

Region's media were scarce at conventions

Tight budgets for Capital Region papers and stations meant fewer reporters on scene

By **CHRIS CHURCHILL**
Business writer

The political conventions may be made-for-TV events — but apparently not local television.

Almost all of the Capital Region's news stations passed on sending reporters or camera crews to Denver and St. Paul. That's a break from years past, when it was not uncommon for stations here to send teams to find local angles on the big national story.

WNYT Ch. 13 and WRGB Ch. 6, for example, both sent crews to the last round of conventions. Neither did this time.

"It's a very expensive proposition," said Steve Baboulis, general manager at WNYT. "With tight budgets, we're going to stay here."

Indeed, the expense of the coverage, estimated at about \$25,000 per convention, was the most frequently cited reason for not covering the events. Also often mentioned: light viewer interest and the lack of a strong New York component to the story.

"Had Hillary remained in the running, that might have changed things," said Lisa Jackson, news director at WRGB, a CBS affiliate.

Capital News 9, the all-news station available to TimeWarner Cable subscribers, is the exception to the local rule. The station sent a crew of about 20 people — including Brian Taffe, host of the "Capital Tonight" program, and reporter Erin Billups — to both Denver and St. Paul.

Gary Holmes, the station's news director, said the national election is the year's big story, so deciding to cover the conventions was an easy call. Plus, "Capital Tonight" is all about politics, he said, and the show would risk irrelevance if it covered the convention from Albany.

To be fair, Capital News 9 operates under a very different business model from other TV news outlets. It doesn't have the benefit of network coverage, and it's able to reduce costs by sharing coverage with sister stations

Please see **CONVENTION C3** ▶

CONVENTION: Region's reporters were scarce

▶ CONTINUED FROM C1
in New York, Rochester and Syracuse.

And with revenues declining at most traditional news outlets, television stations aren't alone in avoiding the conventions. The Times Union sent two reporters to Denver and St. Paul, but no other Capital Region newspaper did.

Neither did the area's radio stations, although Alan Char-

tock, head of the WAMC public radio network, traveled to the Democratic convention in Denver. WAMC also shares the services of New York state-based public radio reporter Karen DeWitt, who traveled to both Denver and St. Paul.

Critics often say the conventions are little more than overgrown publicity events that provide little real news. Gone are the days, the argument goes, of rau-

cous floor fights and last-minute decisions.

Still, Paul Conti, a former WNYT news director who now teaches journalism at The College of Saint Rose, said the conventions sometimes provide surprises. They can be unpredictable events, he said, with newsworthy local nuggets available to a reporter willing to dig.

Conti said the "erosion" in the

number of Capital Region stations covering conventions is part of a national trend. And he believes viewers notice when stations scale back ambition and rely on network news for coverage.

"There is a message that gets sent when you make that decision," he said.

▶ Chris Churchill can be reached at 454-5442 or by e-mail at cchurchill@timesunion.com.