1 A Prologue: What This Book Is For

''When you go to the public rest room, is someone watching you?''

That's the question the Channel 13 news team is asking tonight to tease viewers to watch its 10 o'clock broadcast.

When the newscast begins seconds later, anchor Art Baron, a jut-jawed 30-something white male, explains: ''It's called cruising, and *13 News* discovered it's going on right here in New Mexico.''

Baron looks harder into the camera for emphasis: ''Now this story is disturbing, but you'll want to know what we found going on behind the walls of those stalls.''

The special report takes up not only one-third of the news hole on this night but also on the next night on *13 News at 10* as well, when it is introduced with animated gun-sight cross hairs with the words ''13 Investigates'' stamped over them, punctuated by pulsating musical accompaniment.

Despite the time and effort invested, however, ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls,'' as the report is called, turns out to be an empty exercise. While it notes that a Web site listed 50 bathrooms around the state as places for men to meet, reporters visit only three of the bathrooms and find . . . nothing. In addition, a search of police records by 13's investigative team yields nothing more than reports of two incidents – both in the same place – of indecent exposure in public rest rooms in the entire state.

Instead, the report falls back on several claims it cannot substantiate, some of which seem spurious at face value. Baron, the anchor, goes so far as to hint that the story will reveal pedophilia, telling parents they will want to pay particular attention: ''Your children use rest rooms in public places all the time . . . sometimes they even go in alone.'' The report, however, offers no evidence of pedophilia associated with the rest rooms

the station investigated or even the Web site that has identified 47 other public rest rooms. The allusion to children is a phony stunt, a lure to get alarmed parents to watch.

Tomorrow night, *13 News* promises: ''What secret signals you could be giving out inviting someone to approach you in a rest room.''

Some people might say picking out ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls'' to highlight in this way is unfair. The series is a particularly grievous example of a phony exposé that can't substantiate its claims, that is designed to scare and manipulate, and, as an added insult, that is on the edge of bad taste. Egregious examples of hype and sensationalism in local TV news, skeptics would argue, misrepresent the medium. Local TV news is about more than that. Every day across the country there is superb work being done in the medium. And that is true without question. The reality, however, is that ''the Stalls'' is by no means out of the ordinary. Stations around the country air pieces like ''Cosmetic Surgery Catastrophes'' at the local day spa, ''Killer Bras'' whose wires can poke, ''Is Your Frozen Yogurt Making You Sick?'' because it contains bacteria, and ''Killer Power Lines'' that may or may not maim you if you live near them. All of these are real examples, and most of them ran on multiple stations, often at the suggestion of news consultants.

The more pertinent question is: Why? Why waste so much time and money, and threaten a station's reputation, by leading with a report so thin on meaningful news? Isn't there a risk of promising the audience something and not delivering it? In other words, what is the thinking behind a series like ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls''? While that series may be an extreme example, the thinking behind it is representative of something larger, something that begins to explain, in spite of all the good work in local TV, why there is so much that is bad.

''Behind the Walls of the Stalls'' aired in Albuquerque during a ''sweeps week'' – that period four times a year when Nielsen Media Research counts the audience for the nation's television programs and comes up with the ratings used to determine the rates that will be charged to advertisers for the next three months. Nielsen ratings decide the fate of programs and staff. ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls,'' in other words, was a ploy to prop up the ratings and profits of local news. It was an attempt to catch the audience's attention. The people at the station looked at all the topics available and all the resources at their disposal and decided that ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls'' would be a winner with viewers.

A couple of nights after airing ''Walls,'' the same Albuquerque station ran an exhaustively reported, five-minute piece on an important, but

much less sensational, topic: What happens when people become ''Too Old to Drive?'' The story showed examples of accidents involving older drivers, footage of a driving class for those 55 and over, statistics that compared the accident rates of older and teenage drivers, and even an interview with the director of the motor vehicles office who had to tell his mother she had become too elderly to continue to drive safely.

What happened when the station aired these two distinctly different stories? Did either of them attract viewers?

On the first night the highly promoted ''Walls of the Stalls'' aired, there was no viewership increase whatsoever. The newscast received a 6 rating, the same as the average of all four Mondays in the four-week ratings period.[1]

What about the ''cover story'' on drivers too old to drive? The night it aired, about 10 minutes into the broadcast on a Thursday night, the 10 P.M. news received a 9 rating, the highest (by 2 rating points) of any night during the sweeps and 50% better than the nightly, weekly, and monthly average rating of 6.[2]

How should general managers, news directors, and newscast producers interpret these ''results''? And if ''Too Old to Drive?'' fared better than ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls,'' why did the latter get so much promotion, and why do local stations continue to produce stories like it? The answers to these questions are crucial not just for news directors or local TV stations – Americans depend more on local TV news than any other news source. It attracts a bigger audience than cable or national TV news, according to surveys.[3] Local TV news is the main source of information for many Americans about what is happening in their neighborhood, their economy, and their culture. How well local news serves its audience matters not only for the station's bottom line but also for the bottom line of the democratic enterprise.

One reason stations continue to run stories like ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls'' is that they are not sure what audiences really want. Newsroom decision makers operate by a set of elaborate, long-held assumptions about what motivates viewers, reinforced by anecdote, inference, and corporate mandate. Those assumptions, in turn, are reinforced by limited resources, lack of time, lack of reporter expertise, and growing demand for more programming – all conditions that are on the increase. Added to these forces in many cases is research from consultants too often conducted on the cheap and generic in nature rather than market-specific.

What's more, this mindset has not grown ratings for local TV news in recent years. In 2002, five years after ''Behind the Walls'' and ''Too Old

to Drive?'' aired, we studied the Albuquerque market again. Though the number of homes using television had increased markedly as the region grew, the number of people watching this station remained unchanged. Five years later, the 10 P.M. news was still getting a 6 rating, while its share of viewers had dropped from a 13 to an 11.

So what does work? That is what this book answers.

The conclusions we offer, moreover, are not based on hunches, anecdotes, or even conventional quick market research. They are derived from the most extensive study ever conducted on local TV news. This research includes a content analysis of five years of local TV broadcasts in large, medium, and small markets. Those findings, in turn, were correlated with actual viewer behavior – ratings and share data over time – not merely public opinion polls or focus groups, which have their value but can be misused. The study also includes an annual survey of news directors, dozens of sessions in newsrooms around the country to gather data, and focus groups with viewers. A panel of veteran TV journalists helped guide its design.

The research group behind this book is a mix of local television professionals, academics, statisticians, print and broadcast journalists, and media observers. Everyone who worked on this project understands that TV news is different from (not better and not worse than) journalism in other media and that different strategies are needed to make it successful.

Based on all this work and with that mindset, this book reveals what kinds of content on local TV news can be statistically proven to build audience. It describes the kinds of content that drives viewers away. It shows how local TV newspeople make story decisions now and how they should craft stories differently so that more people will watch them. And based on hard data, it details how newspeople should go about covering major subjects, such as politics, crime, education, and health, to increase viewer loyalty. Perhaps most important, this book points out that many of the assumptions that govern local TV content are patently wrong. Many of the current newsroom conventions lead to the practices that annoy not only critics of TV news but viewers as well.

Let's also be clear about a few things that this book is not. It is not a moral screed about ''good Journalism'' with a capital J or the latest tome from the ''shame on you police.'' Nor is it the work of a group of academics or critics with little connection to or understanding of how newsrooms really work and why. This book is the result of five years of gathering data from 1,200 hours of newscasts from 154 stations – more than 33,000 stories – followed by three years of analysis. It draws from

our work with more than 2,000 local TV newspeople at more than 40 stations around the country.

Our results show that there are elements that can be incorporated into TV news stories that make them credible and interesting to the audience – and that will get good ratings. We call these elements ''The Magic Formula.'' But there is nothing mysterious about them. They come from what veteran TV journalists tell us makes good local news. They are the goals of news directors around the country, and they are taught in journalism schools. The real mystery is why they have such a bad rap in newsroom practice.

Is there a hidden agenda in this book? No. There is no ''do good for goodness sake'' thought process behind its creation. When we began this research in 1998 we had no idea where it would take us. Frankly, our best guess was that news content would make little difference in ratings. We figured the countless other factors affecting viewership – everything from anchor chemistry to program lead-ins to set design to viewer loyalty – would make it virtually impossible to find any correlation between certain kinds of content or approaches to the news and ratings success. We hoped to find evidence that a story doesn't have to ''bleed to lead.'' This would be significant, we imagined. It would mean local TV news had a choice. When we looked at the data, however, they revealed far more than we anticipated. By cross-referencing our content research with audience data, we discovered a road map to better ratings. And in many cases, that formula is about better reporting. In these pages we share what the data revealed.

In Chapter 2, we show in detail how we did our work. We discuss the stations, the markets, the ratings, and the other sources of information we used to understand what is on local TV news today (The Knowledge Base).

In Chapter 3, we examine the current landscape of local TV news and demonstrate that, as many people observe, local newscasts often do look alike wherever you go (The Reality of Local TV News). In Chapter 4, we expose the myths that govern local TV news and give it that uniform feel; and we reveal how those myths hurt ratings, not help them. We prove, for instance, that many of the best-known bits of conventional wisdom are demonstrably false – the idea that it is more important to ''hook and hold'' an audience than to cultivate one, the reliance on yellow police tape to ''grab eyeballs,'' and the belief that TV can't do idea stories well (The Myths of Local TV News).

Most important, we analyze the data to show what actually does work with viewers, and we offer specific ideas and strategies for doing better

stories that get better ratings. In Chapter 5 we look at what approaches work – everything from the number of sources to the amount and type of enterprise and balance. We explain how longer stories aren't always the answer, and by analyzing the data we show how, and when, devoting more time to a story is a good idea and when a few quick moments of video are probably enough (The Magic Formula).

In Chapter 6, we take up particular story topics – crime, government, health, and education – and show what makes them resonate with audiences. We explain when viewers particularly want expert sources and when providing divergent viewpoints is crucial (Steps to Better Coverage).

And in Chapter 7 we take news professionals through specific strategies for implementing these new approaches in the newsroom. We suggest how to get past the old habits that die hard and how to assess the job a station is doing (Putting It All into Action). We offer checklists for news directors about how to motivate and produce news that viewers want to watch.

In the final chapter, we look to the future and the emerging technologies that are changing the way people get information. We show how the kinds of recommendations that we offer based on our results constitute a formula for facing the future as well.

Ultimately, our findings are crucial because they are about more than doing journalism right. They show how good journalism means more ratings points that can translate into tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to local stations. They are practical and bottom-line in an industry that demands bottom-line results.

We prove that doing certain kinds of journalism – using what we call ''The Magic Formula'' – really works. Although our content audit shows that there isn't a lot of high-quality/high-rating content on local TV, explaining why that is the case is not the principal point of this book. We describe in detail what is actually on local TV news and who watches it, and we offer insight into how those decisions are made. But besides the myths that govern local news, we recognize that there are several other factors that affect content and we touch on them briefly.

In part, local TV news looks the way it does because station owners expect 40% profit margins – about four times that of most U.S. industries. To make that kind of profit general managers often focus on the weekly profit and loss statement rather than thinking about the best way to do the news. This book shows, however, that profits and what most would term ''quality'' should not be considered mutually exclusive.

Our surveys tell us that consultants also play a role in determining the content of local TV news. This is not an anti-consultant book, but we have come to believe that the research many of them provide is often too shallow and too focused on the wrong questions to do much good. In fact, by steering stations wrong about their audiences' desires, consultants may do inadvertent harm. There is, and probably always will be, a place for consultants in the TV news business, but the limits of their research should be better understood.

On the whole, if there are any broad lessons from all the data we have examined they might be boiled down to this: The audience is discriminating and cares about how news is reported. The consistent message that comes through all of our research is that viewers reward stations that do a good job of gathering information and telling stories. Audiences recognize when a story is short on information or is being embellished. They tune out. They also know how to read coverage. If a station gives short shrift to a serious topic, they won't watch. And there is evidence that the audience is getting wise to the ''flash and trash'' approach taken by many stations.

Inside the industry there is concern. The days of growing audiences and appeal for the medium may be gone. Local TV news is still the most trusted, most used news source according to public polls, but its numbers are slipping. Its ratings overall are falling. And despite all the gimmicks and all the ''Behind the Walls of the Stalls'' reports, the efforts to hook and hold viewers seem to be having less and less impact.

The question for stations and news departments is: What now?

We think we have an answer. We cannot emphasize enough how much our recommendations face up to the real world – they are as good for the bottom line as for the soul. What if doing well and doing good could lead down same path? We think they do. Let us show you how.

2 The Knowledge Base

Much of what you will read in this book may startle you. If you are a news professional, it may counter what you have been taught in school or learned on the job. It may even seem to contradict what you assume from watching local TV news yourself. Why are our conclusions so dramatically different from the accepted truths about local TV news? It is important to consider from where the received wisdom of local TV news comes. Much of it is supported by anecdotes or practices handed down from bosses. Some of the conventions that are accepted truisms may be correct, but some may just be the way things ''always'' have been done. So from this point on, take all those things you ''know'' about TV news and put them aside. What you are reading uses hard data to reach an entirely new set of conclusions about news production and audience response. Among them:

- Local stations that take the trouble to produce higher-quality newscasts attract more viewers than other stations, even taking into account other factors that increase ratings, such as the lead-in program, time slot, station size, and network affiliation.
- Higher-quality news also attracts the demographic groups that advertisers seek.
- Many newsroom decisions that are made in the name of efficiency actually drive viewers away.
- Story topic, on which most audience research is based, is a poor indicator of ratings success.
- Newscasts that run longer, more detailed lead stories attract larger audiences.
- Flashing lights, yellow police tape, and so-called eyeball-grabbing visuals do not by themselves attract viewers.

What is the basis for our unconventional findings? Copious research in and out of newsrooms, unprecedented analyses of news content, and ratings data provide the hard evidence.

For five years, from 1998 through 2002, we studied the content of local television news around the country. It is the largest research project ever conducted about local news. The study analyzed more than 33,000 news stories from 154 stations in 50 U.S. markets of all sizes and in all geographic regions. This content analysis was correlated with ratings for each station and was supplemented with annual surveys of news professionals at those stations and around the country. We analyzed the tapes of newscasts to see what kind of news content correlated with higher or lower audience ratings. Our quantitative content and ratings data were supplemented with qualitative insights from focus groups and face-to-face conversations with more than 2,000 news professionals in more than 40 local news organizations.

We started this project to answer a basic question: What kind of local news content attracts viewers? Are viewers getting the information they really want to watch? Or are other factors driving the kind of news we see on local TV? How much, for example, does the station's profit target dictate how the news is covered? Is it profit expectations or the real demands of the audience that shape the news product?

When we began the project, we asked, What kind of audience research do stations use to program local TV news? What kinds of information do commercial consulting firms offer stations? What do academic studies show about the correlation between news content and audience trends? The answer was that the market is flooded with information, but there's a lot less hard data out there than we expected. Most of the audience data came from surveys or focus groups.

RATINGS

Ratings data have become increasingly important to stations and considerably more sophisticated in recent years. Originally, ratings were used simply to measure the size of the news audience. Now, they are being used to determine the value of specific kinds of news content.

For many years, the Nielsen ratings were based almost exclusively on diaries in which a member of a selected household kept track of everyone's daily TV viewing over a one-month period. These ratings were cumbersome and imprecise, undertaken only four times a year, and were accurate at tracking only general viewership trends. As a research tool, stations

ferreted out what they could – for example, how many viewers were in a certain county or whether the audience skewed young or old. From this ratings ''research,'' a newsroom might conclude it should do more stories from county X or replace the older sports guy with someone younger.

The use of ratings as a story selection tool became more pronounced in the 1990s with the proliferation of Nielsen audience meters that record when a set is turned on and off, what channel it's tuned to, and when the channel is changed. When a household member sits down in front of the TV, he or she is expected to enter a personal code so that individual demographic information can be correlated to what is being watched.

In 1980, 4 of the 5 top TV markets were metered. Ten years later, there were meters in 17 of the top 20 markets. As of 2005, Nielsen meters were embedded in households in 56 of the nation's 210 television markets ranging in size from New York and Los Angeles to Tulsa and Fort Myers. In all, meters monitor TV households in two-thirds of the country (69.58%) and speak for the members of 75 million households (see http://www.nielsenmedia.com).

SIDEBAR 2.1

THE METER MONSTER

The impact of audience meters can be measured in any number of ways, from ad rates to the faces behind the anchor desk, but the impact might be best understood by looking at how those numbers can affect a single station or a single newscast.

In November 2003, Orlando's WESH-TV had made the decision to run a high-profile series of investigative reports on housing inspections. After much discussion, producers agreed to give a reporter four minutes of airtime, an almost unheard of length, for the latest installment of the series.

The following morning, when news director Ed Trauschke arrived in his office, in his e-mail were pages of data that composed the ''overnights,'' the metered ratings of the previous evening's newscasts compiled by Nielsen Media Research from 450 households in the Orlando market.

Trauschke was anxious to see how viewers responded to the housing story. Before him were two pages of columns with times and numbers that composed a minute-by-minute breakdown of what viewers did when certain stories, anchors, or segments appeared. It