

# CLINTON BYPASSES NETS FOR TOWN HALL

*White House says local televised meeting is best way to keep in touch with public*

By Mike Freeman

**T**he age of the presidential electronic town hall has begun.

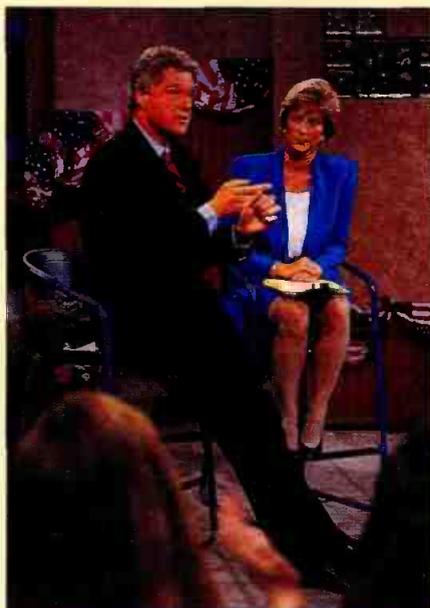
Arrangements were being finalized last week for the first of what the Clinton administration suggests will be many electronic town meetings, this one being set up by four ABC affiliates for broadcast this Wednesday from WXYZ-TV Detroit.

With the town halls, the White House appears to be implementing a strategy to circumvent the national networks and press corps in seeking public support for its policies.

"[President Clinton] said during the campaign that he wanted to stay in touch with the people, and he obviously feels that the town hall concept is the best forum to do that," Clinton's deputy press secretary, Jeff Eller, told BROADCASTING.

The President's first town meeting comes exactly one week before his scheduled State of the Union address to Congress Feb. 17 and, according to WXYZ News Director Walter Kraft, will allow him to use the audience as a "sounding board for some of the new programs he may announce in his first address to Congress."

Plans for the meeting began soon after Clinton's November win, with Kraft, KOMO-TV Seattle News Director Jacques Natz and several other ABC



*Following the Democratic convention last summer, nominee Bill Clinton hit the electronic town hall circuit, which included a stop (above) at KOMO-TV Seattle, moderated by station anchor Kathi Goertzen. KOMO is one of four ABC affiliates sponsoring a town hall this Wednesday at WXYZ-TV Detroit, the first in what President Clinton promises will be a series of efforts to reach citizens via local broadcast outlets.*

affiliate news directors holding regular conversations with Eller.

(During the presidential campaign, Clinton held town hall meetings at KOMO and WXYZ in July and September, respectively. Kraft said that the

previous Detroit town hall meeting did a 20/32 share, a level he expects WXYZ to "easily surpass" later this week.)

Following those discussions, the administration informed Kraft that President Clinton wanted to hold the meeting in Detroit, a city which has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country and is reeling from the \$25 billion in 1992 losses that General Motors reported two weeks ago.

"I think we [Clinton and the White House press office] are more in touch with the state and regional coverage areas than past administrations," said Eller. "This is really part of our desire to reach out directly to people in the individual markets."

The administration seems more interested in "bypassing" than "reaching out," said David Bartlett, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association. "They've made it very plain they prefer to deliver their message directly to the people, bypassing the national media and, to the extent possible, the local media," he said. "After the election, Clinton more or less said he'd be crazy to deliver his message through the national press."

In addition to WXYZ, which will originate the town hall meeting this Wednesday at 9-10 p.m. (ET), three other ABC affiliates—KOMO, WSB-TV Atlanta and WPLG-TV Miami—will downlink the broadcast, allowing studio audiences at those stations to participate in the question-and-answer session.

Those four ABC affiliates, which have exclusivity in their markets, will jointly pick up the tab for the satellite time. As of last Thursday, Kraft said 16 other ABC affiliates, two NBC affiliates, C-SPAN and National Public Radio had signed on to pick up the feed. CNN may also pick up portions, according to Kraft.

Stations excluded from the town meeting will have their day, promised Eller. "We've got four years," he said. "So believe me, there will be many more Clinton and [Vice President Albert] Gore town hall meetings offered to broadcasters." ■

## STEPHANOPOULOS HOUR GOES ON HIATUS

**T**he White House last Monday pulled the plug on live coverage of its daily news briefings, disappointing a growing cadre of viewers who were turning in via CNN and C-SPAN.

"I think the goal is to have it be a more two-way conversation," Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers told the AP in explaining why Communications Director George Stephanopoulos, who presides at the briefings, decided to cancel the show.

The White House had broken tradition by permitting live coverage of the briefings, a move made possible as part of its strategy to "reach out" directly to the people.

But occasional hostile questions from White House reporters sometimes put Stephanopoulos and administration policies on the defensive. "It was a big mistake for Stephanopoulos to do it in the first place," said David Bartlett, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association. "If he is going to get beaten up, it's better to do it in private," Bartlett said.

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