Instructions for News Scorecard

News is democracy's most essential commodity. Here's how to perform your own simple consumer report.

Guiding principles

The primary purpose of socially responsible journalism is to help as many people as possible *make sense* of the issues and events happening in the world around them. News makes informed choices possible: How to improve the quality of life -- be it environment, schools, jobs, transportation, health, government, etc.

In journalism, *entertainment* should serve *information*. Making the important interesting is the journalist's challenge. What's merely interesting may add spice. But when spice becomes the main course, self-government gags.

Ground rules

To make this easy and to level the playing field between print and television, only evaluate the stories editors feel are most important. In newspapers, those are the articles beginning on the front page, and front page of the local news section. Because TV has so much less time than newspapers have space, they only have room for top stories. So we'll examine their entire premiere evening newscast (the longest one falling closest to prime viewing time -- between 6 and 11 p.m.).

For TV, tape the newscast to slow it down for analysis. To rate the media on their best work, skip stories shorter than 10 square inches in print and 20 seconds in TV. You'll need a ruler, but not a stopwatch; most VCR's have a time counter).

Analyzing a single newscast or newspaper is helpful because most newsrooms have minimum standards of quality applied every day. Still, evaluating two or more is better.

Scoring Instructions

Identify the date of the newscast or newspaper (mm/dd/yy); the station's call letters, e.g. KTVU or the paper's name; and the time of broadcast, e.g. 6 p.m., or edition, e.g. "Peninsula" if the paper zones editions.

After each story, stop and go through the questionnaire, placing a mark in the appropriate blank for each question. Tally and circle the totals for each blank when you're done.

1. Story topics: A *core* story is about something of greater lasting importance than a peripheral story. It's usually more newsworthy. Place the story in the most appropriate category. Many will overlap; use your best judgment about the *primary* topic.

Core stories are about:

politics/government -- stories about campaigns or government actions or deliberations or hearings. Many government stories overlap with more specific categories below, e.g., a school board action overlaps with education. If most of the story takes place in a meeting, keep it in this category, otherwise note it in the more specific category below.

natural disaster -- floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.; must be great human or physical damage. Quakes causing less than millions in damage go in "lesser fires/accidents."

education -- all levels kindergarten, even pre-school to university, school readiness, testing, teachers, facilities, etc.

economics/business -- anything about the economy, stocks, labor, wealth, poverty, employment, private companies….

crime/justice -- crimes (including domestic terrorism), investigations trials; prevention, courts/justice system, gun control, etc.

health -- include medical care, HMO's, hospitals, patient's rights, fitness, nutrition, worker safety, smoking, exercise, medical drugs, etc.

environment -- air/water/noise pollution, prevention, urban sprawl, parks, fish stocks, natural habitat, global warming, etc.

science/technology -- (non-medical) physical/social science discoveries, theories, computers, gadgets.

major fires/accidents/emergencies -- must include death(s), major damage (>1000 acres burned; >$10 million damage).

weather -- forecasts, reports of storms, etc. short of natural disaster.

social issues -- serious issues only, e.g., discrimination, transportation, housing, energy, family, population, immigration, plays, museum shows, but not fads or entertainment media such as most movies and television shows.

consumer reporting -- must name retailers, products, and contain explicit info about price or quality, requires critical (non-promotional) tone and evidence --gathering. Include consumer price index, gasoline and housing price indices, etc.

military -- armed forces, wars, foreign terrorism, budgets, exercises, treaties.

Peripheral stories are about:

celebrities -- from sports/entertainment, their lives, deaths, marriages, breakups, new shows, arrests, etc. Put current and former politicians in politics/government.

sports -- including hobbies/recreation, scholastic, Olympics, amateur and professional, performance drug scandals.

lesser fires/accidents/emergencies -- non-lethal incidents, also mishaps, pipe breaks, etc. where damage less severe (under 1000 acres burned, <$10 million property loss). Also traffic reports, lost hikers, minor snafus, earthquakes causing less than $1 million damage.

human interest -- seasonal celebrations, lost pets, emotional reunions, fashion fads, boat or car shows, popular culture including TV hits, movies, unusual photos or videos, freak vegetables, etc.

others -- Stories that don't fit elsewhere.

Scoring: Add up the hatch marks and give each core story 2 points and each peripheral story 1 point. Write the total in the space below the topic boxes.

2. Knowledge Impact: If the purpose of news is not to turn heads, but fill them, what we *learn* from news is more important than its *emotional impact* on us. So even if "everyone is talking about" the story (perhaps the trial of Scott Peterson or a sports event) we'll judge it solely on what the local community learns that helps citizens make sense of their world.

A high-impact, or "big picture," story must: 1) affect the knowledge (not just the emotions) of many (10,000 or more in metro areas) people *and* 2) be important -- contain information that advances how they understand the world *and* 3) have an impact that lasts more than just a month or two.

So thematic reporting about *issues,* or patterns connecting events usually adds substantial news value. Such stories typically affect large numbers of readers or viewers in a lasting way. Almost all stories about politics and government exhibit high knowledge impact, even "event" stories like government or school board meetings.

In contrast, "snapshot" reporting about a specific event, or perhaps a roundup of similar events — a series of fires or crimes related by time (having happened recently) but not by any broader theme — usually adds little to understanding. Such reporting may even detract — keeping us from seeing the forest for the trees. Even if the incident is extremely violent, perhaps a murder, it usually directly affects only a few hundred, at most one or two thousand people. That's usually a small fraction of the total population of the region served. Such reporting is newsworthy and often compelling, but it has low knowledge impact.

Some examples: a weather forecast may affect many people in an important way -- telling them how to dress for the day -- but the knowledge impact is too short term for high impact. A school board meeting may be deadly dull, but what's decided probably affects thousands of people over an extended time. It's high knowledge impact.

Scoring: Give each high knowledge impact story 3 points; no points for low-impact. Write the total in the space provided. Try to put the story in the high or low category, but if you just can't decide, check "Not sure" and give it 1.5 points.

3. Named sources: Sources literally make the news. The more there are and the more diverse their viewpoints the better. *Naming* sources is also important. It allows you to decide how much credence to give their information. It also tips you off about their biases.

If a TV story has 3 or more identified sources (named individuals, not "police" or "lawmakers"), it's *adequately sourced*. Fewer than 3, it's *under-sourced*. Since we eliminated the briefest stories, three seems a fair standard; two sides can be represented plus someone in the middle. Because newspapers have more room, an adequately-sourced story ought to have 5 or more sources. Most stories have more than two sides and print has the space to accommodate greater depth.

Scoring: Give each story with adequate sourcing 2 points; no points for under-sourced stories. Write the total in the space provided

4. Gender diversity of named sources: Sources are usually identifiable by gender either because of honorifics such as Mr. or Ms, the pronouns he or she or first names.

Scoring: Record the ratio of females to males.

5. Appearance of racial/ethnic diversity: For TV only, since newspapers usually don't identify sources this way. You can use visual cues plus characteristic names to place sources on screen. We can only score apparent identity because names and appearances may mislead and most sources are not identified by ethnicity.

Scoring: Record the ratio of Euro/Anglo sources to other listed groups. Note those groups that appear under-represented.

Newscast/paper quality score: A story can earn from 1-7 points. Since we're only evaluating the top stories of the day, the quality of the news -- like children in Lake Wobegone -- ought to be above average. On the other hand, most news providers are businesses. They may need to produce some stories simply to attract audience. A reasonable compromise is to expand the A category to a unit and a half. Thus:

A= average score of 5.5 to 7   B= 4.5 to 5.4
C=3.5 to 4.4   D=2.5 to 3.4
F= less than 2.5

Diversity assessment: News has to reflect the real world, but need not reinforce its prejudices. Because news appropriately reports on the expression of power and power is not equally distributed by gender or race/ethnicity, some mismatch in favor of Euro/Anglos and males may be expected. But since those upon whom power is exercised are also newsworthy and usually far more diverse, a ratio more than 10 percentage points out of balance with the proportion of a demographic group in the community served is suspect for stories about that community.

Warning: This scorecard only measures a few basic components of journalism. It says nothing about the quality of the writing or photography, the choice of sources, fairness, etc. But if a news organization is consistently choosing less newsworthy topics, events with little consequence for the community, and quoting too few sources, even the best writing is unlikely to make it winning journalism. No matter how clever the journalist, a sow's ear can't be spun into a silk purse.