

Once Upon a Time

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Once upon a time, we received our news from a handful of local AM radio stations and the mighty “clear channel,” fifty thousand watt stations such as KFI and KNX in Los Angeles. Later, these stations became more sophisticated with roving news reporters such as the legendary KMPC Dave Desoto and his white station wagon. As time moved on, helicopters and air planes joined the force, reporting traffic and breaking news events. Today, there are hundreds of stations in reach, AM, FM, satellite and Internet radio. The list is almost endless.

Once upon a time, if you had three television channels to watch on that old black and white, you were lucky. National legends such as Huntley and Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, as well as local talents like Hal Fishman and George Putman were household names as they reported on local, national and world events. Back then (only 25 plus years ago) at midnight, television stations went off the air with the national anthem and a flyover by military jets to fade to black, then the notorious test pattern and thousand cycle tone. Today nationally, there are over a thousand television channels, including VHF and UHF television (now digital), as well as cable, satellite and the Internet. Twenty-four hour news is available anywhere in the world, even on your cell phone.

Once upon a time, newspapers dominated the world of news. Many papers published twice a day, sometimes with an “Extra” when the big story broke. Many a high school student made good money delivering papers, often with the help of a sympathetic dad and his car. Today, newspapers are on line and fighting to stay in business as the Internet news services, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Nixle, among others, fight to keep one step ahead of the endless demand for news. Or is it entertainment?

The award winning classic movie Network depicted newscaster Howard Beale as he battled the network news shift from the classic news format, towards entertainment. All that mattered were the ratings. At the time, the film seemed too much to believe by those outside the industry. Watching the movie today is more like a history lesson. One thing has not changed however; it still is all about the ratings.

On demand news is the expectation of the day. Once upon a time, back when the country still had a real civil defense system, sirens made the public call to tune to your local radio for further information. The Emergency Broadcast System squawked the unforgettable tone, interrupting your favorite tune, with “*this is a test of the emergency broadcast system. This is only a test.*” Today, a digital blip is followed by a digital voice. Where would you go for information today if you heard such a siren? The Internet?

If it is on the Internet, is it true? This is a serious question to ask today. Anyone can post a blog, a website, a Facebook account, whatever. Moreover, anyone can “*cut and paste*” from one website or email and post it on their own site. Is this news? Is it “*getting the word out?*” What if the information is wrong? Who do you call? How do you confirm such news that your neighborhood has been devoured by fire or flood? On the other hand, can you afford to wait until

tomorrow for the newspaper to report what happened yesterday? What about local radio broadcasting? Is it even local anymore? Is anyone even in the station? The day of news rooms at the ready are long gone. And yet, the public demand for news is never ending.

It is easy to sit back and complain about local coverage of this or that. Why is local television playing a soap when the town is on fire? Where are the local radio newscasters and their trusty remotes? Where are the news reporters and their pads? What happened to the press photographers and their press plates on their old cars? In fact, what happened to the once coveted law enforcement Press Pass? It is now all history for journalism classes. What happened? In short, no one is willing to pay. Too much is for free. That is not to say however, that the information is true, accurate or verifiable. Nor does it suggest that it is quality information. But it is free and it is more less “*on demand.*”

This is not to suggest that there are not good sources of information. Santa Barbara is blessed with local organizations and some very gifted writers and volunteer journalists who do a good job filing a vital service.

Since the Gaviota fire in 2004, the issue of media and the role of the public information officers (PIO’s), local government and local non-profit groups has become a critical point of discussion. The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury has visited the issue several times. The local media group Emergency Public Information Communicators (EPIC) was formed to address these issues. Many improvements and refinements to established protocols have proven effective. The low power radio station 1040 AM on the San Marcos Pass and 1680 in Montecito are outgrowths of EPIC to meet localized needs for information during emergencies. The radio show *Community Alert* was born from EPIC under an “*Aware and Prepare*” grant to support local public emergency education and awareness. Compared to 2005, significant improvements are well documented.

In time of need, such as fires, flooding, widespread power outages and the enviable earthquake, who will you turn to? Radio, Internet websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and/or Nixle? How many of these resources will be there when you want them? Many are one person operations. If they are not there, the information will not be there. Having more than one resource is essential, but which one? That is up to you. Who do you support? If it is free, great. But will it be there tomorrow? Supporting local media preserves a reliable source of information in and emergency.

Newspapers, radio and television stations all take staff to operate. Someone has to collect information as it happens or go out and find it. Either way, it requires trained human assets, professionals who are accountable and responsible. Consistency and quality all take time and effort. None of these qualities are free.

In the intelligence world, there is a saying “*quantity over quality.*” However, in an emergency, quality is everything. Are you ready?