

Television News Plugola and the Last Episode of *Seinfeld*

By Matthew P. McAllister

This article analyzes U.S. television news coverage of the last episode of the NBC program, Seinfeld, focusing specifically on the concept of “plugola,” defined as self-interested news stories that promote entertainment events. Using the Lexis/Nexis database, stories devoted to Seinfeld that aired on the Big 3 television broadcast news networks, owned and operated stations in New York City, affiliate stations in a midsize market, and the cable networks CNBC and CNN were examined. The analysis revealed that news organizations with connections to Seinfeld covered the program’s last episode more extensively than those without such connections. The article also discusses implications for the role of corporate media in modern democracy.

In May 1998, one of the most hyped events of the year—maybe of the decade—reached a fevered pitch. *Seinfeld*, an anchor of NBC’s Thursday night schedule since 1993, aired its last original episode on May 14 and was trumpeted by a variety of media previews and promotions. Jerry Seinfeld and the rest of the cast appeared on the covers of such magazines as *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, and *People*. Newspapers devoted thousands of column inches to the story. Talk shows like the *Late Show with David Letterman* on CBS featured the cast. Advertisements for products such as Pond’s Clear Pore Strips and Macintosh computers mentioned the media event. Countless promotional spots aired on NBC counting down the days until the finale.

One especially vocal source of promotion for the last episode of *Seinfeld* was U.S. television news. Literally hundreds of cable and broadcast news stories, many several minutes long, promoted the show’s finale. Viewers saw news stories about possible plot developments in that episode; stories about life for the stars after the episode; stories about the real-life people who were the basis for such characters as Kramer, “the soup Nazi,” and J. Peterman; and stories about parties and events during the episode; among many other topics. The journalistic attention to the

Matthew P. McAllister is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Virginia Tech. His research interests are in the political economy of the mass media, advertising criticism, and ideological analysis. The author thanks Sharon R. Mazzarella, Mary Beth Oliver, V. Jeffrey Shires, and Sean E. Herrala for their useful advice about this project. A previous version of this article was presented at the annual conference of the National Communication Association, November 2000, Seattle, WA.

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program seemed especially prominent from television news organizations that had an economic tie to either NBC, the distributor of *Seinfeld*, or Castle Rock, the producer of *Seinfeld*.

This article explores the television news “plugola” associated with *Seinfeld*.¹ The essay will first discuss the incentives of television news to engage in the practice. The paper will then review the news attention devoted to the last episode of *Seinfeld*, focusing specifically on the difference in the amount of coverage from news organizations that had financial ties to the success of the program versus those that did not. Finally, the essay will discuss the implications of plugola for the role of news in a modern democracy.

Incentives for Increased Plugola in the News

The word “plugola” is a quasilegal term created by FCC legislation resulting from the payola radio scandals during the 1950s. Plugola is defined as “when a person responsible for including promotional material in a broadcast has a financial interest in the goods, or . . . the group being promoted” (“Payola,” 1996, p. 5). If the station discloses the plugola arrangement over the air, though, the behavior is legal.

However, there are de facto versions of plugola as well as the strict de jure versions. News personnel often do not have a direct financial interest in programs, but may nevertheless engage in practices analogous to the FCC-defined behavior. Critics have labeled as “plugola” the news stories about an entertainment or news program that airs on the same network as the news division responsible for the story (Benson & Alden, 1995; Waxman, 1996). Plugola, then, may include stories on broadcast network newscasts about an entertainment program soon to be aired by that network as well as similar stories on local affiliates and owned and operated stations (O&Os). With the increased growth of media conglomerates, plugola would also include newscasts featuring stories about a program on a sibling cable or broadcast network owned by the same parent corporation. In addition, news divisions engage in plugola when they create stories promoting movies, CDs, books, and other media products owned by their parent company.

There are several reasons why plugola practices on television news may be increasing in recent years. First, there is heightened emphasis on promotional and marketing activities by the television networks and major motion picture studios over the past 20 years. In the late 1990s, the largest entertainment corporations spent three times as much to advertise themselves than the largest entertainment corporations spent in the late 1980s, even after adjusting for inflation (McAllister, 2000). With the television networks, many factors account for this increased promotional emphasis, including a decline in ratings and increase in program costs. As I will discuss, these factors are also relevant to news programming.

¹The concept of news plugola has been described in various ways, including “tie-ins” (Waxman, 1996, p. E7), “cross pollination” (Cohen, 1997, p. 49), and “synergy” (Andersen, 1995, p. 41; McChesney, 1999, p. 25).

The emphasis on television network marketing manifests itself in several ways. The amount of time devoted to network promotion has increased significantly since the 1980s (Eastman, 2000). NBC and Fox, for example, aired a combined 2 additional hours of promotional spots in the 1998–1999 season than the previous year, including those squeezed in during the closing credits (Feran, 1997; Wells, 1998).

The networks also use programming itself—many genres in fact—for promotion (Andersen, 1995, p. 41). Network stars continually appear on network talk shows such as *The View* or *The Tonight Show*. ABC integrated storm plots into its soap operas and sitcoms to promote the Stephen King miniseries *The Storm* (Adalian, 1999). Members of the cast of *Ally McBeal* were shown prominently in a crowd shot during the Fox-aired 1999 Super Bowl. As will be shown, the networks also view news programs, whether owned or not, as promotional fodder. Local stations, for example, routinely receive extensive press packages from the networks in advance of hit series or anticipated sweeps programming (Waxman, 1996).

Besides this increased promotional environment, several relatively recent factors have influenced news organizations directly, encouraging them to emphasize entertainment- and celebrity-oriented news over more traditional hard news (Alger, 1998; Cohen, 1997; Hickey, 1998). Network news budgets were reduced in the 1980s, symbolized by the mass firings of broadcast journalists at the Big 3 networks (Alger, 1998; Cohen, 1997). In addition, often a large portion of the remaining budget was used for big-name anchor salaries at both national (Hickey, 1998) and local (Frohlichstein, 1995) stations. Technical upgrades like helicopters and satellite equipment (Alger, 1998), the integration of stereo in the 1990s (Frohlichstein, 1995), and the switch to digital (Pope, 1997) also have strained and will continue to strain news budgets. This reduction in personnel and increase in costs has occurred at a time when broadcast news ratings are in decline. From 1980 to 1996, the share for the Big 3 network newscasts dropped from 37.3% of homes using televisions to 24.3% (Hickey, 1998).

These economic pressures alter journalistic practices at different levels in news organizations. For example, reacting to this new financial reality, news management may encourage the airing of stories that emphasize ratings over other more traditional news criteria. As television news becomes more ratings and market oriented, stories are designed to boost viewership, often at the cost of enhanced citizenship, by attracting the eye and tantalizing the emotions. NBC even uses a statistical service to determine how target audiences react to certain stories, allowing them to develop formulas for stories that attract the best ratings (McChesney, 1999). At the level of news personnel, Alger (1998) argues that layoffs may make journalists more sensitive about job security, thus more likely to agree to work on stories that stress the bottom line and promotional goals rather than watchdog or other purely journalistic functions.

In this context, plugola becomes another tool to generate ratings-oriented journalism. One way to attract audiences in a competitive media environment is in a slanting of the news toward celebrity and entertainment. Besides being eye candy for viewer attention, entertainment-centered news also is easy and cheap to produce because it tends to be rooted in public relations materials sent to the journalists and packaged in broadcast-friendly formats. In addition, such news is unlikely

to cause problems with advertisers, given its consumption orientation—in this case encouraging the consumption of entertainment products.

This emphasis on celebrity has led to some disturbing developments. Network pressure at CBS News has encouraged news personnel to edit entertainment footage into news stories and to study *Entertainment Tonight* as the “wave of the future” (Cohen, 1997, p. 41). *Dateline NBC* covers celebrities and celebrity trials more than any other category of story (Alger, 1998). The percentage of “celebrity, scandal, gossip, and other ‘human-interest’ stories” has nearly tripled in major news outlets from 1977 to 1997 (Hickey, 1998, p. 33). To tie this in with plugola, one version of entertainment-oriented news is the news story that hypes entertainment on the same or organizationally connected networks as the news organization. Given the especially easy access that news personnel may have to stars in affiliated divisions of the same corporation, it is a very tempting way to fill airtime.

In fact, besides the economic vulnerability of television news, a second, related reason for increased plugola-oriented news is the spiraling role of corporate buyouts. The concentration of media ownership is not a new issue (Bagdikian, 2000), but buyouts involving television holdings have accelerated in the 1990s at both the local and national levels. The buyouts feed into the profit-driven, ratings-oriented move to entertainment news discussed above. In addition, they also encourage, especially at the national level, the promotion of programs that are economically tied to the news organization in some way.

At the local level, the deregulatory 1980s triggered a series of television station buyouts. It was during this time that antitrafficking rules, which required owners of television stations to maintain long-term ownership, were eliminated. Designed to prevent owners from acquiring stations in order to gut them for quick resales, the termination of the rules, combined with raising the limit of TV station ownership from 7 per organization to 12, sparked a frenzy of TV station purchases in the mid-1980s (Walker & Ferguson, 1998). The turnover of TV station ownership further increased in the 1990s with the implementation of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which lifted the restrictions on the number of television stations one organization can own (Hickey, 1998; McChesney, 1999; Walker & Ferguson, 1998). Local television stations may have changed owners frequently, creating an emphasis on quick profits to satisfy the new owners and perhaps becoming part of a large conglomerate.

In fact, the conglomeration of media hit a frenzied pace in the 1990s. Deregulation played a role here as well, not just with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, but also with the elimination of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (“Fin-Syn”), which lifted the restrictions on television distributors from also producing the programs they carry. The end of Fin-Syn led directly to such developments as Disney’s purchase of ABC and the creation of new television networks by Viacom and Time-Warner (Walker & Ferguson, 1998). Other factors, such as the critical mass needed for a “global” media system, the integration of digital technology, and the economic and promotional efficiencies with “synergistic” media organizations, also played a role in the continued growth of large media conglomerates (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; McChesney, 1997, 1999). Corporations like AOL-Time-Warner, Disney, News Corp., and Viacom rushed to own property in the

new media world, including wired and wireless distribution holdings, internet services, and a variety of journalistic and entertainment media operations.

The embeddedness of news divisions in larger entertainment conglomerates affects news in several ways, often encouraging the proliferation of promotionally based news stories. One such effect, as Bagdikian (2000) and others have noted, involves the purchase of a news organization by a publicly traded corporation. The news organization may feel an increased pressure to push up the bottom line to help the new owner's stock listings and quarterly reports, exacerbating the entertainment pressure discussed at the beginning of this section. Spikes in ratings often result in quick profits; such spikes in news programs may occur with more soft news and celebrity-oriented stories.

New corporate ownership may especially affect local news. Although most industries strive for a profit margin of around 11%, news stations typically earn 20%. Yet corporations, seeking a quick boost in quarterly reports to the stockholders, may demand more. For example, despite WCCO-TV's 1996 profit of 26%, after CBS Inc. bought the station, the corporation expected a 40% profit, thus requiring emphasis on cost cutting and ratings increases to boost advertising revenue (Alger, 1998).

At the national level, cuts in news budgets and layoffs mentioned earlier often occurred immediately after acquisitions of networks by corporations such as Capital Cities (of ABC) and General Electric (of NBC; Alger, 1998). The massive corporate debt that typically accompanies such purchases (Alger, 1998), and the stock option incentives that are part of many top media managers' pay packages (Hickey, 1998), also increase the salience of the profitability of newscasts. As Budd, Craig, and Steinman conclude about the effects of budget cuts and conglomeration, "demands on news shows to produce a profitable audience for advertisers have increased. The result has been a proliferation of entertaining 'soft' news both in traditional newscasts and in prime-time newsmagazine programs" (1999, p. 34).

Conglomerate media ownership of news divisions has created another incentive to promote specific corporate holdings. Several scholars critique the idea of "corporate synergy," where the different subsidiaries of major conglomerates are encouraged, or even designed, to plug the other subsidiaries (Alger, 1998; Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 1996, 2000; McChesney, 1997, 1999). In this scenario, the same characters and symbols are placed in motion picture, television, recorded music, book, magazine, comic book, video game, and amusement park holdings, all serving as explicit or implicit publicity for each other.

News is not exempt from promotional synergy. When corporate mergers occur, news divisions, which may, before the merger, have been the dominant or defining division of the media organization, can become subservient to the larger entertainment and promotional imperative of the new parent conglomerate. New corporate owners, coming more from an entertainment than a journalistic background, may expect news to promotionally toe the line as much as sports programs and celebrity-oriented talk shows (Alger, 1998). Turow (1994) found exactly these fears among journalists working for Time when the company went from being Time Inc., a company based upon the primacy of news, to Time Warner, a company based upon the primacy of film and TV entertainment. Turow

Table 1. Number of News Stories Devoted to *Seinfeld* on National Broadcast TV Networks, December 25, 1997, to May 15, 1998

Network	Morning		Evening News		Prime Time		Totals
	Pre-	Post-*	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	
ABC	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
CBS	7	0	1	0	0	0	8
NBC	14	3	2	0	3	0	22

Note. *"Pre" is the number of news stories aired previous to the May 14, 1998 final episode; "Post" is the number of news stories aired on May 15, 1998, after the episode aired.

argues that, in the new organizational culture, journalists may not feel supported in investigating and criticizing the parent corporation.

Others argue that corporately influenced news divisions not only may refrain from criticizing the larger corporation, but also create favorable stories that feature corporate holdings (Andersen, 1995; Budd, Craig & Steinman, 1999; Cohen, 1997). With the increased growth of media conglomerates, this means more and more things for news to plug. As I will discuss, this orientation affects the tone of the news as well as the topics found in the news. One Republican Party spokesperson, in addressing whether the media's so-called "liberal bias" discouraged coverage of his party, noted that "our difficulty is that we're competing with *Seinfeld*, not media ideology" (quoted in Schechter, 1997).

Plugging the Last Episode of *Seinfeld*

Because of the incentives of news to feature entertainment stories and to promote corporate holdings, I will now discuss the literal interpretation of the above quotation, asking how much of a news force was *Seinfeld*, especially during its last months. Admittedly, the last episode of *Seinfeld* was not a typical television programming event. Besides the hype usually associated with a series-ending episode broadcast during the May "sweeps," NBC felt especially pressured to generate as much revenue from this event as possible. *Seinfeld* was going off the air not because of cancellation, but because of a decision by Jerry Seinfeld to quit the show. The ratings for the show were still quite formidable. The program had been an audience powerhouse since 1993–1994, when it was rated the third highest program at the end of the season (Brooks & Marsh, 1999). NBC announced that advertising for the final episode would sell for \$2 million for a 30-second ad slot. Although most advertisers probably paid around \$1.6 million, the program generated \$72 million in advertising revenue for the network that night (Ross, 1998).

NBC placed high expectations on the event for other reasons. Just 4 months before this episode aired, NBC had dramatically increased its payments to \$13 million per episode to keep *ER* on the network (Carmody, 1998) and had lost the rights to the prestigious and promotionally beneficial National Football League games (Shapiro & Farhi, 1998). Thus, the hype machine was humming louder than usual for the May broadcast.

Method

Using the news database Lexis/Nexis, I calculated the number of news stories on national broadcast networks, national cable news networks, local affiliates, and locally owned and operated stations. The count began with December 25, 1997, the day that NBC announced that the 1997–1998 season would be the last for *Seinfeld*, and ended on May 15, 1998, the day after the last episode originally aired. Full transcripts were available for the broadcast network stories and many of the stories on the national cable news networks. Summaries were available for stories airing on the affiliate and owned-and-operated stations and for many of the cable shows. Additional information about stories, such as time length and verbal or visual qualities, was gathered from the database of the Televised News Archive at Vanderbilt University and videotapes of selected news stories.

Talk shows were not included in the tabled count, nor were entertainment news programs like CNN's *ShowBiz Tonight*. A story was counted only once in a newscast, even if it might have been repeated later in that same newscast. If the same story appeared in a different newscast on the same station later that day, however, it was counted again. Hard news stories not relevant to the final episode (such as a controversy over the portrayal of Puerto Rico in a late-season episode) were excluded from the count. "Co-op" stories during the morning news programs that are made available to local affiliates if that affiliate shows no local news break, a rarity in most markets, were also excluded. Although "teaser" segments that preview upcoming news stories (themselves a kind of plugola) are often listed by Lexis/Nexis, these segments were not included in the count, although they were noted at times when relevant to the analysis.

National News Plugola of *Seinfeld*

Table 1 shows the number of news stories aired on the Big 3 broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) focusing on some aspect of *Seinfeld*'s final episode. With 22 stories, NBC had nearly three times as many stories as the next network, CBS. ABC aired only one network news story about *Seinfeld*, although the morning news team did briefly and casually mention the program in their opening "chat" segments at least twice.

All three network evening newscasts devoted a story to *Seinfeld* on December 26, the day that the announcement was made about its final season and, traditionally, a slow news time.² All three networks teased the story at the beginning of the

² The story of *Seinfeld*'s demise also appeared on the December 26 front page of *The New York Times* (Carter, 1997), granting newsworthiness to the announcement and perhaps influencing a variety of news outlets that day.

newscast that night. Although NBC's story was longer than the other two networks, the stories were comparable. NBC's story ran at 2:50, ABC at 2:20, and CBS at 2:10 minutes. All three stories showed clips from the program, and they all touched upon the program's success.

Looking at the tone of the stories, however, does reveal some interesting differences. Specifically, the way these news stories concluded, the last word of the story, displayed at least slight plugola strategies by revealing the three networks' self-interests. NBC's story concluded with speculation about its own counterpunch to the announcement and to the beloved nature of the program. Audiences heard reporter George Lewis's summarizing voice-over as a scene from *Seinfeld* appeared on the screen:

There's a lot of speculation about whether NBC might try a spin-off show based on Kramer or Elaine or George. But it would be hard to match the long-running success of Jerry Seinfeld, a guy who created a show based on nothing but become everything to his audience.

Whereas NBC left audiences with sentiment, ABC and CBS ended their stories by stressing the disastrous effect of the announcement for their competitor and the money-making opportunities created for them. ABC reporter Jeff Greenfeld, facing the camera, made this point explicitly:

Just how significant is *Seinfeld's* departure? Behind me are the headquarters of ABC. Listen carefully and you might hear the popping of a champagne cork. Fifteen blocks south of here are the headquarters of NBC. Look carefully and you just might see an executive out for a walk on the ledge.

CBS was more subtle, but still discussed the end of *Seinfeld* as a potential end of NBC's control of Thursday night television ratings. CBS's Sandra Hughes concluded the story by interweaving her comments with scenes from the show:

NBC issued a statement putting a brave face on the loss of the show, but that's just a lot of . . .

[Clip from *Seinfeld* of George Costanza]: Yadda, Yadda, Yadda

. . . because *Seinfeld* is a key part of its prime-time schedule, and now Thursday nights are up for grabs.

These are not earth-shattering differences, but they perhaps highlight that plugola does not just involve the selection of stories. It also involves the tone and "lessons" of the story. In this case, the lesson NBC taught was the loss to the audience as the beloved network show was about to end. The lesson ABC and CBS taught, on the other hand, was the loss to their competitor NBC and the new potential bounty for themselves.

The brief self-interest shown by all three networks was magnified by two other differences in the coverage. First, NBC's morning news program, *The Today Show*, became a promotional vehicle for the last episode, airing 13 stories about *Seinfeld*

during the time span of this study.³ Second, NBC's use of prime-time news magazines to highlight the last episode also surpassed both of the other two networks.

The morning after the announcement, the anchors for ABC's *Good Morning America* casually mentioned the program, and CBS devoted short items in its periodic "Entertainment Report." NBC's *Today Show*, though, teased the story as its lead, with host Matt Lauer previewing the story before the opening credits. Ann Curry, substituting for regular host Katie Couric that day, chatted with Lauer about *Seinfeld* in the first segment before the news, and, during the news update, anchor Sara James reported on the announcement. Later in that same broadcast, Lauer interviewed Greg Fagan of *TV Guide* in an extensive interview filled with clips of the show. The interview dealt with why Jerry Seinfeld decided to end the program, the programming strategies that may result, and the future of the actors.

After this first day, the stories on *The Today Show* began to deal less with network decisions and more with outright praise for the program. For the next 3 days after the announcement, *The Today Show* aired segments about *Seinfeld*. Interviews with Kenny Kramer (the "real" Kramer) on December 27, David Bianculli of *The New York Daily News* on December 28, and Robert Thompson of Syracuse University on December 29 all had as their theme how wonderful the show was. Jack Ford, the NBC interviewer of Kramer and Bianculli, asked them both the same question: "But, you know, when you talk about him [Seinfeld] moving on, everybody is saying that this has—sort of entering the pantheon of great TV sitcoms. People talk in terms of *I Love Lucy* . . . and *The Honeymooners*" (December 27); and "I have seen some people—some observers—say that this show, *Seinfeld*, is going to end up in . . . in the pantheons of great comedies along with, as you mention, *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, *M*A*S*H*" (December 28). Lauer's interview with Thompson discusses at length the professor's popular culture class, which, according to Lauer, compares "Seinfeld to Beethoven." Another wave of *Today Show* stories came in May. The program featured news packages and interviews with pundits and the *Seinfeld* cast on May 10, 11, 13, and 15.

Two extensive stories on NBC's prime-time news magazine, *Dateline: NBC*, also helped contribute to the promotion of the show. Paralleling *The Today Show* pattern of stories soon after the announcement and stories right before the final episode, a story about *Seinfeld* was aired on January 4 and on May 12.

The January 4 piece, introduced by Tom Brokaw, was a relatively restrained 4:20 minutes long and dealt with the series' impact and how it may end. In a deliciously ironic note, immediately before the story begins, an announcer tells listeners that *Dateline NBC* is the "winner of the DuPont/Columbia silver baton for outstanding journalism." After this self-congratulation, Brokaw then leads into a fluff-based *Seinfeld* story: "How's this for a *Seinfeld* finale? Elaine joins a convent and Kramer joins her there. Jerry and George join the soup Nazi to buy NBC."

Nearly 27 minutes of May 12's *Dateline*, well over half of the available news time, was devoted to the last episode and featured an extensive interview by Katie

³ Four "morning news stories" counted in Table 1 under NBC appeared not on *The Today Show*, but on *NBC News at Sunrise*, airing at 5 am.

Table 2. Number of News Stories Devoted to *Seinfeld* on Network Owned and Operated Stations in New York City, December 25, 1997, to May 15, 1998

Station	Morning		Midday		Evening*		Late night		Totals
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	
WABC**	2	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	6
WCBS+	15	1	10	1	14	0	8	1	50
WNBC++	36	4	8	0	14	2	2	2	68

Note. *Occasionally the time period/daypart in which a story aired was ambiguously labeled in the LexisNexis database; this always occurred with "PM"-labeled stories. Such stories were coded as "evening" news stories; thus, this category may be slightly overrepresented. To maintain consistency, the same decision rule was followed for all three stations.

**WABC has 2 hours of morning news, half hour of noon news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, and half hour of late night news on weekdays.

+WCBS has 2 hours of morning news, half hour of noon news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, and half hour of late news on weekdays.

++WNBC has 2 hours of morning news, no noon news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, and a half hour of late night news on weekdays.

Couric of Jerry Seinfeld. *Dateline* even aired promotional spots and previews for upcoming *Seinfeld* plugola pieces on other shows (plugs for plugs), such as *Seinfeld* stories to be aired the next morning on *The Today Show*. With this *Dateline* and the stories on *The Today Show* and *NBC Nightly News*, NBC aired national stories about the program every day from May 10 to May 15.

The role that NBC took in promoting the show went beyond coverage of the episode that aired on its network news programs. Plugola also existed at the local level and on cable outlets.

Local News Plugola of Seinfeld

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate *Seinfeld* coverage on network owned and operated stations in a major television market, New York City, and on network affiliates in a midsize market, Indianapolis. NBC's O&O in New York, WNBC, had 18 more stories about *Seinfeld* (68 total) than the next station, WCBS. WCBS, however, had a surprisingly high number of stories (50) devoted to the program. In fact, after discounting morning news, WCBS aired more stories about the program than WNBC did. (A more extensive discussion of the WCBS coverage will be included in the following section.) WABC aired only 6 stories.

Like its parent network, WNBC used its morning news as a major promotional vehicle. In the first half of May 1998, WNBC's *Today in New York* aired 19 stories about the program, averaging more than one story a day, including a series of stories done by weather anchor Al Roker. Stories dealt with predictable topics: personality profiles, amazement over advertising rates, secrecy around the plot of

Table 3. Number of News Stories Devoted to *Seinfeld* on Network Affiliate Stations in Indianapolis, December 25, 1997, to May 15, 1998

Station	Morning		Midday		Evening		Late night		Totals
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	
WRTV*	5	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	10
WISH**	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	5
WTHR+	10	2	6	1	12	1	4	0	36

Note. *WRTV, the ABC affiliate, has 2 hours of morning news, an hour of midday news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, half hour of late night news on weekdays. Occasionally the time period/daypart in which a WRTV story aired was ambiguously labeled in the LexisNexis database; this always occurred with "PM"-labeled stories. Such stories were coded as "evening" news stories; thus, this category may be slighted overrepresented.

**WISH, the CBS affiliate, has 2 hours of morning news, half hour of midday news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, half hour of late night news. WISH also has a full-time entertainment reporter on weekdays.

+WTHR, the NBC affiliate, has 2 hours of morning news, an hour of midday news, 1 1/2 hours of evening news, and 35 minutes of late news on weekdays.

the final episode, and reports on gatherings of viewers à la Super Bowl parties. However, the newsworthiness of other, more esoteric, topics were often stretched to the point of the ridiculous, such as an interview with Jerry Seinfeld's boss from a drug store where the actor was employed in 1971 and a visit to Jerry Seinfeld's high school.

Table 3 shows that, with its 36 stories, the NBC affiliate in Indianapolis (WTHR) had much less total coverage than the New York O&O, but covered the final episode more extensively, compared to its market competitors, than did WNBC. The NBC affiliate had nearly four times as many stories as its nearest competitor. Stories were more of the "canned" variety sent from the network or talking head pieces spiced up with *Seinfeld* clips rather than originally produced news packages, as was the case with WNBC. One example of a "canned" story was the May 12 broadcast of a snippet of the Katie Couric interview with Jerry Seinfeld on *Dateline: NBC* to air that night. This locally aired story on the interview, in fact, was previewed during a commercial break. Given that the Couric interview itself was a plug for the finale, and the local sneak preview was a plug for *Dateline*, the teaser that came before the local story, in an orgiastic fit of promotional post-modernity, was a plug for a plug for a plug for the final episode of *Seinfeld*.

Post-*Seinfeld* stories focused on the final plot resolution, the estimated ratings, and the special events planned around the program. Sometimes these stories about *Seinfeld* were elevated to hard news status. The NBC affiliate in Roanoke,

Table 4. Number of News Stories Devoted to *Seinfeld* on CNN and CNBC, December 25, 1997, to May 15, 1998

Network	Pre-episode	Postepisode	Totals
CNBC	85	5	90
CNN	29	2	31

Note. Given the constant flow of individual news programs that comprise the schedule of CNBC and CNN, daypart was not differentiated in this table.

Virginia, for example, cosponsored a “*Seinfeld* Finale” party at a local eatery. Heavily publicized by promotional spots that ran on the station, this party was the locale of the opening, self-labeled “top story” of the late news the night after the last episode aired. The station’s involvement in creating the top story was signaled by the local anchor’s use of a first person plural pronoun: “Our finale party is still underway tonight.” Even these post-*Seinfeld* stories often served as plugola. NBC announced that it would rerun the last episode that next week, which both WNBC and WTHR mentioned in postepisode stories. Postepisode analyses of the commercials on *Seinfeld*, similar to the Super Bowl, also were aired that next morning on the NBC affiliate in Indianapolis and, undoubtedly, other affiliates. In fact, one wonders if more post-*Seinfeld* stories would have aired if not for the highly publicized death that night of Frank Sinatra.

Synergistic News Plugola of Seinfeld

Besides broadcast network and local affiliate outlets, a third and increasingly more significant dynamic of television news plugola is the use of cable stations and other subsidiary outlets to promote network programming. This was especially true for *Seinfeld*.⁴ Table 4 compares coverage of the final episode on two cable news networks, CNBC and CNN.⁵

Of all the different television outlets reviewed for this study, CNBC, at 90, had the most stories devoted to the final episode. Of course, this figure must be placed in the context of a 24-hour financial news cable station (minus a few hours devoted to late night infomercials), but nevertheless this is 90 stories devoted to one episode of one television show. Stories about *Seinfeld* appeared throughout the morning, afternoon, and evening schedule and were featured on many different CNBC programs. Most of the stories discussed the program from a business angle,

⁴ There were also print versions of synergistic plugola of *Seinfeld*. Cover stories devoted to the program appeared on the covers of *Time*, *People*, and *Entertainment Weekly*—sometimes more than once. All three magazines, of course, were owned by Time Warner, which in turn owned Castle Rock, the production company that made *Seinfeld*.

⁵ Regrettably, the Fox News Network, which may have provided another comparison, was not recorded by LexisNexis for the time period studied.

such as advertising revenue generated by the finale (February 10, on the programs *Market Wrap*, *The Squawk Box*, and *Before the Bell*). Among the 90 stories were those focusing on economic minutiae. News reports included the Ford Company's sponsorship of a special issue of *Entertainment Weekly* on the program (March 17, *Business Center*) and the impact of the show on real catalogue company J. Peterman (March 19, *Business Center*).

Like NBC and WNBC, the pace picked up as the show's end grew closer: Nine stories appeared on May 14 alone, the day the finale aired. *Business Center* aired a three-part series about the economics of *Seinfeld* on consecutive nights beginning May 12. This series functioned as a countdown to the final episode. The May 12 story began with the anchor saying, "And we're two days away from the final *Seinfeld* episode." The May 13 entry began, "Well, in a little more than 24 hours, *Seinfeld* will be history." The last story in this series aired during the 7 p.m. CNBC program on May 14. Given its timing, this segment essentially served as a lead-in for the *Seinfeld* programming that began at 8 p.m. on NBC.

With its extensive coverage of a program on another station, CNBC showed how cable holdings can be used for cross-promotion strategies. It also showed the contradictions of such strategies. CNBC, a news network, was all but ordering viewers to watch a different station Thursday night. More than the affiliate-network relationship, the promotional relationship of CNBC to NBC illustrates the subordination of news organizations to entertainment imperatives. The affiliates, after all, at least share the same programming as NBC and are not mutually exclusive to each other in terms of audiences. Watching NBC means that you are also watching a local station. CNBC and NBC, however, are mutually exclusive. To watch *Seinfeld*, viewers must turn away from CNBC. So not only is the news agenda affected by the synergistic demands, but so is the news audience, as CNBC sacrificed itself for the ratings of *Seinfeld*. As we will see, this was also true of CNN.

CNN had much less news coverage in terms of the number of stories than CNBC (at least, when one excludes *CNN Showbiz Tonight*, which also heavily covered the program). CNN's coverage was still very visible: 31 stories. The timing of CNN's coverage was very similar to the NBC outlets. Like the NBC-connected news organizations, the week before the final episode accounted for most of the stories (17 stories, over half of CNN's total). On May 14, starting in the early morning and lasting after the finale aired, at least on the East Coast, CNN had correspondents reporting live from Tom's Restaurant, the location where the characters often gathered and the scene of a *Seinfeld* party. Other related stories that day dealt with the summer plans of the cast, the love viewers had for the show, an interview with the "real life" Kramer, and the cost of advertising during the episode. Even *Inside Politics*, airing at 5 pm Eastern that day, featured a segment titled, "Political Affiliation May Affect Enjoyment of *Seinfeld*."

CNN's reporters and anchors did, at times, acknowledge awareness of their own contribution to the heavy coverage. The following exchange between anchors Natalie Allen and Lou Waters, revealing an almost pained attitude toward the *Seinfeld*-ian agenda, prefaced a long, on-location report from Tom's Restaurant on the 1 p.m. Eastern edition of *CNN Today*:

Allen: Well, tonight is the night, *Seinfeld* finale, big hype, right here on this program. 90 million viewers, pricey ads, yada, yada, yada.

Waters: Don't say it anymore. They're serving up huge helpings of nostalgia at the New York Diner, where Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer camped out for 9 years. CNN's Mark Scheerer is camped out there for today, he joins us now.

Is CNN's coverage of *Seinfeld* an indicator of the topic's news legitimacy? Or is the coverage simply an example of the obsession with entertainment and celebrity news? In fact, the synergistic impulse also may explain why CNN devoted so much time to *Seinfeld*, especially on the last days leading up to the event. CNN's parent corporation, then the simply named Time Warner, also owns Castle Rock, the production company that made *Seinfeld*. Unlike NBC, though, Time Warner had a strong self-interest in the lucrative postnetwork life of the program, a life enhanced by the publicity around the final episode. Although *Seinfeld* had been syndicated since 1995, renewals of these initial syndication deals were being negotiated in 1998. Watched closely by the television industry, the renewal contracts were not finalized until September 1998; collectively, these contracts ended up being worth around \$2 billion, more than early estimates of their value made in March 1998 (Dempsey & Littleton, 1998; Peers, 1998; Schlosser, 1998). Although Sony Pictures Entertainment is the actual distributor of the syndicated *Seinfeld*, Time Warner, through its ownership of Castle Rock, benefited greatly from the renewal contracts (Peers, 1998). The media craze around the final episode, craze contributed to by CNN, may have helped boost the syndicator's leverage in negotiations by making reruns more desirable.

In addition, Turner Broadcasting, owned by Time Warner, has a continuing history with the program. Turner tried to lure *Seinfeld* from NBC in 1997 to air on the cable station TBS, but was unsuccessful despite the corporate connections between TBS and Castle Rock (Dempsey, 1997). In September 1998, TBS announced that it would be the cable syndicator of the program beginning Fall 2002 (Schlosser, 1998). It is reasonable to wonder if Turner Broadcasting was at least pondering this deal 4 months before it was made, during the time leading up to the final episode. Although it is difficult to know for certain if this factor influenced CNN's news agenda, the corporate connections exist.

Corporate synergy may even at least partially explain why CBS and WCBS covered *Seinfeld* more extensively than NBC's other broadcast competitors, ABC and WABC, as Tables 1 and 2 illustrate. In the early 1990s, Westinghouse, a major TV station owner, invested in Castle Rock, gaining with this investment a percentage of syndication revenues. When Westinghouse bought CBS in 1995, this tied the network to Castle Rock. Westinghouse, the owner of CBS in 1998, may have earned as much as \$100 million from the syndication renewal deals, thus creating an economic incentive for CBS and its owned stations to promote its competitor's program (Peers, 1998). WCBS, in a story airing on March 18, even informed viewers that syndicated reruns of *Seinfeld* could be seen locally on Fox 5, a competitor station! However, CBS does not own the affiliate in Indianapolis and the station does not share directly in these revenues; thus the synergistic incentive is much less than at CBS and WCBS.

Table 5. Amount of News Time Devoted to the Last Episodes of *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, and *Seinfeld* on the ABC, CBS, and NBC Evening Newscasts

	ABC	CBS	NBC	Total
<i>M*A*S*H</i>	0:00	3:20	0:00	3:20
<i>Cheers</i>	0:00	0:15	0:10	0:25
<i>Seinfeld</i>	2:20	2:10	5:20	9:50

Comparing Last Episodes

Are we really seeing an increase in plugola based upon the above amount of coverage, or is this example simply indicative of a promotional-entertainment philosophy that has always driven television news? Of course, in one sense we are seeing an increase, given the existence of relatively new cable outlets like CNBC, which can be used to promote. The news coverage of the last episode of *Seinfeld*, though, suggests an increase in promotional activities even by enduring outlets. This increase can be seen when comparing *Seinfeld* to other high profile “last episodes” that aired before it—*M*A*S*H* on CBS and *Cheers* on NBC.

*M*A*S*H*'s final episode aired on February 28, 1983. Although never a Number One rated program at the end of a season, it had been in the Top 10 since the 1976–1977 season. *Cheers* was in the Top 5 for seven straight seasons when it ended on May 20, 1993, and was *Seinfeld*'s immediate predecessor in the coveted 9 p.m. Thursday time slot. *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers* each lasted 11 seasons, compared to *Seinfeld*'s 7 seasons. *M*A*S*H* and *Seinfeld* won one Emmy each for outstanding comedy series, whereas *Cheers* won four. All three final episodes were expanded installments around which their networks built the entire evening of programming (Brooks & Marsh, 1999). Like *Seinfeld*, the networks did not cancel *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers*. The creative personnel for each show voluntarily made the decision to end its run to move on to other projects (Coe, 1992; Harnetz, 1983).

Table 5 shows the total amount of airtime devoted to the last episodes of the three programs on the Big 3 television networks' evening newscasts.⁶ Although *M*A*S*H* had one long CBS evening news segment devoted to its farewell, *Seinfeld* nevertheless had nearly three times as much evening news time devoted to it as *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers* combined. Given that the home network's attention to the

⁶ Historical comparisons are difficult because of the starting dates for network news transcript archives. Although the Vanderbilt University Archive goes back to 1968, it does not archive the morning news programs nor prime-time news programs like *20/20*. LexisNexis, which does archive such programs, does not go back as far in its indexing. Archiving of CNN and CBS morning news stories are searchable from approximately 1990 on, whereas ABC's *Good Morning America* begins in the mid-1990s and NBC's *The Today Show* starts January 1997. Anecdotally, Peter J. Boyer, in his book, *Who Killed CBS*, tells the story of the struggle between host Diane Sawyer and producer George Merlis over Merlis's refusal to plug the last episode of *M*A*S*H* during the *CBS Morning News* in 1983 (Boyer, 1988, p. 216). This incident demonstrates at least some organizational dissension in earlier times involving plugola stories. Interestingly, Merlis left CBS and became executive producer of the plugola-friendly syndicated program *Entertainment Tonight*.

Seinfeld final episode is greater than either previous program, and the two competitor networks' attention is also greater, this comparison may provide evidence that both the pressure for ratings-friendly entertainment news and the pressure for synergistic promotional news has increased.

More dramatic is a comparison between CNN's coverage of *Cheers* and *Seinfeld*. A search was made for *Cheers* stories on CNN using the same criteria for selection as *Seinfeld* stories, but broadening the time span to include the earlier announcement date of *Cheers*'s demise (mid-December 1992) and the later airing date (May 20, 1993) of the last episode. Recall from Table 4 that CNN aired 31 stories about the final *Seinfeld*, an amount that CNN's corporate connections to the program may have influenced. Excluding *Showbiz Today*, CNN aired a total of two stories about *Cheers*, both of them on May 21, after the final episode aired.

Although it is difficult to completely determine if this difference is because of the increase in entertainment stories generally, or the increase in corporate plugola stories specifically, one other comparison lends credence to the latter explanation. *Showbiz Today* is CNN's explicitly defined entertainment news show. This study excluded the program, but looking at the differing coverage is telling. Only four installments of *Showbiz Today* included one or more stories about nonsynergistic *Cheers*; *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, was featured in 19 different airings of the program. The entire May 14, 1998, telecast of the program was devoted to *Seinfeld*.

Conclusion

Jay Leno's opening *Tonight Show* monologue on the night of the final *Seinfeld* episode joked about the news hype over the event:

You realize just what a show business town this is. I'm reading the paper this morning, and on the front page of the L.A. paper, front page it says, "Count Down To *Seinfeld*, Jerry's Last Show," then there's another article about Jason Alexander getting some big movie deal. And, this is true, then at the bottom of the page, in little tiny letters, it says "India threatens Pakistan with nuclear weapons," PAGE 57!

Although Leno was poking fun at Los Angeles, his point could well be made of his employer's news division and other media outlets. During its May 14 evening news, only hours before the finale, NBC aired a news report about the commercials to be aired during that evening's *Seinfeld*. This was the third longest segment of the broadcast, lasting 2:30.

What, though, is the harm of this 2 1/2 minute promotional story? Viewing news as a democratic resource provides one answer. May 1998 was not a slow month for national and international news. Besides nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan during this time, there were also Middle East peace talks, legal maneuvering over Kenneth Starr's investigations into the Clinton presidential administration, and riots in Indonesia. This latter story received special attention by the other two networks that night. Both ABC and CBS had this as their lead story, with ABC airing a 4:20 report on developments and analysis and devoting an

entire episode of *Nightline* to the story. NBC, conversely, aired a 32-second synopsis of these events on its May 14 newscast. When considering other news events that the networks collectively did not cover at all that day, such as the death of the influential environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Taiwan's diplomatic visit to Hong Kong, 2 minutes of national news becomes precious.

As this example shows, the current corporate context of news organizations influences the agenda of news: what is covered and what is not covered. Richard Cohen, a former producer of network news, argues that "for every story that is broadcast, two or three are left out. Much more news is gathered in a single day than can ever fit on the evening news" (1997, p. 48). So when NBC as a network devotes 22 stories to *Seinfeld* and their owned station airs 68 stories, one must ask, what is being left out? When the news increasingly covers celebrities like Jerry Seinfeld, other topics, topics of more critical importance to the functioning of a modern democracy, are not covered. Just as NBC on one night covered Indonesia less extensively than the implications of Garden Burger commercials on *Seinfeld*, the broadcast news networks generally had decreased their percentage of international news, a topic not viewed as ratings friendly as Hollywood, from the 1970s to the mid-1990s (McChesney, 1999).

We see, with this case study, journalists being put in the position of subordinating news values for a larger entertainment and promotional ethos. Whether it was CNN anchors virtually rolling their eyes at their own network's coverage or CNBC encouraging viewers to turn off the news in order to turn on *Seinfeld*, one message is that an informed viewership is less important than an entertained viewership or, perhaps, a viewership informed mostly about TV shows.

It is not just that socially responsible and useful news is taken away. The consumerist ethic inherent in plugola stories is also problematic. One function of media is to facilitate social and political activism, to engage citizens with the political process, to encourage us to become involved, and to explain to us how we might become involved (McAllister, 1996). Plugola stories are designed to persuade the audience to do something as well: Consume more media. As part of the "commodity flow" of television, which includes ads and promotional spots (Andersen, 1995; Budd, Clay, & Steinman, 1999), plugola stories encourage viewers to immerse themselves in consumption, specifically the consumption of entertainment culture. Commercials, as the most explicit symbol of TV's commodity flow, have been charged with fetishizing commodities (Jhally, 1987; McAllister, 1996), encouraging ad viewers to dubiously solve personal and social problems by purchasing products. The prevalence and celebratory tone of plugola stories is less a fetishism of commodities and more of a "fetishism of sit-comedies." By stressing the joy and social universality of watching TV, news becomes an active tool against political participation. The only activism such journalism encourages is in TV program selection. Plugola becomes another mechanism by which television encourages us to "amuse ourselves to death" (Postman, 1985).

Plugola is not *Seinfeld*-specific; a few days' viewing of morning news, for example, reveals other promotionally based news stories. The ridiculously heavy coverage of the CBS reality-based show *Survivor* beginning in Summer 2000 on that network's news program, *The Early Show*, has stretched journalistic credibility

even farther (Grossman, 2000). Given the increased corporate merger activity in media industries, the pressures to promote can only grow. The merger of CBS and Viacom places CBS news squarely in the domain of motion pictures and recorded music. The merger of Time Warner with America On-Line locates the internet giant in the same corporate home as a news division. In this environment, it may soon be difficult to find news outlets that do not have some connection to a given movie or television program. Indeed, the maze-like connections of CNN and CBS to *Seinfeld* illustrate this difficulty.

By documenting such trends, media scholars can at least argue their potential dangers to colleagues, students, and—through op-ed pieces, talks, and even media appearances—the general public. If the media love to place stories about themselves, perhaps media critics can use that opportunity. Media scholars, after all, are usually institutionally sanctioned experts about media, and this occasionally provides access. The trick is to avoid the temptation of touting the promotional line about the magical qualities of a special-effects-laden movie or the Picassoesque nature of a hit TV show. When invited to appear, scholars can instead provide alternative voices about media trends during media-oriented segments rather than simply affirm the celebration of the latest entertainment hype. This placement of critical ideas, rather than serving as plugola, can instead plug a few news holes by offering differing perspectives.

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