



## Unbalanced Frames



### **Content Analysis for Local Television News in Hartford**

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### **Hartford Local Television News Content Audit Report**



# **I. Introduction: Community, News Analysis & Strategic Frame Analysis**

## **Communications and Community**

Efforts to introduce “system-reform” initiatives in low-income communities must take into account the powerful influence of mass communications. In particular, important new research shows that news coverage (both print and broadcast) has a profound effect on what issues people believe to be important (agenda-setting); the lens through which they interpret issues (framing); and whether they use this information in making judgments about racial groups, policy preferences, and electoral choices (priming). In short, the news powerfully shapes the ways in which people relate to their communities.

Perhaps the most notable trend in news production is the fact that local television news has become the predominant source of information about public affairs. In almost every major media market the local news airs from 5:30 in the morning until twelve o’clock at night. Additionally, news “teasers” are run virtually all day long to promote various programs. The end result is that the local television news is ubiquitous.

A growing body of research shows that media-driven stereotypes of poor minorities as “prime suspects”, “superpredators”, or “welfare queens” have a disturbingly corrosive effect on “public will”. Studies show that such portrayals or “scripts” reinforce negative views of minority groups and increase support for harsh, punitive policy remedies. The implication of these results is to create a sense of doom and disaster among a public weary of intervention on behalf of poor, minority communities. There is a growing perception that the problems are hopeless and the solutions are failing.

More troubling is the finding that racial cues in the news may even erode support from constituencies historically committed to progressive social change. Racial imagery in the news, therefore, has a direct bearing on rebuilding activities in urban neighborhoods. Such an environment makes it difficult to argue that these neighborhoods are worthy of public (or private) investment.

The challenge for community improvement advocates, we believe, is to develop media relationships that empower community-based organizations. To effectively engage the news media, community development advocates should have an understanding of the nature of their local news coverage. Content news audits and content analysis help us understand the nature of the coverage.

## **Understanding Content News Analysis and its Value**

A content news audit is a method for reliably measure what news and information is appearing on television and in newspapers. Audits can include a variety of searchable criteria – identification of coverage topics, tallies of the frequency of coverage topics, coverage treatment such features vs. hard news, and geographic focus among them. A content analysis is an assessment or evaluation of an audit. Journalists often use such analysis to measure the impact of editorial content changes on readership building. Some community stakeholders use it to define how news organizations frame issues.

## **Understanding News Frames**

News frames tell an audience how to interpret and evaluate a given story by drawing attention to some things and ignoring others. Newscasters use symbols, inference and language to construct a story line. The particular mix of ingredients has a profound meaning for how the public comes to understand social issues. For example, recent experimental work shows that exposure to violent youth “superpredators” in the news increased adult support for punitive crime policy. Thus, it may be more than coincidence that politicians and policy makers have moved to enact restrictive youth policies. For example, several states have passed laws lowering the age at which a juvenile can be tried as an adult. Likewise, numerous cities have passed youth curfew, wide-ranging gang injunctions and measures to place metal detectors in schools and search children’s lockers. In sum, the way that the news media frames public issues has important consequences for public opinion and public policy.

## **II. Hartford News Content Audit: Methodology**

This report is based on a review of 60 hours of local television news programming in Hartford during most of December 2001 and early January 2002. The content audit included the analysis of 269 stories produced by three Hartford television stations. The analytical benchmarks were the following: coverage categories, story treatment, news context, sourcing and characteristics of media representatives. These benchmarks tell us 1) what was covered most frequently; 2) the coverage treatment; 3) background provided for the stories; 4) sources that contributed information and/or comments for the story and 5) the race and gender of those delivering the news.

This study examines three local one-hour evening newscasts preceding the national news in Hartford. The audit is based on 60 hours of total news programming produced by Channel 3 (WFSB), Channel 8 (WTNH) and Channel 30 (NBC30).

The audit covered four weeks – Dec. 3-Dec. 21, 2001 and Dec. 28, 2001-Jan. 4, 2002. The audit was coded for hard news only – no sports, weather or soft features. In total, there were 269 stories. The average length was 90 seconds.

## Audit Results

### III. Topics of the Most Frequently Produced Stories in Hartford

- **In a period of economic turmoil, business was biggest news topic; community news coverage was substantial but unfocused and crime was accorded a disproportionate amount of broadcast time.**

Table 1 shows that local news producers responded to corporate scandals such as Enron, unease over a recession and a major terrorist attack by making *economics/government* the most frequently reported topic during the sample period. In all, 32.5% of local news coverage was devoted to the category. Of the total *economics/government* coverage, 38% of that category's coverage was devoted to business. That is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that the "economic impact of international affairs" was the second most covered topic (22%) within this category considering the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on Sept. 11, 2001. The event known as "9/11" was a particularly big story in Hartford given its proximity to New York and the fact that Connecticut is home to some of the nation's largest insurance companies.

The link between business, international affairs and politics were factors in the substantial coverage of government – the third most frequently reported topic within the *economics/government* category at 20%. Indeed, economic and political coverage often intersected because government frequently made news by attempting to address economic issues and security issues on the national and local level. Considering that Hartford is Connecticut's capital, this sort of emphasis should be expected.

However, the level of coverage of community and family affairs cited in Table 1– the second most-reported category – might be surprising in light of the fact that local news stations in cities of larger or comparable size do not devote as much time to the subject. In all, 25% of local news coverage was devoted to *community/family* stories. Community news such as reports on public transportation, city ordinances and development was accorded the most broadcast time within this category, accounting for 37% of community/family news. However, there was no clear thematic pattern in the coverage.

Coverage of health was the third most reported category. The level of health-related coverage was consistent with national trends. Also consistent with national trends was Hartford broadcasters heavy focus on mayhem, accidents and potential threats such as reports on the anthrax scare. Scholar George Gerbner, who has conducted many studies on violence on television, has dubbed this orientation the "dangerous world syndrome."

Crime reporting on TV is part of the "dangerous world" orientation. There is little mystery as to why crime reporting is so attractive to local news programmers with an abundance of airtime to fill. It is cheap to produce, has gripping visuals and involves dramatic situations. Thus, it has the necessary ingredients central to the "action news" format preferred by most local broadcasters.

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However, the amount of airtime accorded to the subject in Hartford is less than the coverage levels in cities of comparable size. Producers of local news are frequently criticized for excess coverage of crime. This was not the case in Hartford during the audit period. Of the total crime coverage, 40% of it focused on the criminal justice system and 25% on murder. Also, crime was about 6% more likely to be the lead story relative to its proportion of news. Crime accounted for 17.5% of all coverage but was the lead story 23.7% of the time. Over the same period, only 4.1% of reports focused on education.

TABLE #1

*Coverage Categories: Topics Most Frequently Reported*

<u>Story Category</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Economics/Politics	87	32.5%
Community/Family	61	25.0%
Health	49	18.3%
Crime/Violence	47	17.5%
Education	11	4.1%
Miscellaneous	8	3.0%
Total	269	100.00%

IV. Story Treatment: How Stories Are Told

- **Broadcasters overwhelmingly prefer stand-alone news stories and narratives that are episodic to series and themed storytelling.**

Local news in Hartford – like news operations in most cities – is largely based on stand-alone coverage. Table 2 shows that this kind of story – typified by the breaking report that broadcasters prefer – was aired 84.4% of the time in Hartford. Over the same period, Hartford television stations produced on-going series only 12.3% of the time. Series are more suitable for complicated stories and for recurring and long-standing issues. It’s also suitable for geographically focused stories such as community reporting because there is often more than one issue of importance in neighborhoods.

Hartford broadcasters also preferred episodic narratives overwhelmingly – using them 87.4% of the time. Thematic narratives help viewers connect events to broader trends or issues. This approach to storytelling is more suitable for “big picture” journalism that provides a backdrop for reports on events and developments. Thematic narratives can be particularly effective in community reporting. Hartford broadcasters used thematic narratives only 4% of the time.

LE #2

<u>Story Types</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b><u>Story Count: 269</u></b>		
<u>Story Type</u>		
Stand-Alone Straight News Stories	84.4%	227
On-Going Series	12.3%	33
Opinion by Journalist	1.9%	5
Unknown	1.5%	4
<b>Narrative Type</b>		
Episodic	87.4%	235
Episodic with some theme	4.8%	13
Thematic	4.0%	11

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## V. Hartford News Reports: Largely Out of Context

- Hartford news producers provide little context for their stories.

Local television news rarely contains background. As Table 3 shows, Hartford news producers are no exception. In three important categories – statistics, historical context and practical information – such background was provided less than 10% of the time. News producers’ favorite way of providing context – on-camera interviews with expert sources – was included only 12.9% of the time.

Historical context is very much needed for stories on long-standing or recurring issues. Viewers can better understand developments if background is provided. Also, the audit results indicate that Hartford news producers are not frequently opting for the “news you can use” approach that more stations are beginning to use in their broadcasts. Only 8.9% of the stories contained practical information.

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TABLE #3

<u>Context Within News Stories</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b><u>Story Count: 101</u></b>		
<u>Expert Source</u>	12.9%	32
Historical Context	9.3%	25
Practical Information	8.9%	24
Statistics Used	7.4%	20

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## VI. Source Selection: Balance Shortcomings

- News producers provide balance in type of sources but fail to find diversity.

**Table 4 shows Hartford stations provided balance in the types of sources used in stories. Individuals connected to a story were sources most frequently – 34.9% of the time. Government officials were frequently sources, followed closely by advocates. The relatively high use of advocates should be encouraging to community stakeholders hoping to present messages.**

However, Hartford’s diverse population was not reflected in TV news sourcing. Only 21.3% of the sources were women. Incredibly, in a city that is 90% black and brown, only 2.5% of the sources were African American and only 1.7% were Latino. Sometimes the best sources are women or people of color. This is an important coverage issue because sources often shape stories. Diversity in sourcing also usually leads to better coverage of communities of color.

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**TABLE #4**

<u>Sourcing by Category</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b><u>Story Count: 146</u></b>		
Individuals	34.9%	51
Government Officials	28.8%	42
Advocates	27.4%	40
Experts/Professional	8.9%	13

  

<u>Sourcing by Gender</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b><u>Story Count: 136</u></b>		
Male	78.7%	107
Female	21.3%	29

  

<u>Sourcing by Race</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
<b><u>Story Count: 120</u></b>		
White	95.8%	115
Black	2.5%	3
Latino	1.7%	2
Asian	-----	----

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## VII. The Messengers: On-Screen Demographics of TV Journalists

- There was gender balance but little racial diversity.

Table 5 shows the perfect gender balance in anchor roles. This is no accident and it is the national trend in local news. Stations consciously pair a male and female for anchor duty to create the kind of balance appealing to both genders in the viewing audience.

While anchors of color are common on early evening news weeknights in most of the nation's large and medium-sized cities, whites anchored nearly all the news segments during the audit period.

As for reporters, there was 50-50 gender balance in on-screen reporting. There was more racial balance on the reporting side – 29.2% of the reporters were non-white. However, the percentage falls far short of the percentage of people of color in Hartford. This is important because African American and Latino journalist are sometimes more attuned to the needs and issues in communities of color.

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**TABLE #5**  
**Characteristics of Anchors and Reporters in TV News**

	<u>Anchors</u>	<u>Percentages</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
Gender	Male	50%	219
	Female	50%	219
Race	White	99.9%	268
	Non-white	.003%	1
	<u>Reporters</u>	<u>Percentages</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>
Story Count: 106			
Gender	Male	50%	53
	Female	50%	53
Race	White	70.8%	73
	Non-White	29.2%	33

## VIII. Conclusions: Media Engagement Opportunities for Stakeholders

The news media have become Hartford's primary window to the world of public affairs. Local broadcast news has surpassed both the national network broadcasts and newspapers as the primary source of news in the city. This survey shows that there are challenges and opportunities for Hartford stakeholders as it relates to coverage and diversity.

### Coverage

**Challenge:** Hartford broadcasters primarily produced breaking stories with episodic narratives – journalism approaches that are not conducive to community reporting. Also, there were no thematic patterns in community coverage.

**Opportunity:** Hartford news stations produced higher than average levels of coverage related to community and family – evidence that local TV news organizations would be receptive to thoughtful “framed” pitches. By framing messages successfully, stakeholders can also encourage news producers to provide more community-related series and themed coverage.

### Sourcing

**Challenge:** There is little gender or racial diversity in the sources in Hartford TV news coverage.

**Opportunity:** Female stakeholders and stakeholders of color have an opportunity to reduce this disparity by presenting themselves as spokespersons and newsmakers. If they frame messages properly when given initial opportunities to appear on news segments, they can become the kind of reliable and TV-savvy sources that all broadcast journalists seek.

### Media Diversity

**Challenge:** Considering that about 90% of Hartford residents are people of color, local television news stations have been woeful in staffing diversity. Journalists of color are often more attuned to the issues and problems in African-American and Latino neighborhoods.

**Opportunity:** Stakeholders can encourage changes in local TV newsrooms by informing broadcast managers that diversity matters. Stakeholders can make a difference by citing insightful reporting by journalists of color and by pointing out shortcomings and/or inaccuracies in coverage of black and brown communities.