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## Regional News in Local Newscasts: What is the Role of the Network Regional News Feed Coordinator in the Gatekeeping Process for Local Newscasts?

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# Regional News in Local Newscasts

## What is the Role of the Network Regional News Feed Coordinator in the Gatekeeping Process for Local Newscasts?

By Michael L. Hilt

The 1980s saw a wave of new television technology. One part of the new technology is the use of satellites to regionalize news coverage.

The CBS television network established a regional news feed system called Newsnet during the mid-1980s. The feed system allows affiliates to access stories and videotape from anywhere in the country and the world. Through one or two regional feed headquarters, stations within a specific region can share news stories.

The daily satellite feed has enabled some smaller stations to use regional stories to fill their newshole rather than hiring additional staff members to cover local news. Other local stations have been able to expand their newscasts to one hour without enlarging the news staff.

This study examined the role of the CBS Midwest Regional feed coordinator as one of the primary gatekeepers of regional news in the local news process. One purpose of this study was to determine how often local stations use the Midwest Regional feed, either by contributing stories to it or by taking stories from it. A second purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the regional coordinator as a gatekeeper.

Studies on gatekeeping have examined both the decision-making process and the role of the gatekeeper. The research ranges from the quality of the local newscasts (Carroll, 1985, 1989; Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975; Roberts & Dickson, 1984; Wulfmeyer, 1982) to the quality of the gatekeeper's decision-making (Buckalew, 1969, 1970; Dimmick, 1974). More recently, the definition of the television news gatekeeper came under examination (Berkowitz, 1990). Berkowitz found the traditional idea of the gatekeeper making decisions strictly on newsworthiness or personal preference did not apply to the present-day local television newsroom.

With the introduction and use of satellites at the local level, the definition of a gatekeeper may change even further. One study found that satellite news gathering may result in

less local news (Cleland & Ostroff, 1988).

The present study focused on two research questions that addressed the regional news feed system for local television: 1) Do the local affiliated stations use this network service, and 2) Does the regional feed coordinator take a pro-active or re-active approach in the pursuit of stories for the regional feed?

### Method

Data for this study came from a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. A survey, cover letter, and self-addressed envelope were sent to the news directors at the 34 television stations in the CBS Midwest Region. These stations are located in 10 states: Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The one-page survey included both open-ended and close-ended questions. The survey asked for the average number of stories contributed to the regional feed each week, the average number of stories used from the feed each week, and how the station personnel decide which stories to bring to the attention of the regional feed coordinator. The survey concluded with an open-ended question asking for suggestions on how to improve the regional feed system. A follow-up mailing also was used. The second mailing consisted of a cover letter reminding the news directors of the survey, a second copy of the survey, and another self-addressed envelope. A total of 27 CBS affiliates in the Midwest Region, out of 34, responded to the survey.

The CBS Midwest Regional feed coordinator in Kansas City was observed performing his duties and interviewed concerning his job and the role he plays in local newscasts. He was asked about his view of the job and if he considers himself a gatekeeper in the local news process.

### Results

#### Quantitative Analysis

Of the 27 respondents, 21 send an average of 1 to 10 stories per week to the Midwest Regional feed (see Table 1). Broken

down further, 13 stations send 1 to 5 stories, and 8 stations send 6 to 10. Four stations send 16 or more stories per week to the coordinator. However, three of those four stations are located in the same city as one of the Midwest Regional feed's originating points (Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Chicago). This makes it much easier to include those stations' stories on the feed.

Eighteen of the 27 respondents use an average of 1 to 10 stories per week from the Midwest Regional feed (see Table 2). Eleven stations use 1 to 5 stories, and seven stations use 6 to 10. Another seven stations use 11 to 15 stories per week. Only two stations reported using 16 or more stories per week from the regional feed.

The respondents were divided on the question of how station personnel decide which stories to bring to the attention of the regional coordinator. Eleven stations said their newsroom management (news director, assignment editor, or producer) decide which stories were of regional interest. Those stories then would be offered to the region feed coordinator. The majority of the stations, 14 of the 27 respondents, said they tell the coordinator all of the stories on the assignment board and let the coordinator decide which will be used on the regional feed. Two stations did not respond to the question.

There were a number of responses to the question about ways to improve the regional feed system. The suggestions included providing better access to stories through regional conference calls and aiding small market stations in buying satellite uplinks and satellite trucks. Several stations mentioned problems in obtaining story information (suggested anchor leads, subject background, and chyron data). Two stations suggested the need for a weekend feed, especially for the transmission of sports stories.

#### Qualitative Analysis

The regional feed coordinator begins each day by reviewing a list possible stories compiled during the preceding days and weeks. The coordinator also checks the news wires

for stories in or about that region.

About 9 a.m. the coordinator begins the daily ritual of calling each affiliate in that region. Each station's assignment editor recites a list of stories, a short list if only regional stories are mentioned, or a long list if the entire local rundown is discussed. Some calls to the local stations take only a few minutes, others can last as long as 20 minutes. In either case, the coordinator makes the final decision on which stories should be uplinked, air freighted, or mailed to the feed point. If it is a breaking or spot news story, the tape would be uplinked if the station has a satellite dish or air freighted. If it is a feature story that can be held for several days, the tape will be mailed. The coordinator also informs the local stations of stories other stations in the Midwest Region are producing that might be of interest to them.

The Midwest Regional coordinator believes he does not play a major role in deciding which stories the local stations air. However, he admits the feed does have an impact on what the local viewers see.

"Part of what we do in the morning calls is if we see a story on the wire, or if we hear of a story in another market that has a connection to their city, we'll call them and tell them," he said. "That may control their lead story that day. So we're a source sometimes of things they wouldn't have known without us."

The coordinator compares his efforts to a clearinghouse, taking in information from 34 stations in 10 states. But he says CBS has urged the regional coordinators to be more pro-active in suggesting stories for the local stations to produce for the feed, rather than re-active in only taking what is presented to them.

"Sometimes we do lobby them (local stations), or we try to convince them that this is a great story, the network really wants coverage, and the other stations are screaming for it."

At 10:30 a.m., the regional coordinators hold a national conference call. This is when local stories are presented for discussion at a national level for possible broadcast in the daily national news feed or on the *CBS Evening News*. At this time, the regional coordinators also decide if any of the stories from other parts of the country could be of interest to stations in their region. If so, they alert stations in their area.

The remainder of the day, until feed time in the late afternoon, includes a great deal of

logistical work. The coordinator arranges for videotape deliveries through airline flights or couriers, records incoming satellite feeds, stays in contact with the local stations to follow the progress of stories for the regional feed, and makes sure any late-breaking news does not get bypassed in the process.

### Conclusion

The regional feed, through the use of satellites, has changed the way local television covers the news. While local stories still make up most of the local newscast, regional stories have found a place in the program. All of the respondents to this survey said they use the service, and all of them said they contribute to it as well.

By its very nature, the regional feed introduced the need for greater cooperation between the network and its affiliates. With budget cuts throughout the industry, this cooperation means local stations can use stories from the feed to air a quality newscast at an affordable cost. For the network, this cooperation means access to stories from across the country without the expense of sending its own reporter and camera crew.

While the local stations' use of the regional feed has its benefits, those benefits do not come without a price. The regional stories on the feed are selected by someone outside the local newsroom. Using those regional stories in place of local news means the decision-making process at the assignment stage is in the hands of the regional coordinator.

The network's push for regional coordinators to become more pro-active in the types of stories included in the feed means reporters at the local level may do reports more for the region than for their immediate

area. The push to become pro-active may mean a decrease in the local stations' influence on the stories included in the feed.

In balancing the needs of all the stations with the Midwest region, the feed coordinator must put together a rundown of stories that will be of interest to the region's stations. To the stations that use the service frequently, this means giving up the local emphasis for a regional identity. Budget cuts have forced some stations to use more regional news, and has left the regional coordinator as one of the station's gatekeepers.

The regional coordinator fulfills this role as gatekeeper by narrowing what could be a list of 100 possible stories from the affiliates to about 25 items. This act of narrowing the list prevents the local stations' gatekeeping process from having its full effect. Thus the regional coordinator can become the principal gatekeeper of regional news.

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Table 1  
Stories Supplied Weekly

Number of Stories	Number of Stations
0 to 5	13
6 to 10	8
11 to 15	2
16 or more	4

Table 2  
Stories Used Weekly

Number of Stories	Number of Stations
0 to 5	11
6 to 10	7
11 to 15	7
16 or more	2