories concerned entertainment or lifestyles, an average of over 11 stories per week, with sports making up another 10 percent of the show's segments. The disparity between news and entertainment is striking: Entertainment stories were 68 percent more frequently covered than business and economic topics, local, state and national politics, crime and media combined.

The study covered 30 episodes of **Chicago Tonight** over three months (9/03, 1-2/04). More than 79 percent of all guests appearing during the study were white, 12 percent were African-American and less than 3 percent were Latino. The study noted that the Chicago metropolitan area is 19 percent African-American, 17 percent Latino, 5 percent Asian and 2 percent Arabic.

During the study period, only white guests were chosen to speak on busi-

ness and economic topics, and they constituted over 90 percent of all guests chosen to speak on national political and electoral topics.

Far from providing an alternative to the perspectives dominating commercial news, the study found that the largest number of **Chicago Tonight** guests (28 percent) were media industry professionals—overwhelmingly employed by large media corporations.

In a stark disparity, the study found

Patterns of bias

The study identified five frequent patterns of bias occurring throughout programming content: marginalization or exclusion of the public interest, while corporate interests were consistently represented; a near-total failure to examine commercialism critically; blurring of news and entertainment; blurring of programming content and promotional content; and catering to affluent viewers.

Prominent examples of such bias can be seen across all story topics. On the issue of war, a September 11, 2003 segment featured three guests—Clinton Defense Secretary William Cohen, former Sen. George Mitchell and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Joseph Ralston—without disclosing that all three are lobbyists associated with the Piper Rudnick firm, which boasts of having "advised and assisted [a] U.S. company in working with a U.S. government officials and the Coalition Provisional Authority in securing [a] major contract related to Iraq reconstruction."

Their company says it also helped "convinc[e] the Clinton administration to rescind the longstanding ban on arms sales to Latin America and to support sales of advanced weapons systems in the Mideast and Europe." Far from being neutral experts, these guests were in fact self-described "advocates," working for corporations that directly benefit from both the U.S. occupation of Iraq and U.S. war policy generally.

In covering the Illinois Senate race, all on-camera sources were professional journalists, nine of 11 from the corporate press. Nine of 11 sources were white and eight of 11 were male. Far



that representatives of elite social segments—government, corporate representatives, academics and professionals—made up 73 percent of guests, while public interest representatives made up less than 2 percent of sources, citizen activists were 0.7 percent of sources and organized labor was a mere 0.5 percent of sources, for a combined total of 3 percent.

The general public made up 17 percent of all sources; however, these appearances were overwhelmingly in stories on entertainment and sports. Of the 69 members of the general public who appeared on **Chicago Tonight** during the study period, only eight appeared on segments that were related to their political or economic interests.

from fostering a discussion of actual policy, **Chicago Tonight** hosts guided the discussion towards scandal and horseshoe: "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?"

Chicago Tonight even presented a segment on Super Bowl ads featuring a panel composed only of representatives from advertising firms, one of which (DDB Chicago) had produced some of the ads in question. Even worse, and undisclosed to viewers, was that DDB Chicago is actually a major **WTTW** business partner. The segment played several commercials in their entirety, thus blurring the line between "news" and "advertising" content.

It's noteworthy that the target market for these commercials matches **WTTW**'s own target demographic—"Baby Boomers and their children" (**Chicago Tribune Magazine**, 6/6/99). This segment of **Chicago Tonight** functioned in many ways as a commercial itself, allowing the advertisers to associate their brands with the "good cause" of public broadcasting and at the same time show 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.

Commercialization leader

The CMA study demonstrated **Chicago Tonight**'s content to be dramatically biased towards commercial interests at the expense of public interests. This core conflict can also be seen in the political battles involving **WTTW**.

Since 1983, when the **Chicago Tribune** (8/8/83) recognized **WTTW** as "leading the way" in presenting the first-ever commercials on public television, the station has been a driving force for ever greater commercialization in local public broadcasting.

Public opposition to these policies grew and, during the 1990s, local community groups on two occasions successfully prompted the FCC to act against **WTTW**'s increasing commercialism. First a series of "home shopping" broadcasts on **WTTW**, where the station devoted airtime to selling products from local museums and the like, drew complaints from a diverse local

coalition that ultimately resulted in an FCC warning to **WTTW**. Then, in 1997, after further efforts by local activists, the FCC (12/3/97) hit **WTTW**'s trustees with a \$5,000 fine—the first against a major public TV station—"for willfully and repeatedly violating" federal laws governing commercialism on public television stations.

Promotional documents prepared by **WTTW** management and intended for potential advertisers confirm that **WTTW** is actively promoting the elite audience sought by advertisers. According to **WTTW** management, "**WTTW** 11 links advertisers to tuned-in consumers," offering advertisers "a targeted reach into Chicago's most educated, most affluent households."

These households are not the "unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities," that **PBS** has been legally charged to serve since passage of the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act. According to **WTTW**'s own documents, these "targeted" consumers are "upscale . . . hard-to-reach professionals" who are "23 percent more likely to have liquid assets of \$250,000 or more . . . 75 percent more likely to own a home with a market value of \$500,000 or more."

Not only do advertisers set the criteria for which audiences are to be reached, **WTTW**'s advertisers also exercise a more explicit role in shaping content. In 2002, **WTTW** program director Randy King—formerly of **Fox**—issued a mandate that no programming would be made that lacked an underwriter. According to anonymous sources cited by **Chicago Tribune Magazine** (7/27/03), "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."

Excluded public

In contrast, the public has been excluded from participation in shaping program content. In 2002, community group representatives met with **WTTW** management to request more news serving communities of color. In 2003, representatives from 25 community groups met with **WTTW** management to request town hall meeting broadcasts on the topic of the then-

looming war on Iraq. **WTTW** refused both requests.

CMA has offered suggestions as to how the station can improve its programming, including "a monthly live town hall broadcast on issues of controversy and debate," "an independent local commission to investigate and make recommendations concerning structural and programming changes" and "a **WTTW** series hosted by and covering issues of concern to African-Americans."

Considering that, in its own promotional documents to advertisers, **WTTW** claims to be "America's most-watched public television station," the response **WTTW** makes to its viewers may set a precedent.

As corporate forces seek to further eliminate critical independent voices from the communication system, it is ever more important for those voices to maintain a presence on high-production value news programs such as **Chicago Tonight**.

Without sustained resistance, local public TV will be completely lost to corporate and government control. On the other hand, local public television broadcasters are uniquely vulnerable to demands from local press and organized viewers. The CMA study and the history of actions in Chicago demonstrate tactics and tools that local activists can use to affect their local media environment; a wave of such activism has great potential to effect change. ■

James Owens is the principal author of the Chicago Tonight study. Scott Sanders provided research assistance for the study and is a Chicago Media Action co-organizer. The complete study can be found at: www.chicagomediaaction.org.



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