

Paul Conti on Future of Television

Ourblook interview with Paul Conti, assistant professor of communications, The College of Saint Rose



What do you see as the future for the once-dominant Big Three network news operations ... NBC, CBS, ABC? Will they be going through the same painful transition newspapers are? Is it good or bad for America that while still influential, they have been losing viewers?

PC: They still have audiences, just not as large as they used to have. The problem is paying for what they do. The size of the audience that remains is becoming too small to keep the ad rates high enough to pay for the cost of the newscasts. I don't know if they will all continue. I suspect they want to continue, but it might not be possible financially. Synergies could be helpful, like the ones NBC is using between NBC News and its various cable components (MSNBC, CNBC and The Weather Channel). What these news programs do has considerable value because it helps prompt a national dialogue on important issues. Those kinds of arguments seem to have little sway in boardrooms.

What do you see as the future for CNN?

PC: Talk about growing pains! I wouldn't be surprised if CNN and one of the networks above merge or form some sort of business relationship. It could make sense financially. It isn't all that easy for it to happen because CNN is reliant upon local TV stations across the country for material. CNN Newsource is a service that many of the local stations use. It is an interesting business model. Local stations pay a fee and run barter ads. In exchange they get access to most CNN materials, including sports highlights. The local stations also supply material to CNN Newsource upon request. Sometimes all of the local stations in a given market subscribe to it. If CNN and one of the broadcast TV network news operations form a business relationship, it could change things for Newsource and therefore CNN. Currently, if a local station gives material to Newsource, it can require that competing local stations in the same market will not be able to use it. That mechanism of protection is already in place. I wonder how interested local stations would be in feeding material to Newsource if it ended up on one of the competition's broadcast network newscasts?

CNN Headline news answers the need for most cable viewers interested in the CNN brand. It is difficult to imagine a business scenario where both will be viable in the future.

What do you see as the future for Fox News?

PC: Fox News started the opinion oriented cable news model. MSNBC uses it now, too. For the present, I think both of those cable news networks continue, successfully, as is. Personally, I don't mind viewpoint news despite outrage in some quarters. All of my TVs come equipped with these handy battery operated devices that permit me to change the channel or turn it off. To the best of my knowledge, no one is required to listen to or watch anything on TV or cable. I'd like to see less demonizing. Somehow, articulating a strongly held opinion has evolved into demonizing people or sometimes fictionalizing a story's facts. The First Amendment protects that. I just don't think it serves democracy. Pontificating by using fact to craft an argument deserves its place, but bloviating from ignorance is foolish.

What do you see as the future for specialty news programs such as 60 Minutes or 48 Hours?

PC: Sometimes I ask about stories that I've seen on 60 Minutes or Dateline in class. No student ever watches those programs. I doubt they ever will. They don't seem to want the depth on an issue. They are headline oriented and think 140 characters of a story are quite enough. Long term, the prospects for those kinds of magazine shows are not all that robust.

What do you see as the future for local TV news programs?

PC: I believe local video news stories will be in greater demand than they are today. Whether those stories are distributed by what are now local TV stations or by some other business is open to debate. As I mentioned last year, newspapers possess far more editorial resources than local TV stations. Why they haven't marshaled that into more multi-media on the web is lost on me. I think publishers believe that they are moving in that direction, but most of them are still experimenting. The enterprises that combine the depth of print and the emotional connection of video under their brand are the ones that will survive and thrive. Sooner rather than later, because I still do not believe changes are happening quickly enough to save most of those businesses. I know some of the large media companies are showing quarterlies with double digit increases in revenue. It masks the fundamental problem with the business model.

Local TV news websites are largely re-purposed content from the news programs. In fact, in most cases it is a massaging of the prompter script. It doesn't have the richness and depth of coverage that encourages more exploration of the web site, which not only helps with the site's "stickiness" but also helps build the brand identity of the news organization.

Newspapers need the video coverage that local TV stations possess on their websites and local TV stations need the depth of content newspapers have on theirs. First one to solve that equation wins!

More and more people are watching television online through Hulu. What impact, if any, does this have on TV news or TV programming generally?

PC: What I want, when I want it, where I want it. That's what media companies need to keep in mind. Hulu answers two of those needs. However, the business model used for Hulu today isn't

likely to be the business model of Hulu in the future. Once a fee is imposed for access to content, I'll be curious to see what happens. At the moment, any device which makes viewing more convenient or gives the consumer more control over the choices is very powerful. The "on demand" delivery systems are going to continue to erode "appointment television."

On demand delivery tends to negate the need for TV news anchors since consumers could be free to select individual stories and view them in any order. That can certainly change some of the local TV economics. Still, all of these new technologies are supplemental delivery systems. Traditional, over-the-air delivery of content still pays the bills. Granted, the checkbook balance is smaller at the end of each month, but "new media" delivery mechanisms do not generate enough revenue to pay for content, at least not with the current formulas for cost. The media players of the future will need to create a demand for their brand and then use it in multiple platforms.

What do you think of the fact that some Americans say they get their TV "news" from watching Jon Stewart?

PC: I believe Jon Stewart would be the first person to tell anyone who does that they are ill informed. His show is intellectual, it is funny, it is entertaining and it is also informative. It should not be the only source someone uses for learning about what is happening in the world. He does good interviews, as good or better than anyone I see. He does his homework. I am a fan of the show. I do not rely on it for all of my news and information. The show makes more sense and the jokes are funnier if I read some newspapers or watch some TV newscasts before I watch The Daily Show. He creates another dialog.

A lot of news shows and channels now are enlisting viewer participation through submission of video feeds. Your thoughts on citizen journalism for TV?

PC: I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm a bit cynical about this. I think it is currently promoted and marketed as a way to gather content at little or no cost. How long before someone submits a very well done but completely fake item? How stupid will that news organization seem when the content ends up in their program or on their pages or part of their web content? Reader/viewer supplied content is not new and I think it is different from "citizen journalism."

There isn't anything stopping my neighbors from buying a camera (or for print using a pen and notebook), venturing out and putting together a story on something they might feel isn't getting adequate coverage. All of that material can be put on their blogs. More power to them if they are so inclined. That's as unfiltered as content can get so for those who worry that big media ignores them. There is an answer. In some cases, the invitation to host that content within the boundaries of traditional news organizations is an attempt to bring "customers" back. However, attaching that type of content to a brand for a media company is dangerous. Ultimately someone will get bitten by it. Who vets it? If someone has the time to investigate the credibility of the story, doesn't that person have enough time to report the story?

We have a sports news channel in ESPN, an entertainment news channel in E, a couple business news channels, a weather news channel in the Weather Channel, and so on. Do

you think there will be more proliferation in the future on cable ... like a foreign news channel for America, an environmental news channel, an automotive news channel, etc?

PC: "If you build it, he will come." I suppose if any one of those ideas can be made profitable the channel will exist. It is an expensive endeavor. The idea is cheap, but executing the idea is expensive.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about the future of television news?

PC: Since we last chatted, the turmoil impacting journalism in all of its forms continues. The forces affecting it may not have as much push this year but the basic issue remains the same as before. How do you distribute valuable content on so many different platforms and find a way to pay for it all? In large part, the past year was about survival and not everyone succeeded in that regard. The lull that exists right now is akin to the eye of a hurricane.

This is an encore for Prof. Conti ... he was on our site a year ago ... welcome back! Before joining the College of Saint Rose, he was news director at NBC affiliate WNYT-TV, where he worked nearly 30 years. He also has his own production company ... CSP Video & Media LLC.