NewsLab Report

News and Tips from NewsLab, a Television News Laboratory • Vol. 5 No. 3 Fall 2003

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Choosing Sound

You've done the interviews. You've reviewed the tape. Now comes the hard part: deciding what sound bites to use. Reporters always come back with more sound than they can possibly include. So how do you choose what to put in and what to leave out?

> **"Don't use sound bites as substitutes for more effective story telling."**

The basic rule is simple: Don't use a bite if you can say it better in track. Too many newscasts are stuffed full of bites that fail this test, most of which come out of the mouths of officials. Avoid sound bites that merely state facts, especially in bureaucratic language. Who needs to hear the mayor say, "We expect to have a decision later this week on contingency plans for the distribution of funds to low-income recipients"? It's a junk bite that brings the story to a screeching halt.

The best sound bites are subjective, adding insight and perspective to stories. They have passion, says KPRC reporter Tony Kovaleski. "During interviews, try and capture the passion," he says. "During writing, make sure not to miss it."

Use bites from people who sound authentic, not like talking heads reading from a script. And as WBFF's Scott Livingston says, "Often it's the person with the smallest voice that has the most powerful sound."

Sometimes it seems that reporters use bites for the wrong reasons. Maybe it took a lot of effort to set up the interview, or it was a long drive to the location. That's no excuse for using a worthless bite. Viewers don't know or care how hard you had to work to get it. If it's bad, leave it out. And resist the temptation to include a bite just to avoid upsetting the interviewee. If you think they've called every living relative to tell them to watch, let them know before air that they're not in the story.

Once you've chosen the best bites, build your story around them. But NBC's Bob Dotson warns, "Don't use sound bites as substitutes for more effective story telling." Reporters who simply string bites together are often taking the lazy way out. On the other hand, don't write your script first and then look for sound to plug in. "Sound bites are not production techniques to break up the sound of your voice," says CNN's Candy Crowley. "Think of them as part of your narrative."

To create a seamless narrative, you need to know exactly what each bite says. Transcribe your bites verbatim, and put the entire text in your script, not just the in and out cues. It's one of the best ways to avoid writing a lead-in that echoes the bite and steals all its thunder; it also helps you get the delivery right.

In most cases, sound bites need company. "When you use a sound bite to either open or close a piece, pair it with a line of track," says KGO reporter Wayne Freedman. "If you close with a sound bite, it should be stronger than any other words you might write."

Bottom line: be more selective about sound bites and your stories will come alive.

Research Report

Graphic Overload

by Deborah Potter and Tom Grimes

Watch television news these days, especially on cable, and you're liable to see more words than pictures. The graphic look pioneered by CNN Headline News two years ago is now widely imitated. Jerry Seinfeld, for one, doesn't like it. "Don't these idiots who run the news networks understand?" he asks in his stand-up comedy routine. "I don't want to read. That's why I'm watching TV."

Graphic overload isn't just irritating, it's also counterproductive. According to a new study, viewers who get their news in a graphic-heavy format wind up less informed than viewers who see the same news without all the graphic boxes, news headlines, sports scores, and weather reports.

> **"Viewers who get their news in a graphic-heavy format wind up less informed..."**

To study the effect of the graphic-heavy format, NewsLab created newscasts featuring different versions of four stories. Version one was the CNN Headline News format as it appears on the air. In this version, the anchor and the video stories appeared on the upper right side of the screen, with a graphic box on the left side displaying facts related to the story, and another graphic layer at the bottom displaying unrelated information that changed every few seconds. Version two was electronically manipulated to remove all of those graphic layers, creating a full-screen of the anchor box.

Researchers at Kansas State University had undergraduates screen the newscasts. Half of them watched a newscast in the original CNN format, and half watched the manipulated "no graphics" version. Afterwards, the students answered 40 written questions to see how well they understood the basic facts and themes of each story.

The researchers ran the experiment twice, giving the two groups of participants different instructions. Both groups were told to expect a written comprehension test after the screening. But the first group was told to concentrate on the anchor portion of the newscast. The second group was just instructed to watch the program.

The results showed that participants who watched the original format remembered significantly fewer facts about the stories than participants who watched the manipulated version that eliminated the layers of graphics. This held true even when the participants were specifically told what to focus on.

Although the results were statistically significant, the researchers note that all participants in the experiment got more than half the questions right. Clogging the screen with graphics does not make it impossible for viewers, or at least younger viewers, to understand most of what they're watching. But the study clearly shows that a newscast in which stories are surrounded by unrelated, changing graphics is harder to understand.

These results should be of great interest in television newsrooms because they indicate that newscast format affects how viewers understand the news. While this research tested only one specific format used by CNN Headline News, it has broad implications for television news in general. Other cable networks and many local stations have adopted similar practices, using headline tickers and text-filled graphics in their newscasts.

A cynic might suggest that newsrooms don't much care whether viewers understand or remember what they see on the air, because what really matters is how many viewers tune in. Indeed, one could argue that the Headline News format—fast-paced and full of on-screen movement—is specifically designed to draw "eyeballs" to the screen. But journalists themselves say their primary purpose is to inform, and if viewers can't understand the news they see on the air, then television journalists are failing to accomplish that purpose. This research sends a clear message: To make your newscasts easier to understand, go easy on the trappings.

Tom Grimes holds the Ross Beach chair in electronic journalism at Kansas State University.

References

- NewsLab's previous study of animated graphics is online at www.newslab.org/animate.htm
- Contact Tom Grimes at grimes@ksu.edu

Lab Results

When Mistakes Happen

by Gary Hanson, Kent State University

Everyone makes mistakes, even in television newsrooms, and sometimes mistakes get on the air. But how often? And with what consequences? Those were some of the questions in a recent national survey of 75 news managers that Stanley Wearden and I conducted at Kent State University with support from NewsLab. The results are sobering, and raise questions about efforts to achieve accuracy in TV news.

The survey revealed that errors are common in both large and small markets, occurring at least once or twice a week. In just over a quarter of the newsrooms surveyed, managers said errors get on the air every day. The most common mistakes are misspellings and mispronunciations; most news managers said they don't consider those errors particularly serious. The most significant error, they said, was getting a fundamental fact wrong, which was the least common mistake they reported. Far more frequent were subjective errors—inflating a story's importance, for example, or producing a misleading promo. Yet even though errors in promos have led to high-profile lawsuits that have cost stations millions of dollars, most news managers ranked those kinds of errors as less serious than factual errors like getting a name or number wrong.

Whatever the perceived gravity of the error, journalists who make mistakes rarely face serious consequences. Only one news manager out of the 75 surveyed said an employee would be fired for incorrectly reporting a person's death. On the flip side, one respondent actually said that nothing at all would happen to an employee who incorrectly accused someone of a crime. But most news managers said anyone making either of those mistakes would deserve at least a written reprimand, and about one in six said a mistake like that could lead to suspension.

Almost two-thirds of the news managers surveyed said that reporters are the first line of defense against mistakes, followed by newscast producers and executive producers. Script review is the major mechanism newsrooms have in place for catching mistakes, and as an earlier NewsLab study revealed, the script approval process in many newsrooms is haphazard at best. Even if script reviews are a regular occurrence, the person doing the review may not be in a position to catch mistakes other than spelling or grammatical errors because he or she doesn't know the story well enough to spot errors of omission or distortion.

> ...[Many] managers said errors get on the air every day.

The survey results should serve as a warning to television newsrooms. If managers really believe that accuracy matters, they'd do well to consider what kind of message they send the staff when most mistakes merit only an oral reminder or reprimand. And if most managers count on reporters to catch their own mistakes, it might be wise to offer the less experienced among them some refresher training to make sure they're equipped to do the job.

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Trade Tips

The average libel judgment against television journalists has skyrocketed in the past 20 years. In the 1980s, the average award was $200,000; now, it's over $1 million. North Carolina lawyer Mark Prak, who represents stations, says newsrooms should make sure that every employee understands basic libel and privacy law. And he urges journalists to pay particular attention to the way they gather and promote the news; more and more plaintiffs are winning suits based on questionable newsgathering tactics and misleading promotions. "If the case goes to the jury," Prak says, "we lose."

image © 1998 PhotoDisc, Inc.

Prak advises stations to develop a checklist of key legal issues and a system for reviewing stories before broadcast. Know what can get stations in trouble: misuse of criminal terminology (arrested vs. convicted); use of "generic" b-roll or file tape that suggests guilt; promos, teases and graphics that don't fit the tenor of the story. To catch problems before air, make sure the same people involved in reporting the story review *all* of the elements, including promos. And Prak says if a mistake is made, handle complaints promptly and retract if necessary. "A retraction or apology may show a lack of malice and mitigate damages."

NewsLab: The Road Ahead

Having reached the ripe old age of five, NewsLab is going through some changes. Simply put, the funding from our original sponsor is running out. What that means for NewsLab's future is not entirely clear, but it's obvious that some changes will be necessary.

Since its inception in 1998, NewsLab has been funded exclusively by the Park Foundation and associated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Thanks to the Park Foundation's generosity, NewsLab has been able to provide training to thousands of working journalists and journalism educators; encourage innovation by developing and sharing new story forms; and generate new, useful research for television newsrooms. But Park, like many other foundations, has suffered losses over the past two years and is unable to renew our grant. While other groups have expressed interest in providing some funding for NewsLab, we have not been able to secure the financial support necessary to keep the project going in its current form.

At this writing, other arrangements are under discussion to enable NewsLab's work to continue. We have filed the necessary papers to become an independent non-profit and are awaiting IRS approval. At a minimum, we expect the NewsLab Web site, with its wide range of resources, research, strategies and links, to remain online and freely available.

We'll use the Web site to let you know what's new with us as soon as we have definite word. We hope you'll continue using the Web site to find better ways of telling stories that are difficult to convey on television, and to improve the quality of your coverage.

For more information on NewsLab's future, check our Web site at www.newslab.org

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NewsLab
Affiliated with the Project for Excellence in Journalism

1850 K St., NW • Suite 850
Washington, DC 20006
Ph: 202.969.2536 • Fx: 202.969.2543
mail@newslab.org • www.newslab.org

Executive Director:
Deborah Potter

Senior Associate:
Michael Song

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