

On Air in Los Angeles, A (Rare) Serious Voice

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LOS ANGELES, May 15 — In the wasteland that is broadcast journalism in Southern California — in which reality is nightly distorted through a prism of high-speed car chases, rapes and drive-by shootings — Warren Olney stands out like a lush oasis.

With a deep steady baritone that exudes both authority and impartiality, the veteran television reporter has turned a small cramped public-radio studio in a basement at Santa Monica College into the main broadcast forum for serious issues in the troubled Los Angeles area.

At a time when Southern California is struggling through its worst economic slump since the Depression, when Los Angeles is troubled by social and racial ills and is electing a mayor, these issues are virtually ignored by the commercial television news outlets — particularly the three stations owned by major networks. The vacuum has been filled by Mr. Olney's hourlong program, "Which Way, L.A.?" broadcast weekday evenings on KCRW-FM and closely monitored in government, business and sometimes even among street gang members, whom he finds "astonishingly articulate, passionate, very sympathetic, oddly."

Each day at 1 P.M., five to eight guests talk live by telephone. Sitting in shirt sleeves at an octagonal table, the tall, trim 55-year-old Mr. Olney deftly leads them through discussions of matters like criminal justice, immigration, mayoral politics, military conversion, racism, education and gangs. Listeners are invited to join by phone. The program is rebroadcast at 7 P.M.

Longtime Television Reporter

It is a long way from the days when Mr. Olney, a fourth-generation Californian whose great-grandfather was Mayor of Oakland, worked as reporter for all three of the network-owned stations in Los Angeles — KCBS, KNBC and KABC — as well as anchor for the independent KCOP. After 22 years in television, he quit the medium a year and a half ago.

"Television news was a serious enterprise once," he said recently, looking up through wire-rim glasses from a cluttered desk before air time. "The traditions observed were journalistic



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Warren Olney doing his radio talk show, "Which Way, L.A.?"

traditions. But now the shows are format-driven with calls for very brief stories.

"There is a minimum of production investment in trying to make complex issues important to a mass audience — at a time when the need is greatest. Management has allowed a deterioration of standards of journalism to below minimal. Producers think politics is dull, so instead of trying to make interesting what they know is important, they abdicate responsibility for detailed coverage of politics and government."

Fairly typical of the Olney program was the April 27 installment, which discussed that night's "Frontline," a harsh documentary on Los Angeles and race relations.

Debating Racial Problems

The guests were Kevin Starr, professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Southern California; Tim Rutten, an editorial writer at The Los Angeles Times; Sue Horton, assistant professor of journalism at U.S.C.; Susan Anderson, a black leader in the city; Donna Foote, an urban reporter for Newsweek here, and Ruben Martinez, a senior editor at the L.A. Weekly.

They debated Los Angeles's racial cauldron, and whether a national media dominated by "Frontline" and other Eastern-based organizations tended to give a distorted, simplistic view of this complex city.

"Olney offers far and away the most intelligent broadcast discourse in all of L.A. on matters of great public interest," said Joel Bellman, press deputy to Ed Edelman, chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

"Which Way, L.A.?" began modestly a year ago just after the riots that tore the city apart after the verdicts in the first trial of police officers in the beating of Rodney G. King. Before that, Ruth Hirschman, general manager at KCRW since 1978, had steered away from local news, catering to an elite, mostly white audience that was more interested in the Soviet Union, Latin America and the Middle East than in Sacramento and South-Central Los Angeles.

A New Awareness

Suddenly, Ms. Hirschman said, "the whole world understood something phenomenal was happening here which never happened before; there was an awareness that we were all in a cauldron, something that sophisticated people did not think about before."

She turned to Mr. Olney, an acquaintance, because he had the "background, temperament, connections and a great Rolodex in his head." What was intended to be a monthlong temporary forum has now evolved into a permanent program that, according to Arbitron, has about 136,000 daily listeners, 10 percent to 15 percent above average for KCRW. Surveys show that about one-third of listeners are black and Hispanic, un-

usual for public radio. "We really set out to bring people from those communities on the air, to give them a hearing," Mr. Olney said.

The television critic for The Los Angeles Times, Howard Rosenberg, recently measured the news output of local commercial television on a typical Monday night. He found that crime and other "negative news" took up the bulk of time not devoted to happy talk, sports and weather. KCBS (Channel 2), for example, devoted 11 of 11½ minutes of a recent report to crime, mainly to an attempted carjacking in Beverly Hills, and, as usual, nothing about the mayor's race.

30 Seconds of Thanks

Meanwhile, KNBC (Channel 4) used 24 of its 27 minutes of news for negative news, not including an endless half minute in which the announcer, Colleen Williams, thanked her station colleagues for a baby shower.

Mr. Olney has theories to explain this avoidance of significant news. Partly, he says, it has to do with the sprawl of the Los Angeles region, in which the City of Los Angeles is only one of scores of communities in the television market. "That becomes a handy excuse for not doing anything," he said.

Asked for comment, the news directors of KCBS, KNBC and KABC did not return telephone calls.

There are other forums for serious issues here, including the Michael Jackson program on KABC-AM radio; "Life & Times," weekday evenings on KCET-TV, and a weekly political discussion run by Bill Rosendahl on Century Cable Television, seen in some parts of the region. But none have quite the regular impact and following that Mr. Olney's does.