

Substantial Disruption



A Dress Rehearsal for Tyranny

By Mike Tully

The image is riveting and unsettling, a [video mashup from *Deadspin*](#) that starts with a pair of local television news anchors reciting a statement about “responsibility,” then adds another pair of anchors from another community in a split-screen, then cuts to another pair, then another and another, all robotically parroting the same script in different communities. At the 35 second mark the video builds a mosaic, each tile a screen shot from yet another local newscast, painting the screen with one talking tile after another until 30 tiles fill the screen with an *ad hoc* chorus of 47 local anchors reciting the same script. Altogether, nearly two hundred cities and towns watched local news anchors echo the script like well-coiffed hostages.

Sinclair Broadcasting, which owns the stations and is responsible for the chorus, [defended the action](#) as a “corporate news journalistic responsibility promotional campaign.” Scott Livingston, Sinclair’s senior vice president of news, characterized the stunt as a “well-researched journalistic initiative focused on fair and objective reporting.” It’s not; it’s a dress rehearsal for tyranny.

As [Michelle Goldberg points out](#), suppression of independent media and support for propaganda outlets is a favorite weapon of modern dictators, such as [Vladimir Putin](#) and [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#). The late [Hugo Chavez](#) forced the sale of an influential television station to a political ally after lodging a false accusation against the station, which had been critical of Chavez. Presidents [Xi](#) in China and [el-Sisi](#) of Egypt rely on a controlled news media. Freedom suffocates when autocrats suck out its oxygen. The oxygen is the independent press.

What does this have to do with Sinclair? Aren’t the “hostage tapes” more a clumsy stunt than a threat? Why are they harmful?

This is why: they are a field test of a powerful new weapon: *federal control over the content of local news outlets*. Local television newscasts are Americans’ favorite source of information according to a recent [Pew Research Center survey](#). In two of the survey periods, nearly half the respondents said they watched local television news “often,” far more than any other category. Looking at it another way, between 10 and 15 percent said they “never” watch local television news. The range for cable news: 18 – 22 %. Network evening newscasts were ignored at a similar rate as cable: 17 – 25%.

The importance of local television transcends viewership numbers. Not only is it watched more often, it is considered more trustworthy than other sources. “There are many reasons for this,” [wrote Josh Stearns for *medium.com*](#). “Local news is viewed as more proximate, more relevant, more accountable, and more motivated by a shared sense of concern for the community.” He added, “Local journalists are our neighbors.” The path to the hearts and minds of America leads through local news channels.

The studies cited by Stearns reveal a vulnerability, one also found in a [recent study by Monmouth University](#): distrust of the media. Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, characterized the finding as “troubling,” noting, “Confidence in an independent fourth estate is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy.” “According to the public, fake news is the result of both outside agents trying to plant fabricated stories and the editorial processes of mainstream media outlets that disseminate false narratives,” said Murray. “The perception of this problem couldn’t be more pervasive.”

That “perception” is chum in the water for Donald Trump and Sinclair. Trump routinely insults and disparages American journalists, from whipping up animosity against them during political rallies to, most recently, [mocking them during a news conference](#) with leaders of the Baltic nations. As for Sinclair, this is from the statement the news anchors were ordered to read:

"(W)e're concerned about the troubling trend of irresponsible, one sided news stories plaguing our country. The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media. More alarming, some media outlets publish these same fake stories ... stories that just aren't true, without checking facts first. Unfortunately, some members of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control 'exactly what people think' ... This is extremely dangerous to a democracy. At (name of Sinclair station) it's our responsibility to pursue and report the truth."

In other words, “all the others are lying to you, but you can trust us.” This echoes Trump, who rails against media outlets that criticize him while praising two in particular that support him: Fox News and Sinclair. He’s using the power of the government to help Sinclair spread his message by [bending the rules to allow Sinclair to purchase another 42 stations](#). That would extend its reach to nearly three-fourths of the viewers in America. Meanwhile, Trump’s administration is trying to block a similar merger that includes CNN, which Trump hates. Hurt the critical outlets, help the friendly ones: right out of Putin’s playbook.

Speaking of Putin, don’t overlook Sinclair’s Russian connections. All Sinclair stations are required to air pro-Trump propaganda by Russian-born [Boris Epshteyn](#), a pugnacious fellow who was [arrested in a bar fight](#) in Scottsdale in 2014. More problematic is Sinclair’s employment of Kristine Frazao, who [recently produced a segment](#) about the so-called “deep state,” a conspiracy whose existence is confined to the imagination of Trump and his loyalists. Sinclair hired Frazao from [RT, an outlet controlled by Putin and the Russian government](#).

Is it overreaction to regard Sinclair as a danger to American democracy? Perhaps, but it’s hard to overlook hiring a veteran of a Putin propaganda outlet and imposing authoritarian control over local news outlets. If Sinclair isn’t a potential agent of a tyrannical takeover, then why is it rehearsing for one?