

Don't (bother to) change that channel

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I have gazed into the future of televised sports reporting in Chicago, looking as far ahead as five, ten, fifteen years. Mark Giangreco and Corey McPherrin are no longer reporting the latest sports news. Dan Jiggets and Howard Sudberry are also gone. Not even the resilient Bruce Wolf will survive the cutbacks. All of Chicago's sports writers and reporters have been phased out in lieu of some guy named Steve and his friend Bob the camera man.

OK, I can't see into the future just yet — and Steve and Bob are fictitious — but you don't need a crystal ball to see the direction that sports reporting in Chicago is headed. It's taking a cue from what other businesses have been doing for years.

Two Chicago television networks are looking to outsource work, specifically when it comes to covering sports. Corporations long ago realized that many times it's cheaper to outsource a job than to pay someone on staff to do it. Of course, the manufacturing industry figured this out ages ago, signing contracts with Chinese factories where the labor is cheaper.

As reported in the Chicago Tribune on March 20, both WMAQ-TV (NBC) and WFLD-TV (Fox) are considering farming out their sports segment. Why pay your own camera man, reporter and editor to cover what Lou Pinella really thinks, when you can just buy and use someone else's footage of Lou for less? The problem is that this sort of cost cutting will result in the complete and utter homogenization of sports reporting as we know it. Don't change that channel folks — because there's really no difference anyway.

"I don't like it," Paula Faris said about this proposed method. An anchor for NBC-5 in Chicago, Faris sees this

as a detriment to the industry. "[I]t takes away from the competitive aspect. You don't want to have the same video, because then there's nothing to differentiate us from Fox (or) CBS."

While NBC and Fox have not yet outsourced their sports, their affiliates in Philadelphia are sharing raw news footage as a cost-cutting measure. Three hours south of Chicago, ABC affiliate WHOI in Peoria has already outsourced their weather segment, instead using a "regionalized" report from Terra Haute, IN. Would doing the same thing for sports, as the adage goes, play in Peoria?

"In Chicago you can do it, but not places like Peoria," said Dave Gibbons. Gibbons is a recently laid-off creative services producer at WHOI. Among the many other things a small-town TV employee would do, Gibbons was the video editor for their "Sports Rewind" program. He was also part of the station's sports committee, which would make decisions about what direction to take their daily sports reports. There, outsourcing was not an option.

"Obviously, in Peoria, we're not going to make it to every single Bears game, so we'd use footage from our Chicago affiliate," Gibbons said. "But people (in Peoria) want local...if you're not talking about high school sports, they're going to change the channel."

On the flip side, the majority of viewers in Chicago care more about the major professional sports. While outsourcing footage, interviews and reports from major local sporting events could save studios money, it could at the same time prove to be lucrative for the companies producing it. It isn't just Chicago TV stations that would be buying these reports, as they'd also appeal to regional neighbors like Peoria or other major markets like New York.

Therein lies the scary part. Sports reporting as we know it in Chicago would be...boring. Imagine, the greatest sports town in the world having the lamest sports cov-

erage. The same thing will be on every channel — no, maybe not all at the exact same time, like a televised Presidential speech. But still, a total lack of variety between all the major networks. Only one point of view for something as volatile as Chicago sports.

One might assume that no station manager in their right mind would want such a thing, but Faris claims just the opposite.

"General Managers think we all get the same stuff anyhow," Faris said. "[TV studios] are cutting staff left and right. It's a frightening time right now."

Needless to say, once a station phases out the need to create its own content, it also phases out the need for its own content producers. We'll lose our favorite anchors too — no more tuning into one guy over another because he talks more about your favorite sport. For example, Giangreco usually squeezes in a bit more hockey coverage, so I'll tune in to see what he has to say. And Wolf — who is sadly no longer on TV — always made the sports segment fun; he had combined sports and comedy long before it became the "in" thing to do.

Instead, we'll be at the mercy of these ubiquitous third-party sports content producers. Yes, we will hear what the coach and star players have to say, but what about the unsung hero? What about the occasional story about a local minor-league team like the Chicago Wolves or the Kane County Cougars? Or special features that have strived to get fans closer to the players? Such frivolity would be a thing of the past for the local news.

At least we still have ESPN.

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