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## Veteran newsman ruled the Detroit TV market

*SUSAN WHITALL*  
*The Detroit News*

Longtime TV anchorman Jac LeGoff, who died at 87 Tuesday, was remembered by many for his affable, laid-back demeanor on the air.

"He's the last of the tranquil news guys who weren't full of flash and dash, but were that solid rock that Detroit needed and wanted," said Erik Smith, who worked with LeGoff at WXYZ-TV (Channel 7).

LeGoff was so popular during his 20-year reign at WJBK-TV (Channel 2) -- Fox 2 now -- that he, co-anchor John Kelly and weathercasters Jerry Hodak and Marilyn Turner were all hired away by WXYZ in the mid-1970s. Channel 7 trumpeted its hirings with a 1974 ad campaign, "We Got Who You Wanted."

"WJBK was so overpowering that the only way Channel 7 could stop it was to buy everybody -- Kelly, Hodak and LeGoff," said Tim Kiska, former Detroit News reporter and author of "A Newscast for the Masses" (Wayne State University Press) and "Detroit Television" (Arcadia). "It took WJBK years to recover."

Former WXYZ anchor Bill Bonds insists that his station was becoming more competitive after its feisty coverage of the '67 riots, and solidified its position in the mid-1970s by raiding WJBK. Bonds remembers LeGoff as a "nice guy and don't think I ever heard a cross word out of him. Never got too excited. Did a nice read and I think made a lot of people feel very comfortable."

At a time when the news was still delivered in a stiff, statesman-like demeanor, LeGoff and Kelly were among the first TV anchors to start their newscasts with jovial banter -- what became known later as "happy talk."

"He is underrated in a lot of ways," Kiska said. "At a time when the city was upside down (in the '60s), he was this calm, unassuming, credible voice. I think that's what sold him to people."

LeGoff was born in Chicago in 1922, served in the Navy during World War II, and completed his education at Columbia College in Chicago. He started at an NBC station in Youngstown, Ohio, working his way to the major market of Detroit in 1953, when he was hired by Channel 2. He once joked to a reporter that he became news director because he was the only one willing to get in early, read the news and assign reporters.

In 1959 LeGoff made headlines when he was fired by WJBK for "editorializing" about the payola scandal then raging in Detroit and nationally.

That year several network quiz shows were revealed to be fixed. By November Congress was holding hearings on radio payola, which involved cash paid to disc jockeys in return for plays of specific records.

In Detroit, the payola scandal led to firings and "voluntary" departures; top jocks Mickey Schorr and Tom Clay were among those to go.

Lee Alan was the all-night disc jockey on WJBK-AM radio in 1959. Late one night, Alan spoke on the air about how when he appeared on a TV quiz show during his senior trip to New York, he was "helped" with

some answers.

Soon after that, Alan ran into LeGoff in the WJBK building at Second and Bethune. "Jac said, 'You're still working here? How did you get away with it?' I said I didn't know, but let's not talk about it too loudly," Alan said.

Soon after that, LeGoff ended his nightly newscast with a brief editorial chiding newspapers for "sensationalism" and asserting that payola had always been around.

"What about the buyers in department stores, in grocery stores -- 'buy one case of my product and you get one free; you buy my blue jeans by the gross or give me your business and I'll remember you at Christmas time.' Is this not payola?" LeGoff said. "Payola in one form or another has always been part of American business."

By the next morning LeGoff was fired, by telegram. The handsome, soft-spoken, "Walter Cronkite of Detroit" was the last person anyone expected to speak out so forcefully.

LeGoff had to go work across the Detroit River, at Windsor's Channel 9, for the next two years, but WJBK-TV's ratings tanked -- clearly viewers missed LeGoff -- and the station hired him back in February 1962.

Later, he served as editorial director and news anchor at WDIV-TV (Channel 4). He retired in 1990 and resided until his death in Novi. LeGoff was a member of the National Academy of Radio and Television Arts and Sciences, a former board member of the Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Center in Detroit and the Kiwanis Club.

He is survived by his wife, Marguerite, seven children and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren. Funeral services will be private. Memorial tributes can be made to Honor Flight Michigan, P.O. Box 237, Royal Oak, MI 48067.

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## Additional Facts

Transcript of LeGoff's comments

Jac LeGoff's defense of the broadcast industry during the payola scandal of 1959 got him fired as chief anchor of WJBK-TV's newscast. Here is a transcript of LeGoff's comments on WJBK-TV in December 1959. "WJBK has received a number of calls from listeners today asking why we didn't carry the story concerning the disc jockeys of radio and the story about payola, or bribery, to play a certain record.

"I didn't use the story at 11 last night, realized that the newspapers would hop on this as they did on the so-called TV quiz payoffs. This sort of newspaper sensationalism can be handled by those who are not in the business, apparently.

"But are their skirts as clean as they would like you to believe? What about the Bob Considine story of alleged payola and the same type story of two other well-known columnists? They were buried in the back pages by those who employ them. Payola has been known to exist in the industry for many months. Those who deny they have ever been approached to take payola are perhaps employees of smaller stations in smaller markets or they are record players and not disc jockeys. There is a difference.

"What about the buyers in department stores, in grocery stores -- 'buy one case of my product and you get one free; you buy my blue jeans by the gross or give me your business and I'll remember you at Christmas time.' Is this not payola?

"Have there not been other accusations of this same sort in the federal government, in the Federal Communications Commission, in the garment industry, in any number of international unions? Payola in one form or another is a part of American business.

"This is certainly not to say that I or the broadcasting industry condones the practice, but I say, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' "

Source: *Tim Kiska*