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978-0-521-87115-0 - We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too
Tom Rosenstiel, Marion R. Just, Todd L. Belt, Atiba Pertilla, Walter C. Dean and Dante Chinni
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WE INTERRUPT THIS NEWSCAST

Local television newscasts around the country look alike and are filled with crime, accidents, and disasters. Interviews with more than 2,000 TV journalists around the country demonstrate that news looks this way because of the ingrained belief that “eyeball grabbers” are the only way to build an audience. This book contradicts the conventional wisdom using empirical evidence drawn from a five-year content analysis of local news in more than 154 stations in 50 markets around the country. Correlating the content of local news with ratings success shows that news stories on a wide variety of substantive topics draw viewers and that audiences reward good journalism with high ratings. The book shows that “how” a story is reported is more important for building ratings than what the story is about. Local TV does not have to “bleed to lead.” Instead, local journalists can succeed by putting in the effort to get good stories, finding and balancing sources, seeking out experts, and making stories relevant to the local audience.

Tom Rosenstiel designed the Project for Excellence in Journalism and directs its activities. He also serves as vice chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. A journalist for more than 20 years, he is a former media critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and chief congressional correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine. Among his books, he is coauthor, with Bill Kovach, of *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (2001).

Marion R. Just is Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College. She is a coauthor of *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (1996); *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (1992); and *The Election of 1996* (1997).

Todd L. Belt is currently Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. He has published articles in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *Campaigns & Elections*. He also coauthored the book *Getting Involved: A Guide to Student Citizenship* (2000).

Atiba Pertilla is currently a MacCracken Fellow in the Department of History at New York University, pursuing a doctoral degree in U.S. history. As a research associate at the Project for Excellence in Journalism, he has published articles in the *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Electronic Media* (now *Television Week*).

Walter C. Dean is a 35-year broadcast news veteran who is a senior associate at the Project for Excellence in Journalism and director of broadcast training for the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

Dante Chinni is a senior researcher for the Project for Excellence in Journalism and a columnist for the *Christian Science Monitor*. He is a regular contributor to the *Washington Post Magazine* and has written for *The Economist*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Salon*, and *ESPN the Magazine*, among others.

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Acknowledgments

This book is based on nearly a decade of research and teaching. That journey has involved dozens of researchers, scores of broadcast news managers, and hundreds of local TV journalists. It began with the Project for Excellence in Journalism's Five Year Local TV News Project, which was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. We cannot name everyone involved here, but many deserve special mention.

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Princeton Survey Research Associates carried out the content analysis coding under the creative and effective leadership of Lee Ann Brady. Lee Ann provided the first round of content analysis statistical results and helped prepare reports on the content published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

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