

AM / FM

The End of a Street-Reporting Era

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STAFF WRITER

BRUCE CHARLES, REID COLLINS, Jim Van Sickle, Peggy Stockton, Christopher Glenn, Ike Pappas, Jim Gash, Bob Hagen, Steve Bell, Bill Diehl, Alan Walden, Edward Brown . . .

In years long past, they were the reporters in WNEW-AM / 1130's mighty news department. Every half-hour, around the clock, the Frank Sinatra music would give way to their newspapers of the airwaves.

Remember Brown? Before joining Walden at NBC Radio's short-lived News and Information Service in the mid-'70s, this erudite and sonorous journalist anchored some of those reports. And impossible as it is to believe in 1991, WNEW-FM not only used to simulcast those newscasts throughout its own broadcast day, but in the evening the rock station would cut away from Cream and Jimi Hendrix to air a five-minute commentary from

Brown about the Vietnam War and other issues of the day.

You could say it was a time when rock-and-roll listeners were told what the Board of Estimate was, told what the mayor was up to, told about the United Nations — and still got the Rolling Stones.

Sure, WNEW-AM and WNEW-FM are no longer owned by the same company, but the fact is that Westwood One, the managing partner of WNEW-AM, last Friday finally cut all ties to that great news heritage. As reported here Saturday, Westwood dismissed Mike Eisgrau, WNEW-AM's remaining street reporter. In 24 years at the station, he had sat through a million news conferences, followed hundreds of political campaigns, poked his way through at least four racial flare-ups and was helicoptered in to cover one Woodstock music festival. A purely economic move, Westwood explained — in

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true corporatespeak, it was called "downsizing."

Acting manager Don N. Nelson, who had to give Eisgrau the bad news, was asked if it troubled him that WNEW-AM no longer has a reporter working the town. "I would ask you how many New York music stations have a street reporter," he replied. "The answer is none."

This is not entirely true, especially when the bigger Long Island stations are thrown into the mix. Nevertheless, since deregulation of the airwaves was begun by the Reagan administration, stations look no less reputable in the eyes of the Federal Communications Commission if they cut newscasts and news personnel. And so they have. News has become a disposable product; many stations carry none at all outside of the morning and afternoon rushes. Even the big radio networks have trimmed their news divisions, as was apparent during the Persian Gulf war, when all but NBC used some TV audio.

With Eisgrau gone, WNEW-AM, which during the '60s and '70s employed dozens of newsmen at any one time, has been reduced to a morning newscaster and another who works afternoons. On other stations, what little news gets on the air is called "information update" and such, as if to disguise a bitter pill — news. In this climate, a plan to staff and launch a four-hour morning news show later this month to air simultaneously on Long Island's WGSM / 740 AM and WGBB / 1240 AM is truly an aberration.

"It's a tragedy," Eisgrau, 51, said as he was packing to leave on Friday. "Programers think that audiences don't want news, so instead we're creating, especially on the FM band, an audience of news illiterates."

At the same time, Eisgrau has covered the news long enough to know that even his own ouster "becomes just another story" all too quickly.

One of his colleagues whose opinion we value and whose anonymity we agreed to put it this way: "My heart says this is tragic, but my head says, 'That's life.'"

Mike Eisgrau, this colleague said, "was an anachronism" at a time when the audience has two heavily staffed all-news radio stations, TV newscasts spaced throughout the day and not one, but two channels of CNN — "a news service that Saddam Hussein can see." It's no longer feasible, this gentleman insisted, for owner Westwood One to maintain an important music format on WNEW-AM, and also bear the costs of extra news personnel, when the news-hungry can easily go elsewhere for a fix.

Maybe. But a tragedy just the same.