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NEW STUDY PINPOINTS NEW APPROACHES TO BUILDING THE AUDIENCE FOR LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

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EVANSTON, IL – In an era when local television news programs are remarkably similar to each other, stations have an opportunity to expand their audiences by enhancing their viewers' civic experience and making them feel smarter, a major new study released today at Northwestern University concludes.

The Local TV News Experience Study, being discussed today at a conference at Northwestern, was conducted by the Medill School (www.medill.northwestern.edu) and the Media Management Center (MMC) (www.mediamanagementcenter.org) at Northwestern University and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (www.knightfdn.org).

“The one-flavor sameness of local television news content – confirmed by the study – provides stations an opportunity to gain competitive advantage by differentiating themselves from the pack,” said Limor Peer, Media Management Center's Research Director.

The study recommends that stations wanting to distinguish themselves concentrate on producing or intensifying one or more of 12 audience experiences (including civic experience and feeling smarter) that researchers found relate to television usage. The dozen were identified through a survey of Chicago-area viewers. They are listed and explained in the study, available at www.mediamanagementcenter.org/localtv.

The study also found:

- The more engaged people are with local television news, the more likely they are to say they follow politics and think it is important to vote, keep up with community issues and events, do volunteer work or donate money to worthy causes. However, there's a difference between saying something is important and doing it; there's no correlation with local TV news engagement and civic activity.

- Viewers have similar experiences with five Chicago-area late night news programs; they are all very similar in content and approach. This perception of sameness inhibits usage.
- Young people show higher levels of disengagement with local night-time television news. They perceive local TV news has too much sad and frightening news and too much emphasis on crime and accidents. They also are cynical about perceived negativity and hype.
- Less than half of every local late-night news program is devoted to news stories (about 45 percent). Sports and weather take up between 9-10 percent of the time and commercials take up almost 30 percent of the time.
- Crime leads the news - it's in the first block, and stories get proportionately the most time of any story topics. More than a quarter of the news is about crime, fires and accidents.
- Much of the news happens in and around Chicago. But while the stories are local in nature, most news stories have no direct effect on the lives of people in the viewing area.
- For every one woman heard in a story on local late-night TV news, there are two men, and for every non-white person heard in a story, there are three white people. People who are white, male and official dominate news about politics.
- Less than 10 percent of the stories studied were enterprise reporting (initiated by the station) and most of those were about health and consumer issues.

The study is based on a survey of about 1,400 local TV news-watching adults in the Chicago metropolitan area and a content analysis of 46 randomly selected night-time news programs on five of the main commercial broadcasting networks: WBBM, WMAQ, WLS, WGN and WFLD.

The 90-page report is downloadable for free from the Media Management Center Web site (www.mediamanagementcenter.org/localtv) where visitors can also find coverage of a one-day conference about the research.

The research identifying the 12 recommended areas of focus is based on groundbreaking research on consumer experience, which MMC has conducted previously in newspapers, magazine and online media and has now applied to television. MMC research shows that understanding which experiences compel consumers to watch more (and which drive them away) is the key to driving media usage.

For example, news directors wanting to enhance a viewers' "civic experience" should try to produce programs that would make the consumer feel that:

- Watching the news makes a difference in my life.
- Watching the news makes me feel like a better citizen.
- Our society would be much weaker without television news.
- Watching the news makes me more a part of my community.

Likewise, news directors interested in enhancing the "makes-me-feel smarter" experience should try to produce programming that would make their viewers think and feel these things:

- The television news I watch stimulates my thinking about things.
- It updates me on the things I try to keep up with.
- It addresses issues or topics of special concern to me.
- I look at the television news I watch as educational. I am gaining something.
- Even if I disagree with things I see in the news, I feel I have learned something valuable.
- It is time well spent.

As part of the study, researchers also conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with local TV executives. They found the executives to be forward-thinking and optimistic, if not always certain how to navigate a new reality in which the mass audience fragments, appointment viewing disappears, and Internet usage explodes.

While the Center studied the Chicago television market, Media Management Center Executive Director Michael P. Smith thinks the study's findings have universal relevance.

"Chicago is not only the No. 3 TV market in the U.S.," Smith said, "it also is widely known as a solid TV news town. Yet in the interviews with news directors and producers, it was clear they understood the need for change. Many people nationally look to Chicago for leadership, so I think this study will have widespread impact."

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The Media Management Center is an executive training and research institute affiliated with Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management and Medill. It focuses on consumer-centered research and media best practices for media leaders around the world. It was founded in 1989 by Knight Foundation.

Knight Foundation, created in 1950, has invested nearly \$300 million to advance journalism quality and freedom of expression. It focuses on projects with the potential to create transformational change. It has just launched year two of the Knight News Challenge, a contest awarding millions of dollars for innovative ideas using digital experiments to transform community news. The foundation plans to invest at least \$25 million over five years in the search for bold community news experiments.