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Technical Aspects of Producing



Visualize two anchors relaying the news on an evening newscast. Except for the weather and sports anchors, the two news anchors are the foundation of the program;

the viewers expect to see them five evenings a week. The station's management hires anchors to lend credibility, convey authority, and serve as the "face" for the station's local presence. The anchors are promoted on billboards and in newspapers and are frequently approached in public on a first-name basis.

Producers must be keenly aware of the viewers' emotional investment in them. To make sure the anchors appear on camera and share enough time on-air (often snidely called face time), the line producer should double-check the rundown for anchor balance. If one anchor will present seven readers and the other has only two, then the first anchor will appear on camera much longer than the other. Even worse, the anchor with less face time will object—and when the line producer is confronted with rundowns that reveal a perceived slant for one anchor over another, the meeting will quickly become unpleasant.

As a side note, newsrooms are filled with anchors who feel they always receive the stories with difficult-to-pronounce foreign names or tongue-twisting medical phrases. Most veteran anchors realize that a pure balance (of either tricky stories or stacks of readers) is difficult to achieve every night. However, the line producer must be fair in balancing the anchors over the course of newscasts.

Still pictures

Many producers tend to avoid still pictures, but when used correctly, especially in a sequence, they can be effective—almost as much as video.

Maps and other graphics also should be used to support copy. If a plane has crashed in some relatively unknown area, it helps the viewer if you show a map and indicate with a star where the plane went down. The map should include at least one town familiar to your audience.

Live shots

Ever since technology allowed TV stations to go live from the scene on a daily basis, there has been a debate about whether the technique is being overused.

Most news managers say the public tends to believe that a reporter at the scene is more on top of a story than a reporter getting his or her information over the phone. Finally, they say, newsmakers are more likely to talk to a reporter in person than on the phone. "It's easy to say no to a strange voice on the phone," said a producer, "but it's difficult to say no to a reporter while looking him in the eye."

Back timing

One major task for the line producer is to ensure that the newscast gets off the air on time. This is particularly important when computers are in charge of establishing when programs and commercials start and end. We all have witnessed situations when one program is cut off abruptly by a new program. That situation happens because a computer has established the time when the new program or commercial is supposed to start, and start it will, on time.

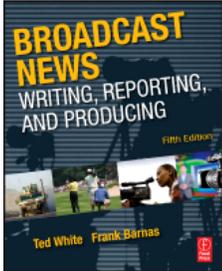
The timing is particularly critical when local news is followed by a network program. The network computer will take over regardless. If the local news anchors are still saying goodbye or the station's final commercial or logo is still playing, something is going to get cut off if the newscast timing is not accurate. If your commercial is cut, that revenue goes down the drain.

To defend against such problems, the show producer must track whether the newscast is "running on time." Anchors may stumble on some lines, a tape may be cued to the wrong spot, or the banter between the on-set talent may be too short or long. That's why producing is so difficult; the unexpected often happens. If the newscast is short, something else must be added to fill the time. The opposite is true if the show is running long something must be cut. As a result, producers use back timing to make sure the program ends on time. In most newsrooms, the computer system back times a show for you, but a producer must be able to do the math on his or her own.

The computer tells you automatically where you stand on time at each point in the newscast. A "minus" sign means the show is running long. Figuring the time works like this: Take the total amount of time for the show (i.e., 30 minutes). Subtract time for commercials; the number left is your news hole, which is the time you have for news. In most cases, it's between 12 and 15

minutes. Add up the time each story takes, including the anchor introduction, the tape time, and the anchor time, and then see how it works!

The bottom line—whether you use a computer or your own math—is to get off on time. News waits for no one, especially a producer who mis-times a show.



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