Instructions for FCC News Scorecard

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

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

Choose one or more local newscasts. Tape them to slow them down for analysis. Print out this instruction document as your guide. Also print out one PDF news scorecard for each newscast you intend to assess. Mark them with a pencil, in case you change your mind on an answer.

Rate the media on their best work. Skip stories shorter than 20 seconds long.

Scoring Instructions

Identify the **date** of the newscast (mm/dd/yy); the station's **call letters**, e.g. KTVU; **metro area**, e.g. Monterey Bay Area; **time** of broadcast, e.g. 6 p.m.

Fill out the questionnaire by placing countable hatch or tick marks in the appropriate blanks. It works best when you stop the tape after each story and go down the scorecard answering each question in turn. When you've analyzed all of the stories in the newscast, put the totals for each category within the parentheses.

1. Story topics: A *core* story is about something of greater lasting importance than a peripheral story. It's generally more newsworthy. Place story in the most appropriate category. Many will overlap; use your best judgment about the *primary* topic. When we score this newscast each core story gets 2 points.

Core stories are about:

politics/government -- at all levels, anything about campaigns, actions or deliberations or hearings. If overlaps with other categories place here only if most of sources are from people in gov./pol. (Exception: articles about media power/influence have their own category.)

natural disaster -- floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.; must be great human or physical damage.

education -- all levels K --university, school readiness, testing, teachers, facilities, pre --school, etc.

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

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

health -- include medicine, HMO's, patient's rights, fitness, nutrition, worker safety, smoking, etc.

environment -- air/water/noise pollution, prevention, urban sprawl, agriculture, global warming, etc.

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

major fires/accidents -- 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 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 price/quality comparisons, requires critical (non --promotional) tone and evidence --gathering.

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

media -- Any stories about power or influence of mass media including ones that might otherwise go in government/politics category.

Peripheral stories are about:

celebrities -- from sports/entertainment, their lives, deaths, marriages, breakups, new shows, arrests….

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

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

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.

When we score the newscast, each peripheral story gets 1 point.

2. Local concerns: Mark "yes" if the story was located in, or most sources were from, the metro area the station reaches with its signal. Mark "no", if either you can't tell or if it took place outside that metro area. One exception: If the story is about state government or state politics, it has the potential to affect the local community directly. Because it's *related* to local concerns, mark "yes."

A good local newscast should be 80% or more local.

3. 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, i.e., it must contain information that advances how they understand the world *and* 3) have an impact that lasts more than just a week or two.

So thematic reporting about *issues,* or patterns connecting events 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.

When we score the newscast, high knowledge impact stories will get 3 additional points and low-impact none.

4. Named local 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 story has 3 or more identified sources (named individuals, not "police" or "lawmakers"), it's *adequately sourced.* Mark "Yes" for that story. Fewer than 3, it's *under --sourced*. Mark "No" for that story. Since we eliminated the briefest stories, three seems a fair standard; two sides can be represented plus someone in the middle.

This is our final score item. Stories with adequate sourcing get 2 more points; under-sourced stories get none.

If you marked the story as non-local in question #2, skip questions 5 - 7.

5. Gender diversity of named sources: Here place a mark for each source rather than each story. One mark for each male source quoted and one for each female.

6. Ethnic/racial diversity of sources: Local news should reflect the community. You can use visual cues plus characteristic names to place sources on screen. We can only score apparent identity because appearances may mislead and most sources are not identified by ethnicity. Place a mark for each source in the appropriate category.

7. Occupation of sources: Place a mark for each source in the appropriate category. Identify sources by the role they play in the story, e.g. a neighbor in a crime story may also be a business person or school teacher, but in this story they are just an individual chosen because they were near the event. If you don't know where to put a source, choose "other."