

Deciding What We See

Joe Courson

About six people will decide in a few minutes what hundreds of thousands of people like you and me will see on tonight's TV news. At most Georgia TV stations, the procedure for determining what stories are covered is about the same. Let's look at a day in WSB-TV's news operation in Atlanta.

The decision makers are the assignment editor (the one who acts like an air traffic controller coordinating news reporters and camera people) and the show producers (middle management people who decide how long a story will last and in what order the stories will appear during the show). When available, the news director sits in.

Half Hour Meeting

At WSB-TV they meet around a table for about 30 minutes each morning. Reporters can sit in the meeting, but usually wait for their assignment based on what is decided in the meeting. Some stations do not allow the reporter or any outsider to sit in. It varies from station to station.

The group looks over a larger-than-legal-size sheet of paper listing story ideas. The group also lists the number of available reporters and camera people. Coverage is often based strictly on available manpower.

All eyes are on the paper. The group looks hypnotized. Few words are exchanged. Occasionally, a person comments about a story idea, but they usually reserve comment until after they have read and reread all ideas.

To get those story ideas, they look over newspapers like *The Atlanta Constitution*, listen to radio news programs on the way to work, telephone their Washington, D.C. bureau, and talk to people like extension editors who pitch story ideas. Ideas come from many sources. To be considered, a story must be on the idea list. It is very difficult, almost impossible, to get them to cover a story if it is not decided on at the morning meeting.

Joe Courson is Editor, College of Agriculture, University of Georgia, Tifton. He has been an ACE member 4 years.

On this day, shortage of reporters cuts to six the number of stories to be covered.

The editors and producers spend only a few seconds considering each story idea. The sheet has a bare bones description. Sometimes they respectfully argue hard for a story they think needs covering. There is a good bit of subtle give and take during the meeting even though their eyes remain on the idea sheet.

Skybus, a new airline service, wanted to conduct operations at a Fulton County airport. It had only a nine-word description: "SKYBUS/FULCO to decide fate of skybus 10:00 today." That was it.

The description for our extension service story on fire ants read, "AGRICULTURE/FIRE ANTS . . .they're spreading north . . .and it's worrying the Georgia extension service." Thirteen words to describe the idea. Because of the manpower shortage, they used our tape and said less than thirty seconds about the problem.

Stories Not Covered

Several stories on the list were not covered. One involved an omelet cook-off. It read, "Omelet contest/congress . . .congressional types including Swindle (Congressman Pat Swindle) . . .cook omelets at house ag comm. meet."

The sheet also has a rundown of activities other reporters have in progress. When working on a news special or a series of reports, reporters don't get involved in the day-to-day news operation. They work on the special project. When it's finished, they return to covering the news.

All of the planning can be for nothing if a fast-breaking story develops. The shuttle disaster is a good example of how news people quickly change from decisions made at the morning meeting. They scramble to get the local angle to the story.

Stations concentrate their efforts on the six o'clock news. That's when the largest number of people watch. Some stations have another meeting in mid-afternoon to fine tune the line-up, going over the stories decided at the morning meeting. They allocate time for each story and decide where to place it in the newscast. The more important stories are placed at the top.

Just when you think that meetings are over, another one pops up, but it involves fewer people. It concerns the 11 o'clock news. The procedure is much the same as for the morning meeting. They have less news time and much of it is devoted to update stories.

Television assignment editors, producers and news directors, take only a few minutes to decide what you and I will see tonight. Now you know what happens behind the scenes.

Research Briefs

Thomas Quaife "Media credibility as perceived by central Iowa farmers." Unpublished M.S. thesis, Iowa State University, 1983.

Credibility studies of the past twenty years have suggested that the public is more likely to believe televised news than news in newspapers. Television often is perceived to be more timely, less biased, and less opinionated than newspapers.

Many researchers have criticized credibility research citing methodological problems in data collection, question wording, audience type and subject matter. Two of these criticisms are addressed in this thesis—an examination of specific audiences and subject matter. Quaife examined the credibility question with a farm audience using both general news and agricultural information. The study randomly sampled 313 central Iowa farmers using a two-stage systematic sample. The mail questionnaire with two follow-ups received only a 49 percent response—considerably below what is generally desired.

Quaife's findings about general news support other credibility findings such as those of Gallup and Roper.

Quaife's data show that farmers, like the general public, perceive television as the most credible source for most general news. Newspapers follow as the second most credible source, with radio a distant third choice.

The most interesting finding of the study asked about the most credible source for agricultural information. More than 52 percent of the farmers in the study named newspapers as