

Sinclair's mandatory TV editorials worry media watchdogs

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Neal Justin



GREEN BAY, WIS. – We interrupt the latest Packers update for a message from Boris Epshteyn.

President Donald Trump’s former aide doesn’t live in eastern Wisconsin, but his conservative-leaning editorials air almost daily on WLUK-TV, a Fox affiliate within tailgating distance of Lambeau Field.

TV stations owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group are required to run commentaries from pundits like Epshteyn, as well as a segment titled “Terrorism Alert Desk.”

“It’s nice to have the information. You can listen or you can disregard,” said regular WLUK viewer Gary Pieschek, a retired Brown County sheriff’s deputy who was rolling the dice with buddies at the Bay Family Restaurant to see who’d spring for morning coffee.

“I think they present both sides, both ways,” he said. “I’m more concerned about how quickly their reporters are here today and gone tomorrow. Some of them don’t even know how to pronounce the names of our cities.”

But other citizens, and watchdog groups such as Media Matters For America and Allied Progress, are deeply concerned about Sinclair, which operates the nation’s largest TV chain. With more than 170 stations, it reaches about 38 percent of American households — just under the ownership limit set by Congress. A proposed purchase of rival Tribune Media would nearly double its reach. Federal regulators are considering whether to relax their rule.

The Sinclair-Tribune deal comes at a time when local TV remains the No. 1 news source of Americans — and media companies are under fire from both the left and right.

Sinclair owns only one Minnesota station, WUCW, Ch. 23. It doesn't air local news and is exempt from running the commentaries. But the company has a presence in nearly 20 Midwest markets, including three in Wisconsin and four in Iowa. Tribune Media would give it a foothold in Chicago and six of the other top 10 U.S. markets.

Criticism of the Baltimore-based company swelled this month when it ordered anchors across the country to read a promotional spot seemingly aimed at adding fuel to the president's fiery attacks on mainstream media.

With a line about "the troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories plaguing our country," the spot drew praise from Trump and criticism from media outlets ranging from Deadspin.com to HBO's "Last Week Tonight With John Oliver."

"I found them sickening," said former Twin Cities anchor Don Shelby.

But Shelby's former boss at WCCO-TV, Scott Libin, doesn't think Sinclair's action crossed any ethical lines.

"It's not without precedent for news anchors to read something written by non-journalists. It happens every day in promotions," said Libin, who also served as news director at KSTP and now teaches at the University of Minnesota. "Sinclair didn't make this stuff up. There is evidence out there that people are worried about fake news."

'Let the local people decide'

A study this year by two Emory University researchers found that Sinclair-owned stations tilted slightly to the right compared to their competition. They also devoted 25 percent more time to national politics than the average local newscast, and about one-third less time on local politics.

"Sinclair can't help but color everything in their markets," Shelby said. "Reporters may be trying to please the boss and go out and find stories that represent a shared view."

Al Tompkins, a former TV journalist who teaches broadcast news at the Poynter Institute, a journalism nonprofit, has raised ethical questions about Sinclair asking its local managers for donations to the company's political action committee. That PAC has contributed to several key members of Congress.

Susan Finco, a former anchor in the Green Bay market, said while Sinclair's influence has been the subject of discussion in the community, she feels most residents can distinguish the corporate commentary from local coverage of stories that matter most to viewers.

"I don't think it's changed the reporting or how people perceive the reporting," said Finco, who now runs the public relations firm Leonard & Finco. "Local reporters view themselves as very independent voices. That would be true at all the stations."

Local TV remains an important source of news for American adults, according to a 2017 study by Pew Research Center. Although viewership eroded last year as younger people shift to online news sources, 37 percent still turn to local newscasts regularly, compared to 28 percent for cable news and 26 percent for the broadcast networks. Those numbers help justify Sinclair's order to work more national issues into local broadcasts.

In effect, the TV chain is positioning itself as an alternative to cable and network news — a strategy that CEO Christopher Ripley reiterated in a memo circulated to his employees this month.

“Sinclair will continue to pursue new and innovative strategies, including our hybrid approach of bringing together the best of the local broadcast model with the best of the network model, which will undoubtedly expose us to more criticism because ‘no other local TV broadcasters does it that way,’” he wrote. “However, those that do not answer the call to innovate will be sucked into the black hole that is big tech, which is consuming every segment of the media universe.”

But when Green Bay resident Kim Oskar wakes up, she doesn't want to hear Epshteyn's take on Syria. She just wants local news from the anchors on WLUK's “Good Day WI.”

“I can't handle the national news that early in the morning,” said the retired nurse from Appleton, who was standing in line at a suburban Mills Fleet Farm to meet the station's meteorologists. “The newscasters make me laugh. They're like my friends. I don't really understand the purpose of the commentaries, but I don't mind them.”