Merely Lights and Wires?

Television newscasts squander precious airtime presenting sensational, one-sided stories and covering unsubstantiated cures.

by Gary Schwitzer
During my first year of living in the Minneapolis-St. Paul television market, I saw news reports describing fantastic medical accomplishments. If only any were true.

- KMSP Fox 9 News used nine minutes of news time over two nights to air a two-part series from a Boston Fox station about unsubstantiated claims for something they labeled a “Cancer Cure.”
- At the beginning of a newscast, WCCO 4 News teased a story with the line, “No more sniffles ... a new cure for the common cold.” I waited 17 minutes to see the 16-second story that explained that a new drug “doesn’t make your cold go away right away, but it does make you feel better faster.” Viewers were also told that the FDA had not yet approved the drug. Two different graphics in the span of 16 seconds spelled out the words “Cold Cure” on screen.
- KSTP TV Eyewitness News ran a story about former football star Joe Namath’s new “arthritis huddle” team. They didn’t disclose that some of the video, Namath’s appearance, and the Web site to which they referred viewers were all paid for by a drug company.
- KARE 11 News devoted nine-and-a-half minutes to a “fountain of youth” regimen promoted by a local cosmetic surgeon who the station said was “nearing guru status on the cutting edge of the latest anti-aging revolution.” They posted the same story on the station Web site and offered a hyperlink to the surgeon’s commercial Web site, with no warning that the user was leaving a news site and going to a commercial site.
- KSTP TV Eyewitness News (and KSTP’s sibling station, KSTC) aired interviews with one dermatologist on three consecutive nights’ newscasts. Was this the only dermatologist source they could find? On two nights in a row, KSTP showed interviews with the physician about cosmetic Botox injections. On the second night he gave several women Botox injections live on the air, and KSTP showed scenes from the dermatology clinic several times within the newscast. KSTP also referred viewers to its Web site for more Botox information, but the Botox hyperlink took users directly to the dermatologist’s commercial Web site. The KSTC report was on melanoma but the interviewee was the same dermatologist.

These were stories that I just happened to see. I don’t watch every newscast. But it’s noteworthy that even casual viewing can capture this splattering of cheerleading sensationalism on each station in the Twin Cities television market—widely regarded as one of the best television news markets in the country. These stories provide evidence of how precious television airtime is squandered. Meantime, I’ve seen little coverage of health policy questions, the status of the state Medicaid program, Medicare reform proposals, access to care...
for the uninsured, quality-of-care issues, or double-
digit increases in health insurance premiums and pre-
scription drug costs, and the effects of all of this on Min-
nesotans. Television journalists, who are quick to point
out that they have limited time to tell such complicated
stories, have little defense when they are found devot-
ing almost 10 minutes of time to a “fountain of youth”
story during a ratings period.

In my judgment, these stories also violate the in-
dustry’s own code of ethics, published by the Radio-
Television News Directors Association. Relevant sec-
tions of the code follow, along with a description of
the ways in which the stories violate the code.

Professional electronic journalists should clearly
disclose the origin of information and label all ma-
terial provided by outsiders. [They] should defend
the independence of all journalists from those seek-
ing influence or control over news content.

Professional electronic journalists should guard against
extended coverage of events or individuals that fail to
significantly advance a story, place the event in context,
or add to the public knowledge. [They] should provide
a full range of information to enable the public to make
enlightened decisions.

KSTP failed to identify that a drug company was
the source of the video, the satellite feed, and the
spokesman for the “arthritis team” story with Joe
Namath. In effect, the station let an unfiltered ad-
vertising message pass as a news story.

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KSTP ran two consecutive nights of repetitive
Botox stories, interviewing the same dermatologist
each night, then provided a link to the dermatolo-
gist’s commercial Web site on the KSTP News Web
site. The report failed to cover some of the rare but
serious side effects that have occurred from the in-
jections and failed to discuss the many social ques-
tions that have been raised about the push for wrin-
kle-free perfection.

KARE allocated an almost unprecedented nine-and-
a-half minutes to the “fountain of youth” story. The
story did not include any data to support the anec-
dotal claims made. Providing a link to the pro-
moter’s Web site put the story in an even more im-
balanced light.

Professional electronic journalists should pursue truth
aggressively and present the news accurately, in con-
text, and as completely as possible.

WCCO and KMSP labeled investigational drugs as
“cures.”

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, in collab-
oration with the Columbia University Graduate School
of Journalism, publishes annual reports on the state of
local television news. The prologue to the 2002 report
was titled, “On the Road to Irrelevance.” Local televi-
sion news coverage of health care is already far down
that road. At a Mayo Clinic national conference on
medicine and the media in September 2002, the Gallup
Organization released new survey research showing
that television is the leading source of health informa-
tion for most people surveyed. But it also showed that
television was the least trusted source among those sur-
veyed.

Stations are told by consultants that health care
news can lure viewers, but the investment made in the
coverage is often window dressing. The Minneapolis-
St. Paul television news market is the 13th largest in the

Journalists lose credibility when
more closely resembles
little regard for evidence or
reported that the drug appeared to cause few, if any, side effects. No station reported the side effect that was eventually revealed to the FDA—that the drug could interfere with the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. In March 2002 an FDA advisory panel unanimously recommended rejecting the drug manufacturer’s application for approval. Trials ended a few months later. Television stories about the demise of the drug were outnumbered by the earlier hype about the drug by a ratio of 8-to-1.

I teach television news writing and reporting and mass media ethics to undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota and will begin teaching in a graduate program on health journalism in the fall. I usually start my television news discussion with a history lesson on Edward R. Murrow, a broadcast journalism pioneer. At the Radio-Television News Directors Association convention in 1958, Murrow pleaded with news executives to use the power of television wisely. “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire,” Murrow said. “But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

As someone who made the choice 30 years ago to work in television news, I refuse to give up on the potential of this medium. But it is increasingly difficult to inspire and motivate students about a medium that most of the time is, as former Federal Communications Commissioner Newton Minow described it, a “vast wasteland.” Forty-five years ago, Edward R. Murrow warned that if historians looked back at recorded broadcasts, they would find “evidence of decadence, escapism, and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live.” The picture has only worsened in the ensuing 45 years.

Twin Cities television stations are devoting substantial amounts of time to discuss Botox, other “fountain of youth” claims, unfounded cancer cure claims, and pharmaceutical advertisements masquerading as news. Think of how that would look in a time capsule. Think of how that airtime could be used to explore health care policy issues of cost, quality, and access.

Concerned citizens must let station managers and news directors know when they see sensational, unethical, wasteful news coverage. It’s time to demand that local television news teach, illuminate, and inspire.

Gary Schwitzer worked in television news for 15 years. He is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota.