

The sorry condition of Atlanta talk radio

By Mike Malloy

Talk radio in Atlanta is slowly dying. The cause of its death is a lack of broadcast professionalism that is fast becoming unacceptable to listeners.

Over the years, this city has shown a willingness to be patient while the local stations fought their ratings wars with ever-increasing assaults on the limits of free speech. That patience is wearing thin. The audience is tuning out.

Program directors at Atlanta's two talk stations, WSB and WGST, will disagree with the premise that local talk radio is comatose. They will claim that their ratings are acceptable, that the number of listeners is expanding and that their current programming is designed to attract a majority audience.

In fact, the audience sought by these two stations is white male and between the ages of 25 and 54. This "target" group is

hardly a majority in Atlanta, but it does constitute the daytime audience that the two stations seem to want.

In their bid to secure this market, the stations' program directors have decided that young and middle-aged white males who listen to talk radio want nothing more than juvenile sexual innuendo, in-your-face use of off-color words and phrases (most having to do with excretory body functions), adolescent anti-female statements, homophobic tittering and slyly subtle racism.

No serious discussion

As a result, it is now nearly impossible on Atlanta's talk stations to hear or participate in an open exchange of grown-up ideas about local, national and global affairs. Although this is the most important election year in decades, the city's talk-show hosts for the most part don't even attempt serious political discussion. They are too busy making leering sexual references and pandering to opin-

Please see TALK, C2 ▶

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Constitution

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Talk: Radio in Atlanta has become sophomoric, mean-spirited and bigoted

▶ Continued from C1

ions based in ignorance, prejudice and outright stupidity.

Every week on WSB, for example, Atlantans can tune into something called "Kiss My Butt Friday." Callers, almost exclusively white, male and twentysomething, are invited to shriek "kiss my butt" to anyone they choose via a 50,000-watt clear-channel radio station that at one time was the standard-bearer of radio programming south of the Mason-Dixon line and east of the Mississippi. This dull-witted use of the First Amendment is defended as "entertainment."

WGST, late each afternoon, offers its own version of talk radio gone berserk: plaintive, searing monologues on how tough it

is in Atlanta to get a date.

A daily diatribe

The station also airs the ravings of a New York-based talk "personality." It is a strange, disjointed, three-hour diatribe against the poor, the weak, the homeless, those least able to defend themselves against this large and omniscient creature who is suddenly on hundreds of radio stations across the country. But, hey, it's all in fun.

So why should anyone care about such sleaze and stupidity? After all, the most efficient censoring device ever invented — the off switch — is right there near the dial.

We should care because Atlantans are being cheated of

something worthwhile.

At its inception, talk radio wasn't sophomoric and mean-spirited. It began as an electronic model of the town meeting — a forum for the open discussion, so necessary in a democratic society, of events and circumstances affecting all of society's members.

That original premise is more vital today than ever. Supermarket news-rags, People magazine, Oprah, Maury, Phil, Geraldo, all combine to drown out the few serious media attempts at encouraging an exchange of viewpoints. Our candidate "debates" are nothing of the kind; they are scripted speeches, peppered with one-liners that will make an acceptable eight-second sound

bite for the 11 o'clock news. Our elected officials are beyond our reach, surrounded and financed by snorting herds of lobbyists.

Destructive role played

Talk radio, in theory and design, should fill — or at least try to fill — that vacuum. When it is in a functioning mode, talk radio provides average citizens with the sense that their voices are being heard, that their ideas and opinions are getting into the nation's stream of consciousness. That is talk radio's constructive role.

Its destructive role is now on full display in Atlanta. Racism, sexism, jingoistic nationalism, homophobic attacks, the belittling of the elderly, the perpetu-

ation of an "us-against-them" attitude — all can be heard on Atlanta talk radio day after day, hour after hour.

Not only do these attitudes and attacks hurt those who are targeted, but they also help to spread and sanction prejudice. Such programming reinforces the notion that it's OK to be bigoted.

This is no plea for "political correctness." The point is that using the radio to perpetuate negative stereotypes does not constitute entertainment.

What is the stations' excuse for subjecting Atlantans to this aural junk-food? WSB's management has said: "All [talk] radio does is reflect where society is going," a statement notable for

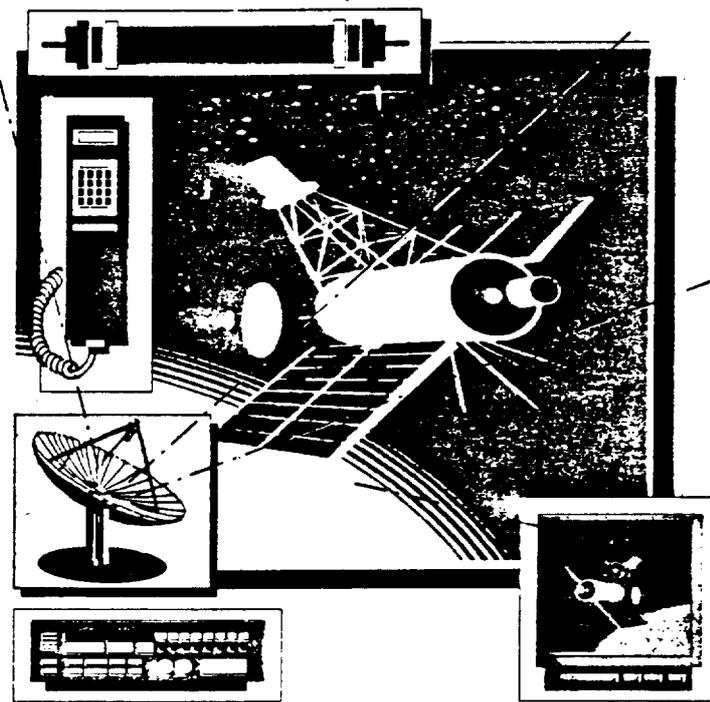
its lack of responsibility and leadership. The station managers insist that people are bored with serious issues, that what they're being fed is what they want. Were that the case, ratings on these shows would be tracking up, not plunging into Arbitron's root cellar.

In spite of its current pathetic state, talk radio still has a potential audience in Atlanta. It is both male and female, black and white, immigrant and native-born.

Unless there are radical changes in how the members of that audience are acknowledged, they soon will completely abandon Atlanta's two talk stations as surely as the stations are abandoning them.

IV. Television Deregulation
- 1990 Census Bureau Survey.

Annual Survey of Communication Services: 1990



Issued March 1992



U.S. Department of Commerce
Barbara Hackman Franklin, Secretary
Rockwell A. Schnabel, Deputy Secretary
Economics and Statistics Administration
Mark W. Plant, Acting Under Secretary
for Economic Affairs and Administrator
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
Barbara Everitt Bryant, Director

RADIO AND TELEVISION BROADCASTING SERVICES

SUMMARY OF DATA

Total operating revenue for U.S. television and radio broadcasters combined was \$28.7 billion in 1990, an increase of 2.9 percent (± 1.2 percent) over 1989. Revenue for television stations and networks totaled \$21.3 billion in 1990, accounted for 74.2 percent of the combined total for all broadcasters, and increased 3.7 percent (± 1.7 percent) over the previous year. In 1989, total operating revenue for radio broadcasters was \$7.3 billion and \$7.4 billion in 1990.

Total operating expenses for all broadcasters rose 4.8 percent to \$24.5 billion (± 1.4 percent) in 1990. Television broadcasters' operating expenses totaled \$18.1 billion and were up 6.1 percent (± 1.8 percent) from 1989. In 1990, total expenses for radio broadcasters were \$6.8 billion and \$6.7 billion for the previous year.

Sales of television station time to networks, advertisers, and sponsors (station time sales) accounted for 57.2 percent of total television industry revenue in 1990 and were up 2.7 percent from 1989. Television station revenue from national and regional advertising rose 3.8 percent.

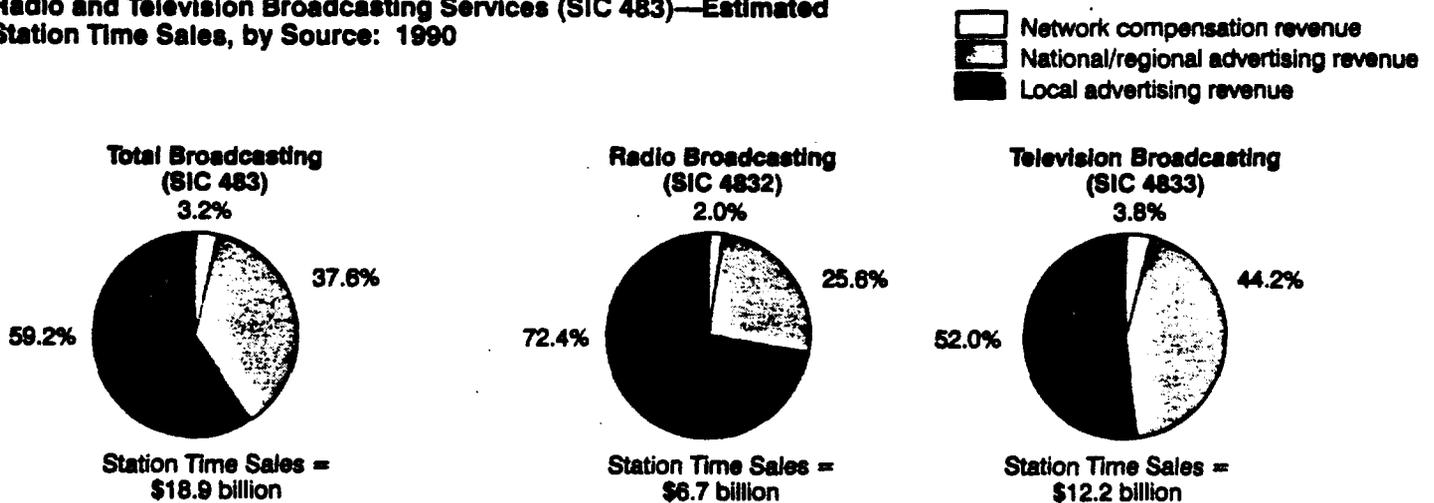
Local advertising revenue was \$6.3 billion in 1990 and \$6.2 billion in 1989. Network time sales in 1990 were up 3.7 percent from the previous year.

Broadcast rights to first-run programs, feature films, syndicated programming, sporting events, etc., accounted for 42.1 percent of total operating expenses for the television industry in 1990, and increased 8.8 percent from 1989. Industry payroll in 1990 rose 3.7 percent (± 2.1 percent) from the previous year to \$4.0 billion. Television broadcasters' contributions in 1990 to Social Security and other employee benefit plans increased 5.9 percent from 1989.

Radio network time sales in 1990 were \$328 million compared to \$324 million in 1989, while station time sales, which accounted for 90.3 percent of total radio industry revenue, were virtually unchanged from the previous year.

Annual payroll was the largest component of total expenses for the radio industry. In 1990, industry payroll was \$2.6 billion, and accounted for 38.8 percent of total expenses. Purchased advertising of radio broadcasters in 1990 fell 6.6 percent from 1989.

Figure 8.
Radio and Television Broadcasting Services (SIC 483)—Estimated Station Time Sales, by Source: 1990



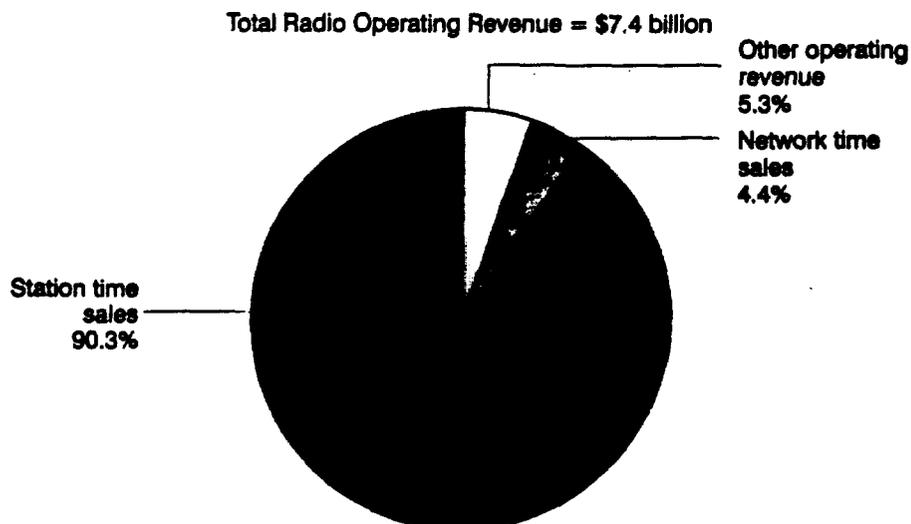
Note: These estimates are subject to sampling variability, however, measures of sampling variability have not been calculated.

Table 7. Radio and Television Broadcasting Services (SIC 483)—Estimated Operating Revenue and Expenses, by Kind of Business: 1989 and 1990

Item	Total broadcasting			Radio (SIC 4832)			Television (SIC 4833)		
	Millions of dollars		Percent change 1990/1989	Millions of dollars		Percent change 1990/1989	Millions of dollars		Percent change 1990/1989
	1990	1989		1990	1989		1990	1989	
Operating Revenue									
Total	26,684	27,882	2.9	7,391	7,341	0.7	21,293	20,540	3.7
Station time sales	18,847	18,511	1.8	6,670	6,658	0.2	12,176	11,854	2.7
Network compensation	592	587	0.8	131	124	6.0	461	464	-0.6
National/regional advertising	7,090	6,868	3.2	1,712	1,687	1.5	5,378	5,181	3.8
Local advertising	11,164	11,056	1.0	4,827	4,847	-0.4	6,337	6,209	2.1
Network time sales	8,178	7,893	3.6	328	324	1.3	7,850	7,569	3.7
Other operating revenue	1,660	1,477	12.3	392	360	9.0	1,267	1,118	13.4
Operating Expenses									
Total	24,948	23,810	4.8	6,788	6,688	1.5	18,160	17,122	6.1
Annual payroll	6,661	6,478	3.1	2,636	2,577	2.3	4,045	3,901	3.7
Employer contributions to Social Security and other supplemental benefits	1,056	1,008	4.8	361	351	2.8	696	657	5.9
Broadcast rights	8,085	7,458	8.4	445	438	1.7	7,641	7,020	8.8
Music license fees	357	364	-1.8	152	151	0.7	205	212	-3.6
Network compensation fees	525	513	2.3	103	90	13.6	422	423	-0.1
Depreciation	1,372	1,377	-0.3	516	525	-1.7	856	852	0.5
Lease and rental	514	511	0.6	173	167	3.7	340	344	-0.9
Purchased repairs	249	244	2.0	86	84	3.0	163	160	1.5
Insurance	147	149	-1.4	69	70	-1.8	78	78	-1.0
Telephone and other purchased communication services	241	238	0.9	113	114	-1.0	128	124	2.9
Purchased utilities	255	250	2.1	98	95	3.0	157	155	1.6
Purchased advertising	951	963	-1.3	392	419	-6.6	559	544	2.8
Taxes	174	179	-3.0	61	62	-1.2	113	117	-3.9
Other operating expenses	4,341	4,079	6.4	1,582	1,544	2.5	2,758	2,535	8.8

Note: Table 8 provides estimated measures of sampling variability (coefficients of variation) for SIC 483, 4832, and 4833. Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

Figure 9.
Radio Broadcasting Services (SIC 4832)—Estimated Percentages of Revenue, by Source: 1990

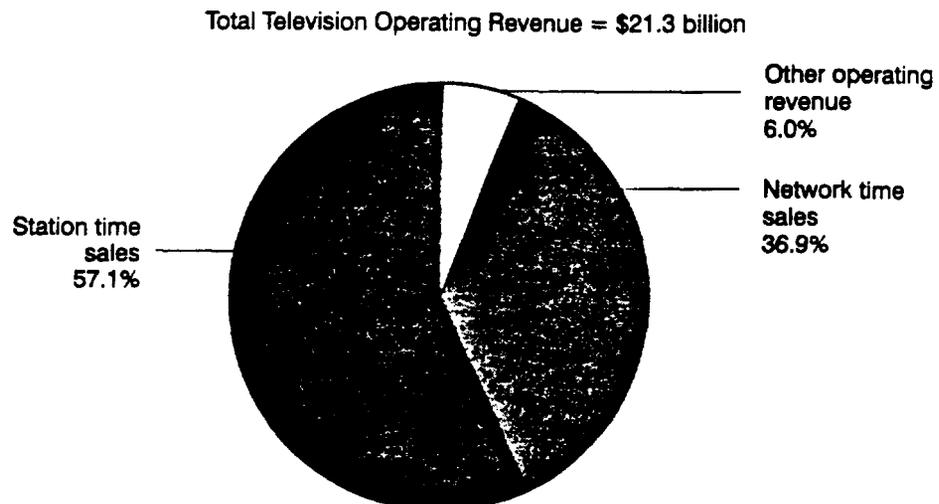


Note: See table 8 for estimated measures of sampling variability (coefficients of variation for percent of total) for 1990.

Table 8. Radio and Television Broadcasting Services (SIC 483)—Coefficients of Variation for Estimated Operating Revenue and Expenses, by Kind of Business: 1989 and 1990

Item	Total broadcasting (Coefficients of variation)			Radio (SIC 4832) (Coefficients of variation)			Television (SIC 4833) (Coefficients of variation)		
	Dollar volume		Year-to-year ratio 1990/1989	Dollar volume		Year-to-year ratio 1990/1989	Dollar volume		Year-to-year ratio 1990/1989
	1990	1989		1990	1989		1990	1989	
Operating Revenue									
Total	1.8	1.7	0.7	3.5	3.6	0.8	2.1	1.9	1.0
Station time sales	2.8	2.7	0.8	3.2	3.4	0.9	3.9	3.7	1.0
Network compensation	8.0	7.8	1.1	6.0	6.4	3.7	10.1	9.7	1.1
National/regional advertising	2.8	2.9	0.8	5.2	5.3	1.5	3.3	3.4	1.0
Local advertising	3.2	3.0	0.8	3.5	3.8	1.0	4.9	4.4	1.2
Network time sales	0.7	0.9	0.7	2.0	1.7	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.8
Other operating revenue	16.9	17.5	2.7	18.7	19.7	2.6	21.3	22.3	3.5
Operating Expenses									
Total	2.3	2.2	0.8	3.9	4.2	0.9	2.8	2.6	1.0
Annual payroll	2.7	2.5	0.8	2.8	3.1	0.7	4.0	3.6	1.2
Employer contributions to Social Security and other supplemental benefits	3.0	2.6	1.1	3.4	3.5	1.2	4.2	3.5	1.6
Broadcast rights	3.4	3.8	1.1	19.8	21.4	1.9	3.4	3.8	1.1
Music license fees	2.7	2.8	1.0	3.6	3.7	1.8	3.9	4.0	1.1
Network compensation fees	4.4	3.1	2.0	20.8	16.1	4.9	2.1	1.5	2.0
Depreciation	4.9	4.6	1.7	8.2	8.2	3.2	6.1	5.4	2.0
Lease and rental	3.7	3.4	0.8	5.8	5.2	1.3	4.7	4.4	1.0
Purchased repairs	4.4	4.5	2.0	5.5	6.1	1.9	6.0	6.1	2.8
Insurance	4.0	4.1	1.2	5.6	6.3	1.6	5.7	5.3	1.9
Telephone and other purchased communication services	3.0	3.3	1.2	4.0	4.4	1.3	4.5	4.8	2.0
Purchased utilities	6.2	6.2	0.9	4.8	5.3	1.4	9.6	9.5	1.1
Purchased advertising	2.6	2.9	2.0	5.4	5.6	1.8	2.2	2.7	3.2
Taxes	3.9	3.6	2.4	5.2	5.4	1.8	5.4	4.7	3.5
Other operating expenses	3.1	2.9	1.7	5.3	5.7	1.7	3.8	3.2	2.5

Figure 10.
Television Broadcasting Services (SIC 4833)—Estimated Percentages of Revenue, by Source: 1990



Note: See table 8 for estimated measures of sampling variability (coefficients of variation for percent of total) for 1990.

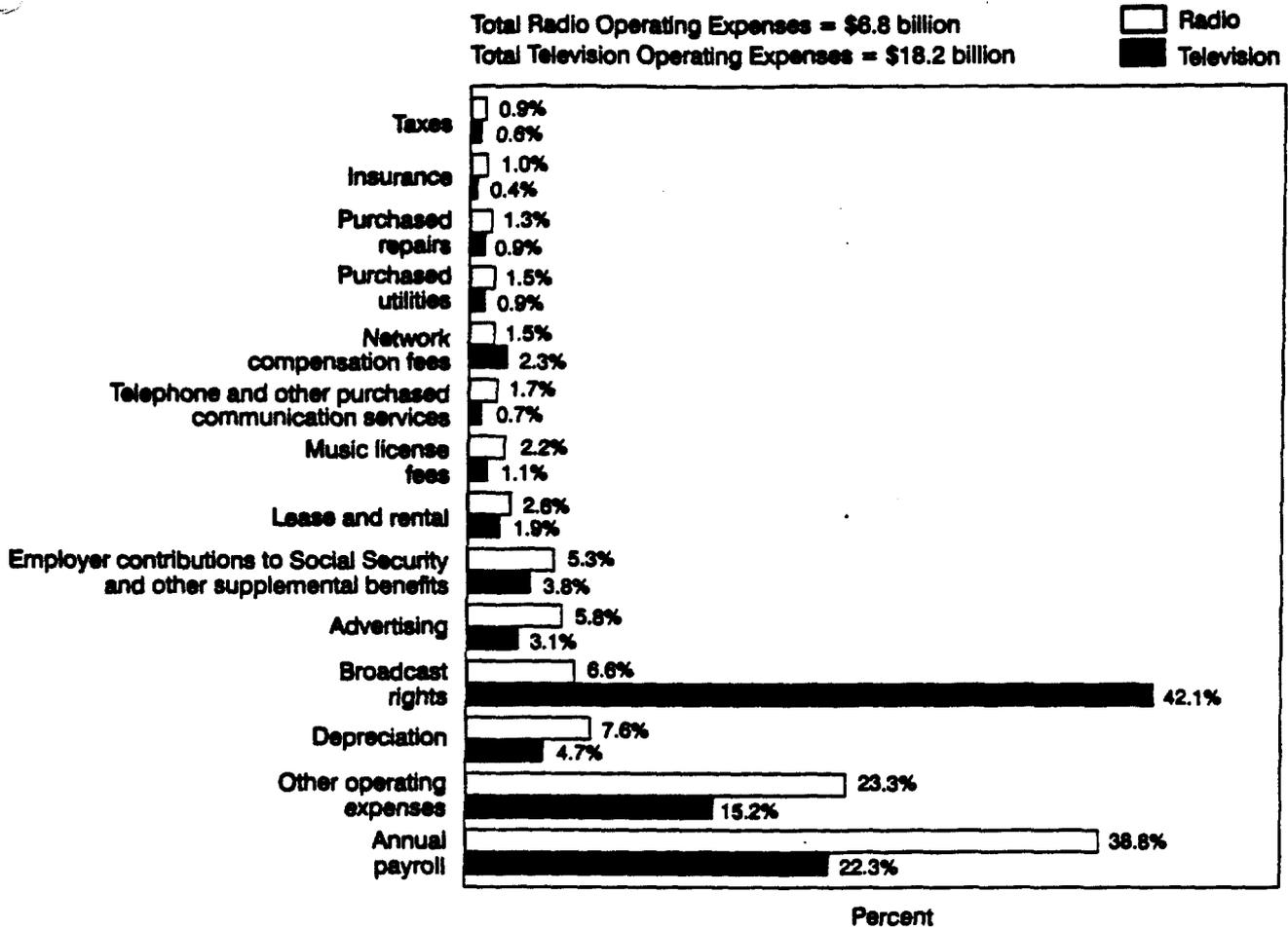
Table 9. Radio Broadcasting Services (SIC 4832)—Components of Estimated Operating Revenue, Expenses, and Coefficients of Variation: 1989 and 1990

Item	Millions of dollars		Percent of total		Coefficients of variation			
					Dollar volume		Percent of total	
	1990	1989	1990	1989	1990	1989	1990	1989
Operating Revenue								
Total.....	7,391	7,341	100.0	100.0	3.5	3.6	(X)	(X)
Station time sales.....	6,670	6,658	90.3	90.7	3.2	3.4	0.9	0.9
Network compensation.....	131	124	1.8	1.7	6.0	6.4	8.3	7.7
National/regional advertising.....	1,712	1,687	23.2	23.0	5.2	5.3	3.4	4.1
Local advertising.....	4,827	4,847	65.3	66.0	3.5	3.8	1.8	1.8
Network time sales.....	328	324	4.4	4.4	2.0	1.7	3.8	3.7
Other operating revenue.....	392	360	5.3	4.9	18.7	19.7	16.4	17.6
Operating Expenses								
Total.....	6,788	6,688	100.0	100.0	3.9	4.2	(X)	(X)
Annual payroll.....	2,636	2,577	38.8	38.5	2.8	3.1	2.3	2.3
Employer contributions to Social Security and other supplemental benefits.....	361	351	5.3	5.3	3.4	3.5	2.1	2.0
Plans required under Federal and State legislation.....	189	185	2.8	2.8	3.7	3.9	2.5	2.6
Other fringe benefit plans.....	171	166	2.5	2.5	3.6	3.6	2.5	2.4
Broadcast rights.....	445	438	6.6	6.5	19.8	21.4	17.6	19.2
Music license fees.....	152	151	2.2	2.3	3.6	3.7	3.0	2.6
Network compensation fees.....	103	90	1.5	1.4	20.8	16.1	20.0	15.6
Depreciation.....	516	525	7.6	7.9	8.2	8.2	7.2	6.9
Buildings, offices, and structures.....	114	130	1.7	1.9	8.7	10.4	8.1	9.0
Transmission systems.....	186	183	2.7	2.7	8.6	8.1	6.1	5.4
Vehicles, machinery and equipment, and other tangible assets.....	216	212	3.2	3.2	13.4	13.2	13.4	13.2
Lease and rental.....	173	167	2.6	2.5	5.8	5.2	3.6	3.0
Buildings, offices, and structures.....	114	112	1.7	1.7	5.9	6.2	3.0	3.4
Transmission systems.....	34	32	0.5	0.5	18.6	13.7	18.3	14.1
Vehicles, and other machinery and equipment.....	25	24	0.4	0.4	7.6	6.2	6.7	5.0
Purchased repairs.....	86	84	1.3	1.3	5.5	6.1	4.4	4.3
Buildings, offices, and structures.....	28	27	0.4	0.4	7.0	7.8	6.4	6.3
Transmission systems.....	33	32	0.5	0.5	8.7	7.8	7.9	6.6
Vehicles, and other machinery and equipment.....	25	25	0.4	0.4	5.7	5.9	4.8	4.3
Insurance.....	69	70	1.0	1.1	5.6	6.3	4.8	5.0
Telephone and other purchased communication services.....	113	114	1.7	1.7	4.0	4.4	3.3	2.9
Purchased utilities.....	98	95	1.5	1.4	4.8	5.3	3.1	2.9
Purchased advertising.....	392	419	5.8	6.3	5.4	5.6	3.3	3.3
Taxes.....	61	62	0.9	0.9	5.2	5.4	5.1	4.5
Other operating expenses.....	1,582	1,544	23.3	23.1	5.3	5.7	2.7	3.1

X Not applicable.

Note: Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

Figure 11.
Radio and Television Broadcasting Services (SIC 483)—Estimated
Percentages of Expenses, by Source: 1990



Note: See tables 9 and 10 for estimated measures of sampling variability (coefficients of variation for percent of total) for 1990.