Local TV News: A Content Analysis of the Late Local Newscasts in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Fred A. Martino

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Local TV News: A Content Analysis of the Late Local Newscasts
In Grand Rapids, Michigan

BY

Fred A. Martino
B.S., Ithaca College, 1990

THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in Communication in the Graduate Studies Program of the School of Communications Grand Valley State University Allendale, Michigan

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Local TV News: A Content Analysis of the Late Local Newscasts in Grand Rapids, Michigan

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WE HEREBY APPROVE THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

_____________________________________________________
Fred A. Martino

ENTITLED Local TV News: A Content Analysis of the Late Local Newscasts in Grand Rapids, Michigan

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMMUNICATION
Abstract

Local TV News: A Content Analysis of the Late Local Newscasts In Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a thorough study of the late newscasts presented on WOOD-TV, WZZM-TV, and WXMI-TV. Seven newscasts were studied on each of the stations. Each newscast was recorded on the same night, over a seven-week period. The first three newscasts were recorded on June 1, 2003. The final three newscasts were recorded on July 19, 2003. The study evaluated the amount of time devoted to nine areas that comprise most of the content offered by traditional local television newscasts: local news, state news, national/world news, issue-oriented reporting, local features, outside-source features, weather, sports, and promotions. As a percentage of total newscast time, the newscasts featured a small amount of local news. The station averages for the seven weeks studied were very similar, with local news comprising 14.8% to 17.7% of each newscast. Reports within the newscast often lacked new information or even clarity. Attribution of sources was rare and many stories were incomplete. All three stations spent a great deal of time on sports and weather, considering that much of the information presented in these segments had little or no local relevance. One of the most striking findings of the study involved the amount of time devoted to promotions within the newscast. All of the stations devoted more time to promotions than state news or issue-oriented reporting. WXMI devoted more of its newscasts (7.7%) to promotion than any news content area, with the exception of local news and national/world news.
This study would not have been possible without the assistance of several of this researcher's colleagues at Grand Valley State University. Michael Pritchard served as chair of this thesis committee and also guided this researcher through a number of courses that resulted in the decision to pursue this topic. Alex Nesterenko, the Director of the School of Communications, served on the thesis committee and was also the advisor for an independent study. Ken Kolbe, the Assistant General Manager for Operations at WGVU Television and Radio, served on the thesis committee and supported the pursuit of study as this researcher's direct supervisor. Finally, Soon Hong of the Statistical Counseling Center, performed statistical tests on the data collected.
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CHAPTER I
Introduction

Study Overview

This study involved a content analysis of local television news broadcasts in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, television market. Specifically, the late news broadcasts were evaluated on WOOD-TV, WXMI-TV, and WZZM-TV. Two other stations in the market, WWMT-TV and WOTV-TV, were not studied: These stations focused coverage on the Kalamazoo-Battle Creek portion of the market.

Significance of the Study

On its web site, The Radio and Television News Directors Association (2002) states, “More Americans get their news from local television broadcasts than from any other source.” But during a late newscast, viewers in the Grand Rapids market do not see a significant amount of local news.

The focus on “star” TV journalists and “entertaining” news, along with the conflict of interests presented by large corporate owners, has led some to accuse the media of damaging our very democracy (Fallows, 2002).

Fallows writes, “The era of TV-celebrity journalism has offered correspondents greater rewards than ever before, but only if they forget what it means to be a ‘reporter’” (p. 73). Fallows explains that as TV journalists distort public life in America, they risk a long-term audience with their short-term attention-grabbing stories.
While creating new obstacles for American politics, today’s media outlets have also put themselves in an impossible position. They increasingly present public life mainly as a depressing spectacle, rather than as a vital activity in which citizens can and should be engaged. The implied message of this approach is that people will pay attention to public affairs only if politics can be made as interesting as the other entertainment options available to them, from celebrity scandals to the human melodramas featured on daytime talk programs. In attempting to compete head to head with pure entertainment programs, the ‘serious’ press locks itself into a competition it cannot win. Worse, it increases the chances of its own eventual extinction. In the long run, people will pay attention to journalism only if they think it tells them something they must know. The less that Americans care about public life, the less they will be interested in journalism of any form (p. 8).

Geisler (2000) notes that very often, television news completely ignores important developments in local government:

...at stations across the country, that message that ‘government is boring’ transformed the way stations shaped their newscasts. Today, there is less coverage of the people who are elected, appointed, or hired to serve the public. Less attention to the process of decision and deal-making. Fewer chances for the public to see city hall—even if it is just through the lens of the evening news (p. 34).

Geisler continues by citing results from the Consortium for Local Television Surveys.

The Consortium studied newscasts in eight cities in 1996 and 1997. The survey found that “crime and criminal justice stories took up nearly 30 percent of the local news time (more than any other topic), while government and politics accounted for only half as much—about 15 percent. Natural disasters and calamities took up 10 percent, education coverage 2 percent” (p. 35).

Experts Critical of Local TV News Content

Since 1998, a larger study has been conducted every year by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2001). The study reviewed 230 local television news broadcasts from 14 television markets. The findings also indicate a lack of substance in community coverage:
Forty percent of stories last 30 seconds or less. One in four stories is about crime, law, or courts. Less than one percent of stories could be called ‘investigative’. Health stories outnumber all other social issues by 32 percent. There are as many stories about bizarre occurrences (eight percent), as there are about civic institutions. Two topics that were barely covered are the fine arts, which accounted for only 24 stories out of the 6,000 studied, and poverty/welfare, which accounted for only nine stories (2001, p. 1).

The study found similar results in the three previous years as well.

Some researchers have found that local television news intentionally avoids important community issues when trying to attract viewers. Television ratings surveys are conducted each year during the months of May, July, November, and February. Potter (2001) found an alarming lack of substance during these months:

Desperate to win viewers back, stations regularly air sweeps stories that are so silly or shameless that anyone with half a conscience should be embarrassed to pass them off as news. During the latest round in February, one Houston station warned that your pet cat could make you crazy. Viewers in St. Louis were treated to a report about thong underwear for men. And more than one station locked a reporter in an empty apartment to see if a person can survive—get this—with only an internet connection to the outside world. Imagine, ordering all your food and entertainment online! Now, how exactly is this news to anyone? (p. 72).

Potter contends that the intense pressure to gain viewers at a minimum cost is what leads stations to such material.

Geisler (2000) spoke with TV news executives and consultants who agree that the pressure to maximize profits leads stations to poor content. Valerie Hyman used to oversee news coverage for ten television stations. Hyman told Geisler that “stations have added newscasts without adding sufficient staff; news consultants have pushed for higher story counts; and news directors are being told to develop stories that appeal to ‘target demographics’” (p. 36).
Joe Rovitto was a television news director for 17 years and has been a news consultant for the last eight years. Rovitto told Geisler that the pressure to maximize profits by filling more newscasts with the same staff is damaging content:

...crews are expected to turn the story for the 5 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. news and recut it for the 6 p.m. and the late news. That leads to what Rovitto calls "short-cut journalism"—a triage in which newsrooms select stories that are easy to find, easy to tell. They can't afford those (stories) that take too much digging and might not make deadline for that day's shows. You simply have to make a choice. If you know you can't cover a story properly you don't cover it all (p. 36).

Rovitto told Geisler that this situation is not allowing consultants to help stations differentiate their newscasts from the competition.

Ratings Decline Along With Content

Tsubata (2001) discovered that local television news ratings are declining along with content, even at the highest-rated stations. Tsubata found that Nielsen ratings have declined in 14 of 20 markets nationwide during the highest-rated half-hour news broadcasts. Tsubata notes, "Both viewer polls and media professional surveys show that when stations forget good journalism, the audience shrinks. Conversely, when stations work hard to serve the community with good, balanced, and ethical reporting, the ratings rebound" (p. 68). Also cited was an analysis of the Project for Excellence in Journalism study for the year 2000. The study uses letter grades to rate newscast content. Tsubata found that eight of the ten best stations were increasing ratings or staying steady in a market that is declining overall.

Downie and Kaiser (2002) illustrate how significant a decline in ratings can be, even for stations that lead their respective markets. Overall, the researchers found
poor content at top-rated WRC-TV and other stations in the Washington, D.C. market:

At WRC, for example, the audience for its financially important 11 p.m. newscast has fallen from 224,000 Washington area households in November 1995 to 157,000 households in November 2000, even as it maintained its ratings lead over rival stations. The total audience for the late evening newscasts on Washington’s four broadcast stations fell from nearly 700,000 households in November 1995 to just over 500,000 households in November 2000. The numbers come from Nielsen ratings. This reflects a national trend.

A study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that only 56 percent of Americans were watching local television news regularly in 2000, down from 77 percent in 1993 (p. 172).

Downie and Kaiser cited small news staffs designed to maximize profits as a major barrier to improving news content, and therefore, ratings.

Content Analysis Offers Hope

Another content analysis of the WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV 6:00 p.m. newscasts does offer some hope that these stations are capable of producing quality 11:00 p.m. newscasts. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) graded the stations over a two-week period in 2002. PEJ evaluates the highest-rated newscast in each market that it studies. In Grand Rapids, that is the 6:00 p.m. broadcast for both WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV.

WOOD-TV’s newscast earned an “A” grade, according to criteria developed by local news professionals of what a local news station should provide to its community. WOOD-TV ranked 3rd among the 53 stations studied.

WZZM-TV, the second-best station at 6:00 p.m., earned a “B” in the study. It ranked 16th among the stations studied across the country.
However, PEJ would have discovered a vastly different story at 11:00pm. At this time period, stations often strive to offer significant national and world coverage along with local news. This can severely compromise local coverage.

In addition to revealing the local coverage efforts of WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV at 11:00 p.m., this study evaluated WXMI-TV. This station, a FOX affiliate, has not been the subject of review. This is a significant oversight of prior studies. Nielsen ratings data (2001) indicates that WXMI scored a 4 household rating in November, 2001. That matches the 4 ratings earned by the 11:00 p.m. newscasts on WZZM and WWMT.

Research Questions

The series of national content analysis studies conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) reflected a connection between high quality news coverage and increasing viewership, as measured by the Nielsen ratings service used by television stations nationwide. Stations which were rated as producing high quality newscasts focused on local coverage and enterprise reporting.

Q1: Do the late newscasts in Grand Rapids spend a significant amount of time on local news reporting? For the purposes of this study, significant amount of time will be at least 60% of the allotted newscast.

Q2: Do the late newscasts in Grand Rapids waste significant amounts of time on stories that have no local relevance? For the purposes of this study, significant amount of time will be at least 25% of the allotted newscast.
CHAPTER II

Television News Research

An Industry In Peril

Research indicates that the television news business is in peril. Many experts contend that a focus on profits has led to a decline in the quality of television news. An overall decline in ratings is also evident. Unfortunately, this decline in ratings has not led most news organizations to focus on quality. Instead, even national news networks have hired actors to be anchors. Sensational and shallow stories are plentiful, while depth and issue-oriented reporting are rare (Brauder, 2002; Dowd, 2002).

Everyone At Risk

The beginning of 2002 was a scary time for many in the television news business. Reduced advertising revenues and increased expenses following the terrorist attacks of September, 2001, had already meant hundreds of layoffs.

Then came the news that ABC was secretly negotiating with David Letterman to bring his late night show to the network. The deal would mean moving, or eliminating, Nightline, one of the most respected television news programs on the air.

In the end, Letterman decided to stay put at CBS. But Brauder (2002) quotes Nightline anchor Ted Koppel as saying that ABC’s moves had caused “collateral damage” to his program. Brauder adds that the “future of Nightline is being watched closely among journalists for signals about how news is valued in an era when major networks are small parts of conglomerates – ABC in Disney, CBS in Viacom, and NBC in General Electric” (p. 1).
Following the Nightline threat, Frank (2002) is not optimistic about the corporate view. He states that "network news divisions have become ever-smaller parts of ever-larger companies. Their half-billion dollar budgets are small change to Disney, ABC's owner; to Viacom, which owns CBS; or to General Electric, proprietor of NBC" (p. 1).

Indeed, ABC executives admit that the threat to Nightline was all about looking for programming that could bring in more money. Brauder (2002) quotes ABC President Robert Iger as saying that the network was interested in distributing "high quality news programs, but also under economic circumstances that make sense to shareholders" (p. 2). Iger further states that ABC "would look at a high quality program with superior economics" as an alternative to Nightline (p. 2).

Brauder (2002) also quotes journalism watchdogs who say that the Nightline situation could be a warning for other news programs. Alex Jones, the director of the Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University said, "If you can take a genuine broadcast news institution that is regarded very, very highly and is profitable and treat it this way, then I think it reflects a value system that bodes very bad things to come for broadcast news" (p. 2).

**Entertainment Pushing Out Journalism**

Other experts say that entertainment had already pushed out most good journalism on television. Dowd (2002) states that the Nightline threat simply adds to a poor record:

Much of TV news had already become part of the big casino, supplanting Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite with neon and showgirls. News executives have been racing to tart up the news with pretty faces in leather coats, soft and sexy stories, and promos for prime-time shows brazenly
masquerading as legitimate news features. They obsess over the talents’ Q-ratings the way Hollywood suits obsess over the weekend box-office rankings. Otherwise, why pay Katie Couric $65 million bucks to perk? Why zoom the camera in on Paula Zahn’s lips and advertise her as sexy? Why celebrate Greta Van Susteren for remaking her face? (p. 2).

Dowd continues by questioning the very future of the evening network news programs, along with serious broadcasts like Nightline.

At the broadcast networks, entertainment programming comprises the biggest part of the schedule. But the same questions about entertainment values entering the newsroom are being raised at the 24-hour cable news networks. Dowd (2002) lamented the controversial promotion of CNN’s Paula Zahn and Greta Van Susteren of the FOX News Channel (p. 2).

However, a former CNN Headline News anchor created a lot more controversy. After a few months, Andrea Thompson resigned from CNN. In the fall of 2001, Thompson got the prime-time Headline News anchor position after only one year as a reporter for a TV station in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She was best known not for her journalism credentials, but for her role as detective “Jill Kirkendall” on ABC’s NYPD Blue.

Trigoboff (2000) interviewed Thompson for the trade journal Broadcasting and Cable. Thompson made no apologies for taking the Albuquerque job, and compared television journalists to models and athletes:

There are a lot of people in broadcasting who deserve this opportunity more than I do. Life ain't fair. The bottom line is that, right now, I've got lots of TVQ (a measure of TV recognition and likability). This came my way because I've already got an audience. The same thing happens with supermodels and athletes. That's the way it is. (p. 34).
Thompson continued by unknowingly predicting her short future at CNN by telling Trigoboff, "I'm taking it slow. I'm sure if I had a big news agent he'd throw me in for the kill. That could be deadly at this point in my career" (p. 2). In fact, Thompson did not take things slowly. She accepted the CNN job after only working for one year in Albuquerque, and she resigned after only a few months at CNN.

Local News Content Also Suffering

Reporters who work at local television stations are among the growing list of critics. Ike Seamans reports for a network affiliate in Miami. Seamans' station asked him to find out what viewers are saying about television news quality. Seamans (2001) heard complaints from people of all ages:

I visited kids at a high school newspaper. In love with journalism, they were confused by local TV news. Student editor Geraldine Rozenman learned one thing from textbooks about news coverage, then saw another on TV. 'So much sensationalism,' she said. 'Helicopters swooping in, breathless reporters on the ground, and for what? An accident on I-95? Please. They could devote those resources to something important.' 'It's sensationalism that appeals to the lowest common denominator,' contractor Michael Jordan told me. 'How about some substantial issues that don't involve murder and mayhem, most of which should be put in a 30-second segment at the end of the show?' 'Is posing a reporter outside a hospital or government building hours after the news is over supposed to make us think something's still going on?' asked retiree David Thornburgh. He's exactly right. Producers have been taught that 'live shots' project immediacy and excitement, providing a sense that a story could 'break' again at any moment, even though their news judgment tells them it won't. There's always been a fine line between TV news and entertainment. That line's been wiped out on some local newscasts (p. 98).

Substance Leads To Success

Local television news can see results when it focuses on resources on serious reporting. Smyntek (2002) cites an example of this success. Detroit ABC affiliate WXYZ did something very unusual in the February, 2002, "sweeps" month. On
February 25, instead of repeating the same news stories and using the same features in the 5, 5:30, and 6:00 p.m. newscasts, the station used 19 minutes of the 5:00 p.m. broadcast to air an investigation into the collapse of Kmart. The result was that the newscast scored almost 2.5 rating points above the average for the month (p. 6E).

Despite the success of WXYZ and others, many in journalism are not optimistic about the future. Shister (2002) spoke with former Philadelphia Inquirer Editor Jim Naughton. Naughton is now the director of the Poynter Institute, a non-profit which researches the industry and provides continuing education for professional journalists. Naughton told Shister that he is worried, despite the increased interest in news since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

At the very moment when America seems to have remembered why news matters, my fear is that there will be so much pressure on corporations to make more money, they will never understand that the public needs them to do the right thing (p. D8).

It is clear that the increased drive for profits threatens the health of television news. On the local and national levels, sensationalism and shallow reporting, along with high-priced “celebrity” journalists, have supplanted the funding needed for substantial news coverage. The result has been an overall decline in television news ratings. But it does not have to continue. Stations which produce good journalism can also be financially successful, while helping society in the process.
Ownership Impact On Quality

Many believe that ownership has an impact on newscast quality. Ownership was a topic of review for this researcher because all of the Grand Rapids stations used in this study are owned by major national broadcasters. WOOD-TV is owned by LIN Television; the Gannett Corporation owns WZZM-TV; and WXMI-TV is owned by the Tribune Corporation. Each of the three companies is among the top 25 owners of local television stations in the United States.

Between 1998 and 2003, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2003) conducted what it called the largest examination ever undertaken of local television news in the United States. The Project is a research institute affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Researchers analyzed 172 stations' newscasts for a total of more than 23,000 stories. The research was conducted in all market sizes and the scope of the study represents about 25 percent of the local U.S. television stations with daily newscasts.

The Project states that the research indicates that ownership type does affect newscast quality. The Project research indicates that smaller station groups tended to produce higher quality newscasts than larger groups and affiliates tended to produce higher quality newscasts than network owned-and-operated stations (O&O's). The research also found that stations owned by newspapers tended to produce higher quality newscasts and local ownership protected stations from failing grades, but did not encourage superior quality.
Study Background

The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2003) studied newscast quality for five years beginning in 1998. The study report states that it was not originally intended to explore the relationship between quality and ownership. Prior to the ownership analysis being released, the Project issued a report on quality without considering ownership.

The Project report states that the data were collected without an agenda. It states that the purpose of the study was “to offer a representative sample of what Americans receive from local television news.”

For the ownership analysis, the Project grouped stations into five different ownership categories: size of station group, network owned and operated, cross-owned by newspaper, locally-based, and publicly-traded. The Project states that most categories contained at least 50 stations. However, the cross-ownership category only included six stations, about a quarter of the 26 cross-owned stations in the U.S.

Definition Of Quality

To design the study, the Project assembled a team of 14 local TV news professionals in 1997. Through survey questionnaires and discussion, that team established that a local television newscast should cover the whole community; be significant and informative; demonstrate enterprise and courage; be fair, balanced, and accurate; be authoritative; and be highly local.

To measure these qualities, a team of academic researchers developed a methodology. Each newscast was analyzed to determine the number of topics covered (covered the community); how many sources and points of view each story
contained (balanced and accurate); who the sources were (authoritative); how much
effort was demonstrated in reporting the story (enterprise); the degree to which stories
were made locally relevant (localism); and the degree to which stories touched on
underlying themes, issues, or trends (significant and informative).

To choose the stations, the Project divided the country into four subsets by
population. Within each of the four subsets, television markets were randomly
chosen to be part of the study. Because of differences in time zones and markets, the
study examined the most-watched half-hour newscast in each market. Each station
was evaluated based on two weeks of Monday-Friday newscasts. Since television
station ratings are evaluated during four months of the year to set advertising rates
(sweeps months), the Project studied five newscasts within sweeps and five newscasts
outside of sweeps for each station.

Ownership Size And Quality

The Project’s five years of data suggest that stations owned by smaller groups
tend to produce higher quality newscasts. Thirty-one percent of stations owned by
small groups received an “A” grade, compared with just 11% of top 10 and 11-25
owners. Only 3% of small groups received a “F”, while 7% of top 10 and 12% of
11-25 owners got a failing grade.
Table 1
Size of Corporate Owner and Quality Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Top 10</th>
<th>11-25</th>
<th>Midsize Groups</th>
<th>Small Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The stations listed in the top 25 groups were placed in that category based on audience reach (the percent of U.S. television households the companies' stations reach). Midsize groups were defined as owners with four or more stations. Small groups were defined as owners with three stations or fewer. The Project report states that the decision to divide companies based on the number of stations owned was made because "companies with stations in multiple markets face technical and management challenges such as syndication deals, the digital transition, and central casting that owners concentrated in only one or two cities do not have to deal with."

Network Owned and Operated Stations

In 2003, the Federal Communications Commission changed its ownership rules. As part of the change, the FCC allowed individual companies to own stations that reach a maximum of 45% of U.S. households. The previous limit was 35% of...
households. Larger companies had argued that the FCC should expand ownership caps because network stations have the resources to better serve communities.

But the Project’s study found just the opposite when analyzing markets that included network O&O’s. Independently-owned network affiliates were 45% more likely to air “A” graded newscasts. In the study, 16% of affiliates earned “A” grades versus 11% of network O&O’s. O&O’s were also more likely to earn “D” grades (24% versus 15% for affiliates). However, 9% of affiliates produced “F”-graded newscasts while none of the O&O’s had failing grades.

Table 2
Ownership Type and Quality Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>O&amp;O’s</th>
<th>Affiliates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Project report notes that in markets that were examined repeatedly over the last five years, the difference between O&O quality and affiliate quality is even greater. In repeat study markets, 7% of O&O’s received “A” grades, versus 16% of affiliates.
Newspaper Cross-Owned Stations

In 2003, the FCC also eliminated a rule enacted in 1975 that bans cross-ownership of newspapers and television stations in the same market. In some cases, this rule did not affect cross-owned stations already in existence in 1975.

The Project studied six cross-owned stations, about a quarter of the U.S. stations of this type. In the sample, stations cross-owned by newspapers were more than twice as likely to receive an “A” grade than were other stations.

Table 3
Cross Ownership and Quality Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Cross-Owned</th>
<th>Non-Cross-Owned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of the six cross-owned stations received a “F” grade, while 8% of the other stations failed. However, the Project reports cautions that the sample size is probably too small to infer much from that data.
Public Versus Private Ownership

Another issue in the debate over the FCC's media ownership rules is public versus private ownership. Some argue that privately-owned media companies are more likely to serve the public interest. Proponents of private media ownership argue that public companies are too focused on stock price, performance reports, and meeting industry-based measures for success.

The Project study, however, did not find a strong relationship between private ownership and newscast quality.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Public Owner</th>
<th>Private Owner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Project studied 54 privately-owned stations and 118 publicly-traded stations. Privately-owned stations were slightly more likely to get A grades (18% versus 14% for public companies) and B grades (35% versus 33% for public companies). However, privately-owned stations were also more likely to fail
(10% versus 6% for public companies). In general, the researchers concluded that the differences were too small to indicate that private ownership leads to better quality newscasts.

**Local Ownership and Quality**

Another argument against changing FCC ownership rules involved the value of maintaining local ownership. But the Project study does not show a connection between high quality and local ownership.

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Local Owner</th>
<th>Non-Local Owner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Locally-owned stations were a third less likely to receive "A" grades, but were also half as likely to fail. However, it is important to note that the Project only studied 18 locally-owned stations. The other 154 stations in the study were not locally-owned.
Diversity Of Viewpoints

Another argument against loosening FCC restrictions on media ownership involved maintaining a diversity of viewpoints. With this in mind, the Project compared coverage of controversial issues on network O&O’s versus affiliates.

Table 6

Viewpoints in Controversial Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Viewpoint Balance</th>
<th>O&amp;O’s</th>
<th>Affiliates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mix of views</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly one view</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All one view</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was little difference in viewpoint presentation between O&O’s and affiliates. In both cases, stations presented mostly one view or all one view the majority of the time.

Impact Of Change: The Radio Example

If the radio industry is any indication, the FCC changes in television ownership restrictions could have dramatic results. The 1996 Telecommunications Act eliminated the national cap on radio ownership. The FCC (2001) reports the number of owners declined by a quarter in just five years.
When the 1996 Act became law, there were approximately 5,100 owners of commercial radio stations nationwide; in March 2001, there were approximately 3,800 owners, a decrease of 25%.

Local markets have seen similar consolidation. In March 1996, an Arbitron metro market had an average of 13.5 owners; in March 2001, the average was 10.3, a decrease of 22%.

However, critics argue that another analysis of the numbers is even more alarming. Columnist William Safire is one of the voices speaking out against consolidation. Safire (2003) states that the two largest radio chains owned 115 stations in 1996. Today, he says those two companies own more than 1,400 stations. He also notes that the top five radio groups generated about 20% of industry revenue in 1996; but today, these five companies take in 55 percent of the money spent on local radio.

Safire argues that the result of consolidation is a lack of diversity in radio programming. He states, “Take a listen to what’s happened to local radio in one short wave of deregulation: The great cacophony of different sounds and voices is being amalgamated and homogenized” (p. A17).

The Diversity Question

Maintaining a diversity of owners was at the very heart of the debate over media deregulation. FCC Chairman Michael Powell is a strong proponent of deregulation. In an editorial in USA Today, Powell (2003) stated, “Today, choices abound. Even in small towns, the number of media outlets—including cable, satellite, radio, TV stations, and newspapers—has increased more than 250% during the past
40 years. Independent ownership of those outlets is far more diverse, with approximately 139% more independent owners than there were 40 years ago” (p. A15). Powell does not mention that independent cable and satellite companies still provide much of the same national programming produced by a handful of owners. He also fails to mention that much of the new diversity in programming requires a paid subscription.

Safire (2003) notes that the new diversity in the media is largely controlled by the same companies that own large numbers of television stations. He states, “The leading 20 internet sites and biggest cable channels are already owned by the expansive likes of GE-NBC, Disney-ABC, Fox, Gannett, AOL Time Warner, Hearst, Microsoft, Cox, Dow Jones, the Washington Post, and the New York Times” (p. A17).

Ironically, the lack of information in the media about ownership diversity is being used in the debate over changing FCC regulations. Safire states, “You won’t find television magazine programs fearlessly exposing the broadcast lobby’s pressure on Congress and the courts to allow station owners to gobble up more stations and cross-own local newspapers, thereby to determine what information residents of a local market receive” (p. A17). Safire also quotes FCC Commissioner Michael Copps as saying, “we’re relying on institutions to cover this debate which have interests in the outcome of the debate” (p. A17).

From what the public appears to know about the FCC ownership proposals, little information was shared in the mass media. A Pew Research Center study (2003) of more than 1,200 adults in February 2003 found that most people did not
know anything about the proposals. When asked how much they had heard about the proposals, 72% of those surveyed said they'd heard “nothing at all”. Twenty-three percent had heard “a little” and only 4% had heard “a lot”.

Of those who had heard “a little” or “a lot”, 41% viewed the proposals to loosen ownership restrictions as negative. Only 13% viewed the changes as positive. 39% didn’t expect much difference if the changes go into effect, while 7% percent didn’t know or refused to answer. The survey had a margin of error plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Ownership Diversity Affects Newscast Quality

The Project for Excellence in Journalism study shows a clear relationship between ownership size and newscast quality. Smaller station groups tended to produce higher quality newscasts.

Moreover, while the number of other media outlets have increased, a handful of conglomerates control the vast majority of our radio and television stations. To allow this consolidation to continue is to further reduce the diversity of voices in the media. This is already being seen with the issue at hand: The mainstream media has virtually ignored the sweeping changes proposed by the FCC.

In addition, the deregulation of radio ownership presents a disturbing model in which one company can dominate an entire market by owning various stations across different formats.

While the Project’s study indicated a jump in quality for television stations cross-owned by newspapers, removing this ownership restriction is also troubling.
Most markets today have only one major newspaper. With that in mind, a newspaper owner which owns a dominant local television station wields enormous power.

The courts have forced the FCC to justify its ownership restrictions or eliminate them. Research is long overdue into the effects of media consolidation. And with an issue so central to the public interest, the government should be paying for some of that research before changing more rules put in place for good reasons.
CHAPTER III
Methodology

Study Design Overview

This study reviewed the content of the 11:00 p.m. local news broadcasts on WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV and the 10:00 p.m. broadcast on WXMI-TV. The broadcasts were studied over a seven-week period. The study was conducted on the following dates:

June 1, 2003       Sunday broadcasts
June 9, 2003       Monday broadcasts
June 17, 2003      Tuesday broadcasts
June 25, 2003      Wednesday broadcasts
July 3, 2003       Thursday broadcasts
July 11, 2003      Friday broadcasts
July 19, 2003      Saturday broadcasts

This structure accomplished several goals. The study covered a range of weeks to prevent a major event from altering this analysis of normal coverage patterns. The study also covered a range of days, as staffing levels vary depending on the day of the week. Finally, this structure does not coincide with a major ratings period (November, February, May), when stations tend to dramatically alter coverage patterns.

The study evaluated the amount of time devoted to nine areas that comprise most of the content offered by traditional local television newscasts: local news, state
Local TV News

news, national/world news, issue-oriented reporting, local features, outside-source features, weather, sports, and promotions.

Issue-Oriented Reporting

This is the category where journalists can truly shine. It often involves original investigation, research, and interviews at various locations. It is also becoming virtually non-existent in local television newsrooms. With an increasing number of broadcasts, reporters often cover several stories a day, leaving no time for this kind of effort. The 2002 Project for Excellence in Journalism study ranked WOOD-TV’s 6:00 p.m. broadcast the highest in the country in the number of investigations. Despite the high ranking, investigations only comprised 4.3% of WOOD-TV’s content. In the market, investigations only comprised 1.6% of content, while the national average was an abysmal 0.7%.

Television news often shies away from local issues, instead concentrating on events, which do not even require a reporter to cover. Events may be important, but usually do not reflect long-term trends or have a direct impact on the audience.

Local News

This includes fires, accidents, press conferences, etc. These stories comprise the vast majority of local coverage. These are stories which usually focus on the who, what, when, and where. Most of the time, “why” is ignored or given very little consideration.

Local Features

This can be some of the best coverage in local television news and some of the worst. Local feature reporters can provide substantial interviews with
newsmakers, uncover interesting trends, and provide useful information. They can also joke-around with someone for several minutes or try to be entertaining for the camera while providing little or no information.

**National/World News**

This was a key portion of this study. While viewers have an expanded number of choices for national/world news on television, local TV stations still spend a lot of precious time on stories that do not originate from the area they serve. The 2002 PEJ study found that only 32.7% (national mean) of local TV newscasts were comprised of locally relevant content.

**Outside Source Features**

Many of these features have little news value. Some provide interesting information that is not news (nothing new). Despite this, these are often franchises which are untouchable, even if the time could be much better spent by reporting the news of the day. For instance, WOOD-TV airs a health feature every weeknight, regardless of content.

**Weather**

Viewer surveys indicate that weather is the most important subject to local TV news viewers. But some stations offer weather three times during one 35-minute newscast. Still others waste valuable time just to highlight weather computer software that is only useful during severe storms.

**Sports**

Sports coverage does not usually dominate the news. However, there are exceptions. The Grand Rapids television market provides a particularly interesting
exception. During high school football season, WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV actually end the “news” at 11:15 p.m. instead of 11:35 p.m. on Friday nights. The most time in these “newscasts” is spent on high school football. In fact, WZZM-TV often continues its coverage until 11:45pm or midnight. It is rare for any local TV station to expand a newscast for news. However, WZZM regularly does this on Friday nights for high school football.

Promotions

These are the endless “teases” and self-promotion during every newscast. This category also included the cross-talk between on-air staff that rarely provides more than meaningless chatter.

Study Format

The study presented the amount of time dedicated to each of the nine subject areas in each broadcast day studied. Each station was compared side-by-side in a table. Comments were presented on the coverage in each of the nine areas.

Finally, this researcher offered comments on the quality of coverage during each day of the study. Strengths and weaknesses of each station were presented for every day of the study.

Technical Procedures

Each of the stations’ newscasts was recorded on a different VHS videocassette recorder for the length of the study. The WXMI-TV newscasts were recorded on a Panasonic PV-V4623S. The WOOD-TV newscasts were recorded on a General Electric VG4259. The WZZM newscasts were recorded on a RCA VR706HF. All of the newscasts were recorded without error.
This researcher reviewed all of the newscasts on the same VHS videocassette recorder. This machine, a Panasonic PV-V4623S, includes a large on-screen display of the time in hours, minutes, and seconds. This allowed for easy and accurate written notations of all elements of each newscast. The machine also features a high-speed motor, allowing this researcher to review items of note in each newscast with ease.
CHAPTER IV
Findings Of The Study

The purpose of this study was to perform a content analysis of the late local newscasts in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This chapter includes summary data of the analysis and an overview of the findings.

The stations that were studied include WOOD-TV (NBC affiliate), WZZM-TV (ABC affiliate), and WXMI-TV (FOX affiliate). The CBS affiliate for Grand Rapids is WWMT, which is located in Kalamazoo. WWMT focuses its local content more heavily on the Kalamazoo and Battle Creek areas, so it was not included in the study.

The 11:00 p.m. newscasts on WOOD-TV and WZZM-TV were studied. The 10:00 p.m. newscast on WXMI-TV was studied, since WXMI does not air an 11:00 p.m. newscast. The newscasts were recorded over a seven-week period from June 1, 2003 to July 19, 2003. Each week, the late newscast of each station was studied on the same day. For example, during the week of June 1, 2003, the late local newscast on June 1 was the subject of the study.

The data in this chapter show clear differences and similarities between the stations in various content areas. To further evaluate those differences over the course of the seven nights studied, a univariate analysis of variance was performed in each of the local content areas.

A mean number was calculated for each station in each local content area. The number was based on the amount of newscast time devoted to the content area. These numbers were used in various calculations in a statistical computing program,
Statistical Programs for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Then, the program produced statistical probability data.

The probability measures the difference between the stations in each content area. A probability of 0 to .05 indicates a significant difference between the stations. A probability of .05 to .09 indicates a somewhat significant difference. Finally, a probability of .10 or higher is insignificant.

Local News

This category included fires, accidents, press conferences, etc. As a percentage of total newscast time, the late local newscasts in Grand Rapids featured a small amount of local news. The station averages for the seven weeks studied were very similar, with local news comprising 14.8% to 17.7% of each newscast.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>2090</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>2494</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>2244</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOOD devoted the most newscast time to local news, with 2.9% more local news than WZZM, which devoted the least amount of time to local news. With a probability of .683, there was insignificant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to local news.
Local TV News

Table 8

Local news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>215861.333</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26982.667</td>
<td>1.773</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2218775.048</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2218775.048</td>
<td>145.773</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>203876.952</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33979.492</td>
<td>2.232</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>11984.381</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5992.190</td>
<td>.394</td>
<td>.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>182649.619</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15220.802</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2617286.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>398510.952</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .542 (Adjusted R Squared = .236)

State News

This category included news coverage outside of the viewing area, but still in the state of Michigan. The time devoted to state news coverage was remarkably similar on the three late local newscasts studied over the 7-week period. The greatest variance between the stations was .7%, making this the most similar category studied in terms of total newscast time. State news comprised 2.3% to 3% of newscast time.

All three stations devoted more time to promotions than to state news coverage.

Table 9

State News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WOOD devoted the most newscast time to state news, with .7% more state news than WXMI, which devoted the least amount of time to state news. With a probability of .807, there was insignificant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to state news.

Table 10

State news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>72286.286</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9033.286</td>
<td>4.350</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>63085.762</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63085.762</td>
<td>30.377</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>71359.905</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11893.317</td>
<td>5.727</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>906.381</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>453.190</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td>.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>24920.952</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2076.746</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>160273.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>97187.238</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .744 (Adjusted R Squared = .573)

National/World News

This included news coverage outside of the state of Michigan. All of the newscasts studied included more national/world news than state news. The amount of national/world coverage varied considerably more than the amount of state and local news. In fact, WXMI devoted twice as much newscast time to national/world news (8.4%) than WZZM (4.2%).
Table 11
National/World News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>1187</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local Features

This category included everything from substantial interviews to stories about free car washes. The stations studied also varied considerably in the amount of time devoted to local features. In fact, WZZM (875 seconds) had more than three times as much of the newscasts devoted to features when compared to WOOD (239 seconds).

Table 12
Local Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Local TV News

WZZM devoted the most newscast time to local features, with 4.5% more local features than WOOD, which devoted the least amount of time to local features. With a probability of .054, there was somewhat significant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to local features.

Table 13
Local features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>37047.905*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4630.988</td>
<td>1.203</td>
<td>.373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>128076.190</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>128076.190</td>
<td>33.272</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>8063.810</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1343.968</td>
<td>.349</td>
<td>.897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>28984.095</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14492.048</td>
<td>3.765</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>46191.905</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3849.325</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>211316.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>83239.810</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* R Squared = .445 (Adjusted R Squared = .075)

Issue-Oriented Reporting

This category involved the coverage of issues involving original investigation, research, and interviews at various locations. Of the eight content areas studied, the greatest difference in coverage was evident in the area of issue-oriented reporting. During the seven newscasts studied, WOOD only devoted 48 seconds (.3%) to this type of coverage. WXMI devoted 957 seconds (6.8%) to issues. Some of the WXMI stories were more than four minutes, considerably longer than a typical local television news story of about 90 seconds.
WXMI devoted the most newscast time to issue-oriented reporting, with 6.5% more coverage than WOOD, which devoted the least amount of time to issues. With a probability of .023, there was significant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to issue-oriented reporting.

Table 14
Issue Oriented Reporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15
Issue-oriented reporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>78413.333*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9801.667</td>
<td>2.930</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>86785.714</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>86785.714</td>
<td>25.943</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>43125.619</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7187.603</td>
<td>2.149</td>
<td>.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>35287.714</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17643.857</td>
<td>5.274</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>40142.952</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3345.246</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>205342.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>118556.288</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .661 (Adjusted R Squared = .436)
Outside-Source Features

This category included features produced by a source other than the station. Over the 7-week period studied, only one station presented a considerable number of outside-source features. WOOD devoted 803 seconds to this content area. At 5.7% of newscast time, the station presented more outside-source features than any other news category except local news (17.7%) and national/world news (6.5%).

Table 16

Outside-Source Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOOD devoted the most newscast time to outside-source features, with 5.2% more outside features than WZZM, which devoted the least amount of time to this area. With a probability of .026, there was significant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to outside-source features.
Table 17

Outside-source features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>52747.524</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6593.440</td>
<td>1.572</td>
<td>.232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>58144.048</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58144.048</td>
<td>13.858</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>10654.286</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1775.714</td>
<td>.423</td>
<td>.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>42093.238</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21046.619</td>
<td>5.016</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>50347.429</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4195.619</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161239.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>103094.952</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Promotions

This category included the endless “teases” and self-promotion during every newscast. The cross-talk between on-air staff was also placed in this category. One of the most striking findings of the study involved the amount of time devoted to promotions within the newscast. All of the stations devoted more time to promotions than state news or issue-oriented reporting. WXMI devoted more of its newscasts (7.7%) to promotion than any news content area, with the exception of local news and national/world news.

Table 18

Promotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>833</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>1083</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WXMI devoted the most newscast time to promotions, with 4.5% more promotions than WOOD, which devoted the least amount of time to this area. With a probability of .000, there was significant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to promotions.

### Table 19

**Promotions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>37220.286a</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4652.536</td>
<td>17.431</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>265668.762</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>265668.762</td>
<td>995.340</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>7799.905</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1298.317</td>
<td>4.864</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>29430.381</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14715.180</td>
<td>55.131</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>3202.952</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>266.913</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>306092.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>40423.238</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*R Squared = .921 (Adjusted R Squared = .868)*

**Sports**

All three stations studied placed a big emphasis on sports in the late newscasts. In fact, more time was devoted to sports than any category except local news and weather. There was also little variation among the stations. WXMI spent the least amount of time on sports at 1660 seconds (11.8%) and WZZM spent the most at 1864 seconds (13.2%).
WZZM devoted the most newscast time to sports, with 1.4% more sports than WXMI, which devoted the least amount of time to this area. With a probability of .719, there was insignificant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to sports.

### Table 20

**Sports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>1729</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>1712</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 21

**Dependent Variable: SPORTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>63026.190*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7878.274</td>
<td>1.734</td>
<td>.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1314000.429</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1314000.429</td>
<td>289.139</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>59949.905</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9991.651</td>
<td>2.199</td>
<td>.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>3076.286</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1538.143</td>
<td>.338</td>
<td>.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>54534.381</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4544.532</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1431561.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>117560.571</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .536 (Adjusted R Squared = .227)
Weather

This category only included forecast-related information. It did not include weather-related news reports. All of the newscasts studied included more time for weather than any content area, with the exception of local news. Unlike local news, however, much of this time is spent on repeating the same information and highlighting national and regional weather patterns.

Table 22

Weather

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>7-newscast total (seconds)</th>
<th>Percentage of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>2140</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WXMI</td>
<td>1712</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOOD devoted the most newscast time to weather, with 3.1% more weather than WXMI, which devoted the least amount of time to this area. With a probability of .009, there was significant evidence to indicate a difference between the stations in newscast time devoted to weather.
Table 23

Weather

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>24536.476</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3067.060</td>
<td>3.043</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1524965.762</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1524965.762</td>
<td>1513.018</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>10103.238</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1683.873</td>
<td>1.671</td>
<td>.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATION</td>
<td>14433.238</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7216.619</td>
<td>7.160</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>12094.762</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1007.897</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1561597.000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>36631.238</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: R Squared = .670 (Adjusted R Squared = .450)

Content summary

Table 24 summarizes the percentage of newscast content in each subject area. The results are presented for each station over the seven newscasts studied. The results indicate similarities in some content areas and great differences in others. Most notably, WXMI strongly outperformed the other stations by devoting a considerable amount of time to issue-oriented reporting. However, the FOX affiliate also presented more national/world news and promotions. WOOD-TV presented the most outside-source features as a result of its nightly health report. However, the NBC affiliate still managed to devote the most time to local news coverage. WZZM devoted the most time to local features and the least to national/world news.
Table 24
Content Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Station content percentage</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WZZM</td>
<td>WOOD</td>
<td>WXMI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local news</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National/world news</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotions</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue-oriented reporting</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local features</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State News</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside-source features</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions

Q1: Do the late newscasts in Grand Rapids spend a significant amount of time on local news reporting? For the purposes of this study, significant amount of time will be at least 60% of the newscast.

None of the stations spent at least 60% of newscast time on local news reporting. The newscasts actually contained relatively little local news as percentage of total content (14.8 to 17.7%). The percentage of time devoted to local issues was even more disappointing. Over the study period, issue-oriented reporting was a small percentage of total content (.3 to 6.8%). In fact, the percentage of newscast content
devoted to promotions within the newscast (3.2 to 7.7%) was higher than the percentage devoted to issue-oriented reporting on every station.

Q2: Do the late newscasts in Grand Rapids waste significant amounts of time on stories that have little or no local relevance? For the purposes of this study, significant amount of time will be at least 25% of the newscast.

All of the stations wasted at least 25% of newscast time on information with little or no local relevance. This included promotions, along with outside-source features and national/world news that viewers could find elsewhere in many forms. In addition, a significant percentage of newscast time was provided to weather and sports segments (11.8 to 15.2%), considering that much of these segments involved regional or national information.

The information collected in this study clearly indicates that the late local newscasts in Grand Rapids could do a much better job with time allocation. With only about 23 minutes in these newscasts, every decision is crucial. Despite this fact, the stations wasted significant amounts of time during every newscast studied.

The stations would be well served by focusing on local stories. Viewers can turn to cable television, the internet, and broadcast network news for national and world content.

With the erosion of local radio news, local newspapers and television stations serve as the main source of news for their communities. However, the late local TV newscasts studied in Grand Rapids included just a small percentage of local news. Moreover, the local news that was covered tended to focus on events. Original local stories and in-depth reports were rare.
Content analysis

This section takes a closer look at the news the stations did provide. This analysis also reveals some trends. Stories often provided very little information. The information that was provided often lacked attribution. Some reports were incomplete, or worse yet, gave a false impression. All of the stations were also guilty of wasting precious newscast time on stories with little or no local relevance.

Sunday, June 1, 2003

WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

The lead story in this newscast was a two minute and twenty second report on the end of a museum exhibit. It was the longest story in the newscast. Part of the length can be blamed on a “live” reporter introduction and tag in front of a dark Grand Rapids museum that was closed for the day. The only news in this report was that the exhibit had a “capacity crowd” on its final day. It did not provide a final number for that crowd… or compare that number to any other day of the exhibit. The rest of the story included previously reported information about the exhibit.

The other story given significant time during the newscast was a rare example of issue-oriented reporting. But the results were very disappointing. The two minute and twenty second report involved the growth of the Hispanic population and attempts to attract the Hispanic vote.

The anchor introduction of the report said that the number of Hispanics had tripled in Kent County since 1990. How many Hispanics live in the Kent County? The introduction, even though it included a full-screen graphic, did not say. The introduction also reported that Hispanics now make up the “majority of people of
color in the United States.” Actually, Hispanics recently became the largest minority group in the country. Some minority groups, including some Hispanics, do not consider themselves to be “people of color.” Finally, the anchor said that the reporter was now going to talk about how the Kent County Republican Party was reaching out to attract the Hispanic vote.

However, the reporter did not interview a Republican. Instead, several sound bites from the Kent County Democratic Chair were presented. One of those sound bites wasted precious time by telling us “at the voting booth, all votes count the same”.

The other interviews were conducted with Hispanic men playing a game of softball. None of the men mentioned being approached by any political group in any way. The men were asked how they felt about Republicans trying to attract the Hispanic vote. One of the men, described as a recent immigrant, did not seem to understand the question and just replied “I’ll vote Republican”. The report did even say how Republican were going to approach their supposed goal.

WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WOOD-TV also covered the end of the Dead Sea Scrolls museum exhibit. While this report was only 43 seconds, it included more new information than the nearly two and a half minute story on WZZM-TV. WOOD reported that the exhibit was the most successful in the history of the museum, a point also noted by WZZM. However, WOOD put that information into clearer perspective by reporting that the museum netted much less revenue than expected. WOOD reported that museum officials expected the exhibit to raise one million dollars, but it only brought in 600
A thousand. The report cited the high cost of security and other issues for the less than expected net result. The revenue picture was an important part of the story, since the museum recently cut its staff and hours as a result of reduced city funding.

The longest story in the WOOD-TV newscast was a national report on a fugitive who had recently been captured. Eric Rudolph had been sought for years by federal officials, so one would expect careful coverage of his capture. But this story came after his capture and could only be viewed as an attempt to exploit interest in the case. It was promoted in the newscast as a review of clues to find the camp where Rudolph hid from authorities. However, we did not hear about any clues and we did not hear any new information. In fact, the majority of sound bites came from a man who lived in the North Carolina woods where Rudolph was captured. The report gave time to his complete speculation without an ounce of credibility. We hear that authorities think that Rudolph had help. But we do not hear an expert evaluation of this theory. Instead, the man who lived in the woods is given time to say, “ain’t no way he had to have help.” We also listen as he points to a stream and says, “you could drink this here water.”

Finally, WOOD-TV disappoints again with what could have been the best story of the night on any newscast. Several television stations and newspapers have closely covered the plight of Sudanese refugees who have settled in the Grand Rapids area. This night, WOOD-TV promoted a story about a triumph for some of these young men, they were graduating from high school. However, we later learn that WOOD-TV has not covered this story. It is simply a promotion for a story that will be published in the Holland Sentinel the following day. The news anchor tells us,
"Read all about their journey, their incredible, incredible journey in tomorrow's Sentinel.” Incredible, indeed. Incredible that no one bothered to cover this story on a television newscast.

WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

WXMI chose to lead its newscast with an exclusive story. It was an update on the high-profile case of a local runaway. Lindsay Ryan was being held in a mental hospital after running away with a 56-year-old man. Ryan was also charged with taking guns and money from her parents' home and was facing weapons charges.

The focus of the story was an interview with the parents, who wanted their daughter returned to them. The story provided excellent background information about the individual case and also gave the viewer a good understanding of how difficult it can be to regain custody of a child who is charged with a crime. The reporter was able to provide a clear picture because he was given almost four minutes to tell the story, more than twice the length of an average local television news field report.

Later in the newscast, WXMI provided more than four minutes for a rare issue-oriented report. Devoid of exciting video, it was also the type of story that television news usually avoids. The report covered the very important issue of the fiscal crisis facing local school districts. It featured an interview with a school superintendent who said it was the most significant crisis in the last twenty years. The story gave examples of cuts at three local school districts. But it also explained how the story affected all schools in Michigan, because it detailed the way that a voter-approved proposition changed the funding model for the state's local schools.
Furthermore, it allowed the superintendent to explain the reason for cuts. He said that most districts spend about 85% of the budget on fixed personnel costs, so other areas must be reduced. The story also briefly touched on possible solutions being discussed in some parts of the state, including four-day school weeks, an idea that the superintendent said was unlikely to be approved in West Michigan.

Finally, WXMI covered a story that the stations covered on this night, the end of the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. The story only took 36 seconds of the newscast, as it provided very little information. Like the other stations, WXMI mentioned that the last day of the exhibit was very busy and it was “the most successful exhibit ever to be held in West Michigan.” However, there was no mention of the actual museum profits or the information that WOOD-TV reported about the high expenses that cut into those profits.

WXMI also offered a 29 second update on the Eric Rudolph case. But instead of spending more than two and a half minutes like WOOD, WXMI gave the viewers the same information in less than one-fifth of the time.

Monday, June 9, 2003

WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WZZM led its newscast with a review of the Grand Rapids school board election held that day. The station spent five and a half minutes on the story. It also appeared that the team spent about five minutes planning its coverage. That coverage began with sound bites from all of the winners, a tiresome exercise conducted by all of the stations with no real effort placed into a report, just a collection of short statements played one after another.
However, those sound bites looked interesting compared to the next two reports. The first was a report on low voter turnout that included only one interview, a poll worker lamenting the lack of interest among voters. The report also included some very misleading information about the turnout. The story led the viewer to believe that the six percent of voters who cast a ballot was very unusual. It mentioned that turnout the year before was thirteen percent. However, as another station reported, the six percent turnout was not particularly low. Instead, the thirteen percent figure was high compared to turnout in the district over the last five years.

The conclusion of the school board coverage was a “live” interview with the board president. This provided the viewer with the president’s comments on why an incumbent may have lost and what might improve voter turnout, both areas of speculation with no facts to back up the statements. The reporter also asked the president about the district’s fiscal crisis, but without any specific questions concerning areas where cuts could be made. Instead, it was the same “times are tough” comments heard countless times on radio and television newscasts.

The only other local field report in this newscast was a preview of the Ms. Michigan contest. However, the report did not focus on the contest, the controversy surrounding beauty pageants, or anything else related to news. Instead, it was a profile of two sisters vying for the title. The most specific things that we learned about them included the fact that one scored poorly in the swimsuit competition, but did well in the interview portion of the contest.
WOOD-TV also led its newscast with the results of the Grand Rapids school board election. However, in about half the time, WOOD provided much better coverage. The station began its report like the other two stations, with a number of sound bites from the winners. But that is where the similarity ended.

WOOD was the only station to include an interview with the losing incumbent school board member, Louis Dean. His loss was the big story of the night, as it left the school board without an African American board member, despite a high student population of African-Americans. Dean mentioned in the interview that there was a need to recruit blacks to run for the school board.

WOOD also mentioned that the voter turnout was less than six percent. But instead of comparing that number only to last year’s turnout, the station review the previous five years to offer some perspective. It was an extremely important piece of research, because the thirteen percent turnout in 2002 was very high compared with the other four years. Turnout was eight percent in 2001; six percent in 2000; and four percent in 1999.

WOOD also included a field report on major budget cuts at another local school district. The cuts centered around the transportation services in the district and the report included all of the routes that were being changed. It also included specific comments from parents concerning how the cuts in service would affect individual families.
Unfortunately, WOOD was not as successful with an outside-source health segment. This is part of the station's format, and it usually wastes precious newscast time on information that is neither local nor news. On this night, it included a short story on monkeypox cases in other states. That was followed by more than two minutes on teen suicide. The report indicated that teen suicide rates increase in the spring. How much do these suicides increase, and who is making the claim? The report did not say. It only said that two hundred teens would commit suicide this spring. Two hundred in Michigan, the nation, or the world? Again, the report did not say, nor did it attribute the number to any person or agency. In fact, the report only included an interview with one doctor and a teen who had tried to commit suicide.

WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

Instead of leading its newscast with the school board results, WXMI broadcast a field report on nine million dollars in cuts made that day by the city of Grand Rapids. With sixty job cuts and the potential for less responsive city departments, one could argue that this was the more important story. WXMI was the only station to give clear details on the cuts, including the number of layoffs and jobs that would not be filled, as well as a ten percent overall cut in each department budget. It also explained the reasons for the cuts, a reduction in state funding and less city income tax revenue.

WXMI also mentioned the results of the Grand Rapids school board election. However, it made one glaring omission. While mentioning that incumbent Louis Dean had lost his bid for reelection, it failed to mention that he was the only African American member of the board.
WXMI wasted almost two and a half minutes on a report regarding the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The report offers sound bites from President Bush and administration officials, but no new information. The reporter states that “soldiers aren’t sure where to go next.” But this conclusion is not attributed to anyone. If those soldiers did know where they were going next to look for weapons, would they tell a reporter?

Finally, WXMI misses its chance to produce the most important story of the night on any station. It was the only station to conduct a field report on a chemical release the night before at a local company, the second such release in a year.

However, instead of an investigation, the report was a public relations video for the company. We hear from company officials and the fire department about how the company was prepared for this release, making emergency plans after the last accident. However, the reporter did not mention any inquiry into how this could happen again and he also fails to mention the state findings regarding the last accident. Instead, he tells us from a city street near the plant that neighbors in the area told him that they are not worried. Which neighbors, and how many did neighbors did he speak with? We are not told.

Tuesday, June 17, 2003

WZZM 11:00 p.m. newscast

WZZM led its newscast with a story outside of the viewing area. The report indicated a possible continuation of violence in Benton Harbor, Michigan, near the Indiana border. The area had seen rioting earlier in the week. At almost three and a
half minutes, it was also the longest story in the newscast. However, while it was long, it contained almost no new information.

The report did not even present any new video. It was simply a “live” phone report, using video of violence from the night before. The reporter had no confirmed reports of current problems, except for the burning of a vehicle. He even states that “we are not seeing any unrest.” Since state troopers had been called to the area, the story certainly should have been included in the newscast. But the three and a half minute story seemed like the worst type of sensationalism.

The other local field report in the newscast was a little over two minutes. But again, it offered no new information. The report concerned curfew violations in the city of Grand Rapids. The justification for the story is certainly valid. We are told that an eight year old was found on the streets at 2:00 a.m. in the last week. This opened the door to find out more about the prevalence and punishments for curfew violations.

Instead, we heard from a parent who said that children cannot be controlled. We also heard from a police officer and another parent who said that parents must learn to control their children. These interviews were followed by a reporter statement that children who violate curfew might need more activities. So, the reporter visited a community center. But the center is not even open past curfew hours. We were left with a report that shed no light on the curfew problem in Grand Rapids.

Finally, WZZM failed with its only local news story on this night. It concerned the deadline for filing papers to run for mayor of Grand Rapids. It was the
first time Grand Rapids would have a new mayor in twelve years, as the current mayor was retiring. But the story was given less than one minute. We were simply presented a list of the candidates with almost no background information. The only interview was a short sound bite with the current mayor, offering his advice to the person who will be the city’s new leader. A lack of complete political coverage is a frequent criticism of local television news. Many say voter turnout would be better if coverage was better. The turnout for the mayoral primary in Grand Rapids turned out to be 13 percent.

WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WOOD also led its newscast with an update on the situation in Benton Harbor. At a little more than one and a half minutes, WOOD’s report was less than half as long as the WZZM report, but it offered more information. The reporter mentioned that state troopers had been called to the city because a “man was rushed to the hospital with gunshot wounds.” WOOD also presented clear information on the background of the story. Before the riots, there was a high-speed chase in the city that led to a motorist’s death. We also learned that community residents had rallied, protesting the high-speed chases the night before. Finally, WOOD offered a sound bite with the Benton Harbor police chief who warns that arrests will be made on this night if there are problems.

WOOD also scored with a story about a local Muslim-Christian summit. Local television news is often criticized for ignoring issues related to religion. On this night, WOOD was the only station to cover the summit. The report mentioned that the majority of Muslims in west Michigan are African-American, not Arab. It
included sound bites from both Christians and Muslims, and it detailed some specific
differences between the religions. Following the story, we were not simply told that
Islam is one of the nation's fastest-growing religions. The anchor noted that there
were more than twelve hundred mosques in the United States, and thirty seven of
these were located in Michigan.

Finally, on its Monday through Friday 11:00 p.m. newscasts, WOOD aired a
health segments. The reports in these segments were almost always features that
offered no new information. However, on this night, WOOD aired a report on a nasal
flu vaccine that was approved on this day by the Food and Drug Administration.
Since it was not a local story, it could be argued that the report should have been a
short story instead of a field report that took almost two minutes. But at least it was a
story with news value.

WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

WXMI's newscast included an important local news story that was not
reported by on the other stations' late newscasts. The report detailed final legislative
approval for several major highway projects that had been planned for years. The
Governor had threatened to veto new projects, which may explain why the other
stations failed to report the story. However, WXMI reported that the Governor was
open to negotiation. And in the end, that was true, as several of the projects were
approved.

The report includes a sound bite with a government planner, who explained
the importance of the projects. It also included a state legislator, who vowed to fight
any veto of the projects. Finally, the report explained that it would take two-thirds of both the House and the Senate to override a veto.

WXMI also presented another local report that was ignored by the other stations. This was opening day for the city pools in Grand Rapids. Rather than the usual feature showing kids having fun or talking with a lifeguard, WXMI actually found a news story. The report focused on a city pool that was closed, due to years of neglect, and the void that it left in a poor city neighborhood. It explained that the 50-year-old pool would take $850 thousand dollars to repair or $1.2 million to rebuild. The report also mentioned that the city was going to seek public input on recreation in the area, to determine if the neighborhood would be better served by something other than a pool.

Like WZZM and WOOD, WXMI covered the violence in Benton Harbor. However, since WXMI's coverage came one hour earlier, it did not focus on the reports of violence which were just becoming apparent after 10:00 p.m. The coverage that WXMI did provide, however, covered an important issue that was ignored in the background provided by the other stations. WXMI interviewed an activist who seemed to suggest that the riots should not have been a surprise because the community was angry about high-speed police chases. But unlike the other stations, WXMI did not air this perspective without interviewing the police chief about this statement and ones like it. This allowed the police chief to make it clear that the rioters were to blame for their destruction, and there was no justification for the crimes that were committed.
Unfortunately, after a newscast with some interesting and well-told stories, WXMI also wasted almost two minutes on an outside-source feature which offered no new information. The story was a report on virus protection for personal computers. However, there was no new information presented in the story. Viewers simply heard old advice, like a warning not to open e-mail attachments from people that you do not know. More importantly, this was a story with no local relevance that viewers could find elsewhere in many forms.

Wednesday, June 25, 2003

WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WZZM began the night with its penchant for “live” reports that are exclusive to the station. The fact that a story is “exclusive”, however, does not always indicate that the other stations were not as fast or as wise in choosing a story. It may mean that more investigation needs to be completed before the story airs or that a story is not even yet newsworthy.

In this case, as with so many others, the reporter was “live” on location for some perceived effect, not because something was happening during the newscast. In fact, the story is about an altercation with police that happened the night before.

Police were responding to a report of a stabbing and had detained a suspect. A supposed witness told the reporter that she saw an officer’s foot on the back of the suspect and that he was not allowed to get up off of the ground. However, later in the
story, the reporter said that the suspect had been drinking and was arrested for a parole violation. The controversy surrounded allegations that the suspect had asthma and was apparently not allowed to reach for an inhaler while he was being arrested.

The reporter was unable to get a comment from police, so the viewer was left with one side of the story. We are told that the suspect had recovered from a supposed asthma attack and that police had arrested some other men in connection with the stabbing.

The three and a half minute story left the viewer with an impression that the police may have violated some rules in arresting a suspect and put the man in danger. However, that was not clear, because we never learned anything from police about what happened that night. In cases like this, news organizations often hold the story until someone is able to get a statement from police.

WZZM's other local field report on this night was a follow-up to an arrest of a man who had sexually abused a relative. The report consisted of one interview with a counselor who talked about the need for children to get immediate assistance if they are abused. The counselor also reminded viewers that the vast majority of sexual abuse cases involve relatives.

On the positive side, the reporter followed this statement with Kent County sexual abuse statistics from 2002. These numbers showed that only six of the 810 sexual abuse cases involved strangers.

The report ended with a reminder that help is just a phone call away. However, the viewers were told to log on the station website to get those numbers. This was a frequently repeated tactic used by stations to introduce viewers to their
website. However, it seemed out of place here, with such critical information. For viewers without online access in the home, this might be a phone number that was needed immediately, while the motivation to get help was high.

WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

The newscast began with the most comprehensive coverage of a major story on this day. Sixteen brush fires had been ignited along nine miles of a major highway, just south of Grand Rapids. While there were no injuries or property damage, the fires caused traffic backups and came close to homes along the highway.

The coverage was one of the rare cases where technology made a huge difference. Unlike the other stations in this analysis, WOOD-TV occasionally uses a helicopter to secure footage. In this case, the view from the helicopter showed the acres of brush burned along the highway, which gave viewers the only good visual perspective.

The story also served as an important warning for viewers, since officials said that the fires were caused by a car. A pipe underneath the vehicle was dragging along the highway, sparking blazes for miles.

The story was also followed with some excellent information. No burn permits were being issued in parts of the viewing area, which were clearly displayed on the screen. The story also made it clear that great caution was needed, because brush fires were becoming extremely common with the dry weather. Viewers were told that there had been 58 fires in southwest Michigan and 297 fires north of the viewing area.
The second local field report on this night dealt with a runaway teenager. But the story was also an indictment of a state agency. The Family Independence Agency gave the girl a bus ticket to return to her home in Columbus, Ohio. She was now missing again. The report mentioned that the FIA had violated its own policy by not providing supervision to the girl at boarding and at her destination. The report also noted that the FIA had not even notified the bus company that the bus would be taking a runaway home.

WOOD-TV also covered an important local business story on this night. The area had been hit with thousands of job losses in the office furniture industry. This report dealt with the latest financial results of one of the area’s largest furniture makers. However, it also covered the outlook for another major local competitor.

Finally, WOOD spent more than two minutes on an outside-source feature. The health report on osteoporosis was a basic overview of the disease, with no new information and no local connection.

WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

WXMI updated an important development in a state news story on this night. Benton Harbor, Michigan, just south of the viewing area, had been the scene of several nights of violence after a high-speed police chase in which a man was killed. At 4:00 a.m. on this day, a state trooper had been shot while patrolling the area. The report included interviews with neighbors who were hoping for calm. But there was also a surprise. The reporter convinced the mother of the suspect in the police shooting to talk as well. She said that her son would have to take responsibility if he
had shot the officer. The interview was a rare glimpse of the desperation of parents in an area hit by high unemployment and crime.

Unfortunately, WXMI also presented some of the worst local stories on this night, following one of the hottest days of the year. The newscast wasted almost three minutes on total fluff.

The first story is supposed to be a profile of what it is like to be a lifeguard. We learned that it’s a “fun job”, “the staff is great”, they “enjoy the kids”, and you “really have to watch” the pool. What could have been an interesting story on the training needed to serve as a lifeguard and the number of deaths and injuries related to swimming was instead just “a day at the pool”.

Even worse was a report on working in the heat. An interview with a sanitation worker revealed that he had consumed a gallon of water to stay cool. A park worker shrugged and looked surprised at the reporter’s question as she said, “I just keep drinking water, so I don’t get dehydrated.” How fast do you get dehydrated? How much water should you drink? What are the treatments for heat stroke and how many people suffer each year? None of these questions were answered and the viewer learned nothing new from this report.

Thursday, July 3, 2003

WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

This newscast began with a report of more than two and a half minutes about a concert and an air show in Muskegon, Michigan. The events are major tourist attractions and are important to the business community in the area. But aside from
hearing an organizer say that the event was a big success and it may “set records”, no
ticket sales results are mentioned.

The other local field report previewed the closing of a maternity wing at a
Grand Rapids hospital. The reporter was “live” outside of the building, but the wing
did not close for several more days and nothing was happening that night. Basically,
this was a chance for nurses to talk about their sadness and the fact that they were
preparing to move to another hospital. No information is presented about the
implications of the move, other than the fact that some nurses will have to get used to
a new hospital.

WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WOOD presented an excellent report about a local police chief who was fired
after turning over an investigation of the city manager to state police. Later, the city
manager resigned and the police chief was rehired.

The report included an interview with the police chief, as well as angry
citizens. The story also mentioned that the city manager had refused to talk with
reporters but had said that the police chief was fired for poor communication and a
bad relationship with his staff.

WOOD’s outside source health report on this night presented some interesting
information about a less invasive alternative to angiograms. The story was not local,
but it provided some excellent information about improvements to eco-cardiograms.
The report also mentioned that the procedure was not a replacement for angiograms,
and could not be used in all cases.
WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

WXMI's coverage of the major air show and concert in Muskegon was only slightly better than the report on WZZM. Ticket sales were still not mentioned, but the reporter did interview a tourism director who stated that almost one million people would be entertained at both events over the course of the week. The story also mentioned the hours of operation for the remaining events, information not noted by WZZM.

On this night before Independence Day, WXMI also presented a very complete report on fireworks safety. A child had been injured after using fireworks the night before. The report included interviews with parents purchasing fireworks and a doctor who warned parents to go to a fireworks show instead.

To give some perspective to the debate, the reporter states that eight to ten thousand people are treated for fireworks injuries each year, and half of the injuries involve children. Unfortunately, no source is provided for this information.

The report is followed by some excellent information. Viewers were given the burn hotline number. In addition, there was a review of legal and illegal fireworks in Michigan.

WXMI continued its practice of airing lengthy national/world news stories. It spent almost three minutes on a report concerning a possible troop deployment in Liberia. The report quoted "some sources," but never explained, even in the most general sense, who the sources were. We were also told that there would be no more than two thousand troops deployed, but the significance of that number was never explained.
Friday, July 11, 2003

**WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast**

WZZM, like all of the stations studied, covered the funeral of a state trooper who had been shot in the northern part of the viewing area. This report included interviews with the trooper’s friends. It also featured a sound bite with a state trooper, who noted that they were still searching for their comrade’s killer. It was a sensitive and well-told report.

Later in the newscast, WZZM made one of its attempts with issue-oriented reporting. In this case, the story involved an $80,000 study examining the possibility of creating an entertainment district in downtown Grand Rapids. However, we were never told how this study would be conducted and what exactly it would attempt to review. There were no interviews with the people conducting the study.

Instead, we heard from a business leader who has investments downtown and is excited about the study. There were no interviews with independent business analysts. The only other sound bites were from people who happened to be walking the street that night. The report sheds no new light on a very important topic.

**WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast**

WOOD led its newscast with more than two and a half minutes on the search for a man suspected of killing a state trooper. Despite the length of the report, it offered no new information on the case. The reporter simply interviewed people in the suspect’s hometown who speculated on his whereabouts. WOOD’s report on the trooper’s funeral was also sensitive and well told. Like WZZM’s report, this story included interviews with the trooper’s friends and fellow police officers. It also
added an important fact about the ceremony. The church bell had been sounded 49 times, to represent the 49 state troopers killed in the line of duty.

Later in the newscast, WOOD presented its nightly health report. This story was about alternatives to hormone replacement therapy for women. It included an interview with patients and a doctor. However, the doctor was not presented as an expert on the subject. In addition, the report does not give information about specific natural remedies and no studies about the effectiveness of alternatives are mentioned. After the report, the anchor of the health segment urged viewers to talk to their doctors about the subject. Then, the anchor stated that a study of red clover showed only a slight improvement in some symptoms. However, red clover was never mentioned in the report, so the viewer does not even know what symptoms were studied.

**WXMI 10:00 p.m. newscast**

WXMI led its newscast with an update major local story. It dealt with how employees of a local firm were left with unpaid medical bills when the company closed without warning. One hundred and fifteen people had lost their jobs at Grand Rapids Plastics, and the story included interviews with several workers who had medical bills that the company should have paid.

In one case, the reporter presented a court document stating the Grand Rapids Plastics was responsible to pay an employee’s bill. The reporter interviewed the owner of the defunct company by phone, who said that he would make the payments in time.
WXMI’s coverage of the funeral of a state trooper who was killed was another fine local story. It was the only report concerning the funeral which said that four thousand officers had attended. No source was given for the figure, but if it was accurate, it was important fact that showed just how much of an impact the trooper’s death had on police across the state and the region. The report included another fact missed in the other reports. It mentioned that the officer who was killed had just won a bravery award for his actions during another case, and that award was one of the department’s highest honors.

WXMI also had an update on a major political controversy involving the firing of a local police chief. The chief was fired by a city manager after the chief forwarded an investigation of that manager to state police. The update included sound bites from citizens asking the city manager to resign. It also noted that the city council was holding a special meeting on Monday to discuss the manager’s possible resignation.

Saturday, July 19, 2003

WZZM-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WZZM led its newscast with a report on an anti-American rally and violence in Iraq. At almost two minutes, it was also the longest story in the newscast. It was also a story that aired on the national news more than four hours earlier.

For its second-longest story, at just over one minute, WZZM sent a crew to a local park. A “poetry in the park” event was held there. We learned little about the poetry and nothing about the background behind the event. Instead, sound bites were presented with people who said that it was a “great event”, “a beautiful art form”, and
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turnout was “great”. In other words, a crew got some video and went back to the station.

WOOD-TV 11:00 p.m. newscast

WOOD presented a report on a drowning at a local camp. The report noted that three counselors were with the children and the girl who drowned got separated from the group when it was time to leave the camp.

The report included an interview with a doctor about the drowning and then offered several tips for parents. Viewers were advised to always watch children when they are around the water, to make sure that they are wearing bright clothing, and to have them use the “buddy system” so they are never alone in the water.

WOOD’s next local story concerned the explosive demolition of a local landmark, the Welsh Auditorium. It was a story that was wisely told in 30 seconds on WZZM. Instead, WOOD wasted almost two and half minutes, replaying the explosion six times during its report. The sound bites were mostly from people reacting to the explosion. The one piece of redeeming value was a short sound bite with a local historic preservationist, who pointed out that the building being demolished was one of the most significant art deco structures in the state of Michigan.

WXMI-TV 10:00 p.m. newscast

WXMI gave the demolition story a similar treatment, though it wasted about 90 seconds. The station replayed the explosion four times instead of six. As for sound bites, we heard similar reactions from people who watched the explosion.
WXMI had a number of exclusive stories on this night. The first involved a fire at a warehouse in Kalamazoo. But instead of just covering the fire, the reporter talked with neighbors, who said that they had been trying to get the city to demolish the vacant eyesore. Another fire occurred at the site several years earlier, and the property was filled with graffiti and trash. The reporter got a comment from a city official, who said that the building should be demolished within a few months.

Another report explained to thousands of residents why they had lost power that day. A truck had hit an electric wire. The report included interviews with neighbors and business owners who had been inconvenienced by the accident.

Finally, WXMI was the only station to cover a local Hispanic celebration. With a significant and growing Spanish-speaking population, community leaders were trying to publicize services. The report included a sound bite with an organizer who noted that there are bilingual bank officers in the area, in addition to other bilingual services.
CHAPTER V
Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a number of recommendations generated from reviewing the data presented in chapter IV. It is clear that all of the stations studied could make significant improvements. Some of the corrections would involve training and better editorial review of information before it is presented on the air. However, the greatest number of improvements could be realized by a better allocation of newscast time. Stations have the opportunity to improve issue-oriented reporting, present more complete information, and generate original stories. In order to do so, information with little or no local relevance must be eliminated.

Conserve newscast time

All of the stations studied wasted considerable amounts of time during every newscast, and there was no time to waste. In a 35-minute late newscast, all of the stations presented about 12 minutes of commercials and promotions outside of the newscast. That left only about 23 minutes for the newscast.

Despite this time challenge, all of the stations reported national and world news that viewers can find elsewhere in many forms. In addition, some newscasts included field reports on national stories that could have easily been told in 30 seconds.

All of the stations also wasted time with “live” reports, when nothing new was happening during the newscast. These reports often include a minute or more just for “live” introductions and tags.
Outside-source features were another waste of time. One station, WOOD-TV, aired outside-source health reports on every weeknight newscast studied. These reports, which averaged two minutes or more, did not contain local information and only presented new information on one occasion during the study period.

New information was also lacking in many local, state, and national stories. For instance, several stations repeated previously reported information about a museum exhibit, simply because it was the last day of the exhibit.

Much of the local weather and sports segments did not involve local information. The same weather forecast was consistently repeated three times in every newscast. Moreover, much of the longest weather segments were used to allow the meteorologists to show computer graphics to explain national weather patterns.

Finally, all of the stations spent more time on promotions than state news or issue-oriented reporting. Sometimes, these so-called “teases” even included sound bites and were nearly as long as the stories being promoted.

Eliminate poor journalism

Poor journalism is another area of concern. Many of the stories presented during the study period included factual information with no attribution to a source. Worse yet, one WZZM-TV story about voter turnout gave the viewer a false impression. The report indicated that turnout was exceptionally low because it was much lower than the previous year. However, another report on WOOD-TV reviewed the previous five years of voter turnout data. The WOOD report showed that the turnout during the previous year was unusually high compared to the other four years.
Another report on WZZM attempted to explain how Republicans were targeting the Hispanic vote. However, no Republicans were interviewed during the report. In fact, no Hispanics who had received Republican literature were interviewed either. Instead, the reporter simply interviewed some Hispanic men to find out what they thought about the supposed plan. The only other interview was with a county chair of the Democratic party.

**Improve issue-oriented reporting**

The newscasts studied devoted a small percentage of newscast time to issue-oriented reporting (.3 to 6.8%). WXMI devoted the most amount of time to issues (6.8%). These stories were often four or five minutes, instead of the usual 90 seconds to two minutes. The time spent was well worth it. The stories included an excellent report explaining the crisis in funding for local school districts and a story about the closure of a city pool after years of neglect. Both reports presented information about solutions being studied, in addition to the current problems.

**Improve research**

On a number of occasions, WOOD-TV presented research following field reports to put the story into proper perspective. All of the stations would be wise to follow this example. In many cases, the information that WOOD presented was interesting and very relevant. One example of this was a report involving a number of brush fires. That report was followed with data about the large number of brush fires across the state and information about an end to burn permits in some areas. In other cases, the research that WOOD presented was crucial to understanding the story. An example of this was the previously mentioned report about voter turnout.
WOOD was the only station to present voter turnout data over the previous four years, in order to show how the current year’s turnout compared.

**Develop original stories**

Over the course of the seven weeks, it was very evident that the newscasts studied were remarkably similar in a number of ways. So-called “pack journalism” is easy, but ineffective. Today, viewers can turn to cable news and the internet 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Local stations that focus on local news and original reporting can hold on to current viewers and attract new ones.

However, there were few examples of original reporting during the study period. That is unfortunate, because original reports often present engaging, important information. For example, a WXMI-TV story showed how difficult it can be for parents to regain custody of a child who has been charged with a crime. The station gave the reporter the time to research the story, and also gave him almost four minutes to tell the story. This was the rare exception. But as this study clearly shows, with better time allocation, every newscast can include stories that are well researched and reported.
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