



# NewsLab Report

News and Tips from NewsLab, a Television News Laboratory • Vol. 2 No. 2 Spring 2000

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## Breaking in on a Beat Lessons from Local Newsrooms

On the wall of the planning room at WTKR in Norfolk, VA, is the “Enterprise Success Board”—a place to list the station’s exclusive stories. The most recent entry is months old—but not because it’s been that long since the station broke a story. News executives say they break so many now, they just can’t keep up.

How do they do it? Assistant news director Mike Mather says it’s simple. Every reporter at WTKR has a beat—either geographic or issue-oriented—keeping them ahead of the curve, and the competition.

A beat system not only breaks news, it also can add value to a station’s newscasts. “Reporters become familiar with issues and players and history so their reporting has more depth and insight and perspective,” says news director Dan Rosenheim of KRON in San Francisco. At his station, each reporter tracks a specialty area in addition to working general assignment.

Converting a general assignment reporter to a specialist can take some training. At WTKR, that’s Mather’s job. He’s a former newspaper reporter, hired away from the *Virginian Pilot* by news director Tracye Fox because she was tired of chasing his stories for her newscasts.

Mather suggests that reporters learning and working a beat take the following steps:

- ✍ Check the beat every day, in person. “No one ever got a story sitting around the newsroom,” Mather says.
- ✍ Pursue at least one story idea per day on the beat, including at least three enterprise stories each week.

✍ Subscribe to and read at least one local newspaper, one trade journal, and four community newsletters that cover their beat.

✍ Watch at least one local newscast each day in which they do not appear.

✍ Create clip files of articles important to the beat.

✍ Use the state’s Freedom of Information Act to uncover stories at least once a quarter.

Management can help by providing time for reporters to dig for stories on the beat.

WTKR grants reporters a “beat day” roughly every two weeks, when they are relieved from having to turn stories for that day’s shows. At KRON, Rosenheim also provides research days. To make the most of that time, he says reporters need a specific

plan for how the day will be spent.

Other news directors who favor beats offer these additional suggestions:

✍ Keep your staff’s interests and experience in mind when assigning beats. People who care about particular issues are more likely to stay on top of them.

✍ Match individual skills and styles to specific beats where those attributes are assets.

✍ Tie performance appraisals to diligence on the beat.

✍ Reward people who break news on their beats.

At WTKR, Fox sees her beat system as an antidote to newscasts full of reporters who do not understand their stories on any more than a superficial level. “Viewers can see through that,” she says. “TV news is notoriously shallow. The beat system fights against that.”



# Making Sense of Complex Stories

by Annie Lang and Deborah Potter

**“Viewers found the reworked stories to be much more interesting, far more understandable, and a good deal more informative.”**

Can changing the order of information or adding a simple graphic make a once-confusing story understandable? The answer seems to be yes, based on preliminary results of research conducted at Indiana University.

The research compared two different versions of four complex stories. One story dealt with a squabble over landing rights between two neighboring airports, another with a grand jury hearing about possible influence peddling. We also had reports about an international trade conference and a commission ruling to establish an ethics policy.

All four stories had aired on local stations, which deserve credit for tackling these difficult topics. The stations provided copies to NewsLab for research purposes. The stories didn't lack for substance, but two of them were seriously short of video and another relied almost exclusively on file tape. The result: the stories were not terribly interesting and they were hard to understand.

NewsLab set out to create a second version of each story using the same soundbites from the original version plus some additional video. We deliberately did not spend much time producing new elements, reasoning that it wouldn't do much good for our research to prove the obvious: that investing a lot more time can make stories more interesting and understandable. Instead, we made subtle changes in each story.

We took the information in the original story and put it in a more linear order, moving relevant background higher up. We reduced the amount of meeting video in one story from 28 seconds down to just six. For another story, we created a simple graphic to establish the relationship between key players. Before the stories were tested, NewsLab also re-voiced the track and shot new standups as needed for each original story, to eliminate the possibility that view-

ers would prefer one reporter's work to another and thus bias the results.

The research study involved 45 adults, ranging in age from 26 to over 55, who came to the Indiana University Institute for Communication Research to screen tape and respond to questions about the stories. They watched the stories alone, not in a group. Each participant screened two different original versions and the reworked versions of the other two stories. Immediately following each story, the participant was asked to rate it on a 10-point scale as to whether the story was informative, believable, interesting, easy to understand, enjoyable, engaging, and important.

We then compared results for all of the reworked versions to results for all of the originals. On every scale, the reworked stories were rated better than the originals. On six of the seven rating scales—all except importance—the difference was statistically significant ( $p < .01$ , meaning there is only a one percent chance that the effect is due to coincidence). And the greatest differences were in three areas: viewers found the reworked stories to be much more interesting, far more understandable, and a good deal more informative.

We look forward to learning still more from this research as we analyze additional data. Among other things, we'll be looking at whether viewers paid closer attention to the reworked stories than the originals, whether they actually understood the stories better and whether they remembered the reworked version better than the original when asked a day or two later.

These preliminary results suggest that it doesn't take more time or additional resources to create stories that can have a greater impact on viewers. Stories that follow a simple, narrative structure, and that use video to illustrate information—not just to cover the track—can interest viewers and leave them feeling more informed.

*Annie Lang is director of the Institute for Communication Research at Indiana University.*

### Recommended Resources

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- Read a summary of more research on television news on the NewsLab Web site at [www.newslab.org/biblio.htm](http://www.newslab.org/biblio.htm)

- Contact Annie Lang at [anlang@indiana.edu](mailto:anlang@indiana.edu)

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### Planning Ahead Pays Off

by Kevin Benz, News Director, News 8 Austin, Austin, Texas

It's not easy to get your staff together for an hour-long editorial meeting. It's next to impossible to take a day out to discuss story structure and ethics. We were lucky. Three months before launching a 24-hour local newschannel, we brought together our new news-staff and invited NewsLab to fill our heads with ideas and challenge our ethics.

Twenty-four-hour news coverage makes unique demands upon a newsroom. We don't have time for drawn out discussions on the ramifications of a breaking news story. We need it on the air now, and since our staff makes those decisions on the fly, we must give them the tools to do it easily. We also place an emphasis on community-based coverage, the kind of stories that are often the most difficult to visualize.

For eight hours, Deborah Potter stood before 50 reporters, producers, and assignment desk editors and asked them to think differently about how they cover news. Our range of experience is pretty wide, from 25-year veterans to fresh J-school grads, but Deborah managed to get through to them all. The discussion ranged from how to find and focus complex stories to what ethical considerations may be involved in even the simplest stories. Using real packages from other markets, handouts, and video "examples,"

NewsLab gave life to a philosophical "big J" debate. One of our veteran anchors commented after the session, "It's encouraging that Journalism (big J) is still alive."

The workshop brought tangible results. Reporters now question the value of information they pick up in the field; they call often to bounce ideas around, and our entire newsroom gets in on discussions about how a story can be done. We sometimes still miss the mark on stories, but after News Lab's workshop, everyone understands how good they can be.



Yes, I know, most newsrooms can't afford the time to do this. But in the "what have you done for me lately" world of TV news, newsrooms really can't afford not to. Our competitive environment is tougher than ever. We all strive to look "different," to report "community-based" news, to "personalize" our stories, but is anyone really teaching us how to do that while still being good journalists? The answer is yes. NewsLab is there for us. As one of our sports journalists said, "They seem to stress creativity, while also realizing the limitations of TV news." Amen brother.

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### Trade Tips

Once upon a time... There's a good reason so many classic tales start with those words. When people tell stories in person they usually begin at the beginning. And to engage your viewers, research suggests you should try telling stories on television the way they're most often told in person.

That means using strong, chronological narratives whenever possible. Studies have found that narrative stories told from beginning to end are remembered substantially better than stories told in the old "inverted pyramid" style.

Quick edits can make viewers pay closer attention to what they're seeing, but only if the cuts construct a visual sequence within a scene. If you're cutting between different scenes, research has found that memory for detail decreases as edit speed increases. No matter what the edit speed, viewers generally have trouble recalling information that immediately follows a cut to a different scene. It's almost as if their attention is distracted by the new visual information so they can't process what they're hearing. The effect seems to last for two or three seconds, suggesting that the track right after a scene change should not include information that's absolutely crucial to understanding the story.



image © 1998 PhotoDisc, Inc.

# NewsLab Help Available 24/7

The story is complicated and you're on deadline. Where can you find help in a hurry? Take a look at the NewsLab Web site: [www.newslab.org](http://www.newslab.org). It's loaded with tips on how to cover many of the complex issues your newsroom may be grappling with.



Trying to do a story on the campaign or upcoming election? Just click on the "Campaign Coverage that Counts" link for ideas on how to make the story come alive. Looking for information on children and families? Pull up our "Internet Resource Guide for Covering Children's Issues" for a list of helpful Web sites.

Similar tip sheets and Internet guides are available to help you research and brainstorm stories on energy deregulation, education finance, light rail transit, internet technology, the courts and the judicial system, and urban sprawl. NewsLab's Web site also provides tips on how to improve your storytelling in general, how to make sure a good story doesn't die in the morning meeting, and where to look for interesting, compelling soundbites.

And NewsLab doesn't just tell you, we show you too! Streaming video examples are available on our Web site to illustrate storytelling techniques outlined in the tip sheets. So, next time you need a little help making a great idea come to life, take a look at NewsLab.org. Chances are, there's something there that will help. And if you can't find what you're looking for, e-mail us. Our Web site is a work in progress for you.

Check the NewsLab workshop schedule at [www.newslab.org/workshops.htm](http://www.newslab.org/workshops.htm)



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