

Producing 5 for Television

We've already discussed several television news producing strategies, including stacking, blocking, and putting together a completed rundown (see chapter 3). These strategies are quite common for the 30-minute (Table 5.1) or 60-minute television newscast format that has become standard at most stations around the country.

The 30-minute news program has evolved over time into the television standard. In the early days of broadcasting, news lasted only 15 minutes, as getting news material was often difficult and expensive. In 1953, for example, the major networks faced significant obstacles in getting same-day coverage of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in London. CBS and NBC chartered aircraft that returned to New York immediately after the ceremonies. While en route, technicians worked on specially installed machines to splice together and edit the film. Circumstances forced the planes to land in Boston and the edited film then had to be driven to network studios in New York.

By the 1960s and 1970s, technology had evolved to the point where news could expand to 30 minutes. Videotape replaced film, and satellite transmission made the distribution of news content much easier and faster. It also made television news a global enterprise, bringing viewers coverage of events in the far corners of the world. New developments in cable, home satellite signal receivers, and digital technology now enable viewers to know almost instantly when something of importance happens, as with the case of reporting during the 2003 war in Iraq.

This shortened news cycle puts tremendous pressure on news directors and producers, even at the local level. The growth of technology and alternative news outlets, such as the Internet, has led stations into a furious race to see who can provide the most news.

Table 5.1 Standard 30-Minute Television Newscast Format

<i>Element</i>	<i>Time</i>
Open	:30
First news block	6:00
(Break)	2:00
Second news block	5:00
(Break)	2:00
Weather	3:00
Health or news story	2:00
(Break)	2:00
Sports	3:00
(Break)	2:00
Kicker	2:00
Close	:30

Note: Stations will, obviously, tailor the news format to fit their particular circumstances, but most stations use some variant of this rundown. For a longer 1-hour show, stations often extend the length of the news blocks, add additional news blocks, or extend the time given to weather and sports. A 1-hour show might also include special segments on consumer news, politics, community interest, and so on.

Stations all across the country are increasing the hours they devote to local news content. Even in the smallest television markets (151+), nearly a third of all stations added more news between 1999 and 2000 (Table 5.2).

Obviously, not all of this additional news content comes in the form of the standard 30-minute news rundown. The rest of this chapter will focus on some alternative news formats and the strategies for producing them.

Alternative News Formats

Stations have several options when it comes to producing additional news programming and a variety of reasons for doing so. Sometimes, a station will want to give a topic extended treatment that doesn't easily fit into the

Table 5.2 Change in Amount of News Offered, 1999 to 2000 (%)

<i>Type of station</i>	<i>Increased News</i>	<i>Decreased News</i>	<i>No Change</i>
All local television	40	5	55
Markets 1-25	30	7	63
Markets 26-50	38	0	53
Markets 51-101	54	4	42
Markets 101-151	42	4	54
Markets 151+	27	7	66

SOURCE: Papper and Gerhard (2001).

standard 30-minute format. This could include things such as severe weather or breaking news. The station might also want to capitalize on a locally important topic or issue. These types of shows are especially common during election season, when stations hold debates or community forums.

An alternative news format might also be used to give the viewers a chance to make their voices heard, such as with a town meeting. Finally, there is a strictly pragmatic approach in which additional news is produced simply as a revenue source. Special news programs can be tailored to meet the needs of local advertisers. A special news program on breast cancer, for example, would be a very attractive advertising vehicle for local hospitals, pharmacies, and other health outlets.

There are several different formats for these special news programs, but generally they fall into one of six categories

LIVE

Many times, stations will do extended or special news programming live at a particular location. In many ways, the program will look like a regular newscast, in that there are anchors delivering the news and introducing taped segments, but going live on location gives the news a somewhat different look and feel. It sends a subtle message to the audience that this is special and not the routine newscast done every day in the studio.

The live show is typically produced in much the same way as a regular newscast. Producers will create a rundown, help put together scripts, and oversee the show from the control room. But the element of live



Figure 5.1 Producing a Live Show Has Many Advantages But Is Also More Prone to Technical Difficulties and Other Problems

television adds an extra dimension of difficulty. With so much of the news crew outside the studio environment, producers find communication more difficult. Stations usually assign a field producer to coordinate activities on location and help the producer communicate with anchors and technicians.

Any time a station goes live on location, it increases problems for the producer. Technical problems can knock the signal off the air, guests can fail to show up, anchors don't have teleprompters and can lose scripts, and timing the show is much more difficult. Producers try to account for these contingencies ahead of time, but no amount of planning can prevent the occasional disaster. This type of show requires lots of communication and flexibility, and producers should have backup plans in place. For example, when a station decides to do its entire newscast on location, it will often require additional anchors to sit at the news desk and be ready to go on in the case of technical difficulties at the scene.

Despite these hazards, more and more stations are producing news programs live on location. It could be as a way to highlight an event that's happening in a particular area, such as some type of disaster. But it might

be nothing more than getting the news team out “on the road” so local audiences can see it. For example, KCRG-TV in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has done a series of summer newscasts from different small towns in its viewing area. Doing the news from a fair or carnival or just in some small community is an effective public relations tool. Some viewers can become very attached to the local news, and they especially enjoy the opportunity of seeing their favorite anchors and reporters in person.

ROUNDTABLE

The roundtable gets its name from the fact that it usually involves people sitting around a table discussing a certain topic. Ideally, it is a discussion between a half-dozen or so prominent people on an important issue, but lately the format has become more argumentative. Shows like *Crossfire* and *The Capital Gang* on CNN have degenerated into shouting matches in an attempt to win more viewers.

This type of news program has several advantages, including the fact that it's relatively cheap to produce. Beyond getting a panel of people together, there's not much expense involved. The show is also fairly controllable, in that it usually takes place in the studio, is taped before airing, and can be edited. Of course, these conditions change if a station decides to do a roundtable show live on location, as ABC occasionally does with its *Viewpoint* program. This introduces all the problems of live news programming mentioned earlier.

The main drawback to a roundtable show is tedium. Like it or not, entertainment has become a big part of the news business, and audiences expect a sophisticated and engaging program. However, the roundtable is really nothing more than people sitting around having a discussion, and depending on the topic, that can get excruciatingly dull.

The producer's responsibility in these situations is to make the program as interesting as possible. Some consideration of personality and on-air presence should go into choosing participants, although this often is out of the hands of the producer. If the show is about the importance of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan needs to be on it, whether or not he's an exciting speaker. Selecting an appropriate panel is the first duty of the producer in these situations.

The producer can try to increase interest by incorporating higher production values, such as music and graphics. Taped elements can also be used at various points in the show to offer a change from the discussion format. ABC's *Nightline* begins each of its discussion programs with an extended taped report introducing the topic.

No matter how the roundtable format is presented, the producer needs to be aware that simply watching “talking heads” for an hour or so is not an effective news presentation.

TOWN HALL MEETING

The town hall meeting is a good way for a station to gauge audience feedback on a certain news topic. Typically, the format is much like the roundtable, in that prominent newsmakers will discuss an important issue. But the emphasis in this show is more on audience input and interaction. Audience members will have the opportunity to give their opinions or make direct contributions to the show.

Given that so much of television news is now geared toward interactivity, this format can be a very effective way of engaging a news audience. The moderator can lead the discussion and also solicit feedback from the audience. Phil Donohue is credited with pioneering this format in the 1960s, and it has become quite popular. CNN's *TalkBack Live* is one example of the many variations of this format now on television.

The main problem with the town hall meeting is unpredictability. Not only does the producer face the difficulties of a roundtable discussion, he or she must constantly monitor audience feedback. Audience members can and will say almost anything on television, which reduces the control a producer has over the show. In some drastic cases, the entire format or content of the show might have to be changed. Again, these problems are lessened if the show is taped first and then edited for broadcast.

With this type of format, producers need both interesting guests and a topic that will generate good audience interaction. If the guest is unappealing, viewers at home will certainly tune out, and if there's little or no audience participation, guests often can't carry the show by themselves. Finding the right balance between guests and audience can make the town hall format very effective.

DEBATE

The debate is a format with limited use, in that it's generally restricted to political candidates running for office. But even though it's used only occasionally, it is still an extremely popular format during election season.

Most debates follow a very strict format, which usually includes a moderator. The moderator is the most important person in the debate, in that he or she controls the topic for discussion, who is speaking, and how much time the speaker has. The moderator must also keep control of the debate and not let participants shape the direction of the discussion.

One of the keys to producing a successful debate is finding a good moderator. In a sense, the moderator is like a producer, controlling such things as the time, content, and flow of the program. If the debate has a good moderator, the program producer actually does very little. The program itself is not scripted, except for a few introductory and closing remarks. The producer mainly keeps track of time and makes the moderator aware

of things such as upcoming commercial breaks. Of course, the producer also must be ready to take control in the event of technical failure or other unforeseen problems.

Debates suffer from the same problem as roundtable discussions in that they can be very dull, but this is not the producer's responsibility. The format of most debates is usually fixed, so that each candidate will get an equal opportunity to speak. Audiences often tune in to see what the candidate has to say and how he or she reacts under pressure. They are forming important opinions about the candidates and don't need outside influences.

Even so, many stations extend their coverage to include postdebate analysis. Although not as tightly formatted as the debate itself, this coverage also usually follows a familiar pattern. Prominent people will comment on how the candidates fared, audience members might share their opinions, and the station might even convene a focus group to discuss the debate. Focus groups include a dozen or so audience members who represent different viewpoints. They will watch the debate together, and then a moderator (not the same as the debate moderator) will solicit their opinions.

In short, the entire debate format is usually tightly controlled, and producers don't have a lot of freedom. In addition, the general lack of interest in all nonpresidential debates and the fact that most debates are carried without commercials have caused stations to think hard about giving up valuable programming time. When a station does produce a debate, it is done more as a public service than as a means of profit.

ELECTION NIGHT

Most stations, no matter how big or small, put a lot of effort into election night. Viewers have a personal interest in elections and stations view their election coverage as an important public service.

There are many different ways of producing an election show, but one format in particular has emerged as extremely popular. Stations will have their main news anchors moderate election coverage from the news desk. The anchors update important elections results and introduce reporters who are covering races live from different locations and who will interview the candidates or other important election officials. Sometimes stations will have live reports from five or six different locations. Depending on the resources available, stations may not be able to do this kind of extensive coverage. But there are election-night producing strategies that apply to all stations, regardless of size.

Producers should understand that all elections eventually come down to winners and losers. Interviewing candidates and getting reaction is great, but viewers are primarily interested in results. Get as many race

results as possible and present them to the audience in an understandable way. Many stations now use a “ticker,” which shows election results at the bottom of the screen underneath the ongoing news program. Some tickers are so small or change so quickly that it’s hard for viewers to keep up. How the results are presented isn’t as important as that the audience gets the results in a timely and easy-to-understand fashion.

The presidential election of 2000 showed everyone in the news business the danger of getting tied up in predictions. Several major news organizations looked foolish for predicting a winner in a certain state, then having to retract the prediction. After the election, the Voter News Service (VNS) used to make predictions in elections was overhauled, then finally scrapped. Even before its demise, there were complaints that VNS would give predictions about races before the polls even closed. Hopefully, producers learned the lesson and will focus more on actual results.

It’s also important for producers to have enough people on hand in the newsroom. Election night is the most labor-intensive night of the year for the news department, and people are needed to take phone calls, tabulate results, bring in food, and so on. Some of these positions can be filled on a volunteer basis, saving other news resources for more important work. The key is planning coverage ahead of time, knowing how many people you’ll need, and defining their responsibilities.

Knowing the available staff and resources can help a producer determine how much election coverage to offer. There is now a great temptation for stations to go live from as many places as possible on election night, not only to surpass the competition but to show viewers that the station is “the place” for election night coverage. However, this type of all-out coverage makes little sense if the station doesn’t have the resources to pull it off. There are simply too many races and issues to cover, and producers might be better off focusing on one or two key things. Know what’s important in your area, and don’t try to spread yourself too thin.

Remember, *all stories are about people*, and that applies to election night as well. Don’t simply settle for campaign headquarters coverage; look for compelling stories to tell. How will the important issues affect people in your viewing area? For example, if there’s a new gambling proposal up for a vote, what difference does that make in the lives of your viewers? Find people who have a direct stake in the outcome of elections (other than the candidates) and try to tell their stories.

THE CALL-IN SHOW

Although this format is much more common in radio, many television stations use it to some extent. A call-in show emphasizes the interactivity that has become so important in today’s media environment and allows viewers to directly express their opinions. Generally, a moderator will lead

discussion of a certain topic and then open the phone lines for feedback. Some stations will not even have a discussion but will simply fill the entire show with audience questions or concerns.

In terms of producing, this type of show is very similar to the roundtable or town hall meeting. It's cheap and easy to put together but is extremely unpredictable and hard to control. Even with technology to delay or eliminate certain calls, almost every station in the country has a story about an obscene call that made it onto the air. There's also the danger that these types of shows are more suited to radio and are not enough to keep a television audience interested.

Given the growth of audience feedback and interaction through the Internet, these types of shows aren't very common on television today. Some producers have modified the format by replacing phone calls with e-mail. In Memphis, WPTY-TV airs a weekly show called *Law Line*, in which a panel of three lawyers responds to viewer questions submitted by mail and e-mail. In any event, producers should still be aware of the call-in show and know how to put one together.

How does a producer know which of these formats is most appropriate to use? That depends on several factors, including the issue or topic involved. Some topics are more naturally suited to certain formats, such as debate format for political candidates. Although the moderated debate works well for political discussion, it would not be as effective when issues such as school violence, escalating crime, or poverty are being discussed. Would a special news program on breast cancer awareness generate enough interest for a roundtable discussion or town hall meeting?

The producer must also consider the resources available for the program, including equipment and human resources. A debate or town hall meeting requires a tremendous resource commitment in terms of cameras, moderators, and finding a suitable venue. It may be that a station only has enough resources to effectively produce a roundtable discussion or live news event. It's often the case that the resources used to put these shows together may reduce the resources available for the regular newscast.

A final consideration should be the level of interest in the program, not only among the audience but among advertisers as well. Certainly, audience interest can influence what type of show to produce. If the show involves an important community topic with lots of public interest, a town hall meeting might be appropriate. If the public is uninterested or apathetic, it might be wiser to go with another format, such as a roundtable.

The station must also make an effort to gauge the interest of advertisers. If there is a strong advertising commitment, the show will have more flexibility in what it can do. More advertising means more dollars, which means the station might be able to afford a higher level of production. If there is little advertiser interest, the production will have to be scaled

down accordingly. In the example of *Law Line*, the show itself served as an advertising vehicle for the law firm involved.

Alternative News Strategies

No matter what format is ultimately chosen, producers can rely on certain strategies for these alternative news programs.

Make the Show Interesting. Because many of these news programs deal with serious topics that can potentially bore audiences, the producer must look for ways to liven up the presentation. In some cases, such as debate, there's not much one can do. Many times, however, producers can help out a show with higher production values, such as music and graphics. It also helps to make the material relevant to the audience. Why should viewers care about this program? Personalizing or illustrating the topic with stories about real people can engage viewers in the show. Don't just give the facts and figures about breast cancer; tell a story about a woman who has fought it.

As mentioned, interactivity is always a good way to make the show more interesting because viewers care more about the news process when they feel they have a stake in it. There are probably other ways you can think of to engage the audience, but the bottom line is *do something different*. Give the show a different look or feel and let viewers know that this isn't just the same old news they see every day.

Plan Ahead and Prepare. Given all the things that can go wrong in these types of shows, it's almost impossible to prepare too much ahead of time. Good producers anticipate potential problems and work out backup plans for when things do go wrong. Nothing can prevent a show from experiencing problems, but good preparation will lessen their impact.

Coordinate. More than regular newscasts, these types of shows require coordination of staff within the station and people outside the station. Producers will need to make sure that all affected departments, including engineering, promotion, production, and sales, are aware of what's going on and what role they play in the show. Some of this coordination is done during the planning stages of the program and some needs to be done while the show is on the air.

Lots of red tape needs to be cut outside the station, especially when programs take place away from the station studio. This includes such things as making arrangements for an appropriate show venue, getting the required permission, finding locations from which to send back live signals, and lining up appropriate moderators and guests. Many shows have been changed or even dropped because a producer failed to go through appropriate channels.

Breaking News

In addition to these alternative programs, a station will occasionally produce unscheduled programming related to breaking news. It could be a fire, explosion, shooting, or whatever. But more and more stations offer special news programming in these situations, and they have a very short time to put it together. The very nature of breaking news is that it happens unexpectedly, and producers may have only a few minutes to get a show on the air.

Breaking into scheduled programming for these types of events has become a topic of debate in the broadcast journalism industry. No one would disagree that the events of September 11, 2001, warranted live and immediate coverage. But there's also a concern that too often, stations are sensationalizing their coverage of breaking news. This has become an important debate in Southern California, where stations often offer live coverage of high-speed freeway chases. For example, in 1998 viewers in Los Angeles watched as a car chase climaxed with a man's suicide. In 2003, city officials finally asked local stations to stop live coverage of car chases because they believed the coverage encouraged lawbreakers. But stations are reluctant to back off, given the tremendous audience interest. "I have to be honest, whenever I see a chase I just have to sit and watch," Los Angeles resident and chase fan Richard Trejo said ("Curb call," 2003).

Most of the time, the decision to break into scheduled programming will be made by a station manager, in consultation with the news director. They will consider some important issues related to the decision, including how the situation affects the viewing audience. There is certainly merit for breaking into programming if the news has a direct effect on a majority of the viewers, such as severe weather. A significant unexpected development, such as a major disaster or catastrophe, might also warrant special programming.

Once breaking news happens, all hell breaks loose in the newsroom, and staffers are running in a dozen different directions. That's why it's important for producers to have a producing plan already in place. This could include things such as important phone numbers and contacts, identifying potential interviews, preassigning staff to certain roles, and so on. Some producers even have enough foresight to have obituaries of prominent local citizens already done and ready to air in the event of a death.

A thousand different questions need to be answered once news starts to break. Is the live van ready to go? Are camera batteries charged? What crews will go out, and what particular part of the story will they cover? A producer can prevent a lot of problems by simply making sure these questions are handled ahead of time, if possible. Have a list of emergency contacts available, know how to contact your off-duty staff, and know the status of your ENG equipment. Knowing these things ahead of time allows the producer to concentrate more on getting news content on the air.

Obviously, planning and preparation will only go so far, and that's when the producer needs to focus on reorganizing and reprioritizing. All throughout a breaking news story, producers make decisions about the most effective way to get the story on the air. They must make immediate decisions about staffing, rundowns, and coverage formats. Who should cover the story? How should the story be covered? Do we need to call in additional resources or move people off from other stories?

The answers to these questions are constantly changing, depending not only on the resources available at the time but on the particulars of the story involved. Police may have blocked off access to a desirable live-shoot location or may have closed down an entire area related to the story. Many stations that wanted to use helicopters in the immediate aftermath of September 11 were prevented when the government instituted a no-fly zone around the scene of the terrorist attacks. Producers must constantly organize and reorganize coverage of a breaking news event.

If possible, producers should try to include as much live reporting as possible of breaking news events, assuming that the news justifies live coverage. Live television news can have a tremendous impact on the audience. The most unforgettable moment of the entire O. J. Simpson saga was the slow car chase down the freeway, watched by millions of viewers as it happened. People like to see news as it develops because this allows them to become part of the drama.

Again, stations face a great temptation to abuse this power, and certainly there are far too many television live shots. But in a justifiable news situation, nothing delivers the impact of breaking news like live coverage. Viewers can see what's going on, get instant information updates, and become drawn into the unfolding story. For stations without sophisticated technology for live reporting, phoners can be an effective alternative.

Even though so much of breaking news is chaotic, producers should strive for accuracy in all their newscasts. Too many times, accuracy is sacrificed for speed, as stations race to get information on the air first. This leads to a situation in which information is often put on the air without the requisite journalistic safety checks, such as with the 2000 presidential elections. Stations using a website to supplement their television news also face problems in this area. In recent years, both the *Wall Street Journal* and *Dallas Morning News* have had to apologize for erroneous material posted on their Internet news sites.

Producers should resist the temptation to air material simply because no one else has it. At the same time, they have to trust their reporters and photographers in the field because they're the ones with first-hand knowledge of what's going on. In many instances, there's simply no way for producers to check the accuracy of statements made during live coverage

of breaking news, and mistakes will be made. Producers understand this, and the station will apologize on the air when necessary. But whenever possible, information should be checked thoroughly before it goes on the air.

SUMMARY

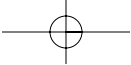
There is a lot more to news than the standard half-hour or hour-long newscast. Producers have a variety of options for putting news programs together, depending on the station's resources, the type of story involved, and the level of audience interest. Lots of planning goes into these shows, but sometimes much of it goes out the window when producers are faced with breaking news. In those situations, communication, coordination, and flexibility are the keys to good news production.

Thinking More About It

The following events are going on in your community (although not all at the same time):

- A special city council meeting is being held to discuss a proposed teenage curfew. The council is considering a 9:00 p.m. weekday curfew to help combat a rise in teenage crime. There is tremendous community interest in the proposal, both for and against, and a large crowd is expected to attend the meeting.
- One of the smaller towns in your viewing or listening area has won recognition as one of the best places to live in the country. The officials of the town, including the mayor, city council, and visitors bureau, are eager to promote the award; they see it as a way to help the town get some good publicity.
- Your city is celebrating the 50th anniversary of an important event—racial integration at the local university. The school has invited several important people back for the occasion, including the former university president and the first minority individual to attend the school. The university has several events planned during a week-long commemoration.

Your news director wants to create special programming around each event and has put you in charge as executive producer. In the process of putting together these shows, consider the following questions:



1. What format would you use to handle each situation? Why?
2. What specific advance planning would go into these shows? What other station departments would need to be in on the planning process?
3. What potential problems could make it difficult to produce these shows, and what steps can you take to address them?
4. What is the target audience for each of these shows? Given this audience, what specifically can you do to make the shows more attractive and interesting?

