An Informed Vote?

Local News Coverage
General Election 2003

A Report by the Grand Rapids Institute
for Information Democracy
Methodology

GRIID conducted a 30-day study of local TV and newspaper coverage of the local primary elections in West Michigan. From October 6 through November 3, 2003 GRIID monitored the Grand Rapids Press, the 5:30, 6 & 11pm newscasts of channel's 8 & 13, and channel 17's 10pm newscast (Monday through Friday only). The 11pm WZZM 13 broadcast was not included as it was regularly pre-empted by Monday Night Football. The 10pm Fox 17 News broadcast was not included for Oct. 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22 and 23 as these were pre-empted by baseball.

Each time a story about elections appeared, we noted the order of the story, length, who was interviewed, and for how long. We also noted if candidates were quoted or given airtime, and how often paid ads ran during the newscasts or appeared in the newspaper during the study period. We looked at story/article content to see if voters would be able to make an informed vote based on the information provided by the four news agencies studied. Lastly, we made comparisons between the election coverage and other topics covered by the three TV stations, including crime coverage.

This study was conducted by GRIID staff Jeff Smith and Tom Schwallie.
Summary of Findings

- WOOD TV 8 had the best election coverage of the three television stations. WOOD TV 8 ran a total of 10 stories and was the only station to report at all on the Holland and Kalamazoo Mayoral races as well as the Grand Rapids 1st Ward race.

- WZZM 13 had only three stories about the election during the study period. Only one of these stories aired earlier than the day before the election. No candidate voices were heard in these segments.

- FOX 17 aired two election stories during the study period. These were a story on the Muskegon Casino vote and the Lowell city commission. The latter story focused on the fact that two of the candidates were married to each other, it did not discuss positions, platforms, or any of the other six candidates.

- During the study period the three television stations ran a combined 322 crime stories compared to only 15 election stories.

- The California wild fires, a story with no local relevance, received a total of 22 segments on the three channels. Channel 13 ran over twice as many stories about the lockdown of a local high school than it did on the various elections throughout West Michigan.

- The Grand Rapids Press provided better election coverage than any of the TV stations. The GR Press did provide some limited coverage of the elections outside of the Grand Rapids metro area. Given that areas such as Kalamazoo, Holland, and Grand Haven have their own newspapers, it is understandable that the GR Press did not cover all these areas in detail. Coverage in the GR Press of city council elections in Cedar Springs, Grandville, Kentwood, Lowell, Rockford, Walker, and Wyoming was non-existent (see page 9). Coverage of the 1st Ward election in Grand Rapids was fairly superficial as far as candidate positions and platforms (see page 8).
GR Press Log of Election stories Oct 4 thru Nov 3

10/8 “Friends open drive to boost transit tax to help The Rapid” Cami Reister
D3 11 inches

10/25 “Prayer vigil backs transit millage” Melissa Kruse 10 inches

10/26 “Polpourri ‘03” Steven Harmon A25 4 inches

10/28 “Candidate uses flags to make signs legal” Terry Judd D5 13 inches

11/1 “Both 1st Ward candidates have gotten to know the constituency” Jim Harger A3 11 inches

11/2 “Coast Guard City prepares to elect another new mayor” Chad D. Lerch and John Tunison A18 24 inches

11/3 “Tense EGR mayor’s race centers on economy” Steven Harmon A1 40 inches

11/3 “Grandville voters blitzed in push for Sunday booze” Keith Essenburg D1 13 inches

11/3 “On the Ballot” D4 (listing of local elections)
### Election Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Story Subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/07</td>
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<td>26 sec</td>
<td>Bus Millage</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11pm</td>
<td>2:58</td>
<td>Holland Mayoral Race</td>
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<td>5:30pm</td>
<td>1:52</td>
<td>1st Ward Race</td>
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<td>11pm</td>
<td>3:10</td>
<td>Muskegon Casino</td>
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<td>5:30</td>
<td>1:49</td>
<td>1st Ward Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/29</td>
<td>11pm</td>
<td>2:17</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Mayoral Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/30</td>
<td>5:30</td>
<td>2:40</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Mayoral Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/3</td>
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<td>18 sec</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/3</td>
<td>11pm</td>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>Election Summary</td>
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WOOD TV 8 5:30, 6:00 & 11:00pm Monday through Friday broadcasts

### Voices on News 8

#### 1st Ward Race
- Roy Schmidt: 29 sec
- Marilyn Kludy: 34 sec

#### Kalamazoo Mayoral Race
- Bob Hopewell: 23 sec
- Robert Jones: 24 sec
- David Juarez: 23 sec
- Sean McCann: 25 sec
- Hannah McKinney: 28 sec

#### Holland Mayoral Race
- Albert McGeehan: 41 sec
- Randy Aalderink: 39 sec

#### Bus Millage
- In favor of: 23 sec
- Opposed to: 19 sec

#### Muskegon Casino
- In favor of: 14 sec
- Opposed to: 20 sec
## Election Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Time</th>
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<th>Story Subject</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/3</td>
<td>6pm</td>
<td>1:20</td>
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WZZM 13 5:30, 6:00 & 11:00pm  Monday through Friday broadcasts

## Election Coverage

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Story Subject</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/29</td>
<td>10pm</td>
<td>2:46</td>
<td>Lowell City Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/31</td>
<td>10pm</td>
<td>2:25</td>
<td>Muskegon Casino</td>
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FOX 17 10:00pm  Monday through Friday broadcasts

## Voices on Fox 17

**Lowell City Council**
- James Maatman 16 sec
- Cathy Maatman 21 sec

**Muskegon Casino**
- Voices for: 8 sec
- Voices against: 12 sec

## Voices on WZZM 13

**Bus Millage**
- George Heartwell 9 sec
## Comparative Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>California Fire</th>
<th>Kentwood School Lockdown</th>
<th>Michigan guy going over Niagara Falls</th>
<th>Election Stories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WOODTV8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WZZM 13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>FOX17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
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WOOD TV8 and WZZM 13 5:30, 6:00 & 11:00pm Monday through Friday broadcasts
FOX 17 10:00pm Monday through Friday broadcasts

## Ratio of Crime to Election stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Crime Stories</th>
<th>Election Stories</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WOOD TV8</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WZZM 13</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>52:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOX 17</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>322</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>21:1</strong></td>
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</table>

WOOD TV8 and WZZM 13 5:30, 6:00 & 11:00pm Monday through Friday broadcasts
FOX 17 10:00pm Monday through Friday broadcasts
THE REGION

Both 1st Ward candidates have gotten to know the constituency

Roy Schmidt and challenger Marilyn Kludy spent a lot of time going door-to-door ahead of Tuesday’s election.

By Jim Hanger
The Grand Rapids Press

Believing he would face several challengers for his Grand Rapids City Commission seat this year, 1st Ward Commissioner Roy Schmidt said he started campaigning early and hard.

By early May, the three-term incumbent had raised nearly $25,000 in campaign donations. He began walking door-to-door in July.

“You never really know,” he said. “I always start out early.”

Marilyn Kludy, the only other 1st Ward candidate on Tuesday’s ballot, also spent most of her summer going door-to-door.

The 1st Ward encompasses the area west of the Grand River and south of Fuller Street, west of Jefferson Avenue SE.

It also includes the Garfield Park neighborhood south of Burton Street and west of Eastern Avenue.

As of the Oct. 34 campaign finance filing deadline, Schmidt had raised nearly $7,000 and spent nearly $15,000, mostly on advertising and mailings. Schmidt planned more mailings just before the election.

Kludy, a 32-year-old law student, is running on a much more modest budget. She plans to spend less than $1,000.

One of Schmidt’s mailings has Kludy upset because Schmidt used it to depict her as the right-to-life candidate.

Kludy, who has lived a youth ministry for 11 years and whose husband was a diocesan priest, said Schmidt’s mailings implied he was the only pro-life candidate. Even though she has been a supporter of the pro-life movement, Kludy said Michigan Right to Life told her they only endorsed the incumbent if both candidates are pro-life.

Schmidt defended his mailing.

“We can both be pro-life candidates, but I endorsed Michigan Right to Life,” he said.

Both candidates say they are stressing constituent service above other hot-button issues, such as the future of the John Ball Park and Zoo or proposals to replace City Hall with a hotel to accommodate convention goers.

With 12 years under his belt, Schmidt said he is focused on neighborhood problems he has solved over the years.

“They’ll call on an issue and they know I’ll call back,” says Schmidt, 50. “My philosophy is that you’ve got to have the same vigor you had 12 years ago. I don’t believe I’ve ever lost that.”

Kludy said she hopes her door-to-door campaign will overcome Schmidt’s fund-raising.

“It doesn’t take a lot of money to put on my shoes and go door-to-door,” she said. “These are the people who vote, and those are the people I want to meet.

“There are a lot of people looking for change,” she said. “I haven’t had a single door slammed in my face.”

On the issues, both say they favor offering tax breaks to businesses that create jobs. They also support tax-dove Renaissance Zones to encourage downtown housing.

GR CITY COMMISSION

Term: Four years
Salary: $22,496

First Ward candidates:

Marvin Kludy
Address: 1634 Leshaw Drive NW
Age: 32
Occupation: Law school student

Roy Schmidt
Address: 623 Myrtle St. NW
Age: 50
Occupation: Sales representative, Wyeth Inc.

Though she faces an uphill battle, Kludy said she won’t regret the experience if she loses Tuesday.

“I’ve met a lot of people and thoroughly enjoyed it.”

In the 3rd Ward, incumbent Commissioner Robert Doolas is unopposed.

GR Press coverage of the 1st Ward race was not as extensive as their coverage of the 2nd Ward and Mayoral race during the October primary. Both the mayoral and 2nd ward races received “Addressing the Issues” pieces which posed a series of questions to each candidates along with their replies (see GRIID 2003 Election Primary Study). The GR Press did not run that style of article for the 1st Ward race, instead only providing the article above to their readership. This was the only article that the GR Press ran that gave any substantive coverage of the 2nd ward race.
The GR Press Ran this list of local elections on Nov. 3, the day before the general election. Of the elections listed here, the GR Press only ran stories about the races or candidates enclosed in a box.