

Matter of Facts
Season 2 Episode 9
Dr. Sturgill – TV News
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[INTRODUCTION - BYRNE] Facebook Twitter 24/7 News Talk Radio citizen journalism fake News Real News audiences are drowning in an overwhelming overload of information. Clearly a guidepost is needed to identify what is trustworthy and a reliable source of both news and information. Season 2 of the Delaware Humanities podcast “A Matter of Facts” delves into the topic, this year examining more closely popular sources of news and information. The “A Matter of Facts” podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming.

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[BYRNE] Thanks for joining us on the “A Matter of Facts” podcast. I’m your host Tom Byrne. Our second season of this podcast delves more deeply into a variety of popular sources of news and information, and on this episode, we turn to a familiar source of news, one that dominated the landscape for decades but is seeing changes in recent years. We’re talking about TV news. Cable news, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and the like have seen growing viewership, though their numbers seem to be plateauing or dropping a bit now that the 2020 election is in the rearview mirror. As for local TV news, it had seen declining viewership until last year when it got a during the pandemic and people sought information about what was happening in their own backyard with covid-19. So where does TV news stand right now and what does the future hold for it? To help us look at those questions and more we are joined on the podcast by Dr. Amanda Sturgill, Associate Professor of Journalism at Elon University and author of the book *Detecting Deception: Fighting Fake News*. Dr. Sturgill we appreciate you taking some time to join us on the A Matter of Facts podcast, glad to have you with us.

[STURGILL] I am so glad to be here.

[BYRNE] So like news and so many other mediums, TV news is hardly your mom and dad’s TV news. The days of the 6/11, local news, and the dominance of the evening network news appears to be long gone. Writ large, how has TV news adapted to the changing media landscape compared to the news and other mediums?

[STURGILL] So, I guess I would take issue with the idea that TV news is not your mom and dad’s, I think they are the ones who are still there in the audience. But you’re right, the TV news as an industry, has had to adapt as their audience has grown greater and has

shrunk size. We've seen a group of median adults, for the first slipped away from regular appointment viewing of TV news into the news online and on social media. And so TV news outlets need to actually reach those audiences there.

[BYRNE] And just kind of looking at the number, studies have shown that local TV news viewership was trending down in recent years until last year, when it appears that covid-19 pandemic brought some people back. Let's dig in a little bit there. Where do things stand with local TV news viewership and what is that bump last year in viewership during the pandemic say to you about where local TV news is right now?

[STURGILL] TV news of all sorts is cyclical, they tend to increase their viewers and they also tend to increase their income during the years when there's a lot of political news, which there certainly was last year, and I think you can sort of add the pandemic into that, more people were at home and they had more of the need to sort of surveil their environment that probably accounts for some of the bump. One of the things that is interesting is that, although the audience for TV news is shrinking, the money has not really been as much of a problem, so the challenges that they face are kind of different ones. You can see that television news is now carrying some of the burden of print news, the financial model shift has been quite devastating to print news, whole newspapers have folded or have let go many of their staff. And so, in the news, is sort of the first draft of history, the burden of creating that first draft is falling some on broadcast. That leads to two different types of challenges. The first one is that when you're trying to attract that audience, analysis program do well, but audiences don't always tell the difference between news and opinion, right. The news is someone telling you the facts that you can make up your own mind. But analysis could be someone telling you the facts with context to help you understand it, but it's shifting more into giving you some facts in order to sort of persuade you to think in a particular way and that is kind of contrary to the first draft of history notion that television is picking up from other news outlets. I think the other threat that they're facing is that it's really easy now to create content that looks like news. And that is sort of a two-edged sword. Where edge one, is that more people have access to create and share content, so you can actually get out of major markets and tell more local stories direct to online and more people can do it because the technology is easier to use. The other side though is that it's easy to create disinformation and misinformation that just pulls the audience and makes them believe false things.

[BYRNE] I'm curious what you think the impact of these kind of changes and the changing landscape is on kind of the actual content itself. For the longest time when I was growing up a lot of people when they talked about TV news, they talked about the idea of "when it bleeds it leads". Is that changed because of the changing landscape or is that, is there still a heavy element of that as well?

[STURGILL] I still have the element of the visual. I would say that the content of the stories themselves and somewhat gotten more sensational, even the way that you're sort of

breaking down the broadcast and putting in those little bits that are taking you from place to place in the broadcast and previewing the next parts, they are trying to make some changes to the format to keep viewers that go through there. But again, if I'm a TV news outlet I'm not just seeing myself as a 6 and 10 or probably a 6 to 12 or 6 and a 10 or something like that, but I'm seeing myself as a 24-hour news outlet that is producing in multiple media all the time.

[BYRNE] Let's move it to the national realm, which is clearly a 24/7 operation when you talk about cable TV and network news. What do we know about how many people are still watching there? And who they are demographically?

[STURGILL] Cable news is doing pretty well, they're also losing some viewers but not as many as local news percentage wise. They are still getting that audience, they still have that kind of appointment with the audience, which is getting pushed in, also, by other media, so social media promotion, as well as talk radio promotion, that is pushing people to some cable news.

[BYRNE] I wanted to talk a little bit about some of the challenges that TV news faces, you kind of alluded to some of them earlier. But in terms of keeping and building that viewership, and making sure in both cases the revenue is what they needed to be. What are some of the specific challenges that they face and how do those challenges compare to what print media is having to face and navigate in this time?

[STURGILL] Advertising is still present for TV news, both at the local level and at the national level. The fact that we tend and not just have election years now but we tend to have large amounts of political news that does pull in a certain kind of an audience and advertisers recognizes that audiences there on the local level, there are some things that people just need to know. Are there any available in their communities to buy? So local car dealers and sometimes grocery stores and you know those kinds of things will still have need to do sort of mass market advertising. They also have the ability to generate revenue through their websites by getting audiences to come to the website and possibly come to the website first and they can sell as there in a targeted way. Generally speaking I think broadcast has been a little bit more successful at making money off of advertising particularly at the local level and having advertisers sort of come in, sorry having an audience come in for those advertisers to the website.

[BYRNE] Is there a distinction to be drawn between major market TV news and smaller market TV news, where it feels like, maybe there's more pressures on the smaller markets in that revenue and then conversely, that means probably fewer staff, more one-man bands, and things like that. Is there is a strong kind of gulf between those two versions of local TV news.

[STURGILL] Yes. Usually measure market TV news, maybe a little bit closer to kind of network level and have you known better access to support with that. Local market TV news usually has to be more sensitive to the individuals who are in the audience for that news in that can sometimes maybe shift the tone of content a little bit because these are people that you're very close to, your kids go to school with them, and you see them at the grocery store and those kind of things. And so that can change the tenor of the things that you cover depending on what's going on in your community. Financially in something like a pandemic a major market is going to have more access to other kinds of businesses and also because they reach larger numbers of people more national level advertising dollars can be spent there, whereas the local markets going to struggle a little bit more with that.

[BYRNE] I want to talk about another issue that's gotten some attention, and that's the consolidation of ownership of local stations. Specifically, for example, Sinclair, having hundreds of stations and questions being raised with some of the content that they are mandating air across all those stations. Sinclair did have its effort to purchase Tribune owned stations halted last year, but is there still a bigger picture concern about fewer hands owning the majority of stations, kind of what radio saw happen a lot just before that?

[STURGILL] And this is true across media. So anytime that you have consolidation you are reducing the variety of voices and places for people to get information, right, you're reducing the choices that viewers have and in that viewers do have agency when they have choices that can help to shift the coverage in directions that are suitable for maybe that local community, so you can think it, we talked about having a free market sense of ideas and the size of that market becomes less free if the message is being controlled through consolidation of ownership.

[BYRNE] I guess the other concern there would be kind of a top-down mandate on what's being covered and a kind of homogeneous version of news that goes across multiple markets as opposed to, maybe be more focused on what's happening an individual market.

[STURGILL] That's not unique to television, that you see in newspapers as well.

[BYRNE] So, having talked about that, where does public trust fit into all this? I mean, local news, TV, and otherwise still seems to have when you look at the polls and surveys, solid public trust, but in an increasingly polarized, environment, especially politically can that continue? Will that eventually more or less trickle-down even into local news, TV and otherwise?

[STURGILL] Local news has the advantage that you can sort of verify with your own eyes if things are true, whereas national news, generally you're only finding out about that in

some kind of mediated way. We know that trust of the media and trust in particular of television news has already eroded kind of moving into 2016, when I was there, there was a fairly major shift in the U.S. information environment. There was a bigger fall in that after 2016 with the idea of fake news as sort of the meme-able, hastag-able easily shared kind of thing to share and changing away from news that had an accuracy to news that may be the newsmaker didn't like, right, so it basically became sort of an easy ad hominem attack for the media. I expect that you would see that locally as well.

[BYRNE] Is that a tougher thing for TV news to fight based on, I guess if you look at some other mediums, particularly say like print, you have the benefit of maybe, perhaps being able to dig deeper into stories, particularly when were talking about, like, the day to day news and TV which does have to operate more in shorter features or sound bites and things like that. Does that hurt the ability to kind of maintain that trust if people don't feel like they're, for lack of better terms, getting the whole story?

[STURGILL] For TV viewers only, yes. I think in the case of both print and in broadcast the trend has tended to be using affiliated websites to provide links to primary source documents, to provide sort of interpretive things, to retake data and maybe data visualization and those kind of things, and that can be helpful for some skeptical members of the audience. But you're right that if you're just watching a 90-second little clip on a new station then it's hard to go back and like verify original sources of that information.

[BYRNE] So you mentioned the idea of fake news and we mentioned at the top your book *Detecting Deception: Fighting Fake News*. In that book, you talk about things like distractions and deception, unrelated evidence issues with numbers, are there any of these issues that that you feel are more prevalent to TV news than other mediums that you were examining in that book?

[STURGILL] Yes. So anything in the news environment is a good bit more deconstructed than it used to be. So it used to be that, you know, dead trees, it'd arrived on your doorstep in a package or you had your 30 minutes that you spent with Dan Rather at night that were all packaged together and it was easy to see what news was. But people are now getting news in multiple different ways, at multiple different times of the day, we have less of what we call appointment viewing for TV news. Even if people are looking at your actual package, they're seeing one piece of a whole broadcast on a website. That makes it harder to understand context. Also, there is a big demand for live video and so this is live video that sometimes comes from TV news itself and TV news gets pressured to do that because now anybody can be a live broadcaster with the device in their pocket. And so, more things are getting carried live. What we saw is that news outlets got better at fact-checking. So actual, is information correct, or is information not correct kinnd of things. Even sometimes in a live context, you know, they could put something on the bottom that says, this wasn't true. They are not as good at checking these deceptive bits

of language, where people are trying to basically say something that is not factually untrue, but makes you think the wrong thing. And so, an example, I could give you from the news that's going on this week is the trial, the Chauvin trials, over the death of George Floyd. And so you will see people saying things, you know, 'cause sometimes these are getting broadcast live as people are giving their opinions or being asked about stuff saying "well, George, Floyd maybe passed a counterfeit bill". I don't think this is a settled matter of fact, and he was not on trial and convicted for anything, but that is something people accuse him of. That is a logic error, right, because you're basically attacking someone's character and then sort of implying that anything else that happened is a result of that, and people, it just kind of goes by, and people can't think quickly enough to think "well that doesn't make sense" or "that's completely irrelevant to what we're talking about right now".

[BYRNE] Are there ways people can be better consumers of TV news or any news for that, that matter. I know I saw it in one place, you had suggest that perhaps there is, this is kind of what you were alluding to just a moment ago, to go beyond fact-checking and do sense checking. Can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by sense checking?

[STURGILL] So I suggest thinking about sort of a three-part test when you see bits of information. So, who is the information being shared by? Why would that person be sharing that information? And then is the information to actually coming with any evidence? And if you think about those things as new pieces of information come in, that can help you sometimes to identify disinformation or misinformation. I also think its helpful to look for information from a variety of different sources. People will tend to have one or two things that they like and follow all the time or they will get information from anywhere and not think about where it comes from. And I don't think either of those are very robust strategies and it's better to have, you know, a variety of sources from different points of view that you look at regularly to try to understand things in their context.

[BYRNE] Is that particularly true at the national cable news level. I mean, we hear a lot of people talk all the time about people kind of get into their echo chambers whether it be Fox News, or MSNBC, or CNN, is that more of an issue do you think there at that national-level, that people can kind of get stuck in one particular bubble and not be seeing anything else that might challenge with they're hearing?

[STURGILL] I think it is true at the national level. I think it's true with social media that you might choose to follow, whether that's from news or from people that comment on news who tend to have a large following. I think it can also be true at the local level, that if you have a local TV station, that has one particular point of view, and you only watch that TV station, you're not going to know about other things.

[BYRNE] I guess, as you look into the future, where do you see TV news going, what's its role likely to look like in five or ten years ago? You mentioned at the top of it, that it's still

kind of serving the same audience, mom and dad. It's had a change in a lot of ways. How does it kind of continue to move along that path as again a lot of that audience that it's been able to hold onto starts to disappear?

[STURGILL] Right, so what they're going to need to be doing is attracting audience to their information. And I would, if I was predicting, I would see kind of two things. One is, you see more of move towards longer form documentary-style pieces that in some cases used almost like narrative techniques to tell stories and those tend to be attractive to audiences. And the other is this, I think the news is going to get increasingly fragmented. You can still think broadcast first right now, right "I'm preparing for the show", but that you're actually going to be thinking social first, as a way to get the stories out to the audiences. The challenge is going to be then making that into a model where you can still afford to pay your employees to gather that news.

[BYRNE] I was gonna say, it does become a situation where you may, you talked earlier kind of about the first draft of history and TV news is kind of taking a little bit of that on, from print news. It seems like there may be within that first draft the first, first draft on social platforms, whether it be from TV or otherwise. Before you get, maybe that kind of more reflective first draft in a formal program, whether it be a nightly TV news show or a radio program or something like that.

[STURGILL] And that's actually an interesting thing. So I've done a little bit of research on crisis communications by news organizations on social media, this is an example of where a variety of sources can be useful. So if you wanted to know what was happening with a shooting in a particular city, you will get more accurate, social media information from the local outlet, than you will from all the national outlets that are covering it.

[BYRNE] So we'll kind of have to learn to filter where to look first, if they want to get that first initial piece of news before there's again that kind of more longer thought out version of the story.

[STURGILL] Right, so you might see it first from a large cable network, for example, but then you would want to go and find the local TV station or the local newspaper and follow their feed if you want the most accurate information sooner.

[BYRNE] 'Cause those are the people who are on the ground there normally, they have sources already and things like that.

[STURGILL] Exactly.

[BYRNE] So we like to end the podcast by asking each of our guests the same question, that is where do you get your news on a daily basis? What are your kind of favorite or go to news sources?

[STURGILL] So I'm a journalism professor, so this is going to be a long list. I look at the websites for CNN and for Fox News. I look at the websites and occasionally the broadcast for my local ABC and NBC affiliates. I subscribe, so I do pay for news and I do recommend doing that if you want news to be around in the future. I subscribe to our local newspaper, *The Raleigh News & Observer* as well as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Atlantic* and I also am a sustaining member of our NPR station, I listen to them.

[BYRNE] Dr. Amanda Sturgill, Associate, Professor of Journalism at Elon University and author of the book, *Detecting Deception: Fighting Fake News*. We thank you for joining us on this edition of the amount of facts podcast.

[STURGILL] Thank you so much, it was great.

[OUTRO - BYRNE] Thanks for listening to this episode of the "A Matter of Facts" podcast. The "A Matter of Facts" podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming. We thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its generous support of this initiative and the Pulitzer prizes for its partnership. A Matter of Facts is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware's source for NPR news.