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A Content Analysis Of Local Television News: Coverage Of Controversial Issues And Diverse Populations In Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Judy R. Sims & Joseph Giordano

This study investigated the 6:00 pm newscast content broadcast by two Eau Claire, Wisconsin TV stations. The objectives were to explore how many stories covered issues defined as "controversial" by Eau Claire voters and how many stories addressed a population identified as "diverse." Researchers also were interested in examining types of "story content," types of lead stories, and the number of stories per newscast.

The results are consistent with previous findings suggesting that "crime" is the most frequently covered topic in local news. Researchers also found that during the 18 newscasts broadcast by the two stations combined, approximately 36% of the 150 stories addressed issues identified by the public as "controversial." However, the "controversial issues", identified most frequently by the subjects were not covered by either station. And, of the 150 stories addressed by both stations, only one story addressed a "diverse" population.

The methodologies of survey and textual analysis were employed. A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1,036 Eau Claire voters to gather data to determine "controversial issues." Results were based on a response rate of 39% and a content-analysis of 150 stories from 18 evening newscasts.

Local TV news originated more than thirty years ago, when quarter-hour segments were produced by local network affiliates to precede the network's national evening newscasts. According to Frank (1997), when the networks chose to double the length of their nightly national newscasts, the local stations followed suit with half-hours of their own. The local news-casts proved to be so financially lucrative that station owners decided to produce longer programs. Since that time "it has become a rule of thumb that local news can generate half of a station's gross revenue" (Frank, p. 19). To compete for larger audiences and thus more revenue, some argue that TV news producers have chosen to feature sensationalized coverage, heavy on crime. Others claim that local TV news does not cover important social issues (Fitzgerald, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to deconstruct and analyze the content of the local TV news in Eau Claire, Wisconsin to understand the following: (1) types of stories addressed, (2) types of lead stories, (3) number of stories per newscast, (4) coverage of local current controversial issues, and (5) coverage of populations identified as "diverse" in Eau Claire.

Local TV News: Story Types

A number of studies have examined the story content of local TV news. Some of the early content-analytic studies, however, were problematic, e.g., the definitions for "story types" were general, the "story type" categories were not mutually exclusive and/or the reliability of the coding procedures was questionable (Dominick, Wurtztel and Lometti, 1975; Wulfemeyer, 1982; Hoffstetter and

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Dozier, 1986; Klite, 1995). These studies found "hard news," "human interest," "feature stories," "issues," "unexpected events," "entertainment," "information useful to citizens," "sensationalism," and "crime" to be the most frequently covered topics on local TV news.

Of the studies reviewed that were conducted between 1978 and 1999 and which appear to be methodologically sound, the research suggests: (1) stories about "crime" dominate the news (Dorfman and Woodruff, 1997; Fitzgerald, 1997; Finder, 1998; Fletcher, 1998; Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 1999; Center for Media and Public Affairs Archive (CMPA), 2000); (2) the percentage of stories about politics, local and state government varies from 15% to 75% (Ryu, 1982; Adams, 1978; Bernstein and Lacy, 1992; Fitzgerald, 1997); (3) the percentage of sensational and human interest stories varies from 33% to 53% (Ryu, 1982); (4) education stories account for just 2% of news time (Fitzgerald, 1997); and (5) coverage of race relations is nearly invisible (Fitzgerald, 1997).

Coverage of "Locally Controversial Issues"

As stated by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, "it is axiomatic that one of the most vital questions of mass communication in a democracy is the development of an informed public through the public dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital public issues of the day" (13 FCC 1249, 1949; Ellmore, 1982, p. 207). One way in which the public is informed about issues is through TV news. As Parenti (1993) claims, "for many people an issue does not exist until it appears in the news media" (p. 1). Although some studies have been conducted to

understand the content of local TV news in terms of "issues" and "ethically controversial news content" (Lind, 1993; Wulfemeyer, 1982), few have focused on coverage of "controversial issues." Researchers affiliated with the Consortium on Local Television (COLT) News attempted to investigate coverage of controversial issues in local TV news; the results revealed little coverage of such issues (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 9). None of the studies, however, clearly defined the term "controversial issue," nor did they attempt to measure the concept based on how local citizens might define it.

Coverage of Diverse Populations

TV news can inform the public of controversial issues; likewise, it can inform the public of minority populations existing within communities. In fact, one way in which people do learn about cultures other than their own is through the media. As Martin and Nakayama (2000) claim, "we tend to rely more heavily on media images when we consider cultural groups with which we have little or no personal experience" (p. 251). If the images produced by TV news can influence how people understand each other's worlds, then it is vital that such images portray others accurately. A review of the studies conducted between 1983-2000 that examined TV news coverage of diverse populations suggests the following: (1) local TV news content may be contributing to stereotypes concerning race and crime through the portrayal of images of minorities in crime-related stories (Oliver 1999); (2) persons of color frequently have been presented in local TV news as dangerous and perpetrators of crime (Dixon and Linz, 2000; Romer, D., Jamieson, K., and DeCoteau, N., 1998;

Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright, 1996; Entman, 1990, 1992, 1994); (3) TV news often views minority life as marginal (Campbell, 1995); (4) local TV news rarely provides coverage of minority populations (COLT study: Fitzgerald, 1997); (5) coverage of minority populations has been inadequate and distorted (Jones, 1983); (6) Hispanic news has been presented as prominently across the media as non-Hispanic news (Heeter, Greenberg, Mendelson, Burgoon, Burgoon, and Korzenny, 1983); and ownership, professional norms, social, economic and racial-ethnic background of managers contribute to some explanation of why local news programs don't cover people of color (Heider, 2000).

Research Questions

This study attempted to understand the types of messages communicated through local TV news in Eau Claire, Wisconsin by examining the news content broadcast by its local TV stations. If an informed public is vital for the development of a democracy, then it is important to explore how, if at all, local TV news in Eau Claire is meeting this need. Although a majority of the Eau Claire citizenry is comprised of Caucasian-Americans, it also includes Asian-American (Hmong), American Indians, African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans.[1] Thus, it is important to know how many local TV stories address the "diverse" populations of Eau Claire, as well as how people from these cultures are presented in the news. Based on these concerns and a review of the literature, the following questions were posited: (a) What types of "story content" were featured on each station's newscasts? (b) What type of stories accounted for the "lead" stories? (c) How many stories were presented within the 30-minute newscasts? (d)

How many stories addressed issues defined as "current controversial issues in Eau Claire" by a random sample of Eau Claire registered voters? (e) How many stories addressed a population identified as "diverse" in Eau Claire?

Method

Participants/Texts

The methodologies of survey and textual "content" analysis were employed. Questionnaires gathered data from the public; the data were later transferred to an instrument that was used to analyze the 6:00 pm newscast content of the WEAU (NBC) and WQOW (ABC).

The questionnaire was returned by 404 participants (39%).[2] The texts included a random sample of 18 newscasts from the 24 videotaped newscasts. Researchers coded nine newscasts from each of the two stations ensuring that the same newscast date for each of the two stations was coded. A total of 150 stories were coded.[3]

Procedures/Data Treatment

The study was based on two pilot studies.[4] Following the pilot studies, questionnaires were mailed to a stratified random sample of 1,036 Eau Claire registered voters. The questionnaires were designed to gather information about the public's TV news viewing preferences, as well as data concerning what issues they considered to be "current controversial issues in Eau Claire."[5] A list of issues was compiled based on the responses gathered.[6] Upon return of the questionnaires, the data regarding the issues were categorized and transferred to the coding instrument used to analyze the newscasts. During the time (November 1-12, 1999) when the participants were responding to

the questionnaires, the newscasts from each of the stations were videotaped for analysis.[7] To ensure that the issues data were timely, the timing of the video recordings of the newscasts coincided with the time period in which the participants were asked to respond.

During the pilot studies, the coding instrument was refined. The categories of "types of stories" used on the instrument were based on categories developed by other researchers (see for example: Adams, 1978, 1980; Hickson, Scott, and Vogel, 1995; Stempel, 1998; and Wulfemeyer, 1982). Sports, teasers (e.g., messages intended to keep the viewer tuned to the station), weather, and stock market reports were not coded. As the researchers also were interested in coding each newscast to determine how many stories addressed populations defined as "diverse," the coding sheet also included a list of those populations. "Diverse" was defined as American Indian, Hmong, African-American, and/or Hispanic, as these populations are defined as "diverse" by the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) on the UWEC campus. In order for a story to be coded as "diverse," the newscaster had to say one of the words from the "diverse" populations' list, e.g., "Hmong," or "Chippewa" (this operational procedure was developed from the methodology employed by Heeter, Greenberg, Medndelson, Burgoon, Burgoon, and Korzenny, 1983).

After the coding instrument was prepared and the newscasts recorded, the researchers, along with three, trained undergraduate students, practiced conducting the content-analysis of the newscasts.[8] A random sample of 18 newscasts from the 24 videotaped newscasts was selected.[9] The researchers coded nine newscasts from each of the two stations, ensuring that the same newscast date

for each of the two stations was coded. "Intercoder reliability" coefficients were calculated for each story, each newscast, and the total project to ensure that the researchers were coding reliably.[10] After the newscasts were coded, some of the data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS); chi squares were calculated. The remainder of the data were tabulated using descriptive statistics.

Reliability and Validity Issues

As the questionnaire was sent to a stratified random sample of Eau Claire registered voters, thus providing the best guarantee of a representative sample, evidence exists to argue that the study is strong in external validity. Likewise, as a random sample of newscast texts was selected from the universe of the 24-videotaped newscasts, additional favorable evidence of representativeness and external validity exists.

Steps were taken to reduce measurement error; for example two pilot studies were conducted and the coders were trained. In addition, as stated previously, the researchers calculated acceptable intercoder reliability scores (.83-100%) for each of the 18 newscasts, as well as the entire project.

Results

Participants

A majority of the 404 respondents were female (57%) and Caucasian American (96%). A plurality of subjects (31%) were 65 years of age or older, 24% were between the ages of 36-45, 23% between 46-55, 13% between 56-65, 7% between 26-35, and 2% were between the ages of 18-25.

Television News Preferences

When the participants were asked if they watch TV news, 97% of the respondents stated "yes." Of those respondents, a majority (58%) stated they value "local news" more than "national news." When asked if they watch "local TV news," an overwhelming majority (99%) stated "yes." A strong majority (77%) of the respondents indicated that they tuned in first to WEAU (NBC), 22% selected WQOW (ABC), and 1% selected WKBT (CBS). Chi squares revealed significance between age and station tuned into first (df=5; p<.01), as well as between female gender and station tuned into first (df=2; p<.05).[11]

Types of Stories

WEAU and WQOW, together, addressed 150 stories in the 18 newscasts, 146 of which were "codable." "Crime" (defined as a story about a crime, e.g., a stabbing, gun shooting, etc.) was the most represented (12%) story topic category covered by both stations combined, although the ABC affiliate featured more coverage of "Crime" stories. Three types of stories tied for the second most frequent type of story featured by both of the stations: "Court Issue," (defined as a story about a current or past court case) "Education," (defined as a story about education, schools, etc.) and "Government/Legislation," (defined as a story about public policy issues, activities of governmental bodies, etc.), each with 11%. "Human Interest-General" (defined as a story about animals, cute children, Ground Hog day, etc.) and "Accidents, Calamities and Disasters" (defined as natural disasters and those instigated by humans) followed with 10% each. A list of the types of stories addressed by each station can be found in Table 1.

Lead Stories

Of the 18 lead stories on both stations, seven categories of stories were represented. "Crime" (e.g., stabbing, suicide, gun shooting, etc.) was featured most frequently (27%) as the lead, followed by "Government/Legislation" (e.g., public policy issues, activities of governmental bodies, etc.) and "Environment," (Seven Mile Landfill, non-smoking ban in restaurants), each with 16%. The following three types of stories, "Court Issue," (e.g., current or past court case), "Economic Issue" (e.g., a story related to economics or the economy, prices, money, etc.), and "Education" (e.g., education and schools, etc.), each represented 11% of the types of lead stories. A list of the lead stories broadcast by each station can be found in Table 2.

Number of Stories

The NBC affiliate (WEAU) averaged fewer stories per 30-minutes newscast than the ABC affiliate (WQOW). The NBC affiliate presented approximately 7.6 stories per 30-minutes newscast; whereas, the ABC affiliate featured an average of nine stories per 30-minute newscast.

Controversial Issues

The two most popular issue categories were "Boyd School" (the location of a new school) and "Commercial and Residential Development" (specifically, the relocation and expansion of Target and Menards retail outlets). Examples of some of the other issues included: "Educational Issues" (e.g., test scores at the two high schools, educational quality, and school safety), and "Taxes" (e.g., property and sewer taxes). A list of

the controversial issues is presented in Table 3.

Approximately thirty-six percent of the 150 stories covered by the two stations in the 18 newscasts addressed issues identified by the public as "current controversial issues in Eau Claire." A total of eleven (42%) of the 26 categories were represented with "Educational Issues" (e.g., test scores at the two local high schools, educational quality, school safety, etc.) as the top category (27%). The remaining ten issue categories included "Stanley Prison," "Taxes," (e.g., property, sewer taxes) and "Traffic" (e.g., congestion, road rage, dangerous drivers) with 13% each; "Employment" (e.g., wages, minimum wage, low wages) and "Other" (e.g., Y2K, county board member issues, evolution) with 8% each; "Street Improvements/Road Construction" with 6%; "City/Government Budget" and "Health Care" (e.g., Medicare, senior citizens, hospitals) with 4% each; and "Guns" (e.g., concealed weapons, handgun control) and "Milk Price Reforms" with 2% each.

Neither station covered either of the two issues ("Boyd School" and "Commercial and Residential Development") identified most fre-quently by the public. Other "controversial issues" not addressed by either station included "Crime Control" (hiring police and fire-fighters), "Environmental Issues," "Highway 53 Bypass," "Homelessness," and "Welfare."

Diverse Populations

Of the 67 stories presented on WEAU (NBC), only one story addressed a population defined as "diverse." African-American was the "diverse" population that was addressed, and it occurred within the context of a story on interracial dating among high school students. None of the stories addressed a "diverse" population among the 79 stories

presented on WQOW (ABC). Thus, of the 150 stories covered by both stations combined in the 18 newscasts coded, only one story addressed a "diverse" population .

Discussion

External Validity

The following findings from this research replicate the results of other studies, suggesting that this study is strong in external validity: (1) the results indicating that viewers value local news more than national news support the findings of a 1995 Gallup poll (Moore, 1995; Schwartz, 1996); (2) the findings revealing that "Crime" was the most represented story topic as well as the most frequent type of lead story are consistent with the results of the 1999 PEJ, the 1997 COLT study, the 1996 CMPA study, and the 1993 Berkeley Media Studies research (PEJ, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1997; Dorfman and Woodruff, 1997; and Fletcher, 1998); (3) the results suggesting that the stations did not cover stories about issues considered most important to the local citizens support the findings of research conducted by the PEJ (PEJ, 1999); (4) the results revealing the lack of coverage of diverse populations are consistent with the findings of Jones (1983), Campbell (1995), the COLT study (Fitzgerald, 1997), and Heider (2000).

Television News Preferences

A majority of the respondents stated they value "local news" more than "national news." These results support the findings of a 1995 Gallup poll, which found that Americans watch nightly network news, but they care more about the information on their local TV broadcasts (Moore, 1995; Schwartz, 1996). According to

the Schwartz, "fifty-seven percent ranked local TV news as very or extremely important to them" (1996, p. 18). The results also support the findings of Stark (1997), who reported that local TV news has become the major source of news for the majority of Americans.

Types of Stories and Lead Stories

"Crime" was the most represented story topic covered by the two Eau Claire stations combined. Furthermore, the most frequent type of lead story featured by both stations concerned "Crime." These results are consistent with the findings of the PEJ (1999) study, which found that "Crime" was the number one story. The Eau Claire findings also support the results of the 1997 COLT study, the 1996 CMPA study, and the 1993 Berkeley Media Studies research, all of which found that stories about "Crime" dominated local TV news (PEJ, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1997; Dorfman and Woodruff, 1997; and Fletcher, 1998). Although "Crime" stories accounted for the most frequent type of story featured on both of the Eau Claire stations' newscasts combined, the percentage (12%) was lower than the COLT study national average (20.2%) and the average (27%) in *The New York Times* study (Fitzgerald, 1997; Finder, 1998).

Still, the present study and national studies conducted between 1978 and 1999 have shown that the topic of "Crime" has remained the dominant type of story in local newscasts. Yet research suggests that the nation's crime rates are decreasing (Mifflin, 1997). If this is true, then why are producers still selecting a majority of stories about crime to present as news? As COLT researcher, Angiotti, has suggested, perhaps the public has developed a habit of consuming crime stories, and this habit may be driving the news industry today. Perhaps journalists have become captivated with the ease and economics of covering crime; it's easy and cheap to use the police scanner as a source. Angotti, in fact, claims that most of crime coverage is economically, rather than editorially, driven. According to Angotti, "it's the easiest, cheapest, laziest news to cover, because all they do is listen to the police radio, react to it, send out a mobile camera unit, spend an hour or two covering it and put it on the air" (Mifflin, 1997, p. 4). Still, audiences may be tiring of crime news; it is possible that too much coverage of crime may negatively affect a station's ratings and ultimately, its' profits. As Angotti discovered with at least three of the cities in the COLT study, "the stations that were using the least amount of crime news were getting the highest ratings" (p. 4 Mifflin, 1997). And, that is precisely what the researchers found in the Eau Claire market. Although "Crime" was the most represented story topic covered by the two Eau Claire stations combined, WEAU (NBC), which had the highest ratings for the six o'clock newscast in the 2000 Nielsen ratings, featured the least amount of "Crime" stories (Brown, 2000).

Three types of stories ("Court Issues," "Education," and "Government/Legislation") tied for the second most frequent type of story featured by both of the local stations. According to Fitzgerald (1997, p. 8) results from the COLT study suggest that, nationally, an average of 9.1% of local news time was devoted to stories of "Criminal Justice," a category similar to the "Court Issues" story type in this study. Coverage of "Court Issues" in Eau Claire is slightly higher (11%) than the national average (9.1%).

Eau Claire's local news coverage of stories concerning "Education"

also appears to be higher than the national average. Results from the COLT study revealed that "nationally, education stories accounted for just 2% of news time" (p. 8, 1997, Fitzgerald). In contrast, 11% of the stories broadcast by the Eau Claire stations focused on "Education."

Number of Stories

The NBC affiliate (WEAU) averaged fewer stories per 30-minute newscast than the ABC affiliate (WQOW). In a 30-minute newscast filled with commercials, weather, teasers, and sports, the number of stories presented can affect the depth with which those stories can be covered. Recent research reported by the PEJ (1999) suggests that people do not want shorter stories in newscasts, and longer stories are not considered a negative. Responding to the need for broader, more in-depth news coverage, WEAU recently started a series of reports called "Compass," which was produced to run once a week during the 10:00pm newscast and average five-minutes in length (Brown, 1999, December 11).

Controversial Issues

Approximately thirty-six percent of the 150 stories covered by the two stations addressed issues identified by the Eau Claire survey participants as "current controversial issues in Eau Claire." Less than half of the 26 categories of issues were represented, and the two issues identified most frequently by the Eau Claire survey participants were not addressed by either station. These findings support the results of research conducted by the PEJ, who found that viewers who regularly viewed local TV news said, "Community interests are not being served" (PEJ, 1999). The PEJ researchers, who focus on the make

up "quality" newscasts, suggest that "master stations" accurately "reflect their entire community . . . and make it locally relevant" (PEJ, 1999).

Diverse Populations

One of the most concerning discoveries of this study was the insufficient coverage of diverse populations in Eau Claire; the findings revealed that only one story addressed a "diverse" population. These results are consistent with the findings of (1) Jones (1983) who found that news coverage of minority groups was inadequate and distorted, (2) Campbell (1995) who found little coverage of the non-white community in the local newscasts' feature stories, (3) the nationwide COLT study, which found a lack of coverage of race relations in local television news (Fitzgerald, 1997), (3) and Heider's (2000) study, which revealed that local TV news coverage of people of color was lacking to the point of being negligent.

The lack of coverage of "diverse" populations by the stations is not surprising given the homogeneous character of Eau Claire. Of the 146,000 people living the Eau Claire metropolitan area, 96.7% of the population is Caucasian-American. (1999, *Demographics USA*).[12] Regardless of such homogeneity, it is still important to consider TV's role in shaping public perceptions of groups in an ethnically diverse society (Nicolini, 1987, p. 597). One way in which people can learn about cultures other than their own is through the media. Tuchman (1978) characterized TV news as "a window on the world and through the news frame, Americans learn of themselves and others, of their own institutions, leaders and lifestyles . . ." (p. 1). Indeed, the images produced by TV news provide people with an opp-

ortunity to learn about others' worlds. If people's beliefs about social reality are cultivated from the mass-mediated images to which they are exposed (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli, 1986), then it is vital that people from "diverse" cultures are represented and represented accurately in TV news. It is vital for people from the majority culture to be accurately informed about people from "minority" cultures in order to break stereotypes and lessen anxiety associated with what is considered "different" or "unknown." Furthermore, it is important for the identity development of people from "minority" populations to see themselves represented and included in news stories.

The demographics in the United States are changing. According to the Population Reference Bureau (1993), by 2050, nearly half of all U.S. Americans will be African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native American (Wright, 1993; Chideya, 1999). As the population of this country becomes more diverse, the TV industry, including the news, must take steps to broaden its scope and include more stories about diverse populations.[13]

The source of the pattern of minority invisibility may be found in newsrooms staffed overwhelmingly by non-minorities; it is likely that the process of news selection and coverage, when dictated in overwhelmingly white newsrooms, produces coverage that reflects white existence (Campbell, 1995, p. 66). The idea that media coverage is influenced by ideological forces, as well as journalistic norms and routines, is not new (see, for example, Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1973). Heider's (2000) research also points to ownership, socialization of news norms, and the economic, social, and racial-ethnic backgrounds of managers as possible explanations

concerning why news coverage of minority populations is lacking.

When coverage of minority populations is provided, it often does not address issues of concern to people of those communities. Instead, on one end of the coverage spectrum, the public is shown minorities linked with crimes, and on the other, coverage of the festivals of people of color (Heider, 2000). As Heider suggests, "when such images are not also balanced with images and stories about [people of color] as business people, lawyers, doctors, computer software designers, and so on, this could well reinforce stereotypes . . ." (2000, p. 36).

Limitations

As indicated, the results suggest that the two controversial issues identified most frequently by the Eau Claire survey participants were not addressed by either station. These results occurred even though the timing of the video-tapings of the newscasts coincided with the time period in which the respondents were asked to list "current locally controversial issues." It is possible that the findings could be the result of a "lag effect," in which an issue identified by the public may have been controversial at the time, but the news directors chose not to cover it during the research period. It is possible that a story about an issue might not have been covered if there had not been a "major development" concerning it.

It should be also noted that the researchers' choice to measure coverage of diverse populations by counting when a newscaster mentioned one of the names from the diverse populations' list may be considered a potential limitation. The decision to use the procedure of observing the newscaster's verbal behavior was adopted from a study

conducted by Heeter et al. (1983). Although the practice of "labeling" or "qualifying" minority populations (e.g., "the African-American teacher") may draw unnecessary attention to one's race, newscasters frequently use this style to report their stories. Coverage of diverse populations can be measured in a number of ways; researchers in this study are confident the results would have been similar, even if a different procedure had been employed. And, as stated previously, the disturbing results concerning coverage of diverse populations from this study support the findings of other researchers, suggesting the study is strong in external validity.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Recent studies, such as the 1998-1999 PEJ, which attempted to find the correlation between quality local TV journalism and ratings, are providing producers with information regarding what constitutes "quality" local TV news. The PEJ researchers suggest that the formula to make quality sell includes less coverage of crime, better sourcing of stories, and more coverage of local concerns (PEJ, 1999). More research is needed to understand what constitutes "quality" local TV news; such information would be useful to news producers. Future researchers also might gather data to understand if the public perceives obsessive coverage of crime to be desirable. For example, 67% of the subjects in a Detroit study thought that local TV news spends too much time on crime stories (Kiska, 1997).

Additional research needs to be conducted to provide evidence that high ratings can be achieved through responsible journalism. As the PEJ (1999) suggests, the way in which to make "quality" sell might be to focus on stories of local concern. In order to do this, producers need to know what the public deems to be locally controversial. According to the Communications Act of 1934 and the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the broadcast licensee has the responsibility to show that it is operating in the public interest. This responsibility could be met if broadcasters were to do a better job of covering local concerns; producers must be enterprising in informing their audiences with coverage of the vital public issues of the day.

Research providing additional evidence of the lack of TV news coverage of diverse populations does not appear to be necessary. Instead, it would be valuable for future researchers to conduct focus groups composed of spokespersons from certain minority communities (e.g., Hmong and American Indian) and news directors to understand the needs of each and how each can best be served. Research also could examine how, if at all, the management and ownership of TV stations are attempting to communicate with people from diverse populations within the community. As Jones (1983) suggested, "reporters [should] be encouraged to develop contacts with minority organizations and minority community leaders" (Goins Wilhoit, 1984 p. 46).

Finally, if one of the sources of minority invisibility can be found in newsrooms staffed overwhelmingly by non-minorities, then research is needed to understand how, if at all, communication and journalism programs are attempting to train future journalists of "majority identities" about (1) the importance of communication that is inclusive rather than exclusive and (2) how to affect what appears to be the practice of "incognizant racism"—the systematic exclusion of coverage about people of color—a practice that may not necessarily be an intentional act

(Heider, 2000, p. 51). Research also should explore how to best provide Hmong, American Indian, Hispanic and African-American students with the knowledge and skills needed to pursue careers in communication and journalism related areas. As Heider suggests, "education is a process that might open a dialogue between stations and communities of color, whether it's the station trying to educate the public on how to get a story covered or whether it's community members taking the time to educate journalists about local history and current concerns" (2000, p. 91).

Table 1
Coverage of Types of Stories by Station

Types of Stories	WEAU		WQOW		Combined	
About the Law:	1	(1%)	1	(1%)	2	(1%)
Accidents, Calamities, Disasters:	5	(8%)	9	(11%)	14	(10%)
Agriculture:	1	(1%)	0	(0%)	1	(1%)
Computers:	1	(1%)	1	(1%)	2	(1%)
Consumer Self-Help:	2	(3%)	2	(3%)	4	(3%)
Court Issue:	8	(12%)	8	(10%)	16	(11%)
Crime:	7	(11%)	11	(14%)	18	(12%)
Economic Issue:	5	(8%)	4	(5%)	9	(6%)
Education:	8	(12%)	8	(10%)	16	(11%)
Entertainment/Arts:	0	(0%)	2	(3%)	2	(1%)
Environment:	5	(8%)	7	(9%)	12	(8%)
Government/Legislation:	9	(13%)	7	(9%)	16	(11%)
Health/Medical:	2	(3%)	4	(5%)	6	(4%)
Human Interest (general):	4	(6%)	10	(13%)	14	(10%)
Human Interest (personality):	2	(3%)	1	(1%)	3	(2%)
Other:	3	(5%)	2	(3%)	5	(3%)
Politicians/Elections:	2	(3%)	0	(0%)	2	(1%)
Poverty/Homelessness:	1	(1%)	0	(0%)	1	(1%)
Race Relations:	1	(1%)	0	(0%)	1	(1%)
Religion/Churches:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Science and Invention:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Transportation and Travel:	0	(0%)	2	(3%)	2	(1%)
Total	67(100%)		79(101%)*		146 (99%)*	

*Percentages rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Table 2
Selection of Lead Stories by Station

Lead Stories	WEAU		WQOW		Combined	
Consumer Self-Help:	1	(11%)	0	(0%)	1	(5%)
Court Issue:	2	(22%)	0	(0%)	2	(11%)
Crime:	3	(33%)	2	(22%)	5	(27%)
Economic Issue:	1	(11%)	1	(11%)	2	(11%)
Education:	0	(0%)	2	(22%)	2	(11%)
Environment:	0	(0%)	3	(33%)	3	(16%)
Government/Legislation:	2	(22%)	1	(11%)	3	(16%)
Total	9	(99%)*	9	(99%)*	18	(97%)*

*Percentages rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Table 3
Coverage of Controversial Issues by Station

Controversial Issues	WEAU		WQOW		Combined	
Annexation of Hallie:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Arena/Convention Center:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Boyd School:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
City Council:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
City/Government Budget:	1	(3%)	1	(4%)	2	(4%)
Commercial and Residential						
Development:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Crime Control:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Educational Issues:	10	(37%)	4	(16%)	14	(27%)
Employment:	3	(11%)	1	(4%)	4	(8%)
Environmental Issues:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Guns:	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(2%)
Health Care:	0	(0%)	2	(8%)	2	(4%)
Highway 53 Bypass:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Homelessness:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Local Media:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Milk Price Reforms:	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(2%)
Religion:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Sports:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Stanley Prison:	3	(11%)	4	(16%)	7	(13%)
Street Improvements/Road						
Construction:	1	(3%)	2	(8%)	3	(6%)
Taxes:	4	(15%)	3	(12%)	7	(13%)
Traffic:	2	(7%)	5	(20%)	7	(13%)
Use of Half Moon Lake:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Values and Ethics:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Welfare:	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Other:	1	(3%)	3	(12%)	4	(8%)
Total	27	(96%)*	25(100%)		52(100%)	

*Percentages rounded off to the nearest whole number.

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Notes

[1] According to Lindquist, between 1990 and 1998, the overall minority population rose from 3.4 to 4.5 percent in Eau Claire County. By 1998, the county became the home to an estimated 655 Hispanics, 536 American Indians and 316 Blacks (Lindquist, 2000). Demographic data from 1999 show the following for the 146,000 people living in the Eau Claire metropolitan area: 96.7% Caucasian-American, 2.5 % Asian/Pacific Islander, .6% Hispanic-American, and .2% African-American (1999, *Demographics USA*). And, in January 2000, city officials estimated that, among the "Asian/Pacific Islander" group, approximately 2,800 Hmong live in Eau Claire (Emerson, 2000, January 9).

[2] A disk composed of approximately 14,000 Eau Claire, Wisconsin citizens who voted in the April 1999 election was purchased from the city of Eau Claire. A stratified random sample was generated from that population; the sample was stratified to include at least one registered voter from each voting ward in Eau Claire. The survey questionnaire featured an addressed and postage-paid return card, and it requested a specific prompt return date.

[3] In order for a story to be counted as a "type of story," a majority of the coders had to agree. Thus, although the researchers coded 150 stories, there were four instances in which a majority of the coders did not agree on the "story type."

[4] The first pilot study was conducted during the 1997-98 Fall and Spring semesters in an undergraduate communication and journalism research methods course at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC). Students interviewed UWEC faculty members to gather a list of controversial issues, and the students conducted a content-analysis of videotapes of five TV-13 (WEAU) 6:00 pm newscasts and five TV-18 (WQOW) 6:00 pm newscasts each semester. The second pilot study was conducted in the Fall 1999 by the two primary researchers and three undergraduate student researchers. The researchers coded two newscasts, one from each station.

[5] As it was necessary for the researchers to be able to identify a "currently locally controversial issue" when they heard or viewed it on the newscasts, the data gathered from the registered voters provided an operational definition of the term, "current locally controversial issue."

[6] The two primary researchers and three undergraduate assistants reviewed the controversial issues data received from the sample of subjects; categories of issues were created and collapsed until a final list was generated.

[7] Selection of the original 12 newscast dates (November 1-12, 1999) was not based on any random procedure; rather, taping began when the researchers were ready to mail the questionnaires. However, within the time period of the 12 newscast dates, nine newscast dates were randomly selected (November 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, 1999). The November 1999 sweeps period ran from 11/4/99-12/1/99. Seven of the nine newscast days were within the "sweeps" period.

[8] This research was supported with a Student/Faculty Collaborative Research Grant from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The three undergraduate researchers included: Ms. Elizabeth Kuntz (Print Journalism), Ms. Lori Kurtzman (Print Journalism), and Ms. Jessica Meier (Advertising). Two newscasts, one from each station, were analyzed during the training session. Guidelines for coding were discussed, formulas for calculating reliability coefficients were reviewed, and the rules for calculating frequency counts of story types, controversial issues, and stories addressing diverse populations were clarified.

[9] Holsti's (1969) formula was used to calculate intercoder reliability. Each newscast was coded by at least four coders, usually five coders. Three potential coding decisions existed per story: "story type," "controversial issue," and "diverse." In order for a coding decision to be defined as "agree," complete agreement had to exist among all of the coders. The coding process was consistent for all newscasts: researchers viewed an entire newscast, coded each story within it, and then each revealed their codes. After the codes for each story were revealed, an opportunity for discussion was provided. Researchers could then change their code or stay with their code. In order for a story to be counted as a "type of story," a majority of the coders had to agree. The same "majority" guidelines applied to "lead story," "controversial issues," and "diverse."

[10] A reliability score was calculated using Holsti's (1969) formula for each of the 18 newscasts; the scores ranged from .83 to 100%. The average reliability score calculated for the entire project was .90.

[11] Results for age significance occurred when Channel 8 (WKBT), the La Crosse station, was dropped (n=2); in all age categories (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 65+), a predominance (79%) of the respondents tuned into WEAU (NBC) first. Results for gender significance occurred when Channel 8 (WKBT), the La Crosse station, was dropped (n=2), and the age categories were compressed to three groups (18-35; 36-55, 56+); a predominance (77.3%) of the women respondents tuned into WEAU (NBC) first.

[12] See note 1.

[13] The NBC network recently responded to this challenge by agreeing to pay for a minority writer to be added to the staff of every new network TV show that wins a second year on the air. NBC's decision was in response to attacks by Kweisi Mfume, president of the N.A.A.C.P.. Mfume threatened a boycott of NBC programs because he felt the network's Fall 1999 prime-time schedule had too few shows having any leading black or other minority characters (Carter, 2000, January 6). Although NBC's actions are not intended to affect the composition of newsroom staff, the move may be a step in a productive direction.