



NIGHTLY TV NEWS—THE DIRECTORS' CUT

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INTRODUCTION

Are you in the picture? There's more to TV news than meets the eye.

Do you put more thought into choosing what's for dinner than dissecting the nightly TV news?

Questions most of us *aren't* asking in front of the box include:

Who's deciding what's news? How do they keep us watching? How does what's 'news' differ across channels? What's the difference between commercial and public broadcasters' definition of news? What role do ratings play?

When TV News Directors themselves openly warn us against passive news consumption, it's time to analyse what

we're feeding our minds.

Snapshot analysis of one night, across five Melbourne TV networks

During the first five stories of the news bulletins ...

- All but SBS ran the same local court story to open their bulletin;
- Three networks (Nine, Ten, ABC) ran identical first and second stories;
- Four networks covered the same three stories in their top five;
- SBS aired no local news, the other four networks aired a total of fifteen local stories;
- Channels Seven, Nine, and Ten aired one international story each, ABC showed two, SBS four;
- Three networks (Seven, Nine, ABC) ran three court stories in their top

three slots;

- Four networks ran one political story, SBS ran three;
- Channel Seven was the only network to run a sports story in the top five;
- Story lengths varied between one minute and thirty-one seconds on Channel Nine, to two minutes and fourteen seconds on the ABC; and
- SBS had the longest average story (2 min. 42 sec.) and Channel Seven had the shortest average (1 min. 5 sec.). Average lengths at the other three networks were within eighteen seconds.

See figures 1 - 3

Network	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4	Story 5
SEVEN	Inquisition	Doctors	F1 Grand Prix	Triple murder	Baby murder
NINE	Inquisition	Baby murder	Truck rampage	Solomons	Doctors
TEN	Inquisition	Baby murder	Triple murder	Doctors	Solomons
SBS	Solomons	BBC embellish	ABC bias report	Iraq troops	Hicks trial
ABC	Inquisition	Baby murder	Truck rampage	Solomons	David Kelly/BBC

Top L-R: Ian Henderson, ABC's 7pm news bulletin • Sandra Sully, Channel Ten's late news • Kerryn Johnston, WIN Newsreader • Mal Walden co-anchor on Network Ten's News at Five. Bottom L-R: Peter Hitchener, Channel Nine • Claire Brady, Journalist, Seven Network • David Johnston, News Presenter, Seven Network • Peter Mitchell, News Presenter, Seven Network. Above Figure 1 Top five stories on each network



Top row L-R: Channel Ten's reporter Martine Griffiths delivers a memorized piece to camera • Anton Enus, news anchor for SBS World News at 9.30pm • Lee Lin Chin, news anchor for SBS World News at 6.30pm • Geoff Phillips WIN Newsreaders. Bottom row L-R: Jennifer Hansen co-anchor on Network Ten's News at Five • Mary Kostakidis, news anchor for SBS World News at 6.30pm • Anton Enus • Jo Hall, Channel Nine Below: Claire Brady, Journalist, Seven Network

Q&A WITH NEWS DIRECTORS

Channel Nine

THE CAST

- Marco Bass, State (Victoria) editor, Current Affairs, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)
- Richard Burgess, Network News Director (national), WIN TV
- Steve Carey, News Director (Victoria), Channel Seven
- Phil Martin, Director of News and Current Affairs (national), Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)
- Dermot O'Brien, News Director (Victoria), Channel Ten
- John Sorell, News Director (Victoria),

What makes a top news story?

ABC

It's a complex mix of things. The importance to the community in which the event happened is ultimately the deciding factor and the degree of importance is, of course, a matter of judgment for professional journalists based on, usually, years of experience in the business.

WIN TV

First and foremost, the story has to be

Network	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4	Story 5
SEVEN	Local	Local	International	Local	Local
NINE	Local	Local	Local	International	Local
TEN	Local	Local	Local	Local	International
SBS	International	International	Domestic	International	International
ABC	Local	Local	Local	International	International

Network	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4	
SEVEN	Court	Politics	Sport	Court	
NINE	Court	Court	Court	Defence	P
TEN	Court	Court	Court	Politics	D
SBS	Defence	Politics	Politics	Defence	P
ABC	Court	Court	Court	Defence	P



Top-Bottom: Figure 2. Top five stories on each network, on one night, by relative audience. Figure 3. Top five stories on each network, on one night, by nature of s

local. We provide a local news service, not a composite, national and international news service ... if a story is local, it's going to be of interest and of relevance. They're the two key words.

CHANNEL SEVEN

Something that has broad-brush appeal, something that affects everybody from the mums and dads, to the battlers, to the kids and the oldies. I like stories that really affect everyone and particularly families ... but it comes down to basic news good judgment and what is a story. It's that old quote, 'A good story's a good story'.

SBS

We have a particular bias towards reporting international events and reporting them in a manner that reflects Australian audiences. If you were looking on any particular evening, you would see between fifteen and eighteen stories a night and of those, maybe three or four would be domestic Australian stories.

CHANNEL TEN

That's a little bit like asking how long is a piece of string ... The stories that I like and the stories that are grist to the mill are local stories and I think, in this town [Melbourne], good police and crime stories are accepted well by the public in our ratings. The other thing too,

is the history of the media in Melbourne. If you look at that, you would see that the Herald—now gone—and the Herald Sun News Pictorial built monstrous circulations, as indeed did papers before them, on reporting crime. The other part of news that you can never underestimate in Melbourne is the importance of sport, particularly AFL. That, in itself, is a whole book.

CHANNEL NINE

There is a clear goal of attracting and holding the audience to the network for the evening in order to generate revenue. That drives the story selection that you see and that applies to all of us: television, newspapers and radio.

Who decides which stories make it into the nightly news bulletin?

ABC

A lot of people make the decisions. I'm the ultimate in the chain of editorial command. Below me is the Melbourne news editor and, in an hour-to-hour day-to-day sense, there's the 7pm bulletin producer.

WIN TV

It's up to each individual newsroom and the chief-of-staff in each newsroom to decide what news stories are relevant for each particular day and what news

stories they want to cover. Over the top of that, each state has its own news director. The news director will have the final say on what goes to air but, as a rule, the chief-of-staff in each newsroom in each region decides what stories are going to cover that day, what order they are going to be in, and what else they might like from other networks.

CHANNEL SEVEN

A combination. The chief-of-staff is the first port of call because he or she is the first one in. The chief-of-staff basically sets up the day from 5am on. I will always call at 6.30am, have a chat to the chief-of-staff and find out what we've got on the go and also get a feel for what is happening overseas and interstate. I'll get in at about 7.30 – 8 o'clock and I'll get the line-up producer of the day and my deputy and the chief-of-staff, and we'll have a meeting and we'll all thrash through what's relevant and what's happening.

SBS

There's a huge process that goes into that. SBS' news agenda has been determined largely by its charter and the history of the organization. A very distilled description of its brief is to reflect the cultural diversities within Australia, and part of that reflection is showing Australians what's happening in the world and

BE A CRITICAL OBSERVER: ADVICE FROM NEWS DIRECTORS TO STUDENTS OF TV NEWS

ABC: The most important thing is to be a critical viewer and listener and reader of all journalistic product you expose yourself to, particularly television news and current affairs. Don't passively consume it. I think it's important for people to tape news bulletins and watch individual news stories and look at how they were made. Separate the words from the pictures and look at the real substance of the information that's being presented and never assume that any story will be a completely

comprehensive picture of the particular event it covers. You can see this on any given night by taping four news bulletins and picking out stories that are common to all of them and looking at how differently or similarly they are covered.

WIN TV: I think it's important to be critical of anything when you're watching it, to be open-minded and prepared to argue the point. Be prepared to not take things at face value. Be prepared to sit up and say, 'Why?'

Channel Seven: I'd tell them to watch! I'd tell them to try and analyse how the intros are written. Are they short and sharp? Yes they are. Are the introductions and stories written in a conversational tone? Yes they are. Do we pay more attention to the structure of stories in terms of how the pictures affect it? Of course we do. So, really, in terms of an analysis of how and what they should do, they should be aware that it's a visual medium. That it's a medium that has immediate

impact. You've got to have an understanding of what makes and shapes news and the only way to do that is to immerse yourself in it. Read everything and listen to talkback radio and watch the main bulletins and see how they're constructed. I'm quite heartened a lot of the time by the young people that call and they have a very, very good idea of how news is done and how it's put together and why, and I think people are a lot more savvy now than my generation was.

in their part of the world.

CHANNEL TEN

The chief-of-staff starts extremely early in the morning making decisions based on his assumptions of what is news and then I contribute to that as I see fit. There is a production meeting at 9.30am with the chief-of-staff, the producers, myself, sports producers, librarian and so on, and the day is reshaped. The producers and chief-of-staff are then in charge of coverage. I can refer to the day's rundown should I want to and I will make various decisions about maybe what would be better. But, at the end of the day, they make the hands-on decisions because they've lived through the various conferences, they've spoken to the various reporters as they've come back, and they've spoken to the interstate newsrooms, so it's only really the fine-tuning that I do. But, ultimately, the buck stops with me.

CHANNEL NINE

It's important to understand that all journalists have different agendas and outcomes in mind. This is certainly true in the case of commercial media. There's no point producing content that people are not going to want to see or hear.

How is story order and duration decided?

ABC

I suppose one of the most obvious guides with news bulletins is the proximity of the event to the actual bulletin time. The closer it is, the more likely it is to run higher in the rundown, if it's a matter of some import. But then there's your slow news day, when you're probably going to have your rundown set with national and international news stories by 2pm. It varies from day to day.

WIN TV

The best picture news stories go first. The ones that have got really good pictures of 200 people marching down the street, the bushfire, the major car accident, that type of thing. We try and run our news stories of equal length within ten or twenty seconds, depending on the type of story. Purely packaged stories usually run at one minute ten seconds to one minute thirty seconds. What makes a news story longer? It depends on how many people you've got to talk to about your news story. You might go out and do a news story and have four or five different interviews that you've got to squeeze into a news story and that might blow it out to 1.30, 1.40 or 1.50. You might go out and be able to find only one person who's prepared to talk about a particular story and that means you shouldn't run it as long. Also, the level of interest in it, the amount of room you've got in your

bulletins—they're the main factors.

CHANNEL SEVEN

That's really an agenda set by the day. Everything's judged on its merits. Do we decide that it's going to be a one minute ten second [story] at the start of the day? No, we don't. I like stories that are 'pacey', so I'm probably a bit different to my peers in that, so I'm quite happy to run short stories so I can get a lot more news in. I don't necessarily run a whole stack of one minute thirty or one minute forty stories, and I'll pace our show with what I call reader voice-overs. In terms of what decides the order, I think it's just what's basic common news sense. I'll always err towards what I think is more interesting to a wider audience. I'll tend to shy away from just a targeted demographic. For example, I won't lead off, unless it's extraordinary, with a narrow focus on disabled education, or something like that. I love those stories but, on the converse side, I like stories that are broad-brush like 'why aren't there more male teachers in schools?' And the other thing with TV news is, of course, pictures. Let's not forget that we're a visual medium. So, if I've got two stories and both stories are of equal weight, I'll run the one with the best pictures.

SBS

Those things are pretty obvious, gen-

SBS: You need to ask yourself, 'Why is this story in the media at this time? What does it mean? What inferences can I draw from it? Do I accept the things that are being put to me? Is there another point of view?' I think those are all the questions that every consumer should ask. It's not always obvious there's a reason things are occurring in the news, and it's often not appropriate for the media to be saying to people, 'Here is a spokesperson commenting on this issue and, by the

way, they are commenting because they're driven by a particular need to express their interest'. Their organizations need to put a point of view. That kind of explanation for coverage isn't always apparent and you need to ask yourself about that.

Channel Ten : Media students should be aware of what we're doing. In reality, I would like to think that at all times we are deciding what's news and covering it in an honest fashion but in terms of running order,

pictures and headlines, there has to be a commercial television element and they should look at that, I suppose. Television and commercial news is a very narrow area in reality and we don't do much more than just cover the news of the day. It is a fact that we don't get terribly bogged down in analysis or anything like that. In television news, what you see is what you get. It is, in my mind, reasonably honest, particularly when we go live and you see the newsmakers doing two-

ways, or you see them live in our shots. It's there for the world to see. It's very hard to tamper with that. Not that you'd want to. We try to treat our audience with honesty and integrity and we try to present news in that way and write our stories concisely and simply and write about the facts and let the pictures tell the story.

Channel Nine: Ask questions, stay open-minded and don't passively consume news, (these) all sound pretty sensible.

erally. We run stories for what they're worth, and that will be determined by a whole range of things. For example, the number of events occurring that are related to that story. As an illustration, a story about the war in Iraq might, on any particular evening, have had five or six or ten or fifteen elements. All of them are important in some way and it is important to report them. You may choose to break them into separate stories but it is essentially one story. It also depends too, on the relative importance of a particular event. If there is the prospect of, say, a major military conflict in our region, you would expect that there would be a greater attention paid to the detail than a military action involving Indian troops, and that's only natural. In India, they would pay more attention to that than the event in Australia.

CHANNEL TEN

We like to be parochial where we can, in that we cover stories that affect people in our market.

CHANNEL NINE

By a combination of the producer, chief-of-staff and me.

Who is your audience?

ABC

It's the ABC demographic. Principally forty-five plus, tertiary educated.

CHANNEL SEVEN

Young families, twenty-five years plus. We broadcast into a predominantly family structure and family environment and that also influences very, very heavily what pictures we'll show.

WIN TV

WIN television in Victoria has six separate news bulletins based on and around the regions of Albury, Shepparton, Bendigo, Ballarat, Mildura and Traralgon. They're very broad regions. I think the demographic of our audience is constantly being redefined. Obviously, though, you look at stories from the point of view of 'OK, who is my audience?' and my audience are mum and dad with a couple of kids, a mortgage, a couple of cars and a couple of television sets, not a sixteen to eighteen-year-old teenage boy who likes to ride skateboards.

SBS

We have in mind an audience that has an interest in international affairs and an interest in cultural diversity and substance. There are very few younger people in the SBS audience profile but that's pretty much the same across the networks. News and current affairs generally attract a much older audience. Some of the networks have had some success in attracting much younger audiences by doing stories that attract a younger audience, like stories about performers, singers or actors.

CHANNEL TEN

I can define our market with a little bit of authority because recently we did some research and the sort of things that I now know, or the sorts of things that have been renewed in my mind, are that: Melbourne people like quality; Melbourne people are cynical; Melbourne likes Melbourne—its sport, its events and its personalities. They don't like to feel in any way inferior to any other city in the world but, in the world of news or media, they want quality. They want honesty, integrity and credibility. That is paramount.

CHANNEL NINE

Everyone.

Describe how your network's news style is different.

ABC

The obvious differences are that the local commercial news is more concerned with local, parochial, parish-pump, ambulance chasing, fire-engine chasing-type stories, than we are. They're more likely to run car accidents, house fires, cats up trees, whatever, than the ABC. That's partly because they don't have the access to the network of foreign correspondents that the ABC does, nor do they put as much stock on political reporting as the ABC does.

WIN TV

Relative to our competitor's offerings, we're the only network in Victoria that offers a complete local news service. Prime and Southern Cross (except in Albury) do not offer any local news services. They take their network national news from Channel Seven and Channel Ten.

CHANNEL SEVEN

We aim to do more local stories because Channel Seven is known for its long association with Melbourne and its history. That doesn't mean necessarily that we don't cover interstate and overseas. Like anything, it's got to have a good mix. You can't have everything local because people are more sophisticated these days—our communications are better, our papers are better, and our radio is better. Our facilities to get to overseas events are better.

SBS

We do very little local reporting of the kind you see in Victorian news. Of course, SBS is the only television network that is a fully national network. That is to say that the same signal is seen in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Broome, or Perth, or wherever. We have the one signal that goes across the country, therefore, we are unable for obvious reasons, to reflect local agendas. The top stories in Adelaide wouldn't go down too well with Victorians. The top two stories in Victoria wouldn't go down too well with Adelaideans, so we steer clear of that completely.

CHANNEL TEN

One of Ten's news's brand assets is the five o'clock timeslot and the hour [-long bulletin]. In terms of the world and the way it is today, I think there's need for an hour. We're always leaving stuff out. So I think an hour's good in 2003. The other news services in reality are good news services but I think they might only have seventeen minutes of news content and about six or seven minutes of sport. We've got double that so I think it's valuable.

CHANNEL NINE

You'd have to ask the viewers that.

ACTIVITY: CLASSROOM EXERCISE

The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's (RMIT) TV Journalism lecturer, Kevin McQuillan, suggests this as a good exercise for students of TV news coverage:

7. Divide ...

Break up the class into five groups. Assign each group the task of monitoring one of the networks' nightly news

bulletins every night for one week. Ask students to write down the top five news stories in the bulletin each night.

8. And Confer

The following day, or on the last day of the exercise, the teacher may wish to put all the results into matrices and lead a discussion around similarities and differences between each network's story selection.

CONTROLLED CHAOS: HOW TV NEWS IS MADE

6.30am

Chief-of-staff (COS) arrives, scans newspapers, radio and tapes of any vision shot overnight. Chooses potential stories and gives each a 'story slug'. Creates a Story List of approximately twenty-five story slugs. Writes Story List on to a whiteboard behind the COS desk.

7.30am

News Director phones COS to discuss Story List so far.

8.00am

COS assigns a reporter's initials to each story and estimates the order, duration and format of each story.

8.30am

Reporters arrive. COS assigns reporters to camera operators. Reporters research background of the assigned story, strategize story format, and select talent to interview. Reporters contact talent and negotiate a time and place for on-camera interviews later that day. Reporters brief COS about their plans.

9.30am

Editorial meeting. COS, news director, producers, line-up producer and librarian attend. COS hands out copies of Story List. COS leads debate about the merit and format of each story. Story List may be changed. Librarian takes requests for archived vision.

9.30am

Reporter and camera operator teams drive to locations to interview talent. Shoot fresh vision of locations, building exteriors, etc. Record piece-to-camera. Reporter updates COS on story's

progress.

12pm

Reporter returns to office. Briefs COS. Shotlists tape by watching on TV screen. Goes into edit suite to select grabs. Back to desk to input data into network's proprietary news application: Timecodes selected grabs and fresh or archived vision, first and last words of grabs and pieces-to-camera. supers. Writes voice-overs. Records voice-overs. Tape editor cuts vision, voice-overs, supers and edits together onto beta cart. Producer sub-edits script. Approves script. Line-up producer sub-edits script. Approves script. Producer and news director watch finished story. Tape editor makes final edits. Reporter makes final edits of script in proprietary system.

4.45pm

Script printed. Tape is cued and ready to roll.

5.00pm

Live news bulletin starts. Story goes to air.

Thanks to Channel Ten, Melbourne, for giving ASE access to a behind the scenes look at their newsroom.

TELL IT LIKE IT IS: AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO TV TERMINOLOGY

COS – (pron. 'cos') Chief-of-staff. Assigns camera crews and reporters to stories.

Crew – The team taping audio and video or operating cameras during transmission.

Drop – To remove a story from a list of stories planned for a bulletin.

Grab – A segment of an interview used on its own or in a reporter package.

Live voice-over – When an entire story is read by a newsreader and vision is shown.

News director – The person with ultimate control of a news bulletin.

Piece-to-camera (PTC) – When a reporter is recorded speaking directly to the camera.

Producer – The person with editorial and legal responsibility for the news bulletin.

Reporter – Person who researches and

strategizes a news story, interviews, shotlists, does PTCs and voice-overs, and writes supers.

Reporter package – A story with pictures, voice-overs and grabs.

Shotlist – To make a sequential list of the vision on a tape with its timecode.

Sign off – The reporter's last words in a story, giving their name and the bulletin's name.

Super – An on-screen caption identifying reporters, locations and interviewees.

Talent – The interviewee.

Teaser – A short description of an upcoming story, read by the newsreader to keep viewers tuned in.

Throw – When the newsreader introduces a reporter, a presenter or a grab.

Timecode – The position, in minutes and seconds, of vision on a tape.

Two-way – When a reporter is interviewed live, by the newsreader, during an event.

Vision – Pictures, footage taken by a camera person.

Voice-over – The part of a news story when a reporter narrates and vision is shown.

RESOURCE LIST

Take a journey even further behind the news from Australian broadcast media

- www.abc.net.au
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
- www.ninemsn.com.au
Channel Nine
- www.theworldnews.com.au
www.sbs.com.au
Special Broadcasting Service
- www.seven.com.au
Channel Seven
- www.ten.com.au
Channel Ten
- www.wintv.com.au
WIN Television

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