



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

ON THE ROAD TO IRRELEVANCE

Quality can be the compass to bring viewers back

Journalism, if nothing else, should reflect its time. In the last year, America has been attacked, begun a new kind of war and seen its stock market and business sector spiral into crisis.

In response, local television news has scarcely changed.

Crime coverage actually increased last year. Reporting of national defense went up, while coverage of everything else — even the economy — shrank.

In a survey of 103 local news directors, half now think their industry is on the wrong path. Only a third are confident about the future.

With viewers tuning out but profit demands unyielding, what gets on the air is demonstrably thinner. The average local TV reporter is now asked to produce roughly two stories a day, the highest ever in our five years of research, even though data show such demands drive viewers away. And with the government moving to allow even greater concentration of ownership, what's thin is likely to get thinner.

There are signs of hope, according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism's unprecedented five-year study of local television news, which has now analyzed some 33,000 stories from 50 markets, more than a million pieces of data in all.

While enterprise and investigative work has nearly vanished, what is left is better than it was five years ago.

Most news directors say they want to get back to proven basics, though after thirty years of consultants there is confusion about what those basics are.

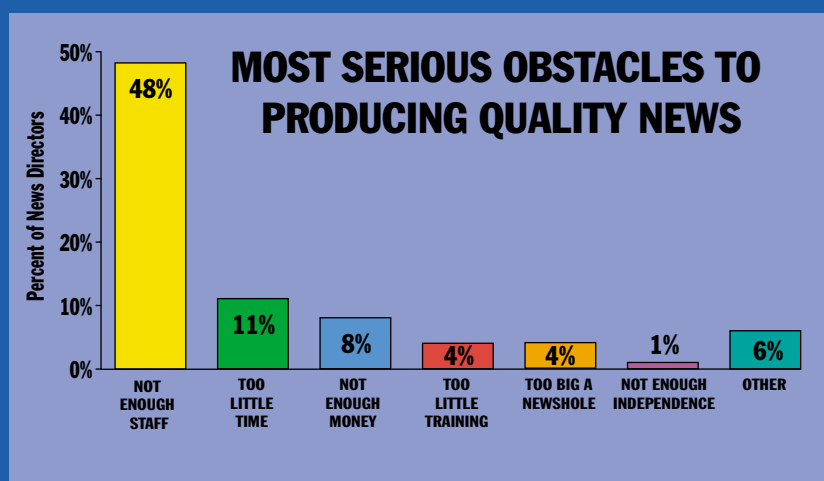
Perhaps more fundamentally, the data show more conclusively than ever that viewers actually prefer quality — even the younger viewers advertisers covet. They just don't see enough of it.

There are also some things that local TV newsrooms can do that are proven to win viewers. They are not costly, but they require commitment.

These are among the findings of the final year of the study of local television by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, 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 news directors' perspective on their industry (**Pessimism Rules in TV Newsrooms**), evidence of the impact of quality (**How Strong Is the Case for Quality?**), a breakdown of what practices demonstrably attract viewers (**Five Ways to Build Viewership**), a sobering look at how local news did not change after September 11th (**After 9/11, Has Anything Changed?**), a detailed content study of the growing Spanish-language news market (**Separate but Equal**), a hard look at watchdog journalism in local TV (**Investigative Journalism Despite the Odds**), and more. •



PESSIMISM RULES IN TV NEWSROOMS

BY DEBORAH POTTER

Superficial reporting, tabloid hype, style over substance: complaints about local television news are nothing new. But now, some of the deepest concern is being expressed inside TV newsrooms, not just by the troops but by their leaders.

In a survey of 103 news directors nationwide, fully half said they felt their profession was heading down the wrong track, while only a third felt that it was on the right track.

The survey, conducted by mail during the summer of 2002, reflects the views of a significant sample of the roughly 800 stations in the country that produce news.

The main reason for the pessimism is pretty simple, according to one news director: "Budget cuts are killing quality."

The financial pressures, which are forcing newsrooms to do more with less, are reflected in one telling statistic. Reporters are now required to produce an average of 1.8 packages a day, the heaviest workload reported in the five years that PEJ has been studying local TV news and surveying news directors.

The news directors are fully aware that the increased productivity comes at a cost. The No. 1 obstacle to producing quality news, they say, is "not enough staff," ranking it well above "not enough money" and "too little time."

More than half the news directors, 55 percent, said the mood in their newsrooms had suffered because of budget constraints or layoffs industry-wide. And in those newsrooms where morale was low, more than twice as many bosses said things in general were going in the wrong direction than said the direction was right. "Low pay, long hours, no raises," one news director wrote, explaining why his employees felt the way they did. Said another, "People come to work every day wondering if they're going to be fired."

News directors who say things are on the right track see the effect of tight budgets differently. They believe they're learn-

ing to produce quality news in leaner times by setting new priorities. "If we were good at ten things five years ago, we have to be *really good* at five things now," wrote one manager. "We'll get better at the things that are really important."

The financial picture overall appears better than last year, when half of all stations faced budget cuts or staff reductions. This year, the figure was 40 percent. The majority said their budgets were flat (30 percent) or had gone up (29 percent). Of the news directors who did have to make cuts, only about a quarter said the reductions hampered their stations' news-gathering ability. "Smaller staff means less coverage at times," one manager wrote. "Some editorial decisions have been based solely on saving money," said another.

Pessimism among news directors appears to be based to some extent on longer-term economic trends. "Wrong track" answers outnumbered "right track" by almost two to one at stations that have lost staff over the past three years, and by about the same margin at stations producing more news than they did three years ago. "We now practice assembly-line journalism in most shops," one news director wrote. "With staff limitations and budget constraints, it is a struggle to 'fill' newscasts, much less look for quality content. We look for easy stories — just add water and stir."

Two-thirds of news directors said they believed that the economic outlook for their stations was improving, but their positive view did not extend to TV news in general. Almost half of those who said their own stations' financial picture looked better for the year to come also said that over all, the industry is on the wrong track.

With a few notable exceptions, the negative attitude cuts across market size and station ownership. "Ratings, style, story-count, pacing, hair and clothes seem more important on a given day than content and issues," wrote a Montana news director. And a news executive from a big city in Texas observed, "Owners even from top media companies . . . have very little interest in the quality of their broadcast product."

In terms of market size, the only category in which news directors split almost evenly on the right track-wrong track question were those in medium-sized markets. News managers were most pessimistic in the smallest markets, where resources are most strained. "Too much news to fill. Too little staff," wrote one news manager. "Too much 'sameness,' for which we can blame consultants. Local news is not what it should be."

Where are the optimists? The survey found a few at network-owned-and-operated stations, where half the respondents said things were on the right track. Only one person said the opposite, while the rest had no opinion. But just ten news directors made up that category, one-tenth of the survey sample. Of the other 90 percent, most felt the industry was on the wrong track. The margin was particularly wide at stations owned by large corporate groups like Tribune and Gannett, where the ratio was more than two to one.

Among the positive thinkers, several appeared to be looking for a silver lining. "We're doing what we can in a changing economic environment," said a small-market news manager. Wrote a news director in a top-50 market, "Still need more time/support for serious in-depth issue pieces, less emphasis on sexy or sensational stories."

Is there any way out? Even some of the pessimists say there is. "Get back to basics and bring back the lost viewers," one wrote. "Strong local content attracts viewers," said another. But many fear those goals will remain out of reach as long as "profits take precedence over quality."

The survey's message is sobering. Despite the improving financial picture, news directors still feel besieged. Things aren't as bad as they were, but there's no reason to believe they'll get much better any time soon. •

Deborah Potter is executive director of NewsLab, a non-profit TV research and training center.

HOW STRONG IS THE CASE FOR QUALITY?

BY ATIBA PERTILLA AND TODD BELT

For years, news consultants have told broadcasters that the spinach in local TV news mattered, too. Certainly they advised clients about whom to hire, how to write teases, and even the most audience-friendly hairstyles. But they also warned that while gimmicks can get viewers to sample a station, it's content that keeps them.

Today, in harder times, newsrooms have more problems than ever — budget pressures, the transition to digital technology, declining viewership, and now the likely coming of duopoly and cross-ownership takeovers, are only a few.

The only thing the newsroom still absolutely controls is what it puts on the air.

It turns out that the consultants were right — content does matter.

A five-year study of local television that analyzed more than 1,200 hours of news and more than 30,000 stories suggests that by several measures quality, as defined by broadcast journalism professionals, is the most likely path to commercial success, even in today's difficult economic environment.

How do we know?

In the first three years, we used ratings as

our proxy for economic success. We created a three-year ratings trend — 12 Nielsen ratings books — to determine whether stations were gaining or losing viewers over time. In all, we found that 47 percent of stations with the highest quality — "A" stations — were experiencing ratings success, a higher percentage than in any other grade.

Meanwhile, we have also gathered data on share — the percentage of all television sets in use that are watching a program — as another measurement of commercial success. Here the data from the last five years show that 52 percent of "A" stations were building market share over time, a better record than in any other quality grade.

And for share, the quality argument is even stronger than for ratings. Not only did the very best stations fare better, but even a little quality helped. The higher a station's quality score, the better its gain in market share was likely to be.

Still, some questions remained. For the last two years, for example, "A" stations were not the grade category most likely to show ratings success. In fact, this year "D" stations fared best, while last year it was "B" stations.

With local news ratings nearly everywhere falling, has the relationship between quality and commercial success weakened? Or is it that ratings alone no longer adequately re-

flect commercial success?

Broadcasters themselves have begun to use new measurements, and for the last two years the study has collected data for two of them: viewer demographics and audience retention.

Most programs — news and entertainment — now rank themselves by how many viewers they get between the ages of 18 and 54, the demographic valued most by advertisers.

In addition, keeping or even adding to the audience a broadcast inherits from earlier programming, the so-called lead-in, has also become nearly as important as ratings. (One trade publication ad boasted of a court show's ability to gain 15 percent on its lead-in — even though this added up to just a lowly 3.9 rating for the station in question.)

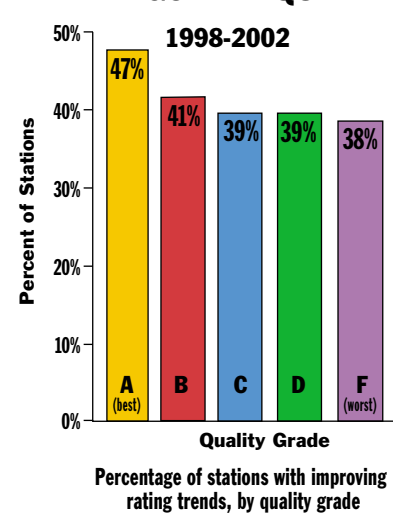
These additional measures make an even stronger case for quality. Stations that did the best job of keeping or adding to their lead-in audience also scored high for quality (380 points on average). Stations that did a poor job of retaining their lead-in scored lower for quality (they average 339).

This is what researchers call a straight-line correlation. Even a small boost in quality is likely to help a station retain more lead-in audience.

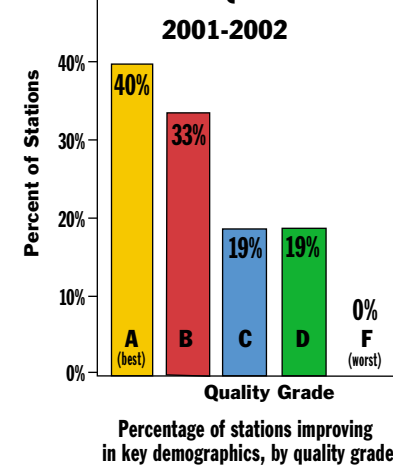
What about demographics? Here too, it

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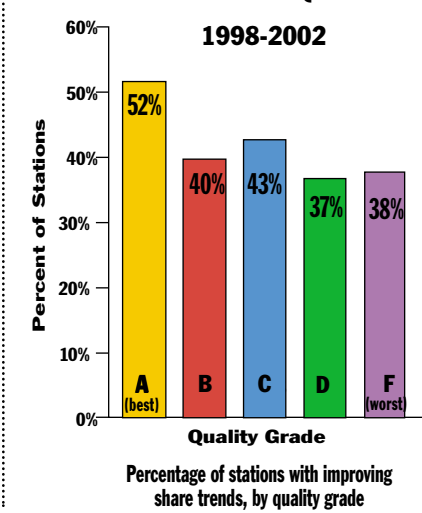
RATINGS AND QUALITY



DEMOGRAPHICS AND QUALITY



SHARE AND QUALITY



FIVE WAYS TO BUILD VIEWERSHIP

Simple and Proven Steps Every Station Can Take

BY TOM ROSENSTIEL
AND MARION JUST

Never mind how you define quality. Are there certain things stations can do that will attract viewers? Last year we tried to outline such a “magic formula.” We used a method common in business — identifying models of success. Using four years of data, we found stations that were building viewership and isolated what distinguished them from stations failing to win viewers. It was basic “benchmarking.”

This year we are adding a second approach. Rather than just comparing one group of stations to another, we also used regression analysis, a statistical method that tries to predict outcomes, to isolate what works.

At a certain commonly accepted level of statistical significance, this method can identify practices that are particularly effective in attracting and holding viewers. We measured these approaches against four different criteria of economic success — ratings, share, retention of lead-in audience and demographics. (The share and ratings data are for five years. The analyses of lead-in audience and demographics are just for 2001 and 2002.)

Using this more rigorous statistical approach, some of our findings from last year were strengthened, others were not, and additional findings emerged.

DO MORE ENTERPRISE REPORTING

Effort pays.

Over five years, stations with better ratings and shares do more special series. Stations with better audience retention and key demographics do more tough interviews.

When the more involved statistical analysis is applied, the case for enterprise becomes even stronger.

Stations that do more enterprise of all sorts are more likely to build on their lead-in audience. Enterprise alone added 6 percent to the rate at which a station held its lead-in audience.

Conversely, stations that produced the fewest enterprise stories (the lowest 20 percent of stations) had worse than aver-

age lead-in retention (2.5 on a 5 point lead-in scale), while those in the highest 20 percent scored significantly above average lead-in retention at 3.15.

We measured the enterprise level of every story — from original investigations at the top, to sending a reporter and not just a camera in the middle, all the way down to using video press releases.

The statistical model shows that all kinds of enterprise helps retain audience. Doing substantive on-camera interviews alone can add 4 percent to the rate at which a station holds its lead-in audience. To retain viewers, do more original stories, not just the daybook. Don't air so much feed tape. Connect events to your community. Send a reporter, not just a camera, and your audience will stay engaged.

Unfortunately local news is moving in the opposite direction. Even sending a reporter out to cover a breaking story or an event from the daybook has become the exception rather than the rule: in 1998 these two cate-

gories accounted for 62 percent of all stories; now they account for just 37 percent. The most common story format now is the anchor voiceover, averaging 29 seconds. Four years ago anchor voiceovers made up 9 percent of all stories; that figure has now leaped to 29 percent.

There are other signs that enterprise is declining. Satellite downloads have risen to 23 percent of all stories, up from 14 percent in 1998. Original investigations, tough interviews, and even reports on other people's investigations have nearly disappeared, especially on late-night newscasts.

Is there a silver lining? Yes. When stations did stories with original reporting, over the past four years their stories scored increasingly higher for relevance to the local audience. Stations know how to do work that viewers care about when they have the time and resources to do it.

COVER MORE OF THE COMMUNITY

Newscasts that air more locally relevant stories are significantly more likely to hold onto or attract a larger audience than the preceding program. Statistically, producing important local stories can add 1 percent to the audience lead-in retention rate.

The statistical correlation here was strong. It didn't apply to ratings and share, but making stories locally relevant clearly helps keep lead-in audience.

Does this mean local stations should do only local news? Hardly. But it means that there is clearly a right and wrong way to do national and regional news that will build audience.

While it may surprise some broadcasters, the right way is to “localize” national issues by finding community examples, getting local comment and clarifying the issue's local impact: How does President Bush's “Leave No Child Behind” education bill affect the community?

The wrong way is to find stories that aren't necessarily significant from a civics standpoint but may contribute to the “water cooler” discussion at the office the next day — the Robert Blake murder case, say, or the San Francisco dog mauling trial. These stories, the thinking goes, are so fascinating that they require no localizing.

The data clearly show that the “water cooler” approach — doing more stories that have buzz factor — doesn't work.

Unfortunately, that approach dominates. Stations today are three times more likely to report national stories without a local context (13 percent of all stories) than they are to report national stories with an explanation of the local consequences (4 percent). The Blake case and the dog mauling trial were among the biggest “buzz” stories in the 2002 study. That type of reporting loses viewers.

Some news directors apparently have reached the same conclusion. One news director told our survey that more “community impact” is his strategy for improving ratings. Placing “emphasis on issues affecting the community,” wrote another. “It may sound cliché but our previous management got away from that and our ratings took a turn for the worse.”

Last year, using benchmarking, we also found that stations with better ratings, share, demographic, and lead-in trends were more likely to air a wider range of topics in their newscasts. That still holds true with the fifth year of data. However, the pattern was not reinforced by the regression analysis. We cannot show statistically that adding more topics to a newscast will itself help add viewership.

But the statistical analysis did find something else. Stations that air the most highly substantive stories — those that focus on ideas, issues, or policy, or investigate public malfeasance — are significantly more likely to retain their lead-in audience.

This doesn't mean you should just air more political stories. Rather, it relates to how you cover your community. Look for the long-lasting impact and deeper issues in stories. Don't be afraid to investigate the powers that be. The audience pays attention.

AIR MORE LONG STORIES

Every year of the study, we've found that successful stations were more likely to air longer stories.

On average, for example, the stories

on stations with better demographic and lead-in trends are five seconds longer.

Now the case for longer stories is further confirmed by the more rigorous statistical analysis.

Even though fast pacing is assumed to attract viewers, stations that air more long stories are likely to improve their demographic trends by 4 percent.

Put another way, viewers like stories they can sink their teeth into.

Why? Longer stories tend to contain more points of view, involve longer soundbites, show viewers more pictures, go more places, get into more detail, and give viewers more time to comprehend their points.

Rather than throwing facts at people, long stories can tell a tale.

SOURCE STORIES BETTER

Viewers notice sources.

Last year we found that stations with successful viewership trends were less likely to air stories citing anonymous sources or no sources at all. They were also more likely to air stories with multiple sources and to feature sources with higher levels of expertise.

With the fifth year of data added, this finding is still true, though the margin of difference shrank slightly.

In addition, this year's more refined statistical analysis shows that viewers particularly like hearing from people who know what they're talking about. Stations that relied on more authoritative sources in stories improved their hold on their lead-in audience by 10 percent.

Similarly, stations that avoid unattributed or unsourced stories improve audience retention and build key demographics.

We measured the authority of sources by noting their level of expertise for a given story — from an appropriate “expert,” to a participant, to citing no source at all. Thus a doctor with the right specialty is an expert in a medical story. A commuter may be the expert for a story on traffic congestion.

There is plenty of room for improvement here, as well as reason for optimism.

In the first four years of our study, only 16 percent of the stories included comments from an appropriate “expert.”

This year, however, the use of experts rose to 22 percent. Some of this increase can be attributed to the number of stories about the war in Afghanistan, a campaign reported largely through on-camera briefings by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others with military expertise.

The challenge is finding ways to get more authoritative sources into the kind of stories local news does more often — not just Pentagon press briefings.

HIRE MORE REPORTERS AND GIVE THEM MORE TIME

Stations that invest their money in more people do better.

This finding has been reinforced in several ways. Three years ago we discovered that stations putting more of their budget toward staff, and less toward equipment, had better ratings trends. Last year, we made a related discovery, that stations that give people more time to work on stories have better ratings trends.

This year we again found evidence that giving the reporter more time helps — in both ratings and share. The most successful stations assigned an average of 1.5 or fewer stories to reporters each day, while the average overall was 1.8.

We have another new finding related to budgeting. Stations that had not asked reporters to do multiple versions of their stories this year and were spending more on production staff were also having more commercial success. On average, they were one full point higher on the five-point scales used to measure rating and share. •

Tom Rosenstiel is director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. 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.

THE PEJ LOCAL NEWS STUDY

2002

7,423 stories

530 newscasts

53 stations

17 markets

FIVE YEARS

33,871 stories

2,420 newscasts

242 stations

(154, plus repeated stations)

50 of nation's 210 markets

Reaching 60% of

U.S. population

AFTER 9/11, HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

BY WALLY DEAN
AND LEE ANN BRADY

How was local television news changed by September 11 — the moment American foreign policy and the specter of terrorism became a local story?

Not even the attack on America and the war on terrorism could wrench local TV news from “live, local and late-breaking” coverage of carnage, crime and accidents.

Local newscasts did begin to cover more of the world in 2002, but only a little more. And to make room for that coverage of defense and foreign affairs, local TV chipped away at the coverage of everything but crime and disaster. In the 2002 local TV news study, a quarter (26 percent) of all stories were devoted to crime, law and the courts, the most of any single year since 1998, when we began monitoring local television news.

The events and aftermath of September 11 did force local TV stations to become more international. Over the first four years of the study, foreign affairs and defense amounted to just 4 percent of stories. This year, coverage of those topics more than doubled to 9 percent, making it the third-most-reported subject.

Yet that figure may overstate how much local TV news really changed. Half of our study occurred in early March, during the heaviest fighting of the Afghanistan war. That week, coverage of the terrorism war at home and abroad swelled to 8 percent of all stories. In late April-early May, the second week of the study, coverage of the war on terrorism had dropped to 2 percent of all stories.

Most of this coverage, moreover, consisted largely of cut-and-paste stories from satellite feed footage (97 percent), rather than using local expertise to connect these issues to the community.

This is predictable with regard to the war abroad, given Pentagon restrictions and financial pressures. But one might have expected stations to staff the domestic war on terrorism, especially given local TV's reliance on the public safety community for news.

Instead, when it came to the war at home — from airport baggage checks to

the threat of bioterrorism — stations did relatively little reporting (just 1 percent of the stories), and hardly any of that involved much enterprise. Only 12 percent of all stories about homeland security were based on what would generally be considered enterprise reporting. The rest was coverage of “threats” picked up from police and fire scanners, news conferences, daybooks, or official press releases.

Indeed, there was as much coverage of missing children, especially the Florida disappearance of Rilya Wilson, as there was of local homeland defense (1 percent each) — and this was before the media glare focused on missing children in July and August.

What didn't get on the air was notable. Issues directly affecting the lives of huge numbers of viewers got even less attention than usual. Some topics became almost extinct, including education and transportation issues (2 percent each). Consider a few statistics from the 7,423 stories we studied in 2002:

- Only nine stories about aging and Social Security.
- Thirteen stories about welfare and poverty.
- Fifteen stories about the arts.
- Thirty-three stories about race.

Coverage of social issues was down from the average of the first four years, as was the percentage of stories about civilization and culture. Despite a languishing

economy, a moribund stock market, and a series of accounting scandals that rocked public confidence, economic/business news fell to the lowest level in the study's history: to 7 percent of stories.

Stories about the job market, perhaps reflecting the scores of layoff announcements, increased, but still amounted to just 1 percent of the total. Put another way, coverage of the effects of the recession rose while coverage of the causes declined.

Reporting on politics, government and public policy (9 percent) did not increase, despite the political dimension of the war on terrorism. Consumer and health news held at 6 percent of all stories even though health reports and consumer recalls were the top two topics in which stations exhibited enterprise.

Much of the enterprise work is done by reporters assigned to specific beats. According to our survey of news directors, three-quarters of local newsrooms have assigned beats. Among those beats, medicine/health reporters were most common (42 percent) followed by crime or court beats (38 percent), education (37 percent), investigative (25 percent), consumer news (24 percent), and government/politics (24 percent).

With all those beats, why are newscasts still so full of crime news? Apparently the reflex to cover the “live, local and late-breaking” — usually crime — is so strong that it

commands most newsroom resources not specifically earmarked for other subjects.

Indeed, the actions of cops, criminals, suspects, crime victims, family members, and lawyers made up 27 percent of all stories.

And nothing was on for very long. More than two-thirds (67 percent) of the stories ran a minute or less, 40 percent thirty seconds or less.

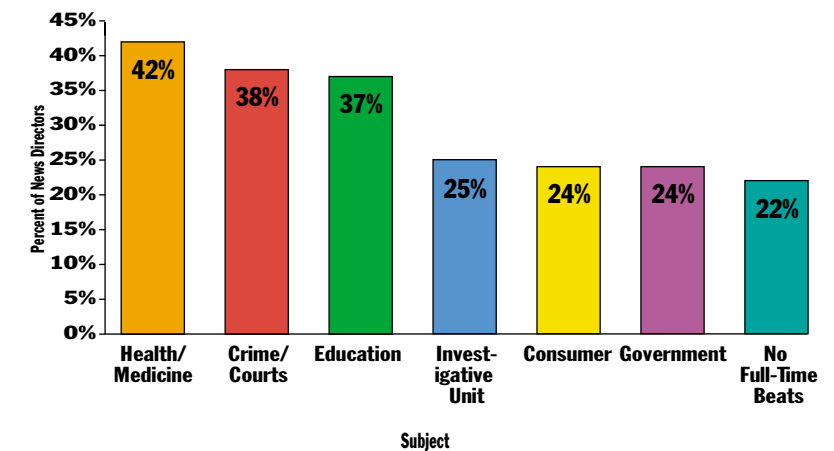
Television at its best can take us to places we cannot go ourselves, be it the corridors of power or the mountains of Afghanistan, and it can connect those places to our lives. But local TV news continues instead to be a surrogate rubbernecker, taking us to crime scenes, murder trials, and traffic accidents, where we can do little but gawk.

Not even a generation-defining event like September 11 has changed that. •

Wally Dean is director of broadcast training for the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Lee Ann Brady is senior project director at Princeton Survey Research Associates.

BEAT REPORTING IN LOCAL TELEVISION

Percentage of News Directors Reporting Specific Full-Time Beats, by Subject



HOW STRONG IS THE CASE FOR QUALITY?

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appears that quality works, though the statistical relationship is not quite as strong as for lead-in. Stations with the best demographic trends — more of that key 18-to-54 audience — averaged a solid “B” for quality. The stations with the worst trends managed only a “C.”

What if you tie these measurements together? We created a Viewership Index by combining two years of ratings data with the new measurements of audience retention and demographics (adding share tends to skew the results since ratings and share measure similar numbers). Once again, we found what academic researchers call a statistically significant relationship between quality and commercial success.

In other words, quality seems to help across the board. While many factors influence viewership — from anchor chemistry to promos and teasers — quality journalism is not just incidental. It's actually good business. Unfortunately, the conventional wisdom is

tempting local newsrooms in a different direction. The success of new genre shows like *Survivor* has reinforced the sense that younger viewers are turned off by traditional programming and want something different.

In news, one response has been to create broadcasts that are “fast-paced” and “lifestyle-oriented.” Take, for example, the marketing campaign for *The Daily Buzz*, a syndicated morning news program that premiered in the fall of 2002. It touted the new entry by declaring that its audience would skew younger than the morning shows on the Big Three networks. “This show will be edgier and funnier, while providing news content that is relevant to the younger generation,” one news executive declared in a company press release.

But there are few successful examples of this “edgier” approach to TV news connecting with younger viewers. We studied one example, WAMI in Miami, in 1999, and noted that it

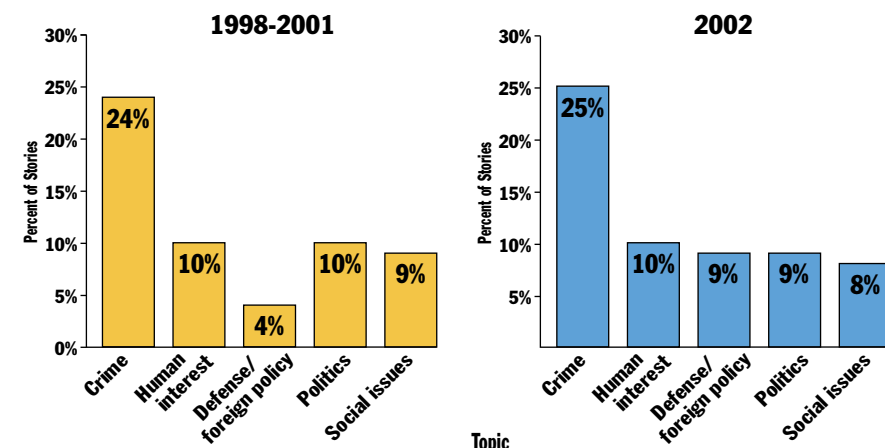
suffered from “too many out-of-town feeds, poor sourcing, and low community relevance.” WAMI's newscast was later shut down after less than three years on the air.

The evidence suggests that younger people want the same thing most viewers do — and that, believe it or not, is quality.

All this should be reason for optimism. Content is the one thing news directors can control. The first challenge is to believe the hard numbers, not the mythology. The second challenge is to learn how to produce more quality with fewer resources. If that doesn't happen — and happen soon — local TV news may be in more danger than newspapers of becoming irrelevant. It is certainly losing more audience, and losing it faster. •

Atiba Pertilla is a research associate at PEJ. Todd Belt is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Southern California.

MOST POPULAR TOPICS BEFORE AND AFTER SEPTEMBER 11



WHO'S BEST IN 17 CITIES?

LOCAL TV NEWS

Quality Grade	Station	Quality score	Network Affiliation	Average Points per Story	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	Viewpoints	Local Relevance	Lead-in Retention	Comments	Ratings Trend	
ALBUQUERQUE 10PM															
D	KOB	286.49	NBC	20.43	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+12%	Best station in worst market. Score down from 1998, but market has fallen further.	###
D	KRQE	284.54	NBC	21.24	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-18%	A mixed bag. Awful on enterprise, but presented a mix of opinions.	###
D	KOAT	264.40	ABC	19.82	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+31%	A cellar dweller. 52nd out of 53 stations. Average or below in every category.	/
BATON ROUGE 6PM															
B	WAFB	398.40	NBC	22.78	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+21%	Solid "B." A journeyman, did everything well enough, but didn't excel at anything.	###
B	WBRZ	375.69	ABC	22.48	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+14%	Virtually even with WAFB. Great at local relevance. Fell down on enterprise.	##
BOSTON 6PM															
A	WHDH	463.10	NBC	25.28	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+5%	Once a "D" now best in study. Scored well on almost everything — especially enterprise.	###
A	WCVB	459.00	ABC	26.02	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+9%	Second in study, best per-story score. Big step up from 2000. Needs more enterprise.	###
A	WBZ	446.52	NBC	24.36	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+41%	No longer best in Boston but still good. Led the march back to quality in town.	###
CHICAGO 10PM															
B	WLS	379.27	ABC	21.93	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+28%	"B" tops Chicago thanks to local relevance. But woeful enterprise, like entire market.	###
B	WMAQ	355.54	NBC	21.33	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-12%	"Springer" station now a solid "B." Good sourcing, but needs more localism.	###
B	WBBM	353.26	NBC	21.65	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-25%	CBS O & O in for more tinkering. Fair quality but where's the sourcing?	##
COLUMBIA, SC 6PM															
A	WIS	403.52	NBC	21.28	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+175%	Longtime leader. Big staff, serious approach but crime-heavy.	/
B	WLTX	375.28	NBC	21.24	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+3%	Gannett dollars boosted reach and ratings. But 40 percent canned events with no reporter.	###
B	WOLO	364.28	ABC	20.60	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+51%	Since study, newsroom cut to three reporters. Shows now produced in another state.	###

CHART KEY

LEAD-IN 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 ● Lowest score

Quality Grade	Station	Quality score	Network Affiliation	Average Points per Story	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	Viewpoints	Local Relevance	Lead-in Retention	Comments	Ratings Trend	
DENVER 10PM															
B	KCNC	365.83	NBC	21.77	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+4%	Best in disappointing market. Needs better enterprise, sourcing, localism.	###
C	KUSA	338.81	NBC	21.08	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+18%	Good on politics, localizing. But no enterprise, too many one-sided stories.	/
F	KMGH	251.58	ABC	20.37	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-32%	Worst in study. Crime, disasters, celebrities. Eyewitness News lives.	###
GRAND RAPIDS 6PM															
A	WOOD	453.59	NBC	24.16	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+51%	Third-best in study. Long stories, very local, strong investigative. But crime-heavy.	##
B	WZZM	393.18	ABC	21.91	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+59%	High "B." Very local and gets both sides. But 61 percent of stories are canned events.	##
B	WWMT	372.53	NBC	21.10	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+55%	Scanner driven. Lots of everyday incidents. If not breaking, a press conference.	##
HONOLULU 10PM															
A	KHON	413.53	FOX	23.29	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+91%	Top 10 station. Good story choices, sourcing. Poor enterprise. News director just fired.	###
A	KGMB	411.76	NBC	24.50	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-15%	In duopoly with rival KHON. Story by story, even better but fewer topics.	##
B	KHNL	388.17	NBC	20.69	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-39%	Live, local and late breaking in market not obsessed with crime. Least issues.	###
B	KITV	356.64	ABC	22.71	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+7%	Lots of experts. Could have done better with broader topic range. Ratings fading fast.	/
HOUSTON 10PM															
B	KHOU	372.25	NBC	22.79	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+3%	Avoided everyday crime. Good at getting both sides, but many unnamed sources.	###
B	KTRK	362.66	ABC	23.09	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+10%	Highest story scores in city. Strong investigative. Needed wider story selection.	/
C	KPRC	309.09	NBC	21.45	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-5%	Low "C." Good at idea stories, science/tech. Weak sourcing and enterprise hurt.	###
KANSAS CITY 10PM															
B	KMBC	400.39	ABC	23.92	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+25%	Missed "A" by half point. Strong story by story. Solid at everything, lacks enterprise.	###
B	KSHB	366.43	NBC	21.85	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	-38%	Decent station. Focuses on ideas, avoids crime. Needs better sourcing, localism.	###
C	WDAF	331.39	FOX	21.08	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+1%	"C" station hurt by lack of enterprise, weak sourcing, and one-sided stories.	###
C	KCTV	328.30	NBC	21.44	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+5%	Heavy on crime, disasters, one-sided stories, and lack of enterprise.	##
LAS VEGAS 11PM															
B	KLAS	361.13	NBC	22.99	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+23%	Low "B." Stories not bad, but topic range narrow. Forty percent crime stories.	###
C	KTNV	341.87	ABC	22.95	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+2%	High "C." Skilled reporters, but narrow story selection and lack of enterprise hurt.	##
D	KVBC	269.22	NBC	20.51	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	+11%	Classic tabloid. Triple national average on celebrities and feeds. Poor sourcing.	###

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

Comparing Local News in English and Spanish

BY LAURIEN ALEXANDRE AND HENRIK REHBINDER

It's the mid-point of the 6:30 p.m. broadcast, time for the day's financial update on the local news. Co-anchor Eduardo Quezada of LA's KMEX fades into the background as a scroll-down list fills the screen.

The Mexican peso is up, Brazil's real is down, and so is Venezuela's bolivar. From Los Angeles to Miami, one of the nightly features of Spanish-language news is not the Dow but Latin America's currency prices.

The 35.5 million Hispanic people in the United States are the fastest-growing segment of our population, yet local Spanish-language television and the two networks that own most of the stations are largely invisible to the majority of Americans.

What is on Spanish-language TV news and how does it compare with and differ from the English-language variety?

To find answers, this year's local news study examined eight Spanish-language stations in the four largest Hispanic markets: Los Angeles, New York, Miami, and Houston. Two weeks of programs were analyzed — one sweeps, one non-sweeps — during the most popular time slot for news in each market.

In a multicultural media marketplace, Spanish-language local TV news is separate but essentially equal. It demonstrates similar news values and ranks with its English-language competitors in quality.

There are, however, differences, as traditions, resources, and demographic diversity both nurture and constrain news content.

Spanish-language local TV news is more populated by ordinary people, and filled with even more crime and victims, than English-language TV. It is more interested in homelands far away, if not the world in general. It believes immigration is a significant issue. And it is a more one-sided media world.

But it is also not monolithic. While stations differed only slightly by company — Telemundo vs. Univision — they differed rather dramatically by city.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT, WHAT'S NOT

Let's start with basics.

When it came to overall scores for quality, we found no significant difference between Spanish-language stations and English-language stations.

If you calculated a GPA for the two genres, neither would make the dean's list. In the markets where both English-language and Spanish-language stations were evaluated, on average, they all earned "C's."

In their average-ness, the two media worlds were quite comparable. Both the

Spanish and English newscasts aired similar numbers of stories and demonstrated a similar — and not particularly impressive — level of enterprise. For both, more than two-thirds of the stories came from pre-arranged events or satellite feeds from elsewhere.

As one gets into details, the distinctions become more pronounced.

One-fifth of Spanish-language stories cited three or more sources (20 percent) compared with only 15 percent in English.

Quality Grade	Station	Quality score	Network Affiliation	Average Points per Story	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	Viewpoints	Local Relevance	Lead-in Retention	Comments	Ratings Trend	
LOS ANGELES 11PM															
C	KCBS	322.53		22.55									-36%	Best in LA is faint praise. Gets both sides of story. But four in ten stories crime-related.	
C	KABC	314.97		21.24									-23%	Below national average in every category. Real lack of connection to community.	
C	KNBC	312.45		21.28									-24%	Station reneges on "police chase ban." Few issues. Sends cameras without reporters.	
MIAMI 11PM															
B	WTVJ	364.98		23.19									-21%	Lots of policy, social issues. Least crime in mayhem-heavy market.	
B	WSVN	360.57		21.61									-31%	Fox station is super-local, owns spot news. Lots of disaster and accident coverage.	
C	WPLG	341.03		22.68									-9%	Good on investigations and covering civic institutions. Too many unnamed sources.	
D	WFOR	290.98		21.27									-10%	Crime and irrelevant national news. I-team aims to be CSI, but mostly Miami Vice.	
NASHVILLE 10PM															
A	WTVF	407.61		22.12									+13%	Music City's best had broad topic range. A good watchdog, but loves pop culture.	
B	WKRN	379.80		21.97									+3%	Solid "B" with rising ratings. Good on sourcing, but too much police blotter work.	
D	WSMV	285.12		19.47									-1%	One of the study's worst. Awful on sourcing, loves feeds. Dropping ratings.	
NEW YORK 11PM															
B	WNBC	366.12		21.57									-19%	"B" is up from 2001. Good on issues, ideas. Weak enterprise, like Big Apple as a whole.	
C	WABC	341.53		21.46									-4%	Lost news director to WNBC. Score similar to 2001. Good opinion mix, but likes feeds.	
C	WCBS	329.47		20.69									-33%	Started news director musical chairs by grabbing from WNBC. Loves everyday crime.	
SACRAMENTO 5PM															
A	KCRA	451.90		25.04									+47%	Powerhouse station just replaced news director. Quality, but in transition?	
A	KOVR	409.44		22.78									+1%	Good station could reduce feeds. Feeble enterprise but lots of news you can use.	
B	KXTV	399.81		23.61									+1%	Good sourcing. Covers social issues, avoids crime. But too many daybook stories.	
SIOUX FALLS 10PM															
A	KELO	444.78		23.05									+151%	Improvement over 2000 for South Dakota institution. Little crime, good opinion mix.	
A	KSFY	419.37		22.50									+10%	Another big jump over 2000. Top station hurt by celebrity focus, lack of enterprise.	
C	KDLT	325.86		20.08									-59%	"C" station burned through two news directors in past year. Topic range prevented lower score.	

SPANISH-LANGUAGE NEWS IN 4 CITIES

Quality Grade	Station	Quality score	Network Affiliation	Average Points per Story	Topic Range	Focus	Enterprise	Expertise	No. of Sources	Viewpoints	Local Relevance
HOUSTON 10PM											
C	KTMD	317.08		20.25							
F	KXLN	235.91		19.64							
LOS ANGELES 6PM											
C	KVEA	344.15		22.33							
B	KMEX	360.05		22.95							
MIAMI 6PM											
A	WSCV	410.07		22.43							
A	WLTW	422.67		23.67							
NEW YORK 6PM											
B	WNJU	376.01		23.08							
A	WXTV	405.84		22.43							

On the other hand, Spanish-language stories were five times more likely than English-language counterparts to have no sources at all, 21 percent to 4 percent.

Spanish-language TV ran more long stories — 25 percent of pieces were two minutes or longer, versus 19 percent in English — but it also tended to tell one side of a story. Three out of ten stories in Spanish presented just one opinion, compared to 20 percent in English. And only one story in ten offered a substantial mix of opinions, half as many as in English.

Nowhere were the differences more apparent than in the treatment of certain topics, especially crime, immigration, and Latin America.

MAYHEM IN SPANISH

Crime is a mainstay of local TV news in both worlds, but even more so in Spanish. One in three Spanish stories was devoted to crime (34 percent), notably higher than in English (26 percent).

What's more, the protagonists of the crime story are different, depending on the language. In Spanish, the "main actors" were criminals or victims (27 percent), twice as often as in English-language local TV (13 percent).

In English-language news, the main person featured was almost twice as likely to be a lawyer or law enforcement officer, 14 percent, versus 7 percent. And in the Spanish-language version, the cops were often the bad guys.

The two-week sample under review provided an extraordinary number of stories about police abuse: the police beating a Latino in Baytown, Texas, the re-broadcast of footage of an Ohio policeman pummeling an unidentified woman, and a week-long trial of a New York cop found guilty of driving drunk and killing a pregnant Latina mother and her toddler. There was also a Dominican epileptic dying inexplicably at the hands of the NYPD.



COTIZACIONES	
LUNES 4 DE MARZO	
MEXICO	9.07
EL SALVADOR	8.74
GUATEMALA	7.92
HONDURAS	16.10
NICARAGUA	13.96
COLOMBIA	2292.50

Instead of reports on the Dow from Wall Street, most Spanish-language stations aired the latest currency figures from countries in Latin America.

IMMIGRATION: WHEN SEPARATE IS NOT EQUAL

The two universes were most different when covering immigration. In the Hispanic world, immigrants play an important role in news stories and the community at large — they work and raise families, and their views are solicited.

On English TV news, immigrants don't even have walk-on parts. Less than half of one percent of all stories in the Anglo media were about immigration. By contrast, almost a tenth of Spanish-language stories were tied to immigration issues (9 percent).

Immigration stories also depicted another feature of the Spanish-language TV news: It differs markedly from city to city.

Immigration was a huge story in Los Angeles (16 percent of all stories), less so in Houston (8 percent), but not nearly so important to broadcasters in Miami (5 percent) or New York (5 percent) where the immigrant populations have generally been here longer.

In many stories, immigration was a subplot. For instance, both New York Spanish-language stations ran a multi-day story on a Mexican boy who was killed on city streets by a hit-and-run driver — no doubt a serious crime story. But the grieving father could not accompany his own son's body back home because he was poor and undocumented. This twist of fate turned an everyday crime into a quintessential immigration story.

FOCUS ON SOUTH OF THE BORDER

Spanish-language TV also has a different approach to covering the rest of the world than English-language news.

Foreign officials and foreign governments were twice as likely to be protagonists in Spanish-language stories (5 percent) than in English-language (2 percent). Most Spanish-language stations in the study aired a regular, in many cases nightly, roundup of Latin American news.

In total, 6 percent of their stories were about news from the homelands of immigrants, led by Cuba, then Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia.

But this highlights another difference. Spanish and English stations carried comparable levels of foreign affairs and defense news (8 percent and 9 percent respectively). But the focus in Spanish was on Latin America. The focus in English was on U.S. foreign policy.

LOCAL FLAVOR IN LOCAL NEWS

Generally speaking, the two networks, Univision and Telemundo, scored similarly on most indicators of program quality. The more interesting differences were found at the market level. Local Spanish-language news reflected the diversity of its different Spanish-speaking audiences and had a local flavor.

MIAMI

The city's Hispanic population is heavily Cuban, highly educated, solidly middle class, politically conservative, and media-savvy.

Here, the flavor was Caribbean, and the dominant flavor was decidedly Cuban. One hundred percent of the stories about Cuba in our study aired in Miami.

Both Fidel Castro's mental state and the machinery of the Cuban state were local news. Another distinctly Cuban characteristic was that neither station aired a single soccer score or re-played (in slow motion and from multiple angles) a single

goal — so common a feature on Spanish-language news elsewhere. (The Cuban game is baseball, not soccer.)

HOUSTON

Houston's Hispanic population is dominated by people of Mexican origin and now has a growing and sizable population of Central Americans. The audience is more heterogeneous, significantly poorer and less educated than in Miami. Many are recent immigrants.

Neither Telemundo's KTMD nor Univision's KXLN aired news programs that evinced substantial resources, tremendous initiative, or high news quality. Both aired more and shorter stories per broadcast than their English-language counterparts.

In a lackluster media market, the two Spanish stations went from bad to worse. Telemundo turned scarcity to service, however, posting still graphics of job listings in the community. Univision's KXLN, in contrast, turned to crime, using computer-generated street maps to enliven its inordinately high number of crime stories (a staggering 48 percent).

NEW YORK

New York's cosmopolitanism showed a Latin flair in its Spanish-language news. For example, the World Trade Center stories on both stations tended to focus on the Hispanic victims of 9/11. Another example was the multi-day coverage of labor strife in a textile factory, exploring its connection to clothes worn by the Colombian music sensation Shakira.

Broadcasting from the nation's financial capital, these were the only Spanish-language stations studied that carried the Dow Jones averages.

Both were solid stations that compared evenly with their English-language rivals.

Univision's WXTV earned high marks for its solid reporting, excellent use of expert sources, and refusal to cave in to sensa-



New York's WNJU focused on a father wishing to take his dead son's body home to Mexico but lacking the necessary immigration documents.

report on the human side of border crossing.

The Catholic Church sex scandal was also big news in LA, much bigger than in other markets. Six percent of all LA stories were about the Church scandal, including allegations of abuse against local priests and complaints against the area's controversial archbishop. As a comparison, only 1 percent of Miami's stories were about the scandal.

In this highly competitive town, Univision's KMEX earned a "B," higher than any other station — Spanish or English — in Los Angeles. It aired more relatively long stories than any other station (28 percent were over two minutes) and made good use of expert sources.

Telemundo's WNJU earned respectable marks and had lots of solid reporting. But it was also the station that had a multi-day exploration into the lives of New York's Puerto Rican strippers that was basically an excuse to broadcast bump-and-grind footage, and it aired a pabulum piece on the female characters of a popular telenovela (soap opera).

LOS ANGELES

The County of Los Angeles has the largest Latino population in the country, and while the numbers of Central and South Americans are vast, the population is still dominated by those of Mexican origin (over 90 percent).

Border stories, like immigration, were big. And fully eight in ten of all Spanish-language stories about Mexico were broadcast by LA stations. Telemundo's flagship KVEA aired a compelling multi-part investigative

report on the human side of border crossing. The Catholic Church sex scandal was also big news in LA, much bigger than in other markets. Six percent of all LA stories were about the Church scandal, including allegations of abuse against local priests and complaints against the area's controversial archbishop. As a comparison, only 1 percent of Miami's stories were about the scandal.

Confirmation that Spanish-language local TV news is as good — and bad — as its English-language counterparts probably shouldn't surprise anyone. But given the ethnic media's influence, and the lack of attention these stations receive from academics and TV critics, the finding is news. Spanish-language TV has things it can teach the rest of the media even as it poses an increasing economic challenge to them. •

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"Hispanic" and "Latino" encompass people of many different backgrounds. The 2000 Census put the Hispanic population at 35.5 million, nearly 60 percent of Mexican descent. The next largest single group, Puerto Ricans, are just under 10 percent. Central and South Americans are close to 30 percent, and Cubans and Dominicans account for less than 5 percent each. Of course, the proportions vary by city.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM DESPITE THE ODDS

Watchdog Reporting Continues to Decline

BY MARION JUST, ROSALIND LEVINE, AND KATHLEEN REGAN

Even in difficult times, most local news stations are still doing investigative reporting, and half of those doing it say they are willing to investigate their sponsors, according to our annual survey of news directors.

Fully 75 percent of newsrooms say they do investigative reporting, the survey of 103 newsrooms from around the country found. The percentage of stations with

full-time investigative units is much smaller, just 25 percent.

Yet for all this, only 2 percent of stories in our local news study this year were labeled by stations themselves as investigative. And only half of those, just 1 percent, were original station-initiated investigations.

Noteworthy, too, is that 25 percent of stations acknowledged that they did no investigative work whatsoever.

Over the five years of our study, in fact, the level of original watchdog reporting has steadily declined, amounting this year to less than

one of every 150 stories. In 1998, one of every sixty stories was a station-initiated investigation. Serious investigative work takes resources and time, two things news directors increasingly say are in short supply.

Most often, news directors said, their investigative reporting focused on malfeasance or scandal related to government, consumers, or health care.

But the scope of the stories varied greatly. Some newsrooms took on major investigations with national implications, such as a border station that showed it was "easier to enter

BRANDING LITE

BY WALLY DEAN

In television journalism, the terms "Investigative Reporting" and "Breaking News" were developed to alert the public that something important and unusual was coming.

In an era when "branding" has become both a buzzword and a corporate mandate, however, some local TV stations now regularly apply those labels to the everyday and even the trivial. In doing so, they undermine the credibility they are trying to build, and cheapen the meaning of investigative reporting and breaking news for everyone else.

The problem may be biggest in the area of breaking news. Amid 24-hour cable and the news crawl, stories journalists once labeled "Developing Story" are now "Breaking News." Indeed, the data show that stations more often give major "breaking news" treatment to events that are, in fact, commonplace.

In this year's study, when dealing with spontaneous news events — as opposed to "daybook" stories — reporters were almost three times more likely to be on-scene at an everyday incident (28 percent), like a car accident, as they were to be covering significant breaking events (10 percent), such as a sniper shooting.

And for all that breaking news has become a marketing brand for stations and a priority for their newsrooms, genuine breaking news — covering an unplanned event as it unfolds — accounts for a tiny percentage of news content, just 2 percent of stories. That amounts to one story a week.

A similar kind of hyperbole is evident, though less common, in investigative reporting.

While three quarters of news directors say they do investigative

work, a significant number of newsrooms affix the label "investigative" to such pressing public dangers as mold and dog food.

A look at station Web sites reveals that one newsroom dispatched its I-Team to report on "The cold, hard, facts about soft serve yogurt," and "A camera that can see through clothes." At another station, a five-person I-Team churned out stories on "Spray-on Makeup," "Hair Cloning," and "Tongue Piercing."

Sometimes, the "investigative" label was applied to spot news simply because a station sent a reporter from its investigative unit to cover it. One station's Web site, for instance, boasts how its "Investigative Reporter" revealed "Twelve arrested at 'Swingers Bar'" and "Pitbull bites boy's diaper, kills his dog."

This is branding lite.

The research team felt that the mislabeling of the term "investigative" is the significant exception in local TV news rather than the rule. A review of the investigative work described by news directors in the survey data and a review of those stations' Web sites suggest that serious investigative work outweighed the faux by better than two to one.

But even the best journalists are affected by the false branding efforts of a few.

Real breaking news refers to something important happening right now. Genuine investigative journalism adds a dimension beyond disclosure; it engages the public to come to judgment about something that the news organization feels may be wrong, or at least important and needing scrutiny.

Various research studies confirm over and over that viewers don't like being misled and manipulated. Raising alarms in the name of the commonplace makes local TV the boy who cried wolf. Sooner, rather than later, people stop watching.

Wally Dean is director of broadcast training for the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

the U.S. illegally since September 11" than it was before the attack.

Other reports were more local, but nevertheless important: "corruption in sheriff's office," and "downtown redevelopment budget problems."

And about a third of the reports struck researchers as ranging from trivial to merely titillating: "recycling old hard drives" or "Investigation of women illegally injecting silicone at parties."

Nonetheless, the figures suggest that even in the face of economic contraction, many local news stations remained committed to investigative journalism, however they defined it. Fully 75 percent of stations that experienced budget cuts this year still did what they described as "investigative" work. That was the same figure as stations whose budgets were unchanged or increased.

Aside from budget-cutting, pressure in newsrooms also comes from sales departments and sponsors.

We know from last year's survey that pressure from sponsors is omnipresent, though often unacknowledged. The level of sponsor interference that news directors said they experienced this year was pretty much the same as last year — it exists in more than half of all newsrooms.

As one news director put it: "Same — Same as ever. Station sales trying to make a buck."

In all, 17 percent of news directors say that sponsors have discouraged them from pursuing stories (compared to 18 percent last year), and 54 percent have been pressured to cover stories about sponsors, up slightly from 47 percent last year.

Many news directors continue to insist that this pressure from sponsors is ineffective: "Sponsor or advertiser tries to get [sto-

ries] killed. Does not happen!"

But news directors also acknowledge that sponsors sometimes do prevail. "Story about lawsuit filed against large advertiser was killed by G.M.," one news director unhappily reported. Another said management had "killed investigation into cell phone costs because our #1 advertiser was beaten by rival cell companies on price."

And still other news directors say that even when they have backing from management, sponsor pressure can have a chilling effect on reporters.

As one news director explained: "A sales person went to the reporter and pressured him about the story he was covering. The sales manager and I both spoke to the salesperson and explained that this was unacceptable. The bottom line is even though the reporter covered the story the way he wanted to in the first place, he still felt compromised."

Perhaps the ultimate test of a station's commitment to the watchdog principle is whether it would investigate its own sponsors. Half of the stations in the survey that reported doing investigative work said they had turned their spotlight on advertisers.

"[Our manager's] philosophy is if the story is legitimate we'll take the heat," said one news director.

Half of the sponsor investigations described in the survey involved car dealerships, and about half of those resulted in economic repercussions for the station. One news director wrote that after his station did a story about a case of fraud, "The dealership canceled annual advertising with the station worth \$1 million (it took 6 years for them to return)."

On the other hand, half the investigations of car dealerships did not result in sponsors' pulling advertising.

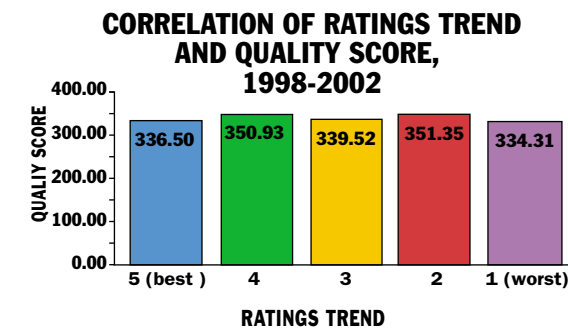
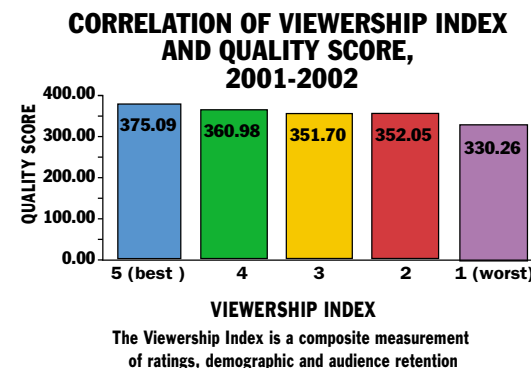
Indeed, news directors reported that their investigations of other kinds of sponsors more often resulted in economic retaliation. One news director compared a car dealer and a furniture store he had investigated. "We worked with car dealer to satisfy his customer," he reported. "Furniture store quit advertising for one year."

Most news directors whose newsrooms did investigative work said their general managers were supportive, even in the face of lawsuits. As one explained: "My G.M. lets me do news. She is reasonable about clients we may anger. All she asks is to be kept informed."

But investigating sponsors can strain relations with management even when the newsroom wins. One news director described the situation as "sensitive." Another reported: "Never interference — but there have been a few moments of angst as the N.D. tells the GM and sales manager about the story we're doing on a client."

In the end, it appears that investigative reporting remains too important a part of a local news station's franchise — and its public obligation — to abandon. As one news director told us: "We are clear on our mission and who we are — we do stories based on that and nothing else." Another had this advice for success: "Cover the news — be aggressive. It isn't brain surgery." •

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METHODOLOGY

The local television news project was begun in 1998 in order to study the relationship between content and viewership. Using criteria established by a team of industry professionals, we created measurements for analyzing these newscasts according to basic variables of quality and comparing those to accepted measurements of commercial success. Newscasts are studied in a market's highest-rated time slot for news, and the sample has remained the same throughout — two weeks of half-hour newscasts, one week during sweeps and one week during the regular season. The numbers have added up. In the past five years, we have studied more than 33,000 stories, gathering information on at least thirty separate variables for each — more than 1,000,000 pieces of data in all.

The study this year included a content analysis of broadcast news programs in seventeen cities, comprising fifty-three English-language stations and eight Spanish-language stations. Markets were selected to ensure both regional and market-size diversity. Newscasts were selected on the basis of the most popular time slot for news in each market and, in the case of markets where Spanish-language news programs were analyzed, on the basis of the most popular time slot for news in each language individually. Taping occurred during a March non-sweeps week and an April-May sweeps week. The final dataset comprised 9,173 stories, including 7,423 English-language stories, 1,094 Spanish-language stories, and a control sample of 656 stories in both English and Spanish. Content analysis was performed using standardized codebooks containing the criteria established by the project design team, and the results were used to assign quality scores and grades.

For Spanish-language stations, the Community Relevance variable was adjusted to reflect the needs and interests of the target audience. Addi-

tional codes were added to give appropriate weight to stories presenting information of particular importance to the local Spanish-speaking community, i.e., stories that provided information about either local Hispanic/Latino communities, or Spanish-language homelands.

Testing performed to measure uniform coding showed that daily scores were reliable within +/-0.49 points per day for all broadcasts. Results for Spanish-language broadcasts were within the intercoder performance parameters established over the five years of this study.

Ratings, share, audience retention and demographic data were generated by an independent researcher using Nielsen Station Index data for the newscasts studied in the twelve sweeps-period ratings books from February 1999 to November 2001 (February 2002 ratings information was not used to avoid viewership skewing effects of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City). Prior PEJ studies referred to in these articles used similar data.

This year's study also included a national mail survey of news directors, conducted between June and August 2002. A random sample of 233 news directors was selected from an enumerated list of broadcast stations that produce local news. One hundred three news directors completed the surveys, for a response rate of 44 percent. The sample of 103 news directors represents more than 15 percent of all stations producing local news. Since the survey respondents come from more than half of the local news markets throughout the country, the results are unweighted by market size. The news directors' survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent, which means that if we were to draw 100 different random samples the same way that we did in this instance, the results in 95 of those samples would not differ more than 5 percent either way from the results reported here. •

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 editor. Atiba Pertilla coordinated the research. Wally Dean, the director of broadcast training for the Committee of Concerned Journalists, assisted in the writing and editing. Dante Chinni and Matt Carlson were the project researchers. Carl Gottlieb, now managing editor for the Sinclair Broadcast Group, supervised the study from 1998 through 2001.

The scholar team that developed the methodology was led by Marion Just, Ph.D., Professor of political science at Wellesley College, and Lee Ann Brady of Princeton Survey Research Associates. It also included 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.

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 trend measurements and analyzed the Nielsen Media Research data for ratings, share, demographics and audience retention. Professor Just created the models and did the regression analyses used to develop the best-practices recommendations. Rosalind Levine and Kathy Regan, with Christine Yi and Grace Kim, performed data collection and statistical analysis for the survey of news directors. Evan Jenkins, consulting 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.
- Carl Gottlieb, managing editor, Sinclair Broadcast Group, Hunt Valley, Md.
- 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, KRIV, Houston.
- Gary Wordlaw, President and General Manager, WTVH, Syracuse.

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