

COMMUNITY SERVICE OR MEANINGLESS RITUAL?

Experts debate whether every station's
required ascertainment
of public needs is doing any good

By John Weisman



Ten-thirty A.M. on a cold winter morning. In the chilly Fairfax Room of the Tysons Corner, Va., Holiday Inn, just outside Washington, D.C., 22 local broadcasters sit scrunched in plastic chairs scribbling notes as a representative from the Fairfax County (Va.) Red Cross tells them about local issues she thinks are important. The broadcasters have been hearing about local issues since 9 o'clock. Before they leave, at 5, they will have heard from an assortment of consumer advocates, family-service clinicians, school boards, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and both the U.S. and Salvation Armies. More than 20 witnesses in all, at half-hour intervals.

Did you know that, by law, the management of every television station in America has to meet with representatives of the public on a regular basis? And did you know that these representatives *must* be asked about the "problems, needs and interests"—according to a Federal Communications Commission guideline—affecting the community? And did you know that every station in a market of more than 10,000 viewers must keep records of the results of these surveys (called ascertainties), and that the records must be kept in a file open to the public? Or that, without them, stations would be unable to get their broadcast licenses renewed every three years?

Well, if you didn't know any of the above facts, don't feel too bad. Because the ascertainment process is, according to many people, the best-kept secret in broadcasting.

Not that it's supposed to be that way. Broadcasters are conscious of it. It costs them millions of dollars annually to ascertain the public's views. And community leaders—the people whose views are being ascertained—are aware of it. So are the Congress and the FCC.

"But the unfortunate fact is that 98 per cent of the viewers don't have any idea that ascertainment goes on," says

James T. Lynagh, vice president and general manager of WTOP-TV, Washington, D.C.'s Post-Newsweek outlet.

What is ascertainment anyway? "The substance behind it," says Leavitt Pope, general manager of WPIX in New York City, "is that a guy who has a [broadcasting] license ought to know what goes on in his community."

More explicitly, it is a process by which radio and TV stations interview community leaders in 19 specific areas. These include agriculture; business; charities; consumer services; education; environment; government; labor; minority and ethnic groups; organizations for the elderly, for women, for youth; public health, safety and recreation; and religious groups. According to the formula, first adopted in the early '60s, and revised by the FCC in 1971 and again in 1976, the interviews must be done continuously over the three years a broadcaster's license is in effect. The interviews can be done singly, or in group sessions, like the one at Tysons Corner. They should be done in person, but FCC rules allow some phone interviews.

A second part of ascertainment involves each station's doing what is called a "random public sampling." This is a general survey of the public, with interviewees selected either by the station or by a professional opinion-taking organization.

Neither the public sample nor the community-leader survey, however, is designed to elicit programming suggestions. They are primarily concerned with identification of those local issues the public deems important, so that the broadcaster can judge whether or not his programs reflect the concerns of his community.

No one has ever argued that some kind of ascertainment isn't necessary. Indeed, most broadcasters will tell you that without any handle on what the public is thinking, it would be impossible to run a successful TV station. →

The question is whether the present procedures, devised by the FCC over the past 18 years, are either successful, desirable or practical.

Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Cal.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Communications (and a former TV broadcaster), calls most ascertainment "bunk. I mean, you listen to the same prattle time after time. The stations don't hear anything they don't already know. Face it—if a broadcaster doesn't understand as much about the people in his area as, say, a city councilman, then he should get out of the business."

But Jeff Hedges, director of sales at Washington, D.C.'s WRC-TV, and an occasional ascertainment interviewer, defends the process. "It's a vital and important method of finding out what the community needs," he insists.

Still, the question persists: exactly what good does ascertainment do?

In the Washington, D.C., area, for example, TV stations must each interview a minimum of 220 community leaders. They are also required to show on paper that the issues and problems cited in those interviews have shown up in programming. "The problem," says Rep. Lou Frey (R-Fla.), ranking minority member of the House Subcommittee on Communications, "is that you cannot legislate responsibility." The good station, he says, is going to ascertain, and then run lots of programs dealing with local issues. The bad station will do the same number of interviews. But it will run cartoons, old movies and game shows. Maybe it'll have an hour a week of so-called public affairs, nowhere near prime time.

"The question then becomes: do we need a formalized process, or should we let the marketplace take care of itself? It seems to me that people will watch the better station—the one that pays attention to its community needs."

One way the Post-Newsweek stations have tried to open the process up to "different" people is with a series

called *Nobody Ever Asked Me*. Done last summer at P-N stations in Miami and Jacksonville, Fla.; Hartford, Conn.; and Washington, D.C., these three-hour, prime-time shows put community leaders and station executives on the air live to discuss local issues. The ascertainment process was explained to viewers who were then encouraged to call the stations with suggestions, complaints and questions.

Critically, the shows were a success. WTOP's James Lynagh estimates that thousands of people learned about ascertainment. But some of the participants had second thoughts about the shows' lasting value to the community. John Wilson, a District of Columbia councilman, called *Nobody Ever Asked Me* "an ingenious public-relations gimmick. The station could propagandize, you know, that they were being helpful to the people. But that makes it more difficult to criticize WTOP for anything it does."

Yet Wilson was a willing participant. "Of course I was. There's no denying the impact of appearing on TV."

Other critics of ascertainment feel that stations are incapable of opening themselves up to meaningful criticism. "Look at who writes up the ascertainment interviews," scoffs Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin. "The stations do. Can you imagine this: not very many of the people they survey turn out to be highly critical. Of course! What we get is the station's version of the interview—not a verbatim transcript."

Indeed, in a few cases interviewees have written to protest errors. One woman, a member of the Maryland Consumer Council, wrote to WTOP's community-affairs director, Ed Ryan, to protest that the interview form she saw "both misstates and omits some of the things I said."

Ryan, who has done "about 125 ascertainment interviews over the past three years," says that it is WTOP's policy to send the interview forms →

back to community leaders for their approval. But WTOP's policy is not generally followed throughout the broadcast industry. Nor is there any FCC-approved method for conducting interviews. Hence, comparison of forms from two stations at the same group meeting sometimes shows that one ascertainment will sum up the interview in three or four lines, while a colleague might use two typed pages.

But Richard Wiley, during whose term as FCC chairman the ascertainment procedures were last revised and informalized, says that it is "virtually impossible" to attain any nationwide standard in reporting interviews. "Things vary according to the location," he says. "What the Commission wanted was the most flexibility possible. We should be saying to broadcasters, 'Have you been thinking about the issues in your communities, not just for the six months before your license comes up for renewal, but for the whole three years?'"

"Ascertainment is only a means to an end," Wiley concludes. "It's the programming that really counts."

"Ah-hah!" shouts Nicholas Johnson, former FCC commissioner and currently head of the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, a public-interest communications lobby. "That's the whole problem. One of the major things wrong with ascertainment is that stations do *not* ask the community how it would like local TV to be run. *No one talks about programming.* They do not ask, 'What kind of broadcasting would you like to have?' They do not inquire, 'Do you think we run too many commercials per hour?'"

"What they *do* ask is, 'What are the major issues in our community?' Well, what are people going to answer? They'll just repeat what they've read in the newspaper or seen on TV news."

WTOP's Lynagh disagrees. "The way we run our medium is our concern," he says. "It's not ascertainment's job to get community groups onto the air

—although sometimes that may happen. What it should do is stimulate us broadcasters to look deeper at subjects that concern the people in our area. It should show us things we may have missed; things that need coverage."

"It is something else, too," says one veteran broadcaster. "Ascertainment is a great way to insure that your license is rubber-stamped by the FCC."

Indeed, some broadcasters, speaking off the record, admit that they pay only lip service to ascertainment. One says, "No one at the FCC ever looks to see if we've done a conscientious job; only that we've seen the right number of people and filled in the forms correctly."

Another adds: "In a way it's a kind of insurance. If a pressure group challenges your license on the grounds that you don't operate in the public interest, you can pull out your interview forms and show that you've gone out and talked to the public."

What can be done to make sure that all broadcasters actually *do* take ascertainment seriously? At the moment, not much. The FCC appears unlikely to change its current rules. The new chairman, Charles Ferris, "hasn't even thought about ascertainment since he arrived at the Commission," according to an FCC staffer.

Broadcasters are unlikely to do anything. As one says, "Those of us who think it's meaningful will do a good job—and our programming will reflect it. The others? They'll manage to get around it somehow."

Congress is trying to rewrite the Communications Act of 1934 this year. But it's unlikely that a new bill will pass before 1981. Nevertheless, staffers at the House Subcommittee on Communications vow that ascertainment will soon "be made more meaningful."

One slight problem is that neither they—nor anyone else right now—knows exactly how that will be done. **END**