SPECIAL REPORT: LOCAL TV NEWS

Quality Brings Higher Ratings, But Enterprise Is Disappearing

BY TOM ROSENSTIEL, CARL GOTTLIEB, AND LEE ANN BRADY

Who needs a dog when you've got local TV news? No matter where you live, it seems news teams are your best friend, on the streets "Working 4 You," "On Your Side," or doing "Whatever It Takes."

Unfortunately, there is less and less substance behind the slogans, a major new study of local television finds. For all the "I-Team" graphics and driving music, enterprise reporting — the serious, proactive journalism that local TV so heavily promotes — is dropping precipitously.

Ironically, the study also finds that enterprise reporting is one of the few staples that can still build viewer loyalty and ratings.

These are some of the findings in year two of a multi-year study of local television news — the largest ever undertaken — which continues to repudiate many of the commonly held conceptions about the most popular news medium in America.

The 1999 study, produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and a team of local TV journalists, university scholars and professional researchers, confirms last year's finding that quality sells.

The top-scoring station in the study, WEHT in Evansville, Indiana, covers more of its own community, including the local schools, the environment and business, than any other station examined and is steadily gaining viewers.

In Miami, WTVJ does nearly twice as many in-depth series as the average station in the country and is rising in the ratings.

In Boston, WBZ covers local institutions more than the competition, features a talented political reporter, and has begun to turn around its fortunes.

Does Quality Sell?
Percentage of stations, by quality grade, rising in ratings
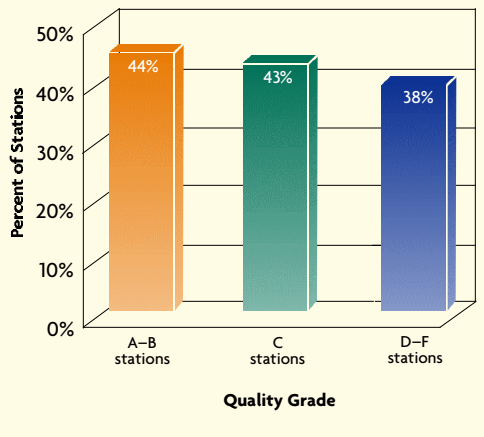
These stations are not the exception. The study, which ranked the quality of 59 stations in 19 cities and compared those results with ratings, found that the very best-scoring stations were more than twice as likely to be succeeding commercially as failing. More generally, any stations with above-average scores were more likely to be rising in ratings than falling.

A year ago we found that stations could succeed commercially nearly as well by filling their newscasts with crime, scandal and celebrity — in short, a classic tabloid approach. This year that did not hold true: stations at the very lowest end of the quality scale were twice as likely to be failing commercially as succeeding.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism that is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, also found:

■ There may be a formula to make quality sell — two years running. Cover less crime, be more enterprising, source stories better, and above all be local. This year it helped to cover core local institutions and concerns — from infrastructure to education to trends.

■ There is less crime on TV than a year ago. Coverage of crime, courts and law dropped from 28% of all stories last year to 22%. Everyday crime stories are down from 22% to 15%. Crime is still, however, the No. 1 story topic.

■ The notion that people want shorter stories is again debunked. Unlike last year, it is not so clear that longer is better, but it is no negative.

■ Local TV is not all the same. It is often superficial, reactive and thinly sourced, but the best stations this year again scored twice as well as the worst.

The study examined the top-rated half hour of news in each city during a February sweeps week and an April non-sweeps week. A single team of experienced professional coders analyzed 8,000 stories from 590 broadcasts, or some 295 hours of news. The results were then put through computer analysis by scholars at Wellesley College and Princeton Survey Research Associates and assessed by a team of journalists.

A smaller study of two major cities also reveals that stations consistently produced better newscasts at 6 p.m. than at 11 p.m. — in some cases dramatically so. WNBC in New York, a "C" station at 11 p.m., would have been the best newscast in the study at 6 p.m. Why do newscasters produce such different products for different time slots? (See Six O'Clock Rocks.)

Perhaps the most startling finding — and unequivocal — is the drop across the board in how much enterprise reporting stations do versus a year ago. More than 80% of stations received "D" or "F" grades for enterprise — such things as the number of investigative stories, special series or tough interviews they do. Last year, only 25% of stations received these low grades. Among repeat stations, 17 of 19 saw their enterprise grades fall. Over all, scores on three key enterprise categories dropped by a quarter from last year. Coverage of breaking news, a staple of local TV that requires a lesser but still notable level of effort, is also dropping. Meanwhile, stations aired 25% more out-of-town feeds than they did the year before.
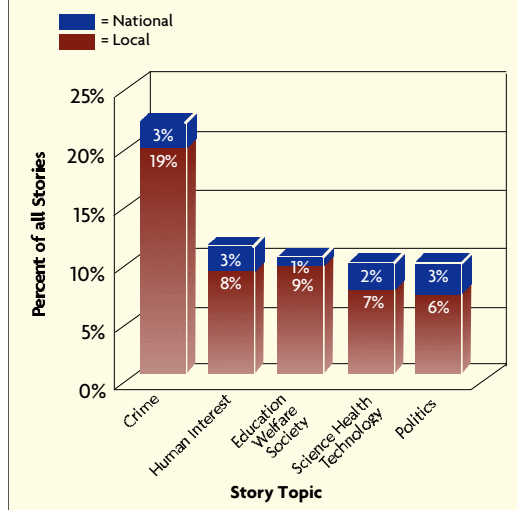
Evidence suggests that the drop may be due in part to ever-increasing pressure on newsroom finances, particularly from having to fill more air time without getting commensurate staff and budget increases. (See The Budget Game.)

Although the second year confirms the notion that quality is a powerful strategy for financial success, local news is still in need of a thoughtful fix. Over all, the face of local TV news again appears one-sided and reactive. More than nine in ten stories come from either the police scanner or planned news events. Less than one in ten come from journalists' own initiative. Among those stories involving controversy, once again a troubling 55% give only one point of view. There are, however, some signs of improvement. Fewer stories focus around commonplace incidents — such as car accidents and everyday crime — though the number is still high, 40% versus 46% a year ago.

In 1998, some critics wondered whether what the study identified as good journalism had a bias toward smaller cities. Nine of the 10 best stations last year were in smaller cities, those with fewer than 910,000 TV households. This year the opposite is true: seven of the top ten stations are in cities with more than 1.3 million TV households. Although our top station is again WEHT in Evansville, the 96th largest market in the country, the second- and third-highest scoring stations were WTVJ in Miami and KRON in San Francisco.

Top Five Local News Topics
Percentage of stories by broad topic category

Perhaps the best explanation for why local news looks the way it does is money. News executives responding to a PEJ survey about resources say the biggest obstacle to quality is a "lack of staff" at a time when they are being asked to fill an expanding news hole. Indeed, those station executives who provided an answer acknowledged that they require reporters to produce at least one story a day, a demand that precludes most in-depth or enterprise reporting. The reason for these intense demands has to do with the extraordinary profit expectations that permeate local news organizations and Wall Street. Of those stations that provided answers to the question, the average pre-tax profit margin expected of local news was 40%.

This suggests it is a misconception to assume that local TV news merely reflects what viewers want. Local TV news gives viewers what the resources allow.

In focus groups we conducted in two cities, viewers who regularly watched local TV news overwhelmingly said they wanted news that was more meaningful, more varied, more in-depth and "hit closer to home."

"Community interests are not being served," said a viewer in Atlanta. Another, in Tucson, said, "It's not important to be first. Get the story straight."

The audience for local news is declining, as has the audience for network news. An orientation toward meeting immediate profit demands, which fails to invest in the content that viewers really want, is likely to fuel that decline.
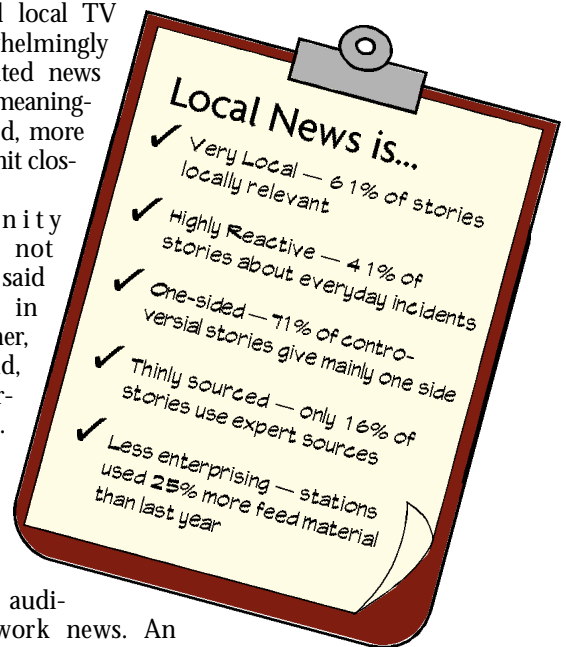
WHAT IS QUALITY?

In this second year, the definition of quality remains the one established by our "design team" of local TV news professionals. (See Design Team.) It emphasizes mastering the basics: Newscasts should accurately reflect their entire community, cover a broad range of topics, focus on what is significant, make it locally relevant, balance stories with multiple points of view, and rely on authoritative sources. (See What is a "Good" Newscast?)

We again used the system developed by a separate team of university and professional researchers to rate newscasts on a

point scale according to these criteria. (See Who Did the Study and Methodology.) A caveat: To keep the grading objective, a story can score well if the reporter includes all the right elements, even if the presentation is lacking.

Just as in the first year, quality scores were then correlated to the latest Nielsen Media Research household ratings encompassing a three-year period beginning in May 1996 and ending February 1999.

The study continues to probe three major questions: How would one define a "good" newscast? Does content affect ratings? Are there successful quality stations that can serve as industry models? In addition, this year we examined the differences between news at 6 p.m. and 11 p.m., and began to examine trends over time.

This year 19 cities were randomly selected after ensuring population and geographic balance. Eight cities were repeated from the first year, and 11 cities were new.
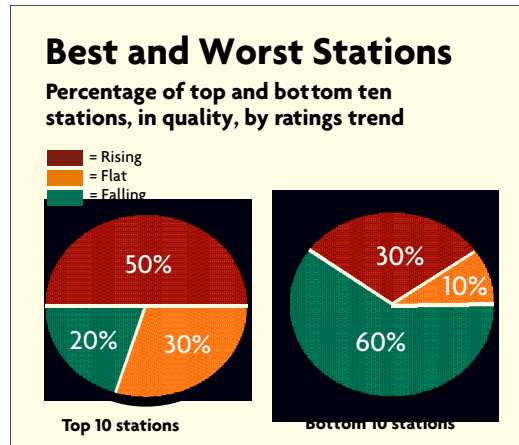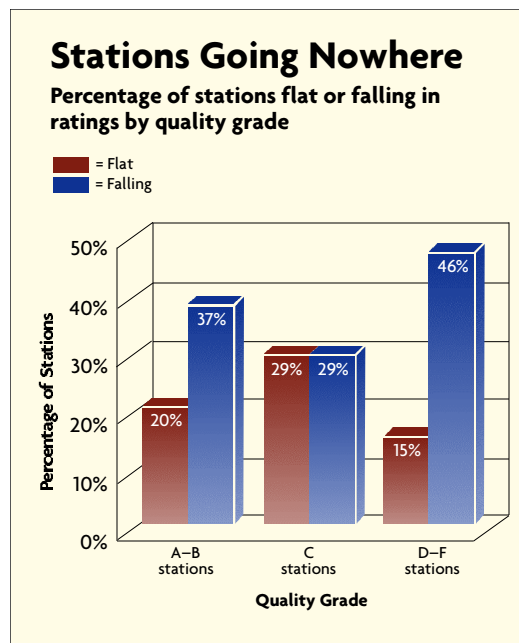
In some cities, such as New Orleans, we saw wide differences in quality. The best station, WWL, scored nearly double that of the worst station, WGNO. In other cities, such as Minneapolis-St. Paul, we saw signs of a news culture in place. Three of the city's four stations, KARE, KSTP and WCCO, shared similar traits and an emphasis on in-depth coverage. All earned the same above-average grade.

In Miami, a city known for a pulsating style of news once called "the quick and the dead," a new news culture seems to be evolving, less violent and more enterprising but still moving to a rhythm that might be out of place in many cities. Miami was the study's second-best market, after small-market Evansville; none of the four stations scored lower than a solid "B." (See Miami Vice No More.)

QUALITY VERSUS RATINGS

If anything, quality in this year's study proved an even more reliable path to success than in year one. We saw it in good stories at successful stations. Chicago's dominant WLS does a multi-part series about the changing role of fathers in today's society. Minneapolis's KSTP does a "Focus 5" segment detailing the financial ordeal of one woman to show the dangers of tempting credit card offers.

We also saw quality's value in the overall numbers. The top-ten scoring stations in the study were more than twice as likely to be rising in ratings (50%) than falling (20%). The pattern holds up by a smaller margin when examining a broader category of quality, all A and B stations, with 44% rising and 36% falling.

Stations Going Nowhere
Percentage of stations flat or falling in ratings by quality grade

Best and Worst Stations
Percentage of top and bottom ten stations, in quality, by ratings trend

The low road did not fare as well this year. The 10 worst-scoring stations were twice as likely to be falling in ratings (60%) as rising (30%). Among all D&F stations, again more were dropping (46%) than rising (39%).

We saw some big changes in quality among the stations studied both years, much of it for the better. At the 19 stations where we studied the same time slot, 12 rose in quality while seven fell. This finding could be simply random. Or, to be optimistic, stations may be responding to the scores earned in the first year.

In some cities, improving quality coincided with changes in either news directors or general managers. This was true at WCCO in Minneapolis (up from an F to a B with new GM Jan McDaniel), at rival KSTP (from D to B with news director Scott Libin) and at Evansville's WFIE (from C to A with new GM Lucy Himstedt). While money and the market affect what goes on the air, people are ultimately making these decisions based at least in part on their gut and their values.

We saw evidence that quality can be contagious, as in Boston and New York, where every station got better. We saw signs, too, that getting worse can become a trend. In Louisville, in a deadlocked race for No. 1, all three stations changed for the worse.

TWO ROADS TO SUCCESS?

A year ago we found two paths to ratings success: quality or tabloid. Nearly two-thirds of the very best stations and the very worst were enjoying market success. We theorized that the audience for local news was not so much schizophrenic as segmented. One group liked news full of sensation, revelation, scandal and celebrity. Another liked a more sober information-based approach.

Why didn't the low-road stations fare as well this year? One explanation is simply that we measured different markets. Another possibility is that the tabloid approach is getting old. A third is that our segmentation theory was simply wrong.

A close look at the data suggests that low-scoring stations this year were putting a thinner product on the air. As a group, they were only half as likely to respond quickly to breaking events, nearly twice as likely to send a camera without a reporter, and twice as likely to use out-of-town feeds. They put fewer experts on the air, were more likely to air one-sided stories, and relied more on single and anonymous sources than they did a year ago. The numbers jumped out at us.

Was this year's sample simply different? When we looked at repeat stations with low scores, we saw the same decline. Six of the seven repeaters scored lower in these categories —

which reflect a station's ability to respond effectively, to get people on camera — not on their broadcast style.

Then we looked at every repeat station in the study regardless of grade, those 19 stations where we examined the same newscast both years. While the majority improved in several categories that didn't cost anything, such as variety of topics covered, all 19 dropped markedly, an average of 12%, in the areas relating to enterprise.

This year's results, therefore, neither prove nor disprove the theory that audiences are segmenting into different preference groups. But they suggest a more important trend. Whether looking at enterprise, quality of sourcing, or getting both sides of the story, the findings suggest that when it comes to categories that require time and effort, newsrooms are stretching their resources, perhaps to their long-term detriment.

HOW TO MAKE QUALITY SELL

This year we seem to be closer to identifying a handful of key elements that help make quality sell. Keep in mind, content is not the only factor that might shape ratings. Anchors, set, lighting, lead-in, viewer history, all play a role.

Once again we split the stations into groups: At the high end are what the study defines as "master" stations, those with high quality (an A or B grade) and rising ratings (an up arrow). "Earnest" stations are those with high quality and declining ratings (a down arrow).

Some findings are supported two years running:

■ Master stations cover less crime than earnest (also less trivial and less out-of-town crime).

■ Master stations are more local (88% of stories were locally relevant versus 80% for earnest, a bigger differential than last year).

■ Master stations show more enterprise. They are nearly twice as likely as earnest stations to do multi-part series, for instance, and rely less on out-of-town feeds.

■ Master stations are 31% less likely to use anonymous sources. This not only reinforces last year's findings, it also reinforces our focus groups, where citizens repeatedly complained about unnamed sources. "Whenever the news tells me 'a source said,' I think ...somebody is dropping leaks or something. [It] seems sort of dirty, underhanded," said a viewer in Atlanta.

Viewers still apparently like seeing everyday citizens in the news. Master stations remained the most likely to air person-on-the-street interviews. Yet there are signs this year that viewers turn off if they perceive tragedy being exploited. Master stations are 16% less likely than earnest stations to put victims and their family members on the air.

Perhaps the most tantalizing new finding is that master stations are more likely to cover the core institutions and concerns that hold a community together. If one creates an index to measure how many stories a station is doing about major local institutions, businesses, economics, infrastructure, legislatures and social issues, master stations produce more of these stories — 36% versus 27% —

than earnest stations. They also do more stories about substantive trends. This holds true for all rising stations this year, unlike last year. And when it comes to politics, horse race coverage is bad for ratings. Reporting on the legislature is not.

THE LOW ROAD TO RATINGS

While we did not find evidence as suggestive as last year that there are two paths to ratings success, stations that scored low in quality but thrived in the market still shared some traits.

Last year it was a classic tabloid formula — scandal, celebrity, tragedy, the bizarre and breaking news. This year, the low road to ratings was not quite so direct.

Again to simplify the discussion, call the stations with low-quality scores (D and F grades) and rising ratings (up arrow) "rough and ready." Call the stations with low quality scores and falling ratings (down arrow) "down and out."

Few rough-and-ready stations this year could be described as classic tabloid. Rough-and-ready stations actually covered celebrity, scandal, crime and accidents less than down-and-outs. They also scaled back on their coverage of the bizarre and their focus on national news. Instead:

■ Rough-and-ready stations put the fewest victims or their families on the air than any newscasts — even less than masters.

■ Rough-and-ready stations also scored higher on covering the core local institutions and concerns in their community, at least compared to down-and-outs. On this core local index, they scored 25%, compared with 20% for their low-end rivals.

Last year, rough-and-ready stations relied less on anonymous or single sources. They also did fewer very short stories (under 20 seconds) and more very long stories (over two minutes) than down-and-outs. This year, the opposites were true.

Stations by Quality Grade
D

11
4
2
21
21
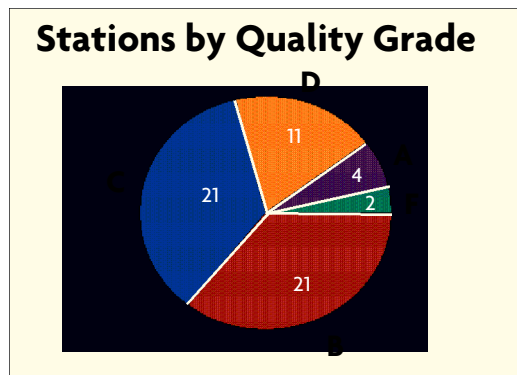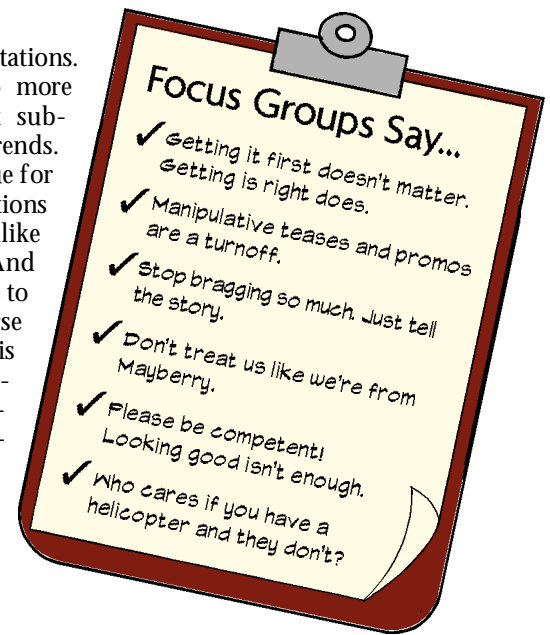
STATIONS IN THE MIDDLE

One difference this year was that a good many C stations — those in the middle — succeeded in ratings, 42% compared with only 30% a year ago. Why?

This year many C stations shared some of the winning qualities of

good and bad stations enjoying market success. C's rising in ratings were more local than those falling, even more local than earnest stations. Rising C's scored higher on our index of covering local core concerns — infrastructure, institutions, business, etc. — earning a collective 35%. This was nine points higher than C's falling, eight points higher than earnest stations and almost equal to master. Rising C's also avoided those out-of-town feeds, just like master stations.

Not all the patterns hold up. Rising C's did more crime than falling C's, but, like master stations and even rough and ready, they avoided out-of-town crime stories and stayed local.

STORY LENGTH

Last year's results shattered the myth that viewers — whose attention spans are supposedly shrinking — want their news shorter and faster. Stations at both the high and low ends fared better by avoiding too many very short stories (under 20 seconds) and by selectively airing more very long ones.

This year, with a different sample of stations, the basic finding holds up. There is no penalty for length. However, we found less suggestion of a reward for it.

Master stations tended to run more stories over two minutes than did earnest stations. But contrary to last year, rough-and-readys ran fewer long stories. When all stations were

WHAT IS A 'GOOD' NEWSCAST?

The study takes an elemental approach to measuring what a "good" newscast is. A "design team" of local TV professionals defined quality as succeeding on the nuts and bolts of journalism, things like being fair, relevant, and enterprising. To measure these, the study gauges stories by a set of easily quantifiable fundamentals, such as the number of sources. Here is a summary of the design team's ideas and how they're measured.

TOPIC RANGE — Reflecting the community in its totality is the preeminent concern. No topic should be considered off limits. The problem is what local TV "doesn't cover." So one yardstick is a ratio of the topics covered in a newscast divided by the number of stories. The greater the range of topics, the better the index.

STORY FOCUS — Newscasts should be significant and informative — as well as interesting. Topic matters less than treatment. Thus, the study measures the focus of each story. Was it a larger issue or trend that affected a lot of people? Was it a public malfeasance? Was it a major, unusual event? Or was it an everyday incident, an everyday crime, human interest, celebrity/scandal or popular culture?

ENTERPRISE LEVEL — Being gutsy, providing depth and context, showing initiative, and demonstrating enterprise are also prime values. This variable measures how much effort went into a story. Was it a station-initiated investigation, interview, or series? Was the station responding to spontaneous or pre-arranged events? Was the story simply taken from the news wire or a feed from another source, or was it based on rumors or gossip? The more enterprise, the higher the score.

NUMBER OF SOURCES — Being accurate, credible, fair, balanced and honest are important. As a first step, this measurement simply counts how many sources there were in a story, or whether any sourcing was even required.

VIEWPOINTS — As a second way of measuring balance, fairness and credibility, this index notes whether the story had multiple points of view (no one view accounted for 75% of the story), made only a passing reference to a second point of view, or contained only one point of view. Stories presented as undisputed (a fire, the weather) were noted separately.

SOURCE EXPERTISE — Newscasts should be authoritative to be credible. A good yardstick is the quality of one's sources. This variable notes whether the source on the given topic was a credentialed expert, impartial data, the major actor in the story, a person on the street, an unnamed source, or finally whether no source was cited.

LOCAL RELEVANCE — Because reflecting the community and being relevant stands out with accuracy and fairness as primary values, this variable measures the local connection. Did the story affect citizens in the whole area, important institutions in the area, major demographic or geographic groups in the area, smaller subgroups? Or was it interesting but with no direct connection to the community?

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The study also codes stories, though allotting minimal points, for presentation. Was the story understandable or not? The study, finally, also noted whether stories were sensational, which was defined as replaying video or graphics beyond the point that added new information.

The design team does not think all stories should be alike. A story about big ideas might get more points than one about a commonplace event, but any story done well scored high. Stations that covered a lot of topics well scored the highest.

What didn't win points is notable. Topic is considered neutral. A crime story might score as high as a science piece. Stories earn no points for length. Production techniques are considered tools and not rated. The study avoids rating subjective qualities such as tone or negativity.

Last, if one does not agree with the design team's frankly quite basic "values," it is still possible to learn from these measurements. The values mainly note how stories were put together. One can ignore the quality scores, and simply track which newscast characteristics audiences respond to via the ratings data.

grouped by ratings trend — up, down or flat — no statistical correlation between story length and ratings success showed up.

The suggestion this year is that story length will help you if the story deserves it, but not if it doesn't. It is a matter of taste, judgment and mix.

FOCUS GROUPS

To augment the lessons from the first two years of the content study, we also conducted four focus groups last winter in two cities, Atlanta and Tucson. The purpose was to see if viewers recognized what the study defines as quality, and to discover how they responded to the criteria.

One finding dominated the discussion. Viewers are aware and scornful of the techniques local news uses to manipulate them. They find much of this laughable. "We've got a helicopter and you guys don't," mocked a Tucson viewer. Everyone broke into laughter. "How about 'We bring you the news first,'" the moderator asked, quoting a local station. "Don't care," responded one viewer. "Doesn't matter," said another. An Atlanta viewer called the happy talk between anchors "comical.... They discuss each others' ties." People are also irritated by constant repetition of stories and by teases.

Another finding is that viewers not only recognize the elements of quality the design team believes in, they appreciate them. People yearn for local television news to have more value in their lives, to be more relevant and significant, and to involve more follow-up. A Tucson viewer praised a station that was "aware of the more serious nature of the story." Others said they wanted the news delivered when they as citizens can still have a stake in the outcome.

The one promotional concept that viewers liked was a station being "On Your Side" — but only if the station's coverage lived up to it.

We prompted the groups to see how much viewers responded to other elements in local news besides content, the things we don't measure in our study. We found anchors matter. "News is more believable with a good anchor," said a Tucson viewer. "You learn to trust them just when

they get rid of them," said another, complaining about turnover.

The overwhelming impression, however, should worry the profession. Everyone in the focus groups considered much of local television to be superficial, exploitative and designed to entertain. "Cut the goofy stories," said an Atlanta viewer. "They're stupid." Often, viewers see local TV journalists simply as personalities not to be taken seriously.

BOTTOM LINES

We have now studied 101 stations in 31 cities. When you include those cities we have studied twice and those in which we studied two different time slots, we have data from 125 news shows.

Much of the analysis still should be considered theory. How firmly can we identify a formula for quality that sells? It's evolving. Is there a tabloid road to success? There was last year but not necessarily this year. Are mediocre stations less likely to succeed commercially? Perhaps not. Again, many factors influence ratings other than content.

After two years, though, the data support one conclusion above all: quality does sell. Taking all 125 stations studied into account, the best stations are the most likely to succeed, ahead of those in the middle or the bottom.

At the very least, we believe we can declare, not just theorize, that there is no commercial penalty for good journalism on TV. If stations produce poor, sensationalized, scandalized, violent and exploitative newscasts, that is their choice. The market does not demand it. Blaming lousy local news on viewers is a cop-out for incompetence.
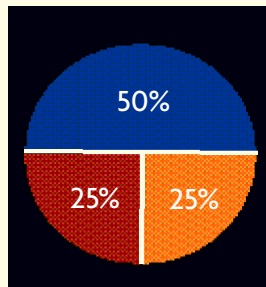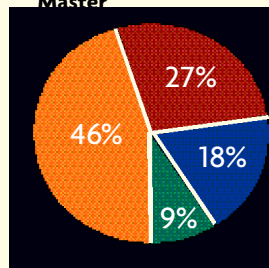
The weakness in local television is not story selection but execution. Stations fail at the basics: sourcing, enterprise, getting both sides, seeing the big picture. There are signs that stations are doing a better job of covering more topics and making them locally relevant. Yet there are disturbing signals, too, that stations are spreading themselves thin, airing more feeds, and doing less original work. With ratings in decline, enterprise, which speaks to effort and intellect, is one of the few things the data suggest will bring them back. If the trend continues, local television news may slowly be committing suicide.

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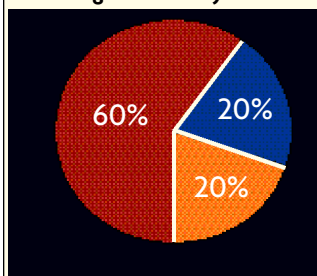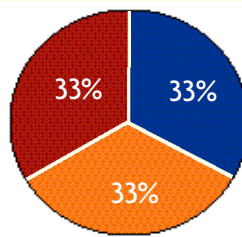

Performance by Network

= ABC = NBC
= CBS = FOX

Master
- 27%
- 18%
- 9%
- 46%

- 50%
- 25%
- 25%

Rough and Ready
- 60%
- 20%
- 20%

Down and Out
- 33%
- 33%
- 33%

Correlation of Market Ratings
by Quality Score

- 312.29
- 353.22
- 344.54
- 341.74
- 336.44

Quality Score

Market Rating Trend