



NewsLab Report

News and Tips from NewsLab, a Television News Laboratory • Vol. 1, No. 1 Spring 1999

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Storytelling Strategies: Finding a Way Around Picture Problems

Some of the toughest stories to tell on television are those that are “picture poor” or where the pictures are predictable. NewsLab has been working on a series of strategies to help journalists turn these stories into something worth watching. One effective strategy is to find an image or a metaphor that will convey the essence of the story. When faced with a complex, non-visual story, try asking yourself, “What does this remind me of?”

Consider, for example, a story about a new kind of computer chip. What’s the video? Technicians in white lab coats? Robotic arms moving tiny wafers around? Not necessarily. Reporter Byron Harris at WFAA-TV in Dallas managed to tell the story with only one shot of chip manufacturing. Instead, he used video analogies. He compared information flowing through computer chips to traffic, using

aerials of streets and highways. And he explained how the chips are made by comparing the process to home construction, using video of reinforcing bars in a house foundation.

If a complex issue or process reminds you of precisely nothing, ask your sources what it reminds *them* of. Reporters often use this technique as a way to get a usable soundbite out of an expert interview. But it’s also a proven way of getting ideas for video to illustrate non-visual subjects. Another approach is to press your source for telling details that can give you visual clues.

More strategies for how to approach similar stories can be found on the NewsLab website at www.newslab.org/strategies.htm. If you have a success story to share, we’d be happy to hear from you.

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What’s New in the Lab and on the Road

NewsLab offers local television journalists a chance to think, plan and experiment. Stations are invited to send a team to Washington, DC, for Lab Days—two days of intensive planning and hands-on work on the project of their choice.

Lab Days should be most useful to stations that have a specific project or problem they want to work on. It could be a news story, or a program they want to rethink. It could be a franchise segment they’d like to start or a story type they’ve never done successfully. The aim is to provide stations with time away from the newsroom to experiment, hands-on, in our AVID-equipped lab. Participants can bring tape and shoot additional footage as needed. We’ll schedule only one station at a time, so they will

have our undivided attention. NewsLab pays travel and lodging for two people per station. Please contact us for more information.

NewsLab regularly offers presentations at regional journalism workshops. The spring 1999 calendar follows.

April 10, 1999, St. Paul, MN
“Making Dull Stories Sizzle” at the Northwest Broadcast News Association annual conference

April 17, 1999, Wilmington, DE
National Writers Workshop

April 24, 1999, Bloomington, IL
Illinois News Broadcasters Association annual conference

April 25, 1999, Omaha, NE
National Writers Workshop



The Shrinking Audience for TV News: Why are Viewers Tuning Out?

by Deborah Potter and Walter Gantz

“Some viewers, it seems, are turning away because they don’t like what they see.”

For years, network television news lost viewers while the audience for local news held steady. Now, the local news audience is shrinking too, and a pilot study by NewsLab and Indiana University suggests that content is at least partially to blame.

Surveys tell us that local television is still the number one source of news for most Americans. But according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the number of people who call themselves regular viewers of local television news has declined by 11% in the past three years. In 1995, almost three-quarters of those surveyed (72%) said they watched the local news regularly. In 1998, fewer than two-thirds (64%) fell into the category of regular viewers.

Data collected for a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found a similar decline. Over a three-year period, the combined viewership of local news was down in almost three-quarters of the 20 markets studied—in some cases by as much as 20 percent.

What’s turning people away from local television news? The conventional wisdom is that it’s all about lifestyles and choices. People are too busy to watch, or they’re turning to other sources for news. But are there other factors?

Working with Professor Walter Gantz at Indiana University, we surveyed almost 200 adults in the Indianapolis area. Despite the limited reach of the study, the findings are intriguing.

Over half the respondents (58%) said they watched the local news “regularly,” at least several nights a week. When we asked those who said they only watch the news “sometimes” why they didn’t watch more often, the most common answer—as expected—was lack of time

(45%). But a substantial minority (23%) mentioned content as a reason for not watching. More than half of those respondents specifically mentioned annoyance with content laced with violence, sex and scandals.

We also found an interesting split in the audience. About a third of our sample said they watch the news more often now than a few years ago, and a similar number, about a third, said they watch less often. Those who have cut back on local television news were much more likely to say they get their local news from other sources. They were also more likely to say the news is too shallow, and that the newscasters are uninformed. And there were indications that people who watch less may be turned off by the promos for the news.

The two groups don’t differ greatly in some areas where they might be expected to. They are about equally likely to criticize crime coverage and to say the news is boring. But people who said they had cut down their viewing of local news were less interested in specific kinds of content they’re likely to see on the news: the weather, accidents, crime, education and high school sports.

This study is too limited for us to draw any firm conclusions. But it offers news directors and broadcast executives something to think about. Their stations may not be losing viewers just because people are too busy to watch. Some viewers, it seems, are turning away because they don’t like what they see. This group may be a minority of the audience, but with viewership declining and competition increasing, it’s well worth considering what kinds of content may be driving these viewers away, and what might bring them back.



Recommended Resources



- Read more about this study on the NewsLab website at www.newslab.org/nonview.htm

- Surveys by the Pew Research Center can be found on the Internet at www.people-press.org

- Contact Walter Gantz at gantz@indiana.edu



Making Sense of a Meeting Story

by Deb Halpern, assistant news director, WFLA-TV, Tampa

It was the kind of story that makes perfect sense when you read it in the newspaper, but it just didn't work on TV. Our city's public transportation commission was meeting to discuss how to handle a pending lawsuit, and how to protect itself against future legal problems. The lawsuit stemmed from the commission's handling of ambulance permits. A businessman had sued, claiming the commission played favorites by awarding the permits he applied for to a former commission member.

At the meeting that day, commissioners voted to require former members to wait two years before doing business with the commission. And to pay the legal bills resulting from the lawsuit, the commission said it might raise the permit fees for all ambulances, taxis and limousines, or it might pass the cost along to taxpayers.

The story that aired that night relied heavily on video and sound from the meeting. It was also confusing. The lead sentence said the businessman left the meeting "a much happier man." But the story never quite explained why. More than 20 seconds later, in a soundbite, the businessman called the commission's vote "unfortunate." Seeking some

fresh ways of approaching stories like this, I sent the tape to NewsLab.

Within a few days, NewsLab sent back a series of suggestions and a revised script. A new version of the story on tape followed shortly afterwards. NewsLab's ideas weren't revolutionary. They urged us to stay away from so much meeting video. Their version used b-roll from the meeting over only one, six-second paragraph, where the original used it in three places for a total of 28 seconds. NewsLab's version used more b-roll of ambulances, limousines and taxis. They also reorganized the information in the story, moving the reference to a possible tax increase to the end, giving it the prominence it deserved. And they created a simple graphic to explain the background of the story.



I'd often told the reporter on this story that you need to do a better job of explaining the basics before you can get into the developments of the day. But having a real example to show this reporter made all the difference. The story on tape clarified and reinforced my suggestions. I think we'll do a better job with similar stories from now on.



Trade Tips

Slick production tricks may draw viewers' attention but can cost you credibility. According to researchers at Indiana University, production features like music, sound effects, slo-mo, and flash frame edits do grab attention, but they don't make stories any easier to remember. What's worse, viewers rate stories produced with these features as less enjoyable, less informative, and less believable than stories with identical content produced without any effects. The study suggests that if you want your news to be more credible, you should skip these production effects.

Telling viewers something important while they're watching compelling video may be a waste of time. Studies have found that viewers don't remember much of what they hear while compelling, negative images are on the air. In fact, they don't remember what they heard just before those images either. The study suggests that if you're going to hit viewers with emotional pictures, you should give them time to watch the video. As the late Charles Kuralt once said, "Give people time to feel something." Don't fill the audio track that accompanies the pictures with information viewers need to understand the story—they'll miss it. Save that essential information for the track that follows the compelling video.



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How NewsLab Can Help You



Deborah Potter

NewsLab's mission is to work directly with local television stations to find new ways of telling complex, non-visual stories. You know the ones—they're the stories that often get passed over in the morning meeting because no one can quite figure out how to make them into television.

NewsLab is a non-profit, hands-on laboratory, funded by the Park Foundation in association with Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and affiliated with the Project for Excellence in Journalism. NewsLab was established in June 1998, and since then has served more than 40 stations across the country. All our services are free.

We work with stations in lots of different ways. We offer feedback on stories that fell flat. Stations may be looking for better ways to tell a similar story in the future. They send us tape of what they aired, and we suggest approaches they might try. Sometimes we create new versions of the story on tape in our AVID-equipped lab, and send them back for review. NewsLab

also holds "Lab Days" when station staff can come to us to think, plan and experiment on specific projects. And NewsLab staffers make occasional station visits and participate in journalism workshops.

The goal is simply to help stations transform "important but dull" assignments into memorable stories. The payoff, for us, is to get some stories on the air that might not otherwise have made it, and to help stations tell stories so they make sense to viewers. Again, all our advice is free. But we do ask for feedback (and for stories on tape that we may have influenced) so we can develop and illustrate strategies that work.

If you're interested in working with NewsLab, we'd be delighted to hear from you.

For more information on NewsLab's free services, visit our web site: www.newslab.org.



Affiliated with the Project for Excellence in Journalism

1150 18th St., NW • Suite 775
Washington, DC 20036-3816
Ph: 202.969.2536 • Fx: 202.969.2543
mail@newslab.org • www.newslab.org

Executive Director:
Deborah Potter

Senior Associate:
Jason Racki

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