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New faces for local Fox news

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Abstract:

Deerfield, for example, ownsWSTR in Cincinnati, WUTB in Baltimore and KBTB in Beaumont, Texas -- all of which, like WUHF, are operated by Sinclair and all of which are in markets where Sinclair owns and operates another station. Since 2005, WUHF had an outsourcing agreement with Nexstar Broadcasting Corp. that had WROC running its local operations. Viewership of early-evening newscasts (typically meaning between 5 and 7 p.m.) is down almost 14 percent over the past five years, according to the State of the News Media 2013 report by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Full text:

Local television news will see a large shuffle Jan. 1 as WUHF-TV (Channel 31) ends eight years of running newscasts from WROC-TV (Channel 8) and starts carrying news from WHAM-TV (Channel 13) instead.

That swap, with ABC affiliate WHAM also taking over the sales operations for WUHF, a Fox affiliate, comes as a 2005 joint services agreement between WUHF and WROC expires.

The 10 p.m. news show WHAM currently produces for the local CW station, broadcast on Channel 13.2, WHAM's second digital signal, will move to Fox and be called "13 WHAM News at 10 on Fox Rochester."

"We have the No. 1 news broadcast news brand in the market ... and we're going to continue to do that brand on Fox," said WHAM General Manager Chuck Samuels. "We're not going to pretend we're something else."

With WHAM news personnel doing the Fox newscast, he added, "Everyone's going to know it's 13 WHAM's production."

Similarly, WHAM's 7-9 a.m. newscast, also currently on CW, will likewise move to Fox and be renamed "Good Day Rochester," Samuels said.

The CW morning and evening newscast holes will be filled with syndicated programming, Samuels

said.

The news swap was set in motion in December 2012, when Sinclair Broadcast Group, which already owned Fox Rochester, bought the non-license assets -- including such physical assets as the studio equipment and building -- of the Rochester ABC and CW affiliate from Newport Television LLC, which sold all its stations and dissolved.

WHAM's Federal Communications Commission license was subsequently bought by Deerfield Media -- a holding company with a slew of stations in similar operating agreements with Sinclair. Deerfield, for example, ownsWSTR in Cincinnati, WUTB in Baltimore and KBTB in Beaumont, Texas -- all of which, like WUHF, are operated by Sinclair and all of which are in markets where Sinclair owns and operates another station. Since 2005, WUHF had an outsourcing agreement with Nexstar Broadcasting Corp. that had WROC running its local operations.

FCC rules generally prohibit one company from owning multiple stations outright in a single market.

"We're thrilled with this acquisition," Samuels said. "If you'd asked me a year ago, before I knew this was going to happen, what's the one thing you'd like to have? I'd have said Fox Rochester. It broadens our reach in many ways and allows us as an organization to reach a more diverse audience.

"It's not a big secret ABC has predominantly targeted women viewers in recent years. They moved Monday Night Football to ESPN and a number of sporting franchises off the network to ESPN. Our own demographics start to skew female over the years. With Fox we get more male demographics. We're going to have the Super Bowl in February. NFL football. You have baseball, NASCAR. For us it's a wonderful thing from both a sales and a content perspective to broaden our reach."

By Jan. 1, WHAM will have added six people in sales and three in news as a result of the WUHF acquisition, bringing its headcount to more than 100, Samuels said.

Opportunities

and challenges

Times are both rosy and challenging in the local television news industry.

On one hand, it, like traditional media from newspapers to radio, has been battered by a declining audience and advertisers looking elsewhere. Viewership of early-evening newscasts (typically meaning between 5 and 7 p.m.) is down almost 14 percent over the past five years, according to the State of the News Media 2013 report by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Viewership at 11 p.m. is down 17 percent. At Fox affiliates, where the evening news is at 10 p.m., viewership is down 23 percent over the past five years.

On the other hand, stations are increasingly lengthening their newscasts or adding additional ones since advertising during newscasts generally is the main source of stations' income, said Jeffrey M. McCall, professor of communication at Indiana's DePauw University. Creating an hour-long newscast at noon or an early morning news show "is cheaper than trying to get Wheel of Fortune in syndication, for example," McCall said. "Once you have your initial investment, it's not an extra huge expense to add an extra half-hour in the morning or late afternoon."

However, McCall added, "I'm really disappointed when I see local TV news stations get rid of their newsgathering functions. In the TV news industry, there's already a lot of consonance, where

everybody's covering the same thing anyway. When you have a station picking up newscasts from a competitor, you've lost all that extra news judgment."

For area viewers, having WHAM program both the CW and Fox Rochester means "far fewer programming conflicts" between the two stations, which reach similar audiences, Samuels said: "A couple years ago, I put The Steve Wilkos Show, unbeknownst to me, up against Jerry Springer. Some of the viewers said, why on earth would you do that? Now, if we're doing court shows on one channel, do the conflict talk shows on the other, or vice versa."

Though the WROC/WUHF deal does not expire until year's end, some programming decisions already are being made in conjunction with WUHF, WHAM and CW. This fall, for example, WHAM moved Big Bang Theory reruns from CW to Fox and paired them with Modern Family reruns, Samuels said.

For the local television news audience, the WHAM/WUHF deal should mean very similar news broadcasts for both stations, he said. "There may be some stories we choose that are different. Much like we might write stories differently for different platforms like digital or broadcast -- you have to keep in mind who your audience is. But I don't expect a dramatic difference in how we present the news. Top stories will be similar -- the news is the news."

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