

# H-Net Reviews

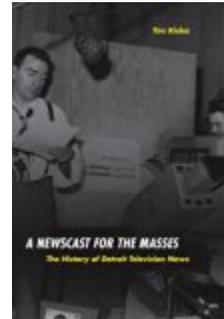
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Tim Kiska.** *A Newscast for the Masses: The History of Detroit Television Journalism.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. xix + 198 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-3302-0.

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In today's converging media environment, with TV news online and radio broadcasts streamed down from satellites, it may be hard to remember just how innovative these mediums were when they were first introduced, or how the media ecologies of the past led to those found in our present. In his "microhistory of television news," Tim Kiska helps us to remember the development of this important medium (p. xii). By tracing the fates of three TV stations in Detroit through the 1970s (WWJ, WXYZ, and WJBK), he shows that broadcast journalism became a cultural force, moving from a loss leader to an entertaining moneymaker. He tells a localized history of personality and policy conflicts, and describes television's path, sometimes convoluted and controversial, from a newspaper-and-radio influenced "straight" news to a more entertainment-infused news format (p. xv).

TV news did not arrive in a vacuum. In Detroit and other cities, as Kiska writes, it followed technical and political paths forged first by radio. In his first two chapters, Kiska outlines the early formation of WWJ-AM and WWJ-FM and their ties to the *Detroit News* and the Scripps family. The close initial connection between newspapers and radio led to links between newspapers and TV, too, with newspaper companies owning up to as many as two-thirds of post-World War Two-era TV stations. As exemplified by the Scripps family and their Evening News Association, these ties also reflected a willingness to experiment with new technology, with the family's foray into radio dating from 1920.

The American Broadcasting Company's WXYZ and the local CBS affiliate, WJBK, operated by Storer Broadcasting, were also on the air in Detroit by the end of the 1940s. The live, untried nature of TV was first explored

by young, innovative broadcasters often culled from the ranks of radio news and newspapers. The visual elements of the medium went largely unutilized, and the format followed radio's lead. Stations had distinct personalities, however. While WWJ-TV focused heavily on developing thorough, traditional reporting under its news director, James Clark (who ran the station's news department from 1953 to 1970), WXYZ-TV shunned this approach, stressing instead sports and entertainment programming. WJBK, for its part, hired Jac Le Goff, who became one of the city's most recognizable on-air figures. Kiska populates his narrative with personalities like Le Goff, and examines connections between their increasing popularity and the equally increasing profit potential of TV advertising. With major television networks digging more deeply into stations' broadcast day, local TV news became a priority, if only because it was one of the few consistent programs for which stations could still sell spots. As Kiska puts it, "television was becoming lucrative enough that the medium could afford to begin building a journalism presence" (p. 45).

Though local broadcast news had started with basic headlines and a simple rehashing of print news, by the beginning of the 1960s, it began to come into its own, with thirty-minute "newscasts" and more in-depth, original coverage on issues of the day, such as the civil rights movement. One of Kiska's more important contributions is tracking the observations and recommendations of McHugh and Hoffman, Inc., for WJBK, and, by extension, for TV news stations across the country, during this formative period. In his third chapter, he argues that broadcasters listened to this consultant's counsel to "program for the masses," the "Joe Six-Pack[s]" of the lower-middle and upper-lower classes (pp. 50-52). They

advised stations to make news more palatable, easy to understand, and “softened,” with its delivery carried out by trustworthy, unbiased “personalities” who would help viewers feel like part of a community (p. 55). The ABC affiliate, WXYZ, aggressively pursued this kind of news coverage, hiring such people as the colorful Bill Bonds. Kiska tracks the resulting robust growth in revenue in useful tables. But it is in his fourth chapter, on the pivotal impact the 1967 riots had on TV culture in the city, that Kiska makes the best use of his sources. TV stations had limited contact with Detroit’s African American population, and it showed. Still, WJBK and WXYZ managed to get their news crews, for better or worse, into the middle of the action, and their ability to enact the new ethos of broadcasting trumped WWJ’s more stolid style. Not only had TV news become a source of revenue, but it had also expanded its role in bringing the immediacy and intensity of breaking-news visuals to the public.

By the 1970s, however, the entertainment side of TV news, in the form of “happy talk,” began to dominate. Pioneered by Detroit newscasters and Albert Primo, the news director at Philadelphia’s KYW-TV, “happy talk,” promoted by TV stations, involved the encouragement of playful banter among “news teams” (pp. 82-83). In his fifth and sixth chapters, Kiska discusses the effects of entertainment on Detroit’s TV newsrooms, and describes how WWJ-TV faded further from the scene as it turned rightward in its political orientation. Ownership changes helped to slowly revive the fortunes of WWJ-TV when Post-Newsweek Stations (which owned the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*) swapped holdings with the Evening News Association (in a move that turned out to be legally unnecessary). WXYZ-TV, meanwhile, raided the talent

(on and off the air) at WJBK-TV, leading to a gradual decline of the latter as it failed to market its replacement personnel well—and in a world where that mattered more than ever, the station could not recover its hard-fought-for audience.

Kiska concludes that Detroit TV stations largely succeeded in promoting their entertainment-based news. But that success had come at a cost: by balancing a sense of public-service oriented journalism with a drive to make money from advertising, journalism often suffered. By examining the roots of Detroit’s TV news in radio, Kiska also shows that TV news’ development was culture- and place-specific. He argues that entertainment was not, at first, the primary motive in local or network news: “that happened only later, when station managers began to look at news as a source of revenue” (p. 146).

The author, a former TV critic at the *Detroit News* from 1990 to 2002, based his study on his PhD dissertation, oral interviews, and government and industry documentation. His interviews are especially crucial sources due to the dearth of recorded material from the period under consideration; his study stops in the early 1980s, with the advent of cable on the national scene. The only weakness of relying so heavily on interviews is the sometimes-rosy glow they can give to recent history. Nostalgia softens edges and makes history seem more inevitable. However, his use of data on broadcasting revenue, in particular, helps to counter that tendency. As he reminds us, there is not much in the way of literature on Detroit TV journalism (compromising mostly, as it does, of a few memoirs). As a local media history, therefore, his work fills a needed niche, and is a good model to follow for other, smaller cities.

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