

NO NEWS IS GREAT NEWS

In recent weeks we Chicagoans have been lucky enough to have had a late evening newscast that's self-consciously dedicated to "hard news". You know, news that matters, news about real issues, and all that. Bravo, I'm all in favor of it. But I have a message for the TV news programmers in town: Please, keep your weekend newscasts just as inane as you've been all along.

There's a time and place for serious news, but Sunday night at 10 isn't one of them. By that point, I've just lived through all the weekend relaxation I can stand. I'm fried, I'm exhausted, I have to get up in a few short hours to start everything all over again. And I desperately need to see that video of the water-skiing squirrel.

Why do I find such comfort in the ridiculous filler of the weekend news? I suppose that on the threshold of a new work week, I need to ingest some information that doesn't overload my brain. I like to be reassured that the 24-hour news cycle hasn't grown like a monster into a 7-day news continuum. I need to see that, over the past two days, nothing of substance has happened except for the creation of the world's biggest reuben sandwich. It gives me peace of mind to know that the hard-driving, Type-A movers and shakers of the world also take the weekend off once in a while. No news, at this point, is good news.

Maybe this is nostalgia for when I was young, nine or ten years old, and I first got to stay up late on weekends. With fresh popcorn and cold root beer, I'd stay up with my dad and watch "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," then "Bob Newhart," then "Mission: Impossible" or Mike Connors as "Mannix." Then, a brief interval with the local Detroit news, which always started with the announcer portentously asking, "It's 11 o'clock—do you know where your children are?" By the end, Dad would be long asleep and I'd get to indulge in a good Godzilla movie, hosted by some sophomoric local star in his house of cheap comedy. Those nights seemed to go on forever.

There's more to the late weekend news than just fund raisings and car crashes. It can be entertaining all by itself, regardless of the stories. One of my favorite pastimes is The Teaser Game, in which you have to guess where the upcoming story actually occurred. First, you'll need to listen to whether the anchor has failed to mention the locale of an event, which would lead unsuspecting viewers to think it's a local story. When he breathlessly announces, for example, "Six people die in raging floodwaters—details coming up," you say to yourself, "Okay, right now, it's the end of April, and it hasn't rained or snowed here in almost two weeks. Where could it be flooding? Alabama? Cameroon? Azerbaijan?" Watch for clues in the video, like overturned rickshaws or rescuers in lederhosen. Make bets on the location with your roommate or spouse, if he or she is unlucky

enough to be up late with you.

(And here's a solid tip for the Teaser Game: Any time they have video of a wild animal breaking loose in a crowd of people, it will invariably turn out that the event happened in Spain or Florida. I don't know why—it just does.)

It's also entertaining to watch the reporters work so hard to keep my attention with so little to report. Compare it with an old episode of "The Lucy Show," in which Lucy would have to distract someone from entering another room because there was a stolen racehorse or a pack of chimps inside. Lucy's same expression—the bug-eyed look that pleads "No, no, wait a minute"—is all over the broadcaster's face, as he segues from a story about a beached whale to news about a visit from the King of Liechtenstein.

But I think the main reason I relish the boring mundanity of the weekend news is precisely the fact that it is boring and mundane. Every story can be stripped down to very basic elements: births, deaths, dogs who swallow entire Beanie Baby collections. It's wonderfully direct and honest. No resonance with the broader issues of the day, no grand messages, no pile of confusing information to sift through. Like popcorn and root beer, it's simple fare, served up unpretentiously.

When you look at it the right way, the news on the late weekend broadcasts follows the basic patterns of our lives: we're born (some of us in taxis on the way to the hospital), we eat and drink (sometimes in record-breaking amounts), we see some interesting things, and maybe we win an award or a ribbon at the State Fair. And after we're dead and gone, the world will continue to turn, Sunday nights will continue to be quiet and uneventful, and squirrels will still feel the urge to slap on skis and hit the surf.



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