

**Testimony of Mona Mangan, Executive Director, Writers Guild
of America, East**

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Thank you. My name is Mona Mangan. I'm the Executive Director of the Writers Guild East. The Writers Guild East represents writers in entertainment, screen and television, east of the Mississippi River, as well as news writers who reside east of the Mississippi River.

I have been asked today to talk about a slightly different topic, which is the effects of needs for localism, lack of diversity and quality in the news operations of the networks, as well as owned and operated stations and independent affiliates in the United States. For many years, our news writers have been particularly concerned, as have the producers we represent, with issues of management cuts to their news room staffs, and this is pervasive, and its affect on the news is quite substantial. I want to emphasize as we talk about this that the things that we are talking about today, the cuts, will be deeply affected by broader ownership rules that permit more mergers and duopolies, and they will exacerbate a situation which already exists, and that is the affect on news of massive cutting and retrenchment.

News rooms have long suffered from chronic

understaffing. I can give you a few examples of this understaffing. Unfortunately, I can't confine them to Los Angeles; they have to be nationwide. At WABC in New York, 50 percent of the jobs that have opened up in the last five years have not been filled. Additionally, news writers absent for vacations or sick leave are not replaced, which creates a situation of chronic understaffing which has, of course, its affect in the reporting quality and the quality of the news delivered on television itself. Under-resourced newsrooms are negatively impacting the news lineup, that is, the stories that are chosen to be aired.

I'll give you one example. Last week, on Wednesday, the 27th of September, the news stories reported the sentencing of Enron's Jeffrey Skilling and the jailing of Tyco's Bernie Embers were bumped at WABC in New York in favor of a story reporting on the rock band U-2's book-signing tour. A Harper-Collins publicist had provided ABC with U-2 related materials on which the aired story was based. No publicist existed to provide information on Bernie Embers' and Jeffrey Skilling. The choice made by the news personnel was inevitable because it was a choice based on economics.

The use of VNR's, video news releases, provided by corporate sources has decreased, but the use of the VNR's

themselves continues. They are now pirated, they are exploited and bastardized. Sections of them are taken and reworked into other stories so that the networks and stations can take advantage of the footage that is provided by these independent corporate sources.

We are also seeing at this time across the board commercialization of news broadcasts from the network down to the local level. One form that this commercialization takes is the development of news stories to further plug the networks products. At ABC network radio and its national affiliate News Services, they produced more stories this year about the National Spelling Bee than in any prior year, because this year, not surprisingly, the National Spelling Bee was televised by ABC.

In New York City, WABC TV ran stories on its prime time news broadcast on the magician David Blane for nearly every night of his eight-day underwater living stunt before his emergence from water, which was, not surprisingly, televised on national ABC prime time. It could be argued that such valuable news time could have been better allocated to local news stories of real value to the community.

Other news writers and producers of ours complain of being led by news management that is not ethnically

diverse. At WABC TV in New York, for example, there's not a single African-American, Latino, or Asian manager in their newsroom. This lack of diversity in the newsroom contributes to homogenized newscasts. You will recall, Commissioner Cops and Commissioner Adelstein, when I appeared at a hearing the last time, I discussed the City of Los Angeles, where one of the major news producers decided to air the story of President Bush announcing his move of the reserves to the Mexican border. Fifteen minutes into the show, they devoted 40 seconds to that particular show, with no comment -- local comment whatsoever, but devoted on that night two minutes to cosmetic toe surgery. As a New Yorker, even I cannot make the joke that one's tempted to make there.

The Writers Guild contracts also serve to help the process of diversifying newsrooms. We have engaged with CBS, for example, in our current contract negotiations to create an internship program which will create diversity based interns -- positions for diversity-based interns, and we hope to encourage the increased broadening and diversity employment in that network, and we have had certainly CBS's cooperation in the creation of that internship program.

Working without a union contract has -- working under a union contract, for example, has given a great deal

of protection to some writers and producers who have been able to contest their refusal; for example, recently in New York to air a story on a VNR footage.