

Winter 1999

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Recommended Citation

Lipschultz, Jeremy Harris and Hilt, Michael L., "Deciding Local TV News: Perceptions of Late Evening News Producers" (1999). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 51.

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*Educating tomorrow's
electronic media professionals.*

VOLUME 40 • NUMBER 1 • 1999

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WINTER
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Deciding Local TV News: Perceptions of Late Evening News Producers

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A substantial number of television news viewers express the concern that local TV news is biased and sensational, often over-dramatizes the news, does not look out for ordinary people, manufactures news stories, and overlooks stories that ought to be reported (*Broadcasting & Cable*, Sept. 21, 1998, p. 52). Viewer reactions come from local television news content – the product of newsroom employee decisions. In this context, it might be worthwhile to have an understanding of how decisions are made about local news. Research is needed on the role of organizational structure within newsrooms. Station competition leads to market forces that may be important to the individuals making final decisions about the airing of local news stories.

In the past decade it has become common for researchers to study television general managers and news directors for indications about newsroom decision-making (Lipschultz & Hilt, 1993). At the same time, journalism research has focused on news reporters and their sources (Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998). However, in local television newsrooms, it is the producer that decides which stories will air in a given newscast, and then writes many of the stories that are seen. Unfortunately, producers have not been the subject of previous research. The purpose of this paper is to consider the views of late evening television news producers—those persons responsible for writing and editing weeknight newscasts between 9 and 11 p.m.— in deciding the lead story of their local newscast. The survey data in this paper examines how market forces might affect the producer's day-to-day decision making, for example, leading with local news, selecting dramatic video, and emphasizing crime coverage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has addressed neither the role of the news producer nor how market forces impact the producer's decision making. Producers are responsible for the final content of their newscasts: "Once a decision has been made on which newscast a story will be placed, the reporter will do most of his or her communicating with the producer on questions of story focus, length, etc." (Goedkoop, 1988, p. 72). As much as half of the overall news content is written not by reporters but by producers. Producers also decide the order of the stories within a newscast, placing special emphasis on the "lead story of the day, one which the news staff covered in depth" (Fang, 1985, p. 21). Fang's point is that a producer will cut other stories before touching the lead. The research on producers, however, does not address the underlying reasons for selecting a story as the lead.

Research has identified the importance of market forces in organizing the culture of broadcast newsrooms around the need to entertain the audience (McManus, 1994). Gans' (1979) news values have been extended to include concerns such as visual quality, amusement, and topicality (McManus, 1994, p. 120). In the case of local television news, a consumer-based approach more often has led to commercial pressures and "sensationalism" in the name of ratings:

The most common explanation of how economic considerations affect news coverage is that news is selected and presented not so much for its importance as for its ability to entertain...the news media are said to give greater prominence to stories that elicit emotion than to those that inform (Kaniss, 1991, pp. 46-47).

While Kaniss acknowledged the importance of the late evening newscast and its emphasis on timely coverage of crimes, fires, and accidents, she limits her discussion of local television news to station managers, news anchors, and reporters.

Likewise, McManus described a three-stage news production process that is reporter-centered. He viewed the producer as an important news manager who selects events to be covered based upon similar criteria: "One reason for this orthodoxy is the similar advice given by the major television consultants" (p. 130). Neither Kaniss nor McManus, however, focus their studies on television news producers. This study will link the role of the news producer with potential market forces in an attempt to better understand the decision making process.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question #1: In the view of local television news producers, what elements are important in deciding the lead story of a late evening newscast?

Research Question #2: In the view of local television news producers, how influential are other newsroom personnel in making news judgments?

A national mail survey of local television news producers was conducted in Summer 1997. The research focused on a group of individuals responsible for the writing and editing of local late evening television newscasts. One station from each of the 211 television markets was randomly selected from the commercial stations listed in the 1997 *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook*. The selected stations were called to identify the late evening news producer. Those producers were mailed a copy of the survey (Babbie, 1992; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). A second mailing of the survey was sent ten days after the initial wave (Dillman, 1979). Television news producers responded to a series of statements concerning their news judgment in late evening newscasts (see Table 1). The producers also responded to a series of demographic questions.

RESULTS

A total of 87 of 211 television news producers responded from across the country. This represented a response rate of 41.2 percent. The respondents came from the largest to the smallest television markets, and everything in between. The sample included 51 females (59.3 percent) and 35 males (40.7 percent). One respondent did not answer the demographic information. The percentage of women was consistent with previous findings where 64 percent of television news producers were women (Papper, 1998).

The typical producer of the late evening television newscast in 1997 was a 29-year-old white (96.5 percent) female (59.3 percent) who had completed college (89.6 percent) with a journalism or mass communication degree (59.3 percent), and considered herself to

be politically independent (39.5 percent) and middle-of-the-road (65.5 percent). She was as likely to be married (46.5 percent) as never having been married (44.2 percent).

The producers answered twelve statements concerning their late evening newscasts. The items covered decisions about lead stories, the impact of dramatic video, and the influence of newsroom managers and others on the newscast. Overwhelmingly, the guiding principle for these news producers was to lead the late evening newscast with local stories. It is not clear from the present data whether leading with local news happens because it supports organizational values, it is driven by the market, or it is a combination of both.

The dramatic nature of available video, the importance of a particular news story, and the staple of crime news helped explain news judgment. A majority of the producers disagreed that they often lead with national news stories (69.5 percent). The data suggest that content decisions occur within the organization context of producers telling reporters what is wanted and knowing what the news director expects. The top six items of agreement are a combination of news content that is local, important, crime-related, and highlighted with dramatic video, as well as being the product of newsroom decision making between the news director, the producer and the reporter.

TABLE 1
Producer Agreement with Late Newscast Statements

Statement (Ranked by mean)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
We often lead with local news (4.74).	1.2%	0.0	0.0	20.9	77.9
I tell reporters what I want (4.14).	0.0%	3.5	14.1	47.1	35.3
I know what my news director wants in the newscast (4.06).	1.2%	3.6	15.7	47.0	32.5
I look for dramatic video in deciding which stories to air (4.05).	0.0%	5.9	11.8	54.1	28.2
We lead with the most important news story, wherever it occurs (3.96).	0.0%	11.9	17.9	32.1	38.1
We often lead with crime news (3.52).	1.2%	15.5	27.4	41.7	14.3
Our audience research guides what we broadcast (3.14).	8.2%	12.9	37.6	38.8	2.4
The executive producer regularly decides what leads (2.95).	23.8%	17.5	16.3	25.0	17.5
We consider our prime-time lead-in show in deciding what to air (2.87).	17.6%	21.2	25.9	27.1	8.2
Our news consultant guides what we broadcast (2.47).	27.2%	19.8	33.3	18.5	1.2
We often lead with national news (2.27).	18.3%	51.2	15.9	14.6	0.0
The assignment editor regularly decides what leads (1.82).	41.7%	41.7	10.7	4.8	1.2

Respondents were late-evening news producers working at ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC stations sampled from 211 Nielsen markets (N=87).

Producers were mixed in their responses as to the role that the executive producer and news consultants play in the newscast process. Most producers, however, disagreed

that the assignment editor regularly decides what leads (83.4 percent). Producers varied in their perceptions about the use of audience research and prime-time lead-ins in making news decisions. These data raise questions about the importance of broad newsroom policies that are not emphasized by the news director. The influence of the assignment editor appears to stop at the end of the assignment process.

DISCUSSION

This study confirmed what most researchers suspect: local news drives the late evening newscast. Producers perceive that they carry out what their news director wants in the newscast. As was shown in Table 1, producers do that by using dramatic video, selecting what they believe to be the most important stories, and considering available crime news. These data fall short of explaining why competing with other stations in a local market would lead most producers across the country to lead local, emphasize crime, and select dramatic video. The similarity of responses on the local news item is remarkable; all but one respondent in this study agreed that they often lead with local news, and more than three-fourths of the producers strongly agreed with the statement.

An interesting issue raised by this study is how other influences such as audience research and news consultants impact news judgment directly through producers and indirectly through other newsroom managers. The producers in this sample were split on the affect of news consultants on the newscast, but may not always see the consultants' influence as filtered through the news director. More research is needed on whether consultants and audience research are a driving force behind localism.

The role of newscast producer comes with established rules of news judgment. This study supported the view that local television news producers apply a market model of journalism to their work. They recognize the need to "please audiences or at least those audiences that advertisers find attractive":

Market Model journalism is anathema to journalists.... It is the model of the business office, not the newsroom. This gives it enduring influence, for instance, it pretty well governs all local television news. But it is the model that any self-respecting journalist fears and loathes. (Schudson, 1998, p. 135)

Producers must work in an increasingly competitive environment in which the number of viewers for late evening newscasts have declined dramatically since the 1980s (Jacobs, 1990). Still, some 67 percent of adults watch local television news, compared to 49 percent who watch network news (Graber, 1997, p. 326).

This research added some support to the idea that market forces are important in local television news. The late evening producers agreed that local news and dramatic video drive their decision making process. But, is leading with local news evidence of business office direction, or the newsroom meeting its historic mission of informing the audience about news that directly impacts them? How should producer decisions to lead with a relatively insignificant story simply because it is local be classified? It is not known from the present research how producers judge stories in terms of importance. However, it is known that a local angle and dramatic video will increase the likelihood of the story airing in the newscast.

While local television news in the United States is often criticized for focusing on the sensational, it is difficult to envision another American model other than one driven

by market forces in a commercial setting since most countries in the world have other, more public oriented models. Competitive pressures and deregulatory forces have moved local television news away from a public service model. Even within the drive for ratings, it may still be possible to leave some room for coverage of issue-oriented public affairs. Of course, the audience would need to be patient enough to watch it, and news management would need to be willing to take the risk. In this age of declining news ratings, maybe its time has come.

While television news content is produced by newsroom employees, their decisions still need to be better understood. The present data make it clear that while producers operate under a set of decision-making rules, their decisions are strongly influenced by perceptions of what the news director wants. These perceptions appear to influence communication between producers and news reporters. The influence of consultants and audience research appears to operate indirectly through the news director, if at all. Future studies need to ask producers, along with executive producers, news directors, general managers, assignment editors and reporters, whether consultants and audience research are the main reasons why they lead newscasts with local news. Such data would provide a broader context in which to interpret responses of producers.

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