

Ted Turner's SuperStation WTBS: An Examination of Local News Coverage of America's First SuperStation in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*; 1970-1989

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ABSTRACT: R.E. Ted Turner in the late 1970s and 1980s successfully built WTBS Channel 17, a small Atlanta, Georgia UHF station, into the first "SuperStation." This study examined 53 articles from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's coverage from 1970-1989 to determine how the local newspaper reported on Turner and his "SuperStation." The review of articles showed that three themes emerged in the newspaper's coverage of him, including Turner as a hands-on CEO, a social/political activist, and a media innovator. This research helps to further the body of knowledge on an important moment in the history of the cable TV industry.

Keywords: TV Industry; Ted Turner; WTBS; Media History

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, the cable television industry was in its early days of growth. One of the pioneers of cable that helped to pave the way for so many others to have success in the industry was R.E. "Ted" Turner. He started his cable television company with one small local Atlanta, Georgia, TV station, WTCG (he would later change its call letters to WTBS). While he is now one of the most well-known media moguls in the world, he did not start out that way. In the early days of Turner Broadcasting and WTBS channel 17 locally in Atlanta, he was a man that was trying to keep his small UHF TV station on the air and in business in the Atlanta market. Turner had very strong opinions and did things his way in his business. One way in which he was different from other media executives during this era is that instead of having his company in the world's largest media market, New York City, he had his company headquartered in the South in Atlanta.

While Turner was working on building a media empire, the local paper of record, the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* (AJC) covered the weekly happenings at Turner Broadcasting and WTBS. While nationally known newspapers such as *The New York Times* and other industry publications reported occasionally on his

company, the reporting on his corporation in the AJC offers an alternative and local perspective on the business of Turner's WTBS. These articles help to provide historical information during the early days of this important moment in cable broadcasting that other papers may not contain since other sources did not cover Turner on a weekly basis.

The early history of cable SuperStations is an area of broadcast interest to study given the historical significance of these channels to the development of the cable television industry. In particular, Ted Turner's SuperStation WTBS is of interests to study due to his influence on the industry and his channel's success as the largest network of its time. By analyzing local newspaper coverage of WTBS, it was hoped new insights would be discovered into the history of the early days of the station, as this was an important era in cable history. This study will help to further the body of work on Turner and help to provide more understanding into an aspect of his company and its early history that prior studies have not covered.

Literature Review

Prior journalism and broadcast researchers have reviewed the cable TV industry and its growth. The cable-satellite distribution system began to grow

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exponentially in the 1970s. In the 1960s, predictions were made about the concept of TV programming delivered via cable and satellite dishes that would allow channels to broadcast from coast-to-coast.¹ A study in 1967 predicted a cable future where there would be multiple networks that would provide programming to a niche audience as opposed to broadcast networks such as NBC, which tries to reach the largest audience possible.²

Harold Barnett and Edward Greenberg reported how the TV industry could improve its service by offering more choice for the consumers. One proposal mentioned was from the Rand Corporation that called for a national 20-channel service that would replace the current broadcast service that was not serving TV audiences as it could.³ Patrick Parsons discusses the growth of cable and satellite technology and how the industry grew in its early days. He explains that without the advancement of satellites that could provide local cable systems the national networks, national cable channels growth would have been diminished.⁴

Cable TV saw growth in the 1970s and even more growth in the 1980s. Stuart Brotman described how the growth of cable was helped by many factors including a relaxing of regulation restrictions from the FCC, increase in investment in the industry and more consumer interests as more and more Americans wanted more choice other than the three networks. He concluded cable would probably become a profitable business and offer more choices to Americans than the

previous three networks offered. He also stated that the broadcast networks could keep the status quo going and cable could become a fringe business. His main rationale on whether cable would grow or not was if national advertisers would be willing to purchase time on cable channels.⁵

Besen and Crandall reported during the 1970s/early 1980s, the federal government was still trying to protect the three broadcast networks for fear the cable TV industry would greatly damage the status quo of the three networks. The FCC's biggest fear was the cable channels would not serve "the public interest" and would decrease the entertainment options available to homes that could not afford cable TV and depended on over-the-air broadcasters. The FCC thought the amount of programming on local broadcasters could decrease as more programming shifted to cable channels and thus would leave some viewers without a large amount of entertainment. As the 1970s continued, the federal government saw the growth of cable did not have a necessarily negative effect on broadcast TV as cable grew, because the broadcast networks were still in business and were still able to compete. While there was still legislation aimed at cable in 1978, many of the imposed limitations on the cable industry were lifted, as it was obvious broadcast TV could still compete successfully with cable.⁶

Rolla Park concluded the potential revenue decline that could result from the growth of cable would not be large enough to be of a concern to broadcast TV. The paper concluded that while overall the decline in revenue from cable would be small, especially for stations in large markets, stations in smaller markets would be hurt more if cable were available in a large amount of homes.⁷ While many limitations on cable

¹ Leon Papernow, "One Man's Opinion," *Television Magazine*, p.30-31, December 1965.

² J. Licklider, "Televistas: Looking ahead through side windows," *In Public Television, A Program for Action*, pp. 201-225, 1967. (New York: Bantam Books).

³ Harold Barnett and Edward Greenberg, "A Proposal for Wired City Television," Wash. U. L. Q. 1 (1968).
http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawrev/vol1968/iss1/

⁴ Patrick Parsons, "The Evolution of the Cable-Satellite Distribution System," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. 47(1), 2003, pp. 1-17.

⁵ Stuart Brotman, "The New Era," *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976) 5, No. 1 (Winter 1981): 76-85.

⁶ Stanley Besen and Robert Crandall, "The Deregulation of Cable Television," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 44, No. 1 (1981): 77-124.

⁷ Rolla Park, "The Growth of Cable TV and Its Probable Impact on Over-the-air Broadcasting," *The American Economic Review*, 1971, 61 (2). American Economic Association: 69-73.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1816977>.

were abolished in the late 1970s, the FCC mostly deregulated cable in 1980. Jules Simon determined that deregulating cable would benefit the public overall by providing more sources of programming, but the growth of cable could harm broadcast television.⁸

In 1988, cable television reached a milestone having coverage in half of U.S. households. Research from Sylvia Chan-Olmsted and Barry Litman reviewed the possible antitrust possibilities due to the large mergers that occurred in the cable industry during the 1980s as the industry grew. One business deal examined was TCI cable's deal to become the second largest stockholder in Turner Broadcast System. This deal provided TCI cable a stake in channels that were on their cable system. The researchers concluded that with the growth of cable systems, there should be antitrust authorities overseeing the industry to make sure the public interests were served.⁹

Research from Thomas Streeter viewed the growth of cable TV from a policy perspective. He discussed the political and business policies that helped to create cable. He stated that one hope of cable was to help end the TV oligopoly but instead it helped create a new one. Streeter was referring to the small amount of TV channels and owners, but as is the case now, there are just a handful of cable channel owners. Some examples mentioned in regard to the attempt of cable related companies trying to purchase broadcast TV networks included Capital Cities Communications purchase of ABC, and Ted Turner's (failed) attempt to purchase CBS. He also concluded that cable TV was not as technically advanced as some assumed because it was barely more interactive as traditional broadcast TV. During the early growth days of cable during the 1970s and early 1980s, he reported that most viewers could receive on average 20 channels.¹⁰ Today that is

considered a basic cable package, but during the early days of cable, this was an advancement from a consumer perspective.

One company that led the way in the growth of cable in the 1970s and early 1980s was the Turner Broadcast System and its flagship station WTBS Atlanta. WTBS was the first SuperStation on cable. James Rothe, Michael Harvey, and George C. Michael explained that a SuperStation is a local station that beams its signal nationally to cable systems across the nation. In addition, they examined the reasons cable has expanded during this era. The main reason is the growth of satellite technology, as well as investment from entrepreneurs that helped the industry's to grow. Other factors mentioned included the dissatisfaction from TV viewers that could only receive a small amount of channel choices and programming options. As mentioned in previous studies, this paper also explained that FCC policy changes helped to drive the growth of cable television.¹¹ While there are still stations that broadcast their local signal nationally, most stations now do not use the SuperStation moniker including WTBS. The station is simply marketed as TBS. The station is a national only feed as Turner Broadcasting divided the local WTBS feed into a local station and rebranded the station WPCW, PeachTree TV Atlanta and eventually sold the station to the Meredith Corporation in 2017.

Robert Bellamy Jr., studied the business relationship between Major League Baseball (MLB) and television. His study reviewed the impact of cable channels carrying games during the 1980s and described cable SuperStations as the most controversial aspect of MLB's and TV's relationship. At the time of publication, baseball was afraid that airing games on these networks could harm the baseball markets that did not have a local SuperStation in which to air the local team's games. In the article, a source cited stated that Turner aired 150 games per season on his SuperStation. In addition, the article cited various sources showed that others would follow Turner's business model by purchasing a baseball team to air on their SuperStations, including the Tribune Company (Station: WGN, Team: Chicago Cubs), Gaylord

⁸ Jules Simon, "The Collapse of Consensus: Effects of the Deregulation of Cable Television," *Columbia Law Review* 81, No. 3 (1981): 612-38.

⁹ Sylvia Chan-Olmsted and Barry Litman, "Antitrust and Horizontal Mergers in the Cable Industry," *Journal of Media Economics* 1, No. 2 (1988): 3-28.

¹⁰ Thomas Streeter, "The Cable Fable Revisited: Discourse, Policy, and the Making of Cable Television," *Critical Studies in*

Mass Communication 4, No. 2 (1987): 174-200.

¹¹ James Rothe, Michael Harvey, and George C. Michael, "Perspectives on the New Television," *Business Horizons* 25 (1982): 55.

Broadcasting (Station: KTVT, Team: Texas Rangers).¹² In an effort to help even the playing field between markets that did not contain a SuperStation with those that did. MLB and SuperStation owners including Turner, in an effort to appease MLB agreed in 1985 to pay \$30 million over five years to Major League Baseball.¹³ This revenue was spread to the other teams in the league.

Research from Holderness and Sheehan used Turner's company as an example of an organization that is controlled by a single man and what effect this has on the company. The research explained that he had the majority of the stock in the company and it was he alone, not a board of directors that made the decisions for the company. They explained that operational changes at the company brought a new board of directors gave Turner less a majority say in his company. The research concludes by stating the organizational changes within the company brought TBS success as the stock price increased 400% in the two years after these changes were implemented.¹⁴

This study researched the following questions:

- Did the Atlanta Journal Constitution reporting on Turner and WTBS show local bias or offered a fair account of his network?
- How did the Atlanta Journal Constitution frame Turner's contributions to the emergence and success of cable television?

Method

This study reviewed local Atlanta coverage of Ted Turner's SuperStation WTBS from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* from 1970-1989. The articles were

¹² Robert Bellamy, "Impact of the Television Marketplace on the Structure of Major League Baseball," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 32, No. 1 (1988): 73-87.

¹³ A. Breznick, (February 4, 1985), "Baseball teams reach deal on superstations," *Multichannel News*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Clifford Holderness and Dennis Sheehan, "Monitoring an Owner: The Case of Turner Broadcasting," *Journal of Financial Economics* 30 (1991) 325-346. North-Holland.

accessed from the AJC.com website archives, which require a subscription in order to access. The researcher used key terms such as "Ted Turner," "SuperStation WTBS," "Ted Turner WTBS," "Ted Turner Braves," "Ted Turner WCW," and "Ted Turner MGM" in order to access articles from the database that concerned coverage of the station in the newspaper. A total of 53 articles were reviewed.

Findings on Superstation WTBS

While reviewing the coverage of Turner in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, three themes emerged in the paper's coverage of him that included Turner portrayed as a hands on CEO, a social/political activist and media innovator. Articles that presented coverage of his company offered a view of the media executive as a determined businessman that at times could be difficult to work for and opinionated. The AJC reports of him as a political activist covered his dealings with the Soviet Union and his attempt to use his network to help bring political peace. The articles that offered news on his media innovation included his programming decision of placing the Atlanta Braves games on his network nightly, which is programming a cable channel never aired nightly before and coloring black and white movies, which caused controversy within the film industry. In multiple articles, more than one of these themes was presented as Turner's business and political interests were one in the same in many situations.

In 1970, Turner purchased a small UHF TV station in Atlanta and changed its call letters to WTCG, which stood for Watch Turner Communications Group. The call letters were also used in promos in which the call letters stood for "Watch This Channel Grow." At first, it was only a local channel available in the Atlanta market, then he decided to air it nationally and he created the first "SuperStation." In the early days of WTCG the station aired mostly reruns of old movies and reruns of TV shows such as *I Love Lucy*. The station would eventually begin to air other programming such as professional baseball and basketball games, as well as wrestling matches. The station would rebrand as WTBS in 1979 as Turner changed his company name to Turner Broadcast System. On the station's tenth anniversary, Turner told the AJC that he was "as busy as a peg-legged man at a fanny-kicking contest." He has always had his own unique way of saying things. This quote from an article written about the ten year anniversary of WTBS showed how determined he was for WTBS to succeed as he discussed the past decade of the station and also shows that WTBS was a success as it celebrated its tenth anniversary.

As mentioned previously, sometimes his social and political opinions would bleed over into his business interests, as he seemed to understand that TV was more than just entertainment, that it could have a real impact and effect on society. In the WTBS 10th anniversary article, he said, “the greatest mistake we ever made as a society is the misuse of television. Television is more important than the school system, more important than the churches, almost as important as parents as far as setting role models and determining the way we live and what we think.”¹⁵ He seemed to understand the influence that TV programming could have on our nation and children and he tried to offer as much family friendly programming as possible on his channel.

During these days, he was a hands on executive. He was known to sleep on his third-floor office at TBS and some employees would see him walk the hallways of the offices at night in a robe, unshaven, and barefoot. He was also known as a man that could be difficult to work for and yet determined to succeed as the AJC reported. “The great thing about Ted is that he treats everyone the same – like a janitor,” said former show producer Bill Reilley. Turner was known for having a temper. Yet this is the same man that said network TV was bad for America, promoted family values, considered Rev. Jerry Falwell a friend, while at the same time visiting Fidel Castro in Cuba, and bragged to Playboy magazine about photographing women naked and smashed a reporter’s tape recorder after not liking the line of questioning when he asked him if he was a hypocrite.¹⁶ Turner was his own man, an original that was very determined to win and live by his own rules and create his own path, which is how the AJC framed their coverage of his business dealings.

In 1985, he told reporters that his goal was to become number one in the broadcast TV business and it is hard to argue against that he did not reach his goal.¹⁷ In 1989, he became a billionaire as his portfolio of media

¹⁵ Gerry Yandel, “10 sometimes great years for SuperStation,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 17, 1986.

¹⁶ Jim Auchmutey. “For Mellow Ted Turner, it’s Still Full Speed Ahead,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1985.

¹⁷ Thomas Oliver, “What Makes Turner Tick? He Likes Winning,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. April 19, 1985.

properties were worth \$1.34 billion.¹⁸ However and whatever he did, it must have worked because TBS is still on the air today and remains a top channel in all of cable. While he had a lot of success with The SuperStation, not everything was super with the channel through the years as the AJC reported the good and the bad of WTBS.

Turner MGM Business Deal

One of the biggest business deals Turner made during this time period was the purchase of MGM. The AJC articles reported on this deal from a business perspective, but also presented coverage of his innovated idea of colorizing classic black and white movies. From the business angle, the AJC reported how he nearly brought his empire down with a massive \$1 billion deal for MGM/UA in 1985 that brought his company a large amount of debt. Many within the industry thought the massive deal could bring down Turner’s company due to the debt that accrued with the purchase. Turner in an interview with the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* he said that some of “those are the same people who said WTBS wouldn’t work on the satellite, and that CNN wouldn’t work and that we paid too much for the Braves. Only we know what we plan to do, and they don’t have a basis to comment.”¹⁹ He was always a confident businessperson (at least publicly) and the AJC reported on this issue by offering the financial side of the deal and the debt, but also provided his side of the story as well. The deal provided Turner access to over 2,000 movies including *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* that could air on WTBS. He needed programming and this was a way to obtain programming.²⁰ He wanted to build a 100,000 square foot movie studio in Atlanta before the MGM

¹⁸ NA, “Captain Outrageous Now a Billionaire,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 21, 1989.

¹⁹ Keith Herndon, “Road to Oz, or Ruin? Some Say MGM Deal Weakened TBS,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1986.

²⁰ Janice Castro and Denise Worrell, “Turner Takes on Hollywood,” *Time* 126, No. 7 (August 19, 1985): 32.

deal but the deal never transpired.²¹ However, in the business deal, he agreed to sale the production assets of MGM to United Artists and the agreement included a provision that would allow TBS to produce three feature films per year that United Artists would distribute, so he was still able to produce original movies. The sale of MGM's production, distribution, and videocassette businesses to United Artists netted Turner an estimated \$300 million. He also agreed to sale MGM's 44-acre production facilities to Lorimar-Telepictures for \$190 million.²² While he had to sale the production and other assets of MGM, the deal gave him what he wanted most, which was content that he could air on his channel. He would once again be an innovator with his newly acquired movie library, but not everyone would be on board with his newest, innovated idea according to the AJC's coverage of this massive business deal.

One issue that falls under the Turner as media innovator in the AJC's coverage are articles that report on his idea to colorize some black and white MGM movies. Color TV was the broadcast standard by the time WTBS hit the airwaves, and Turner decided that it only made sense to show colorized movies instead of showing the movies in the original black and white in which the movies were produced. His plan to colorized classic movies including *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *The Maltese Falcon* and *42nd Street*, made some purists within the film industry upset. Movie director Woody Allen called colorizing the movies as "sinful" and other Hollywood movers and shakers at the time held similar views as Sidney Pollack, Ginger Rogers, and Jimmy Stewart all were against Turner's plan. These Hollywood leaders even asked Congress to step in and stop the process of colorizing movies. Congress, nor Hollywood stopped Turner from his plan. In 1987, he planned to colorize 300 of the nearly 2,000 MGM movies that he owned over the next decade. In the same article, he said the colorizing of the classic movies made the company an average of \$950,000.²³ This same

²¹ Thomas Oliver, "Turner's Goal is Programming for WTBS," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* August 6, 1985.

²² Keith Herndon, "Sale Contract Allows TBS to Produce 3 Films a Year," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 11, 1986.

²³ Keith Herndon, "Turner Paints Film Colorizing a Financial Success. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 11, 1987.

year he earned the TV broadcast rights to MGM's most famous movie, *Gone with the Wind*. At the time, CBS still owned the broadcast rights even though Turner purchased the company.²⁴ The AJC offered a balanced view on this colorization controversy by presenting both Turner's opinion as well as quoting those that were against his idea as previously discussed.

Turner's Team and Other Sports Endeavors

Another topic the AJC reported on that presented him as both a determined businessperson and media innovator is the Atlanta paper's coverage of Turner's Atlanta Braves. The most well-known program on the channel was Atlanta Braves baseball games and because of this the Atlanta paper of record provided extensive coverage of the goings on with the team in reference to WTBS. When the SuperStation began airing the games, Turner did not own the team. After the team was for sale in 1976, he decided to purchase the team since he was already airing their games on his channel.²⁵ The Braves were one of the earliest teams to receive national media coverage since WTBS was national. At one point because of the coast-to-coast coverage of the Braves, the Atlanta team was dubbed "America's team."²⁶ Airing the games gave WTBS daily content that viewers could not receive anywhere else. In addition, airing the Braves helped his company earn more revenue as he owned both the team and the channel their games aired. The paper reported he was planning to airing minor league Braves games during a potential 1985 baseball stroke since he could not air the major league team. At one point, he aired the class AAA Richmond Braves on WTBS a couple of times per week.²⁷ As with WTBS, he had a large influence on

²⁴ Keith Herndon. "TBS Acquires 'Gone with the Wind' TV Rights." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 14, 1987.

²⁵ Maynard Stoddard, "Cable TV's Ted Turner: Spirited Skipper of CNN. (Cable Network News)," *Saturday Evening Post* 256 (1984): 44.

²⁶ Steve Wulf, "Not Home Free Yet," August 09, 1982, Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://www.si.com/vault/1982/08/09/624676/not-home-free-yet>.

²⁷ Hubert Etchison Jr., "WTBS Likes Idea of First-Place Braves. Turner Plans to Televisе Class AAA Minor League Team If Players

the game of baseball as well. The AJC stated that he “revolutionized baseball’s concept of television, had his hand in proffering the free agent marketplace, and re-examined franchise business possibilities and how they might be run.”²⁸

In 1977, he purchased the Atlanta Hawks basketball team, which gave the channel even more original content that viewers could see nowhere else.²⁹ WTBS aired many of the team’s games during the season, but not as many games as the Braves as some of the Hawks games aired nationally on CBS.³⁰ The reason Turner’s station aired less Hawks games than Braves is because the NBA season is shorter than baseball. The NBA plays 82 games per season, and baseball has its teams take the field 162 times per season. He did not have as much influence on basketball as he did the game of baseball, but the team did provide channel 17 with more content, which was the main goal.

Another sporting event that received much airtime and reports in the AJC was Turner’s wrestling matches that aired on WTBS. The “World Championship Wrestling (WCW)” organization promotion was purchased by Turner because this gave his channel more programming and would help his channel compete with the popular WWF (World Wrestling Federation, now known as WWE: World Wrestling Entertainment). In 1988, he purchased the contracts of what became some of the most well-known wrestlers from the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) for the WCW. Some of the contracts he received in this deal included Ric “Nature Boy” Flair, Sting, Lux Luger, and Dusty Rhodes. When Turner purchased the NWA he wanted there to be less violence in an effort to appeal to a younger demographic. Before Turner, there was

more violence shown on screen. In an effort to clean up the violence and make the show more family friendly, Turner forbid bloodshed in the matches as was reported in the AJC.³¹ His sports business dealings received extensive coverage in the paper and were framed from a business angle.

Turner as America and Soviet Union Peace Maker

The paper also covered Turner’s political activism as he used his SuperStation to help spread his political message. As if owning a Major League Baseball team and National Basketball Association team was not enough, Turner created his own Olympics style games that featured American and Soviet Union athletes. The AJC covered this international endeavor extensively. In 1984 Turner and his wife at the time Jane Shirley Smith, visited Moscow and shortly after his visit there, his concept for the Goodwill Games came to fruition. He wanted to try to do what politicians and public opinion could not do which is make the relations better between the United States and the Soviet Union. The games aired on the SuperStation. The Soviets boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics because America boycotted the 1980 Olympics that were held in Moscow, and the Turner athletic competition would be held in alternate-years to the Olympics. The plan was to have the American and Soviet athletes compete in 18 different sports. WTBS planned to air 130 hours of coverage of the games. Turner told the AJC that “The Russians are just people like us. They don’t want to fight a war. I asked Janie how we could improve things between our countries.”³² While trying to create better relations between the countries was a noble thought, financially for the company it was not as successful of a concept as the 1986 Goodwill Games was estimated to lose \$20 million. The ratings were lower than expected for the games as well, which made Turner have to renegotiate advertising contracts with sponsors. While he was disappointed that the games did not earn a profit, he was willing to take the financial lost as the games helped to give his network worldwide exposure.

Strike,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, August 6, 1985.

²⁸ Thomas Stinson, “A Maverick Joins the Establishment,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, December 3, 1988.

²⁹ NA, “TBS: The Mouse That Roared. Key Events for Ted Turner’s Company,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, August 6, 1985.

³⁰ Karen Rosen, “Nation to See More Hawks Hames on Television Next Season,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, May 10, 1986.

³¹ Bo Emerson, “Turner Tries a Ted-lock on TV Wrestling Rivals,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, December 19, 1989.

³² Dave Kindred, “Turner’s Simple Idea Might Work,” *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, September 8, 1985.

“I’m building a worldwide network, and these games will get it started,” Said Turner in the AJC.³³ The paper covered his political ambitions, but in its coverage, the paper did report on the financial angle of the Turner Olympics and what impact these games had on his TV channel and company. As explained previously, many times his political ideas blended into his business reality as reported in the AJC.

After SuperStation WTBS

In further coverage of Ted Turner, the businessperson, the AJC reported on his 1987 agreement that provided much needed cash in a \$550 million deal with several cable companies including TCI, Cablevision, Times Mirror Cable, among other cable companies. The deal reduced Turner’s ownership of the company from 81% to 50%. The investors received 35% of control of Turner Broadcasting. The deal did allow Turner to contain complete programming and editorial control of WTBS and his other properties including CNN. One reason for this deal was because the purchase of MGM left the company with a large sum of debt.³⁴ The deal allowed investors five members on an eleven-member board. Even after the deal, his company was left with an interest rate of around 14%, which if he refinanced could bring the interest rate down to around 10-12%. One analysts quoted in the AJC described the deal as “putting a collar and chain” on Turner and his business pursuits.³⁵

By the end of the 1980s, Turner seemed to be less bold, more responsible in regards to business deals. In summing up Turner’s previous years of business, the AJC described him running his business as “a high-wire act for years, taking big chances, investing good money in what conventional wisdom called bad ideas. Yet it’s worked. Those “bad” ideas – four cable television channels and the MGM movie library – are worth a couple of billion dollars now.”

³³ Keith Herndon, “Goodwill Games Loss Could Hit \$20 Million,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 11, 1986.

³⁴ Keith Herndon, “TBS Deal Will Raise \$550 Million, Reduced Ted Turner’s Power,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 1987.

³⁵ Keith Herndon, “Loans May Cost Turner More Control,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 4, 1987.

One reason he was less “brash” was at the end of the Eighties there were more investors involved that also helped to make decisions for the company. “I think it’s true that when you get more people involved in a situation you are less likely to take a risk like the risk that launched CNN. Ted clearly made the decision and he was right. Whether the board would have is a whole ‘nother question,” stated a former Turner Broadcasting board member to the AJC.³⁶

Conclusion

Through the next few decades, SuperStation WTBS would grow to become one of the most popular and most profitable channels in all of cable TV. Without the success of WTBS, the Turner television empire may not have ever existed. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution’s* reporting on Turner and this time period of the early days of SuperStation WTBS provides an interesting analysis of one of the most well-known media entrepreneurs of the era. Their reporting offered a uniquely local and regional view on Turner. They reported factually and did not present news on his station with a local bias. Whether the issue reported was positive or negative for his SuperStation, they presented the news in a non-bias and straightforward way.

While there has been prior research on Turner’s businesses, this research offered a unique take on a part of Turner’s company that has not received as much examination as CNN and other parts of his business. While CNN and his deal with TimeWarner in the 1990s are important parts of the Turner story, the rest may not have ever happened if it not for the success of SuperStation WTBS. Turner was a TV innovator a head of his time with his channel’s original programming of movies, classic TV show reruns, sports programming, and special shows. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* offered a perspective on Turner’s business dealings that other national papers may not have offered since the AJC provided local insight into his company.

Future research should consider examining the AJC print archives as the archive website was difficult to browse and the search feature was difficult to use. Other ideas on future research include examining other early SuperStations including WGN, WOR and KTVU.

³⁶ Eric Elie, “Ted Turner: Less Brash, but Still Dancing to His Tune,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 12, 1989.

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