



This study was produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The study uses empirical data to measure the quality of local TV news and compare those results with ratings.

SPECIAL REPORT: LOCAL TV NEWS

GAMBLING WITH THE FUTURE

Local newsrooms beset by sponsor interference, budget cuts, layoffs, and added programming

Local TV journalism is on dangerous ground.

In a survey of 118 local news directors, more than half report that advertisers try to tell them what to air and not to air — and they say the problem is growing.

To meet profit demands, many news directors report they are having to produce a thinner and cheaper product by adding news programs while cutting their budgets.

News directors say consultants are only providing the most generic solutions. One in five also say their consultants discourage them from covering certain kinds of news.

Gimmicks that once seemed to bump ratings — every story seemed “shocking” — don’t work any more. And stations don’t know what to do in their place.

Everything is up for grabs. Too much is for sale.

Is there a way to succeed in such an environment?

The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s ongoing content study of local television news

suggests there may be. Based on data collected from 189 stations over four years, we have isolated five characteristics that commercially successful stations share.

Adopting these practices won’t guarantee financial success, but statistically they will give a station the highest likelihood of achieving it.

The elements:

- Cover more of the community
- Demonstrate more enterprise
- Source stories better

- Air more long stories and fewer very short ones

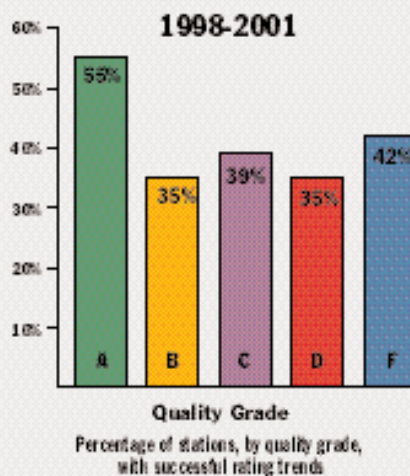
- Hire more staff and give them more time to develop stories

The problem is that these ideas run counter to the prevailing wisdom in local TV. Some are overrun again and again by short-term budget demands. And some rarely enter the newsroom conversation.

These findings and many others are part of Year Four of the local television news study by PEJ, a think tank affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

In the stories that follow, the Project offers troubling findings about sponsor interference (**News for Sale**), new evidence of the impact of quality (**Quality Sells**), the practices that viewers respond to (**The Magic Formula**), a glimpse at the typical newscast (**The Look of Local News**), budget problems (**Thinner, Cheaper, Longer**), a comparison of network versus local TV news (**The Patriarch vs. the Family Circle**), and more. •

DOES QUALITY SELL?



NEWS FOR SALE

Half of stations report sponsor pressure on news decisions

BY MARION JUST AND ROSALIND LEVINE, WITH KATHLEEN REGAN

How much is your local TV news influenced by the people who buy ads?

In a survey of 118 news directors around the country, more than half, 53 percent, reported that advertisers pressure them to kill negative stories or run positive ones.

And many of these news directors say the problem won't go away. "Sales is getting more and more influence on newscasts," said a news director from one medium-sized market. "Sponsorships, coverage suggestions, on-air mentions."

The pressure to do puff pieces about sponsors occurs "constantly," "all the time," "everyday," "routinely," and "every time a sales person opened his/her mouth," news directors reported in a major survey of local news stations.

It is "getting harder every year" to maintain the wall between sales and news, reported another news manager.

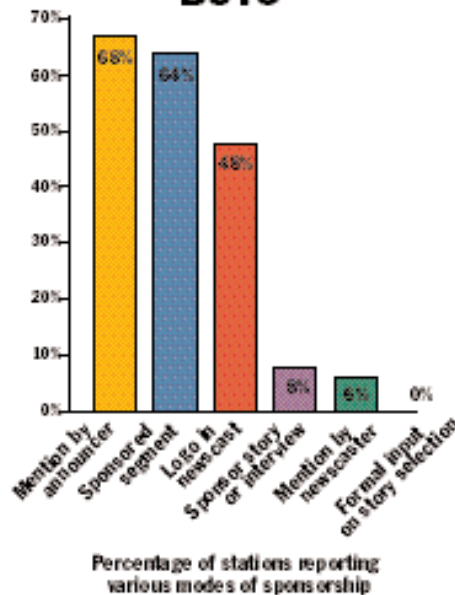
These are some of the findings of the survey of 118 news directors around the country, conducted between June and August 2001. The sample represents a significant proportion of the approximately 850 stations that broadcast news. The answers have a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. News directors in all but two cases wanted their comments to be anonymous for fear of retaliation for criticizing their companies.

News directors also reported their TV consultants (outside companies hired by stations to critique newscasts and improve ratings) issuing blanket edicts about what to cover and what not to cover in order to attract the most advertising dollars.

Together, the findings and comments raise questions about the journalistic independence of local television news.

The number of stations that indicate sponsor pressure this year confirms a problem we first saw in our 2000 study. Last year a third of the news directors in a limited sample of 20 stations reported ad-

WHAT SPONSORSHIP BUYS



vertisers trying to influence what gets on their broadcasts. Although that sample was small, when coupled with the comments by news directors, the evidence suggests the problem is getting larger.

Breaking down the sponsor suggestions more specifically, 47 percent of news directors this year said sponsors tried to get them to provide favorable coverage.

And 18 percent of news directors — almost one in five — say sponsors try to prevent them from covering stories, a problem that is more acute in smaller markets. "Interference is common," one news director told us.

When it comes to advertisers trying to compel positive stories about themselves, 16 percent of stations said that they had been asked to cover sponsor events. Another 8 percent covered events that were partnerships between the station and the advertisers; 12 percent said the sales or advertising staff requested positive coverage of sponsors.

Some news directors take a benign view of sponsor pressure. As one put it, if the story has "a valid 'news' angle," they will

cover it whatever the source. "Advertisers have the same right to pitch their stories to the news department as anyone," said another news director.

At most stations, however, news directors admit that advertisers get something more than just commercial time for their money. In over two-thirds of stations, for instance, news sponsors are named by the announcer or identified with a particular news segment.

At about half the stations surveyed, the sponsor logo appears in the newscast. None of the stations in our sample reported that sponsors were allowed involvement in story selection, but a handful of stations gave sponsors interviews or mention in the body of a newscast in exchange for their support.

A news director in a large market said the biggest change in the newsroom this year was "pressure from sales because of the economy."

More alarming is the idea of sponsors discouraging stories or even getting them killed.

A half a dozen news directors singled out local car dealerships and auto manufacturers as the focus of squashed stories. "We don't aggressively go after car dealers," one news director admitted. Another reported a "negative story on an auto dealer canned under pressure from client."

News directors also mentioned health investigations at local restaurants as vulnerable. At two stations, for instance, stories were killed when they reflected poorly on restaurant sponsors. Two other news directors said grocery stores tried to get them to drop investigative stories.

Another news director described how pressure came from within the station (the sales department) and without (the local restaurant association) but "news prevailed."

In fact, a number of news directors felt able to withstand interference from "sales reps who don't understand the business." Some volunteered that they were supported by their general managers so that "the sole and final decision is with the news department."

One news director commented that he received "zero pressure from the general manager," and another reported that even in the face of loss of sponsorship, management "always backed up the news department."

What emerged was the sense that the relentless push by advertisers and sales departments inevitably yields small concessions from beleaguered news directors. Even without overt pressure news directors may feel obliged to compromise just to keep their jobs.

SMALL MARKETS, BIG PRESSURE

The problem of sponsor interference in our sample was more acute in medium-sized and small markets. In one case, “Sales sold sponsorship to [a] local retail group, which required ‘positive’ stories on retailers (i.e. thinly veiled commercials).”

Another news director complained that “[the] sales department books our live trucks for live sales remotes, which air in commercial breaks within certain newscasts.” One live truck out of service, one less opportunity to cover breaking news. And commercials that look like news thrown in for good measure.

While only a third of news directors in the very largest markets reported sponsor pressure to provide positive coverage, fully two-thirds of news directors in the smallest markets feel those pressures.

A quarter of news directors in small markets, those under 376,000 households, report that they have been pressured to censor their news. One news director in the Rockies described the situation as “a very large problem in this market.”

Pressure on newsrooms is aggravated by the fact that small stations cannot afford their own lawyers. As a result they try to avoid stories that might prompt legal action.

One news director described an incident where the station “obtained copy of a Department of Human Services report on abused foster child. State law holds it ‘confidential.’ We would have been hauled to court if used [report] and refused to reveal source. Source broke the law by handing it to us.” This small station did not feel it could cover the story.

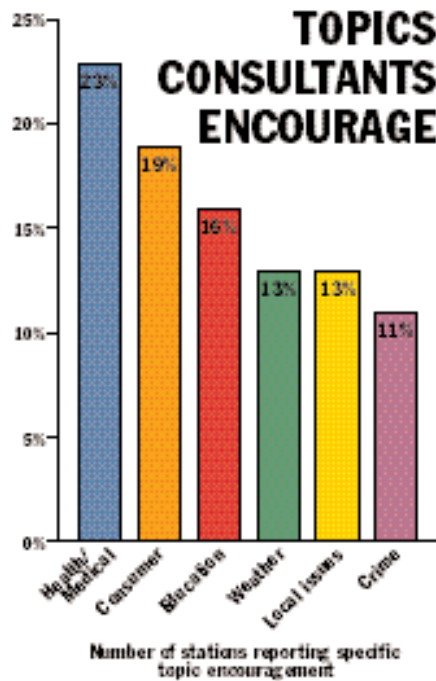
Other small-market stations also reported staying away from stories that dealt with social service agencies in their states or cities. Several news directors avoided stories where a libel suit was threatened or even where “one individual was named” in a negative way.

CONSULTANTS

Pressure on news content comes not only from outside the newsroom, but also from those who are invited in — the ubiquitous news consultants. Most stations use independent consultants.

About half the stations surveyed use outside consultants periodically or for special topics and 21 percent solely rely on consultants drawn from their parent company. About two-thirds of the stations in our survey report that consultants visit their stations two to four times a year.

What kind of advice do these consul-



tants have to offer? A common complaint is that consultant recommendations are not tailored to the needs of individual stations. More than half of the stations report that the advice they receive is “mostly” or “entirely” general, usually focusing on presentation rather than content.

Not surprisingly, the maxim “you get what you pay for” holds true for consultants. While 59 percent of stations in large or very large markets get advice made to fit their particular situation, only a third of small-market stations have access to that kind of consultation.

News directors are not overcome with enthusiasm about consultants, but most tell us that consultant advice is at least some-

what useful. Consultants played a role in a wide range of activities, everything from developing a station’s news “philosophy” to recruiting and coaching on-air personnel.

More than half of stations (52 percent) say their consultants actively push covering certain kinds of news. When they did so, they tended to tout “soft news” — health and consumer issues.

Nineteen percent of stations reported their consultants did something we consider even more worrisome, discouraging covering certain kinds of news.

News directors told us that sports was the topic consultants most often discouraged, but they said that politics and local business coverage had also been singled out.

Consultant advice to give more time to health and less to sports seems pitched to make local news more attractive to female viewers.

News directors are more positive about advice from general managers than the kind they get from consultants. They rarely see managers as “interfering.” Several GM’s mentioned in our survey were former news directors. Others commanded respect because of their experience and expert knowledge of the news.

A number of news directors said general managers suggested story ideas “like everyone else.” But of course, as one news director remarked, “They are not everyone else.”

Increasingly, it seems, advertisers aren’t either. •

Marion Just is a professor of political science at Wellesley College and a research associate at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard. Rosalind Levine is an attorney in Boston. Kathleen Regan is a student and research assistant at Wellesley.

METHODOLOGY

The study this year examined broadcast news programs in 14 cities, 43 stations in all. We also studied the three broadcast network evening news programs. Taping occurred during a February sweeps week and an April non-sweeps week. A team of professional coders analyzed 6,472 stories from 470 broadcasts, or 235 hours of local news. The results were then statistically analyzed by researchers Princeton Survey Research Associates and at Wellesley College and interpreted by a team of journalists.

Our definition of quality is the same established by our design team of local TV news professionals. We stress the basics: a newscast should cover a broad range of topics, focus on the significant aspects of the news, be based on original reporting, provide credible information, use multiple sources, balance stories with multiple points of view, and contain locally relevant stories. We continue to use the system devel-

oped by separate teams of university scholars and professional researchers to grade newscasts by a point system matched to these criteria. As in years past presentation is a very minor factor. So that grading can be accomplished objectively, stories score well based on an accumulation of the simple journalistic values mentioned above.

This year’s study also included a national mail survey of news directors, conducted between June and August 2001. A random sample of 196 news directors was selected from an enumerated list of television stations. One hundred eighteen news directors completed the surveys for a response rate of 60 percent. The sample of 118 respondents represent 107, or more than half, of the 210 local television markets throughout the country that produce news. Results are therefore reported unweighted. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent, which means statistically that in 95 samples out of 100 the results will not differ more than 5 percent from those reported here.

QUALITY SELLS

It builds share, demographics, and more

BY CARL GOTTLIEB
AND ATIBA PERTILLA

By any measure of financial success, quality journalism sells.

In the four years that the Project for Excellence in Journalism has conducted its annual study of local television news, 55 percent of “A” stations have successful ratings trends, better than any other grade.

This year we found quality is also the best way to succeed when it comes to market share, demographics and audience retention.

Our 2001 study included 43 stations in 14 markets. We found the correlation between quality scores and household ratings not quite as strong as in years past: for the first time another grade (“B” stations) actually scored better than “A” stations in our sample. But we also measured quality against other yardsticks broadcasters told us they consider important. When we did, the case for quality became even stronger.

AUDIENCE RETENTION

Quality, the numbers show, is the best way for a news program to retain or add to its so-called lead-in audience. “The fact that we can maintain audience from program to program shows that viewers are not just loyal to our programs — they’re loyal to our station,” says Diane Caggiano, research director at KTVK in Phoenix, a high-quality station from last year’s study. “That gives

us the ability to get the number-one share in the market for selling advertising.”

This year was the first in which we studied lead-in numbers for every broadcast. We found that 63 percent of “A” and “B” stations were adding or retaining audience. Stations in the middle didn’t fare so well: only 27 percent of “C” stations and 20 percent of “D” stations were gaining on their lead-in.

Both of our “F” stations were building audience. But don’t try this trick at home. The “F” stations are at the absolute bottom of our quality scale and most newsrooms are not good enough to be that bad.

MARKET SHARE

Quality is also the best way to build market share — the percentage of households watching TV tuned to a given station.

Four years of data reveal that high-quality stations are the most likely to be gaining in share over time. Fifty-seven percent of our “A” stations were building share over time, significantly better than every other grade. What’s more, “D” and “F” stations were most likely to be losing share.

Over four years, it turns out, the correlation between quality and share is even stronger than the correlation we have generally used, basic household ratings. As the number of people watching television declines, the ability to claim the largest share of the available audience is becoming more and more important to station management.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Quality also turns out to be the best way to attract the audiences advertisers want most — people aged 18-to-49 and 25-to-54. Half of all “A” stations this year were improving in these demographic groups over time, better than any other grade. At the other extreme, neither “F” station was improving, and the next worst category was the ten “D” stations.

While the amount of data is small, it suggests that going downmarket may alienate the most demographically desirable audience.

When we began this study, we cautiously concluded from our data that the news did not have to bleed to lead — that audiences were not demanding trash and flash in local TV news.

If broadcasters were aping the tabloids, it was their own choice, not the audience’s. There was no penalty for doing better local news.

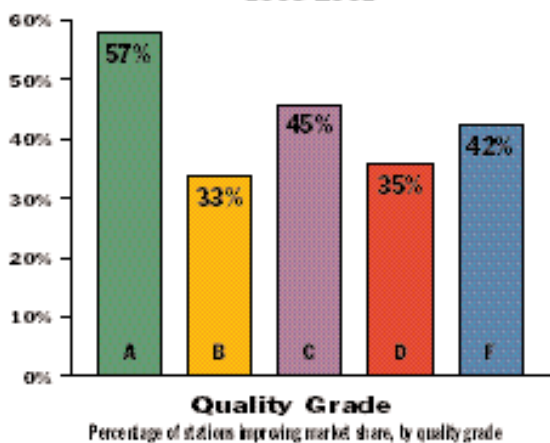
Today, we can say something more. Audiences prefer quality.

If a company that owns television stations wants to protect and nurture its assets, the data suggest investing in quality is the best strategy. It may require investing in people, giving them time, and even resources, but it is more likely than any other approach to pay commercial dividends over time. •

Carl Gottlieb is deputy director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Atiba Pertilla is a research associate at PEJ.

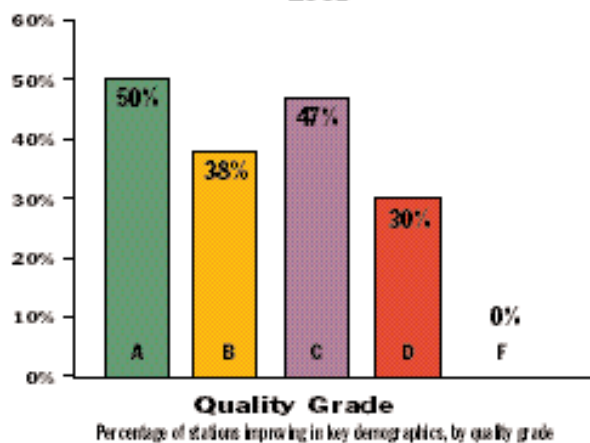
MARKET SHARE AND QUALITY

1998-2001



DEMOGRAPHICS SUCCESS AND QUALITY

2001



THE MAGIC FORMULA

Five proven steps to financial success in news

BY TOM ROSENSTIEL, CARL GOTTLIEB,
AND ANDREW FINLAYSON

It's becoming clearer, over dozens of stations, thousands of stories, and millions of viewers.

There are some things we can demonstrate audiences want.

They are characteristics commercially successful stations share — whether this study rates them as good quality stations or bad.

They are the things news directors should ask for in their budget meetings, and that station and group managers should support.

They were not arrived at by some discussion of lofty journalism principles. They were discovered the other way around — by taking all the stations that are thriving in business terms, and then isolating those factors that helped them get there.

Some cost money, some don't. But they show that content matters, and that squeezing a station's people, resources and time is not the answer.

The five factors amount to a formula for success—a formula that is provable with numbers based on our study of 189 stations over the past four years:

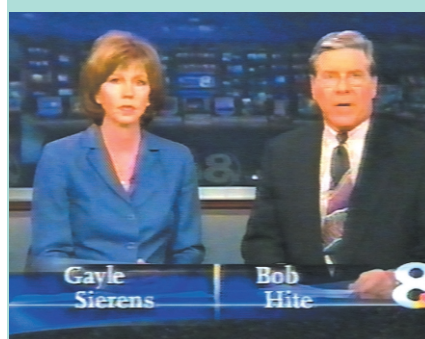
- Cover More of the Community
- Do More Enterprise Reporting
- Source Stories Better
- Do More Long Stories and Fewer Very Short Ones
- Hire More Reporters and Give Them More Time

In a sense, the data suggest a surprisingly simple analogy: if you tune into a sitcom and it's not funny, you don't go back. If you tune into a news program and there isn't enough information, you won't tune in again.

Let's take these successful practices one at a time.

COVER MORE OF THE COMMUNITY

From the outset, our design team of industry professionals agreed that covering the entire community was the most important thing a local TV news operation could do.



Stations putting the magic formula to work, from top: WTSP coverage of a February brush fire; former captive Stephen Gonzales talks with a KTVT reporter; WRC interviews an Iraqi-American; WFLA anchors on the set.

It turns out their professional instincts were right. The data show stations that cover a broader range of topics in their newscasts have a better chance of succeeding commercially.

It's a mistake for stations to cleverly limit themselves to topics that test well in focus groups, are highly promotable, or strike station managers as good "water cooler" material.

This study measures topic range by comparing the number of topics in each newscast to the number of stories aired.

Stations that score highest for topic range are 33 percent more likely than any other grade to have successful ratings trends.

Take Florida's WTSP, a high-quality station beating the ratings odds. The station had one of the best scores in this year's study for topic range, scoring 19 percent better than the national average.

Its market contains two distinct cities separated by water, Tampa and St. Petersburg. But in the words of former news director Jim Church, "bridges are not barriers" but instead "connect together communities."

So, Church says, the station pursues a regional approach. "We do tons of stories focused on issues such as the persistent drought, transportation, and protection from hurricanes."

Incidentally, covering more topics doesn't just help ratings. The numbers show it also helps a station succeed by the other key commercial measures: market share, audience retention and demographics.

The demographics numbers are interesting. They suggest audiences want to learn about the whole community, no matter who or how old they are. Tailoring your topics to appeal to key demographics is a fool's errand.

MORE ENTERPRISE REPORTING

Stations that demonstrate more enterprise fare better commercially.

Enterprise is measured on a scale — from original investigations, at the top, all the way down to using video press releases. Over four years, successful stations do

13 percent more of certain kinds of enterprise, especially the kind people can recognize — tough interviews, investigations and special series.

Other kinds of enterprise also help, though statistically not as much — doing more breaking news, avoiding video press releases, sending a reporter and not just a camera. The lesson — effort pays.

For instance, KTVT, this year's best large-market station, also scored near the top for enterprise reporting.

While ratings at the other stations in Dallas were generally trending down, KTVT was the only one picking up steam at the time of the study.

When it comes to getting story ideas, "We don't believe in reading the newspaper," says news director Linda Levy. Her philosophy is that producers, reporters, and assignment desk staff all are held accountable for coming up with stories, and she urges her newsroom not to take no for an answer.

That attitude is demonstrated in the details, like fleshing out a piece on prescription drug abuse with interviews of recovering addicts.

On the day China allowed the crew of a Navy spy plane to return to the U.S., KTVT took the initiative to interview a local U.S. soldier who had been held captive by Bosnian Serbs two years earlier, giving viewers insight into the experience of being the prisoner of a hostile nation.

After September 11, KTVT assigned its entire nine-person investigative staff full-time to look for local ties to the terrorists and those who might have aided them.

It is an approach that Levy thinks can be summed up as "super aggressive, super responsible."

BETTER SOURCING

The Project measures sourcing various ways.

We check the number of sources in stories: the more sources, the better.

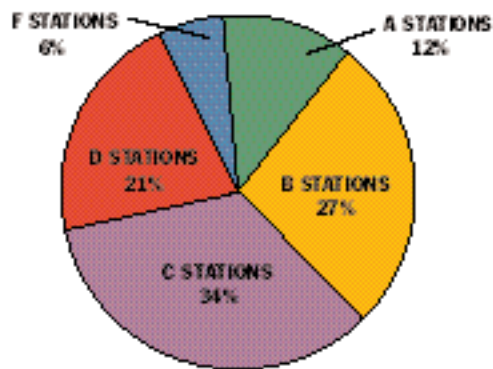
We gauge credibility by noting whether a source has appropriate expertise for the story: an independent doctor may score high in a medical piece, a voter in a political piece.

These elements may seem like journalism 101, but the scores have proven lower than expected.

And over four years we have found that successful stations generally score higher for sourcing.

Some types of sourcing are especially important. For instance, over four years, successful stations were 17 percent less likely to use anonymous sources.

PERCENTAGE OF STATIONS BY GRADE 1998-2001



Number of stations studied = 189

But better sourcing across the board adds up. Successful stations were 5 percent less likely to cite no source at all in a story. They score 5 percent better for using multiple sources. They score 3 percent better on source expertise.

These numbers relate to ratings, but the basic correlation between better sourcing and commercial success holds up no matter what the measure — ratings, share, audience retention or demographics.

WRC has long enjoyed the ratings lead for late news in Washington, D.C. While it received a "B" for its overall grade this year, the NBC station is one of the better ones we studied when it comes to sourcing of all kinds.

"It's part of the culture in our news room," says WRC news director Bob Long. "Newsroom discussions are likely to be philosophical . . . We question our reporters."

When U.S. fighter planes attacked Iraq in February WRC localized the larger story by doing a piece about a Washington restaurateur and his fears for relatives still living in Iraq.

WRC also interviewed Middle East experts with opposing views on the wisdom of the attack, providing a quick primer on the conflict as well as illustrating its human side.

A story about an overturned truck on Interstate 95 in the D.C. suburbs provided viewers with official information about the next morning's rush hour, a resident's concerns about the truck's toxic cargo and a state environmental official allaying fears that a nearby stream had been polluted.

While viewers probably don't sit and count sources or ponder their expertise, WRC comes across to local viewers as credible and informative. It's one of the

reasons it has dominated the Washington market in recent years.

MORE LONG STORIES AND FEWER VERY SHORT ONES

For years, the common wisdom was that viewers had short attention spans — and maybe they were getting shorter. The thinking was that people would not be able to focus for long on complicated stories about dense issues.

As a consequence, soundbites — and stories — have gradually shrunk. And stories have been told with fewer and fewer facts.

The numbers say all this is a mistake.

After four years we can show that stations that are enjoying better than average ratings air fewer short stories — those under 30 seconds — and more stories longer than two minutes.

In fact, successful stations are 17 percent more likely than stations losing ratings to air stories two minutes or longer.

Commercially successful stations are also 13 percent less likely to air stories 30 seconds or shorter.

Tampa's WFLA uses its airtime wisely. Twenty-nine percent of the station's stories in the 6:00 p.m. time slot are two minutes or longer compared with 19 percent nationally. The station also airs shorter stories less frequently than most, 25 percent of the time, while the national average is 40 percent.

"It is more important being right than being fast," says former news director Dan Bradley, who has since been promoted by the station's ownership, summing up the philosophy that results in longer stories. Current news director Forest Carr thinks the program's pacing reflects a larger ambition of the

newsroom to recognize that “local news is about me the viewer, not me the producer.”

And while the station has been known to tear through ten stories in a first block, it also has aired pieces as long as four and a half minutes.

Until 1993, WFLA had a different approach. “Some stories were literally eight to nine seconds long,” according to Carr.

The current philosophy, he said, “is if we can’t budget enough time to make a story relevant and meaningful we give that time to another story.”

It seems imparting more information through longer stories is also good for business. Stations that tend to do better in the ratings, increased market share, those building lead-in audience and improving their key demographics avoid very short stories and air longer ones.

HIRE MORE REPORTERS

When we compared our national survey of news directors with our data on commercial success, we discovered something striking about staff size and workload: stations that invest their money in people do better in the ratings.

In this year, a tough one for advertising, stations adding staff had a significantly better chance of holding their own or improving their ratings than those where the staff held steady or declined.

More than half of stations (54 percent) that increased staff had average or even above-average ratings trends, compared to only a third of stations that did not increase staff — regardless of market size.

Letting staff do more thorough reporting also helped ratings. Stations that asked reporters to produce only one story a day fared significantly better in the ratings than stations that required their reporters to do more than one.

The benefit of investing in people and giving them production and reporting time is underscored by another finding — stations that avoided video press releases and relied on their own reporting had significantly better ratings trends than others.

Indeed, limiting the number of stories reporters undertook each day and discouraging the use of video news releases accounted statistically for 20 percent of the improvement in station ratings trends.

That’s a big impact for good journalism in the face of so many factors influencing ratings that stations cannot control.

Added together, these five elements suggest there is a particular approach to managing TV newsrooms that is demonstrably more likely to succeed than any other. It is not just about packaging, promotions, high-tech equipment or slogans.

Television journalism is best practiced by hiring talented people and giving them the time and resources to cover the entire community, demonstrate genuine enterprise, and put their stories together carefully and completely.

Viewers notice. The numbers show it. •

Tom Rosenstiel is director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Carl Gottlieb is deputy director of PEJ. Andrew Finlayson is News Director at KTVU in Oakland, California.

CORRELATION OF MARKET RATINGS BY QUALITY SCORE 1998-2001



WHERE HAVE ALL THE VIEWERS GONE?

BY CARL GOTTLIEB AND TODD BELT

Today in local television news few stations are gaining audience.

Winning is now a matter of beating the odds.

This year, in our sample of 43 stations, 77 percent are suffering ratings declines.

In our 1998 study, by comparison, that number was 66 percent, but it has been in the mid to high 70s ever since.

In the past, we talked about station ratings rising or falling. Today, it makes more sense to talk about “succeeding” or “failing.” “Succeeding” stations have ratings trends better than the average; “failing” stations are doing worse than average.

If ratings are declining, where are viewers going? Are they abandoning TV news to watch something else, or are they no longer watching TV at all?

By comparing a station’s ratings with its market share over time we are able to get an answer. If the share for news were

falling faster than the ratings, that would mean people were tuning to another program. (Ratings measure the number of households watching a given station. Market share expresses ratings as a percentage of all households watching TV at the time.)

The evidence shows that local news is not losing its audience to other kinds of TV programs, even cable programming. TV news is losing out to other activities — the Internet, raising kids, commuting, working.

This finding confirms studies by our affiliate NewsLab, researchers at Indiana University, and the private company Insite Research. Their results suggest that people are turning away from local TV news because they find it repetitive, formulaic and superficial, and can get their local news more effectively from other sources.

Our data suggest that news directors who mold their news shows to resemble entertainment are making a mistake. That is not where their viewers are going. Turn-

ing news into entertainment will probably drive more viewers away.

But local TV news can’t seem to break away from the belief that being like entertainment will boost numbers. Mimicking the prime-time entertainment schedules, celebrities and crime continue to be mainstays of local news, greatly outweighing coverage of civic institutions and leaders.

The ratings in New York demonstrate the folly of this strategy. There, coverage of celebrities has more than doubled between 1998 and 2001 and is now three times larger than the national average. Meanwhile, over the past three years, New York newscasts are losing audience faster than 78 percent of the late newscasts in other major markets in our survey. •

Carl Gottlieb is deputy director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Todd Belt is a doctoral student in political science at the University of Southern California.

WHO'S BEST IN 14 CITIES?

LOCAL TV NEWS

Quality Grade Station Quality Score Network Affiliation Average Story Score Topic Range Focus Enterprise Expertise No. of Sources View-points Local Relevance Audience Retention Ratings Trend

BILLINGS - 5:30PM

A	KULR	424.69		22.00								+4.2%	
Good station. Above average for investigative. Not much breaking news. Could improve sourcing.													
A	KTVQ	420.15		23.30								+22.1%	
Dominant station, and good. Great sourcing, but lots of canned events.													

CHARLOTTE - 11PM

C	WCNC	316.08		21.51								-58.1%	
Best station in worst market. Ratings improving. Best sourcing in town. Good watchdog.													
D	WBTV	272.03		20.33								-9.6%	
Big changes. Dropping 6:30 show. New news director. Program needs work.													
F	WSOC	227.21		18.96								+8.7%	
Worst in study. One-time powerhouse in ratings dive. One sided, poor sourcing. Overdoes "breaking news."													

DALLAS - 10PM

A	KTVT	423.85		23.08								-44.4%	
Best large-market station this year. Good ratings. Most investigations in town. Needs more sources, fewer feeds.													
C	WFAA	335.61		21.45								+13.9%	
Low on crime, high on ideas. But too many everyday incidents. Belo powerhouse falling fast in ratings.													
C	KDFW	320.34		21.23								-16.2%	
Improving station. High focus on institutions. Should add more viewpoints in stories.													
D	KXAS	278.87		20.29								-9.3%	
Down from B to D since '99. Most everyday crime in town. Too many stories with no sources.													

DETROIT - 11PM

C	WDIV	321.69		20.46								-8.2%	
Dominant at 11pm. Above average for investigations and series. Very local. Could improve number of sources.													
D	WXYZ	296.34		20.28								+4.3%	
New news director. Could improve sourcing. Needs more enterprise. Lots of everyday incidents.													

CHART KEY

Audience Retention
Percentage of viewers gained (+) or lost (-) from preceding program.

Overall Grade

A = 400.75 or higher
B = 353.23 – 400.74
C = 305.72 – 353.22
D = 258.20 – 305.71
F = 210.69 – 258.19

Ratings (3 years)

up
 flat/slightly up
 slightly down
 down
 sharply down

Icons: Average story score for a station by variable.

highest score
 second highest score
 mid-range score
 second lowest score
 lowest score

Quality Grade	Station	Quality Score	Network Affiliation	Average Story Score	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	View-points	Local Relevance	Audience Retention	Ratings Trend
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HONOLULU - 10PM

A	KGMB	407.91		24.79								-19.4%	
<i>Top ten in quality. Recent ratings bump. Low on crime, high on series. Good sourcing.</i>													
B	KHON	378.66		23.20								+50.4%	
<i>Market leader airs lots of sources, viewpoints, but too many feeds. Could use more expert sources.</i>													
B	KHNL	378.22		22.67								-76.5%	
<i>Ratings challenged. Needs to add sources, viewpoints, ideas. OK at breaking news and localism.</i>													
B	KITV	371.83		22.86								+1.1%	
<i>Strong number two in ratings. Hearst station could add sources, investigations, and viewpoints. Crime heavy.</i>													

LAS VEGAS - 5PM

C	KLAS	350.18		21.61								+18.2%	
<i>Best station in a bad market. Missed a "B" by three points. Needs more investigations, localism.</i>													
D	KTNV	288.14		21.25								-3.5%	
<i>Needs work. Lots of series, human interest. Good mix of viewpoints. No ratings.</i>													
F	KVBC	251.34		19.82								+21.6%	
<i>Tied for ratings lead. Could be more local, improve sourcing and breaking news. Most investigations in town.</i>													

LOS ANGELES - 11PM

C	KNBC	346.77		21.15								-34.2%	
<i>New G.M. bans live police chases and ratings suffer. Best station in weak market can get better.</i>													
D	KABC	302.77		21.23								-39.9%	
<i>Long way to go, but closing on KNBC. Lots of feed stories. Could improve sourcing, do more investigations.</i>													
D	KCBS	278.58		19.55								-55.4%	
<i>Changes coming with new G.M. Only investigations in town. Needs more viewpoints, less crime.</i>													

NEW YORK - 11PM

C	WABC	348.49		21.38								-4.9%	
<i>Gaining on WNBC at 11. Not much crime. Could cover fewer pressers, get more sources.</i>													
C	WNBC	340.44		22.13								-21.5%	
<i>Quality dropping. Could air more breaking news, fewer press conferences. Could be more local.</i>													
C	WCBS	340.37		20.05								-52.4%	
<i>"Information network" slogan not working. Try quality to differentiate. More viewpoints, sources needed.</i>													

OKLAHOMA CITY - 10PM

B	KFOR	398.72		24.16								+14.7%	
<i>Best station in a decent market. Airs lots of issues, investigations and viewpoints. Big on everyday crime.</i>													
B	KOCO	355.23		22.02								-24.9%	
<i>Losing viewers to competitors. Covers local institutions. But has apparent aversion to enterprise.</i>													
C	KWTV	339.80		21.62								+20.4%	
<i>Challenging for No. 1. Lots of politics, breaking news. Needs to improve sourcing.</i>													

Quality Grade	Station	Quality Score	Network Affiliation	Average Story Score	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	View-points	Local Relevance	Audience Retention	Ratings Trend
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PHILADELPHIA - 11PM

C	KYW	325.55		19.48								-39.7%	
<i>Improving station but ratings in the cellar. Poor sourcing hurts credibility. Needs to cover the neighborhoods.</i>													
D	WCAU	296.41		20.14								-19.5%	
<i>Breaking news all the time. Nearly 40% of stories are everyday incidents. Few issues. Beat WPVI in February book.</i>													
D	WPVI	275.33		19.10								+6.3%	
<i>Market king showing weakness. More than half this station's stories poorly sourced. Needs more experts, localism.</i>													

PORTLAND - 6:30PM

C	KOIN	339.90		18.54								-24.4%	
<i>Recovering from layoffs? Too many everyday incidents, too few sources, viewpoints. Ratings headed south?</i>													
D	KATU	300.47		20.89								-19.1%	
<i>Finally has a news director. Lots of breaking news, sources, viewpoints. Fails to make national news relevant.</i>													
D	KGW	282.04		18.25								-25.9%	
<i>Little breaking news, lots of feeds and politics. More than half of stories not local. Leading in ratings dogfight.</i>													

SALT LAKE CITY - 10PM

B	KSL	353.61		22.11								+19.9%	
<i>Market institution could improve on breaking news, expert sourcing. Little everyday crime. Lots of pressers.</i>													
C	KTVX	344.21		21.51								-4.4%	
<i>Awaiting fate in Fox deal. Big on issues. Could be more local. Use more sources, do more investigations.</i>													
C	KUTV	328.04		21.64								+5.7%	
<i>Losing ratings traction. Most breaking news in town. Very local. Too much crime, everyday incidents.</i>													

TAMPA - 6PM

A	WFLA	418.07		22.76								+21.5%	
<i>Dominant. Best in town at 6. Covers local business, institutions. Could use more sources in stories.</i>													
A	WTVT	409.01		23.53								+9.3%	
<i>Quality Fox. Fast moving. Lots of issue stories — and crime. Weakest sourcing in town. Not many pressers.</i>													
A	WTSP	400.78		22.24								+27.5%	
<i>Rebuilding. Lots of breaking news, everyday crime. Could improve sourcing. 30% "news you can use."</i>													
B	WFTS	371.09		20.17								+5.7%	
<i>New management team. Shallow coverage. 76% of stories non-controversial. But high on tough interviews.</i>													

WASHINGTON - 11PM

A	WJLA	411.65		21.36								-48.7%	
<i>Getting better but ratings challenged. Lots of sources, series, breaking news. Could use more viewpoints and experts.</i>													
B	WRC	377.88		21.36								-21.7%	
<i>Market leader vulnerable at 11? Stories well sourced. Could be more local. Great "front four."</i>													
C	WUSA	347.40		21.29								-15.5%	
<i>New news director and G.M. Leads D.C. in everyday crime and investigative. Stories need more sources.</i>													

THE LOOK OF LOCAL NEWS

BY LEE ANN BRADY AND ATIBA PERTILLA

When you look at the numbers, it is difficult to conclude that local television news gives citizens the information they need to make informed decisions about their communities.

Consider this statistic: one has to add up all the educators, school board members, city council members, mayors, state agency officials, state legislators, governors, members of Congress and all other local elected and appointed officials combined just to match the number of criminals and suspects on screen.

Local TV news can vary widely from place to place in quality and sometimes in style. Our highest-scoring station, KULR in Billings, for instance, earned nearly twice as many quality points (424) as our worst station, WSOC in Charlotte (227 points).

But the mix of stories is remarkably consistent across the country, and the tone is generally breathless, chatty, and superficial. Here are some numbers:

- Forty percent of the stories last 30 seconds or less.
- One in four stories is about crime, law or courts.
- Less than 1 percent of stories could be called “investigative.”
- Health stories outnumber all other social issues by 32 percent.
- There are as many stories about the bizarre (8 percent) as there are about civic institutions.

An important part of the picture is what’s missing. Poverty, welfare, and homelessness are all but absent in local news. Out of the nearly 6,000 stories studied, only nine dealt with these topics, not enough to even register a single percentage point.

Cultural events are another topic that barely rates coverage. A recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts found that citizens spend more money each year attending performing-arts events than either the movies or professional sports.



News Director (and anchor) Blaire Martin of top-scoring station KULR in Billings with co-anchor Tim Vendt

Yet on local TV news, the arts and culture are almost invisible, accounting for just 24 stories — again, less than one percent of the total studied.

Who are the people shown in local TV news stories? After criminals and suspects (who make up 10 percent of all people on screen) the next most common group featured is crime victims or their families (9 percent).

But this focus on victims, perhaps to manipulate viewers’ emotions, is unwise. Stations doing well in the ratings are the least likely to broadcast interviews featuring victims or victims’ relatives.

BIG CITY VS. SMALL-TOWN NEWS

Crime is the perennial No. 1 topic, in large markets and small, but in the largest markets stations are most likely to pad their

crime coverage with tales of mayhem from distant places.

Stations air stories about economics, social issues and scientific or consumer matters at almost the same rate regardless of market size.

Regardless of the topic, however, small market stations are far more likely to tell the story from a local perspective (98 percent of stories) compared to the largest markets (69 percent).

Minorities are more likely to appear in large markets, but this may be changing with increased immigration

to small cities.

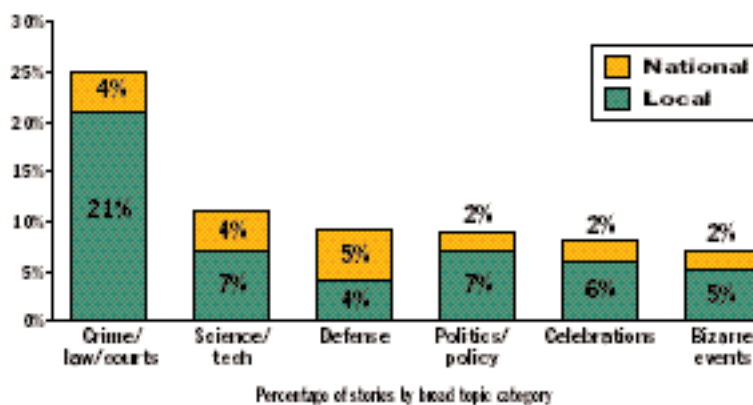
What small-market stations do more than larger markets is cover stories affecting major community institutions or employers, perhaps because small metropolitan areas are less economically diverse.

POLITICS, POLICY OR SCANDAL

Coverage of politics, policy and government fell by nearly half from last year’s presidential primary season, down to just 8 percent of all stories. The bigger problem is that the politics that were covered seem fairly trivial now.

Our sample period included weeks when Congress was debating a massive tax cut and President Bush was promoting his plans to rebuild the military. But the scandals surrounding President Clinton’s departure from office made for much more

MOST POPULAR NEWS TOPICS: 2001



popular material, outweighing coverage of the tax plan 5 to 1.

In all, only 16 stories out of nearly 6,000 discussed the tax-cut debate in Washington or its possible effects on the local community.

GOING GLOBAL

This year, our study also coincided with two international incidents involving the military — the sinking of a Japanese fishing boat by a Navy submarine and the collision of a U.S. EP-3 spy plane with a Chinese fighter jet. As a consequence, defense issues jumped to the No. 3 topic on local newscasts. Although our sample included four stations in Honolulu, the home base of the submarine involved in the sinking, these stories were covered heavily throughout the country. This may be a sign that when public concern demands it, a national story will capture the attention of local TV, overriding the “local-only” mantra that so many stations promote.

Unfortunately, the data point to unsettling conclusions. Despite the increased coverage of defense issues, there is little energy or imagination evident on the air.

Just 12 percent of all defense stories were based on breaking news. Nearly twice that, 23 percent of the stories, were news conferences, and 43 percent were covered using feed material. About half these stories connected the national story to the viewing audience, but local stations were almost equally likely to simply pass along the latest updates without explaining their local effects. The locals mostly duplicated the networks rather than supplementing them with more nuanced, original coverage.

The events of September 11 will present an even greater challenge. The demands of a prolonged war on terrorism, much of it to be fought in covert operations in far-off countries, will strain already decimated newsroom budgets.

The nation looks to local news for information. A poll by the Pew Research Center this summer found that local news stations were a more popular news source than the networks, though not as popular as cable channels. But there is reason to worry whether newsrooms will prove deserving of the public’s confidence. •

Lee Ann Brady is senior project director at Princeton Survey Research Associates. Atiba Pertilla is a research associate at PEJ.

THINNER, CHEAPER,

To pad profits, broadcasters cut budgets and staff while adding programs

BY MARION JUST, ROSALIND LEVINE, AND TODD BELT

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington galvanized their local stations and brought into relief the challenge of providing all-out breaking news coverage.

Based on what news directors around the country say about their budgets, it’s questionable whether most stations would be able to respond just as quickly and thoroughly.

Even before September 11, stations were being asked to do more and more with less — and that was forcing them to put a cheaper and thinner product on the air, according to a national survey of people who run local television newsrooms.

There’s an intensifying “fear-loathing of stock-based companies laying off for profit-only reasons,” and a “feeling that their decisions are very short-sighted,” reported one news director.

We surveyed news directors at 118 stations around the country between June and August 2001, a significant portion of the 850 stations that do local news. We promised confidentiality to news directors in return for information about their budgets, fiscal decisions, and their comments on the news business. Here is some of what they had to say:

- Half of all stations had either budget cuts or layoffs in the last year. The average budget cut was 8 percent.
- Sixty percent of stations had to make unscheduled budget cuts within the course of the last fiscal year.
- Two-thirds of stations added broadcast hours.
- Fifty-seven percent had to produce the same or more news despite layoffs, budget freezes or budget cuts.

“Budget cuts, frozen positions, less money and more responsibility,” explained one news director, describing the atmosphere at his station. Another news director estimated a “loss of news gathering ability of 10-12 percent due to cuts.”

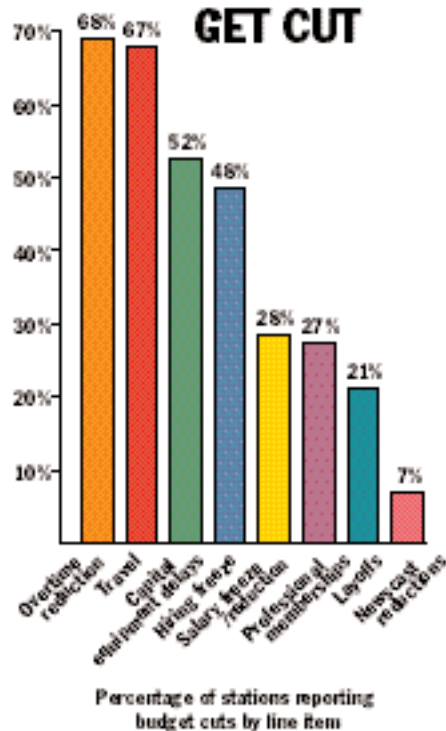
Much of the pressure on broadcasters has come from declining ad revenue as the country slipped into slow growth and near recession. But only seven percent of the news directors surveyed reported that their stations had responded to declining revenue by reducing the number of newscast hours.

Quite the opposite. Producing news is still cheaper than buying syndicated entertainment programming.

Events since September 11 will likely make things worse. An analysis by CMR, a company that tracks ad spending, found that local affiliates lost \$93 million in advertising the first week after the terrorist attacks. Major sponsors like airlines and car dealers are pulling back. A new war on terrorism will further tax news budgets. Meanwhile, virtually all stations are facing investments ranging from \$3 million to \$8 million to convert to digital broadcasting.

The belt-tightening already in place came in various ways. Overall, 68 percent

WHERE BUDGETS GET CUT



LONGER

of stations limited overtime, 48 percent imposed hiring freezes, and 21 percent resorted to layoffs. Travel has also been cut severely and capital purchases have been put on hold indefinitely.

While these actions satisfy the short-term demand for maintaining or increasing profit margins, the cuts may backfire.

In 1999, the survey data, when matched with ratings, found that adding staff is the best way for a local news operation to invest resources to build ratings.

With smaller staffs, coverage of breaking news is bound to suffer. Enterprise or in-depth coverage, the kind our studies have shown TV viewers appreciate most, becomes less likely. In the words of one news director, budget cuts mean that “sometimes we don’t commit as much resource to certain discretionary stories.” Another indicated that budget cuts meant a “major reduction in use of part-timers. Thus full-time staff is stretched, less time for investigative work, special projects.”

Not surprisingly, 54 percent of news directors fear that budget cuts have substantially hurt their station’s news-gathering ability. As one news director noted, “The cutbacks have made a lean staff malnourished.”

Another commented: “Freeze on capital & hiring freeze has us shorthanded...”

Even when there are no staff cuts, quality may be affected, said some news directors. The problem, one noted, is “retaining qualified desk managers and talented producers, attracting skilled persons with the salary we have budgeted.”

Small stations are suffering the most. Many had few resources to begin with and the demand for more newscasts puts them in a terrible bind.

One news director in a small-market described the situation as “Tough!... 2.5 hours a day with a 19-person staff.” More than 40 percent of stations in small markets rely on their reporters to produce two or more news packages a day. Half of the reporters in small markets routinely shoot or edit their own video, significantly more than those in larger markets.

News directors sounded frustrated, even angry, about their stations’ strategies. “We added product (newscasts) then three months later reduced staffing through a hir-

ing freeze and we’re still producing the additional newscasts,” reported one news manager.

Many news directors echoed the concern about the impact of budget cuts on staff. They responded that the biggest change in the newsroom this year was “Cutbacks in staff due to budget restraints,” “staff cuts, early retirements,” “layoffs,” “cutbacks,” “reduced staff,” “staff reduction,” “lower staffing,” “staff turnover,” and “shrinking staff.”

And no matter what the market size, more than half the stations reporting say that budget cuts have affected morale in the newsroom. One Midwestern news director, calling morale the biggest change in the newsroom this year, declared: “People are no longer kidding themselves about the ethic of business vs. quality journalism. ‘Journalism’ is now ‘commercial journalism.’”

Several news directors described a prevailing anxiety brought about by budget cuts. In response to an open-ended question, more than one used the term “a sense of uncertainty.”

“Everyone wonders if, and when, layoffs may happen here,” wrote one news director. “It is like a dark cloud looming over the staff,” wrote another. “Who is next?” wrote a third.

News directors are worried about the stress on the workforce. One, from a small-market station, ticked off his concerns: “Fewer people — more work for remaining staff. Dip in production quality for daily stories. Inability to get all stories.”

In some stations the budget crisis has created, or intensified, tension between the newsroom and the boardroom.

“The news staff has become frustrated with corporate and it has begun to show,” explained one manager. Another expressed a “higher level of frustration over high expectations with not enough resources.” Said another, slightly more optimistic, “For the most part the staff has pulled together but it still affects how people view our corporation.”

One news director described a nexus of problems: “Anxiety about future of business, resentment toward corporate ownership, lack of money for better coverage.”

Many news directors indicated that young people were particularly worried about their future prospects in the news business, an ominous sign that the profession may lose some of the most talented members of its next generation.

The best young staffers have “worries about career future[s]” or a “sense of discouragement,” said one news director. “Staffers hoping to move up in markets are frustrated and that spills back into their work,” said another.

Not all stations believed that budgets affected morale — or at least “not yet.” Some said their operations were already trimmed so close to the bone that there was nothing left to cut. One news director noted that because the station made cuts in the non-salary portion of the budget, morale did not suffer.

One news director waxed philosophical. The effect of budget cuts on morale was “what you’d expect, but we soldier on.” Another explained: “We’re very open with employees, and by choosing a reduction in annual increases over layoffs, it actually boosted morale.”

Budget pressures are topmost in the minds of news directors. When we asked them about the obstacles to producing a high-quality newscast, “too little money” was a popular response, second only to “too few staff.”

But the linkage between the two problems is clear. “Budget cuts have killed staff morale — no raises, a hiring freeze, no overtime,” said one news director.

Luckier ones reported investments in their stations. Some news directors bragged about new equipment (“we went digital!”), new personnel (general managers, news directors, owners, on-air talent), and new newscasts.

And a few remained optimistic by concentrating on the people they work with: “In spite of all the negatives (what we can’t do and industry impacts) [we’re] maintaining a creative, positive, forward-thinking team,” said a news director from a small market. “More positive than ever before.”

One thing seems clear. Nearly all news managers are going to have to find creative ways to cope with the people and resources that remain. The question is whether viewers will begin to decide that what is left on the air is not worth their time when they have more choices than ever for news. •

Marion Just is a professor of political science at Wellesley College and a research associate at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard. Rosalind Levine is an attorney in Boston. Todd Belt is a doctoral student in political science at the University of Southern California.



THE PATRIARCH VS. THE FAMI

Format dictates much of the difference between network and local news

BY ANDREW TYNDALL

One might think local and network news together would provide viewers with a full plate, a well-rounded hour of local, national and international news plus sports, weather and traffic.

As comprehensive as this hour of news is designed to be, the latest study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism reveals that its two components — the local half hour and the network half hour — are chalk and cheese.

Do not think of the two as doing the same job with two beats: one local, the other national and international. Instead think of two different approaches to television journalism.

Network news is more abstract: its stories are more likely to feature clashes of opinions (32 percent of stories versus 16 percent in local broadcasts), to cite expert sources (49 percent versus 19 percent) and to discuss societal trends (17 percent versus 2 percent).

Local news is more mundane: its stories cover everyday events like fender-benders (42 percent of stories versus 5 percent among network newscasts) more than monumental ones (2 percent versus 16 percent) and they quote the vox pop (14 percent versus 7 percent) almost as much as the expert.

The two beats, local and network, are worlds apart. The networks' national and international focus is brimming with big events and ideological clashes. In April 2001, during our study period, the networks were handed just the type of event their news operations are made to cover: the downing of a U.S. Navy EP-3 spy plane on the Chinese island of Hainan and the ensuing diplomatic tug-of-war to secure

the crew's release. Defense and foreign affairs — along with that other great national abstraction The Economy — accounted for fully 39 percent of all network stories filed, compared with a mere 16 percent on the local broadcasts.

The two beats, however, are not the most important distinction. That difference is their formats.

Flowing from the expectation that they would be covering consequential, far-reaching and complicated stories, the networks set up a format in which a lone anchor serves as the symbolic commander of a cadre of correspondents. The traditional anchor's desk presides over the headquarters of a worldwide newsgathering operation, a sort of journalistic Captain Kirk on the bridge of the Starship News. While Dan or Peter or Tom may have his name attached to the title of his nightly newscast, the routine work is assigned to the correspondents who together file between six and seven edited packages each day complete with soundbites, graphics and visuals. Half of all the network news stories are longer than 120 seconds, as opposed to 19 percent for local newscasts.

If the network newscast looks patriarchal, the local news anchor team seems familial: usually four personalities — a his-and-hers anchor team plus sportscaster and weathercaster. Occasionally,

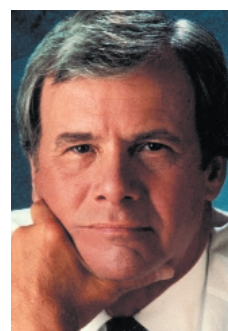
news managers even think in terms of casting a family — the older husband, the younger wife, and then the children, one a jock, the other the trustworthy weather person.

The time devoted to news in a local half hour minus commercials, weather, sports, traffic, and chit-chat is shorter than 15 minutes, compared with almost 19 minutes at the networks. Despite the smaller news hole, the local story count is higher (14) than the network (11).

How can that many stories be crammed into that small a news hole? The local anchor couple shoulders the workload. They average eight read-only stories (lasting 45 seconds or less) between the two of them; the solo network anchor reads only four tidbits each night.

Granted the networks have more resources, time, expertise, and clout, all of which help them put together better stories that would score higher in this study. Still, the main reason the networks would do better is that their format features more reporter packages. It is easier to include the attributes of journalistic quality — such as a mix of points of view, experts and sources — in a correspondent package than in an anchor read-only story.

Thus the solo anchor versus the family circle format determines not only image, marketing and promotion, but journalistic quality itself.



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Y CIRCLE

The networks' advantage in resources is not irrelevant. If you eliminate the read-only stories and compare just the reporter packages (those stories 90 seconds or longer), the networks still do a better job. As an example, the networks were notably more likely to include three or more sources in such stories (56 percent network versus 45 percent local).

Both the networks and the locals rely heavily on the "day book" of prearranged events for these long packages (roughly four in ten stories for both). Only one package in five covers unexpected breaking news. Thus the networks are actually getting more into their long packages with basically similar assignment habits.

We have already noted that, overall, local news tends to focus more on events (as opposed to ideas, issues, policies, malfeasance, institutions or trends) than the network stories do (54 percent vs. 42 percent). The important difference, however, was not in the number of event-driven stories but in how consequential they were. Almost all the networks' event-driven stories (88 percent) were classified as monumental, unusual, or breaking news. Compare that to just 22 percent for local.

Since the purpose of examining the networks was to illuminate the journalistic options for local newscasters, this piece is not meant to be an analysis of the quality of the nightly newscasts themselves. ABC, CBS and NBC have problems. Each has precipitously cut its commitment to overseas coverage. All have devoted more time to commercials. They have begun picking stories based on demographic targeting rather than newsworthiness. And yet they still have been unable to devise a news agenda that attracts young viewers — or even to get the newscast programmed by the time viewers are home from work. We leave these and other issues to another day.

Still, the data show that the networks

are more likely than their local counterparts to employ journalistic strategies that have engendered criticism: "gotcha!" journalism and lifestyle fluff.

One of the sample weeks chosen for this study included a prize example of the gotcha game, representing the last hurrah of the Washington press corps' fascination with Bill Clinton. The investigation of his pardons of the fugitive financier Marc Rich and others led the way as fully 11 percent of all network packages had an investigative tone (versus 2 percent for local). The numbers do not define the line where hard-nosed investigative journalism crosses over to mere "gotcha!" But my own sense of watching these stories is that they provided more fodder for scrutiny of that line than the local stations did.

Another example of questionable enterprise is the category "news series." These are the nightly non-news-related features run under titles such as ABC's A Closer Look or CBS's Eye on America or NBC's In-Depth and Life Line which, depending on one's taste, either round out the day's coverage to survey important

underlying societal trends or pander to the self-serving pre-occupations of key demographic components of the viewing audience. Again, without drawing conclusions, 11 percent of the networks' packages ran under such formats whereas only 3 percent of the local broadcasts' did.

If the high-stakes, hard-driving, correspondent-dominated style of the networks leaves them open to charges of slickness and remove, the local newscasts offer a contrast. This study demonstrates that your local station's promotion of its familiar four-person anchor team goes beyond mere marketing. That format shapes the journalism itself. Compared with the networks' severe patriarchal product, local news may seem anti-intellectual and superficial. But that intimate local family circle delivers the reassuring rhythms of everyday life. •

Andrew Tyndall is publisher of the Tyndall Report, a research service, and has been monitoring network news coverage since 1987.

QUALITY BY STATION GROUP 1998-2001

Large media companies are growing more eager to buy television stations. A chain of stations that shares production facilities, marketing strategies, content, and even sales staff will save money and be able to offer advertisers more eyeballs. The FCC is expected to lift the ban on the rule capping any company reaching more than 35 percent of the nation's viewing audience, a ceiling already breached by CBS/Viacom and Fox.

A review of annual reports shows that most media companies publicly extol the importance of good journalism. We decided to average the quality scores of those ownership groups in which we've studied four or more stations in hopes of learning about different companies' commitment to quality.

[For complete documentation, please visit our web site, www.journalism.org.]

Station Group	Average	Grade	Stations
EMMIS	363.30	B	7
RAYCOM	356.47	B	4
GANNETT	351.86	C	12
CBS	338.24	C	12
NBC	337.08	C	7
BELO	335.88	C	8
HEARST	330.23	C	9
ABC	323.96	C	5
SCRIPPS	301.81	D	4
COX	262.86	D	4

WHAT COMES NEXT?

On September 11th terrorism spurred television news people to do what they do best.

Producers suddenly were allowed to create news programs rather than gimmick-filled promotional vehicles. Reporters were asked to cover something important and take care to get it right. The anchor mugging and bon mots largely disappeared.

Can it last?

Local television news over the last generation had devolved into something less than journalism because the medium thought it lacked compelling stories to tell. Manipulating viewers overtook thinking about content. An obsession with extracting absurd profits overwhelmed what was originally a federally required public service in exchange for a license to broadcast.

Now, the federal requirements long gone, the audience has begun to shrink, and the profits are drying up.

An ABC affiliate in St. Louis recently dropped news altogether because it couldn't make enough money. Others will likely follow. There is not enough audience or advertising to support so many news outlets.

The short history of television reveals that epic mo-

ments can define new eras for journalism. News institutions remake themselves and find new philosophies. Viewers sample new stations, switch channels and create new loyalties.

Since that unthinkable September morning, Americans have returned to the news. Viewership is up, and these people are hunting. One major station executive told us privately that by the first of October, close to 90 percent of the households in his market had sampled his news programs.

We have come back to news because there is an important story in the country that compels us to look beyond ourselves, our health, and our consumer impulses.

If this project has established one thing, it's that many of the conventional formulas broadcasters apply don't work any more.

If local broadcasters respond by trying to exploit this new audience, rather than inform it, viewers will be repelled as they would by a war profiteer or a price gouger.

Now TV news professionals have an opportunity, and a reason, to show the public that they can practice journalism again. •

WHO DID THE STUDY

This study was conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a journalists' group in Washington, D.C., affiliated with the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Tom Rosenstiel, director of the PEJ, was lead writer. Carl Gottlieb, the deputy director, supervised all aspects of the study. Atiba Pertilla and Chris Galdieri of PEJ were project researchers.

The scholar team that developed the methodology included Marion Just, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College; Michael Robinson, Ph.D., formerly of Georgetown University; Ann Crigler, Ph.D., Director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California, and Sherrie Mazingo, Ph.D., of the University of Minnesota, and Lee Ann Brady of Princeton Survey Research Associates.

Researchers at Princeton Survey Research Associates coded the newscasts and prepared the initial statistical data under Brady's supervision. Todd Belt of USC developed the measurements and analyzed the Nielsen Media Research data for ratings, share, demographics and audience retention. Kathy Regan and Rosalind Levine performed data collection and statistical analysis for the survey of news directors. Evan Jenkins, con-

sulting editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, edited the articles. Nancy Novick, art director of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, designed the layout and graphics.

DESIGN TEAM

The following local news professionals developed the criteria of quality for this study and signed off on major decisions:

- John Cardenas, News Director, WBNS, Columbus, Ohio.
- John Corporon, Board of Governors, Overseas Press Club.
- Randy Covington, former News Director, WIS, Columbia, S. C.
- Marty Haag, former Executive Vice President, A.H. Belo.
- Alice Main, former Executive Producer, WLS, Chicago.
- Gordon Peterson, Principal Anchor, WUSA, Washington, D.C.
- Jose Rios, Vice President of News, KTTV, Los Angeles.
- Dan Rosenheim, News Director, KPIX, San Francisco.
- Kathy Williams, News Director, WKYC, Cleveland.
- Gary Wordlaw, President and General Manager, WTVH, Syracuse.

This year's Local TV News study is dedicated to the memory of James Lawrence Snyder. Jim was one of the guiding hands of this project and was a member of the design team of industry professionals that continues to advise us. To a fine journalist and a terrific friend, we will miss you.