Sensationalism in local TV news: A content analysis comparing ratings and non-ratings periods

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SENSATIONALISM IN LOCAL TV NEWS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS COMPARING RATINGS AND NON-RATINGS PERIODS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

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Sensationalism in Local TV News: A Content Analysis
Comparing Ratings and Non-Ratings Periods

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT

Sensationalism in Local TV News: A Content Analysis
Comparing Ratings and Non-Ratings Periods

by

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Sensationalism in journalism has been a topic of debate for centuries. Many critics charge that, in general, sensationalism dominates television news over public affairs reporting. However, a gap remains in the literature regarding whether there is an increase in sensationalism during ratings periods over non-ratings periods. This study examined the amounts of sensationalism/human interest stories and local public affairs reporting during those two periods. This study examined the four major local television news stations in Las Vegas: KVBC, KVVU, KLAS, and KTNV. Eight hypotheses were tested. The hypotheses posited that when comparing ratings periods to non-ratings periods, there would be more news time devoted to sensationalism and human interest stories, there would be more embedded sensationalism, and that sensational stories would appear earlier in newscasts.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Local-market television news producers, editors, anchors, and reporters face the daily task of deciding what will air on news programs and how particular news stories will be covered. Within this challenge lies the dilemma of what is ethical and what is unethical; what is necessary to the news story and what is unnecessary; what is reporting the news, and what is using sensationalism to sell the news. Journalists are guided by their “personal and professional consciences and informed by whatever understanding they have acquired of the codes of their business” (Hulteng, 1976, p. 63). The values and standards of the American news media constantly continue to change (Barkin, 2003; Diamond, 1991). Diamond (1991) noted that the “range of ‘permissible’ subjects continues to broaden” (p. 181) in journalism. Barkin (2003) argued that the distinctions between news and entertainment are becoming more and more difficult to decipher. He highlighted a talk presented by CBS anchor Dan Rather at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism in which Rather expressed a fear that journalism, especially broadcast news, was succumbing to entertainment, and to what he called ‘Hollywoodation’, in lieu of its role in the governmental system of checks and balances and public service (Barkin, 2003). Barkin also noted that “news and entertainment are as solidly linked on network ‘news’ programs as
they have ever been” and if the “battle for the soul of television news in fact was ever waged, it is certainly over by now” (p. 7).

Normative journalism theories suggest that the “proper goal of news reporting is public enlightenment so that the citizenry can engage in effective self-governance. These theories assume the news media will emphasize public affairs coverage, including stories related to government, community, and foreign affairs” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 291). Critics have charged that profit motives often dominate the content of television news to the extent that sensationalism is ever increasing at the expense of public affairs reporting (Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986; Ryu, 1982; Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). For instance, Ryu (1982) found that “sensationalism/human interest stories serve as reserves to maintain high ratings” (p. 78). Slattery, Doremus and Marcus (2001) examined amounts of public affairs reporting and sensationalism on the network evening newscasts during a 28-year period, from 1968 to 1996. Sixty weekday-evening newscasts were content-analyzed from NBC, CBS, and ABC. Results concluded that the sensational/human interest content and the embedded sensational/human interest content comprised 9.5% of network news content in 1968 and rose to 37.9% in 1996. Similarly, Slattery and Hakanen (1994) found local television news devoted more time to sensational and human interest stories in 1992 than in 1976. They noted that the “time spent on such stories came at the expense of news coverage related to local government, politics, and education” (p. 205). Also interested in the role sensationalism plays
in local television news, Hofstetter and Dozier (1986) conducted a content analysis of three network-affiliated television stations in Houston from July 13 through August 14, 1981. Early and late evening weekday newscasts were videotaped and coded, for a total of 924 news stories. Each story within the sample was classified as “government and politics,” “community and economic affairs,” or “sensationalism and human interest” (Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986, p. 818). A news story was placed into the sensational category if it emphasized “crime, violence, disasters, accidents, fires or vignettes about individuals and groups which are not linked to political concerns” (p. 818). Results concluded that an average of 46% of news time was devoted to sensational topics.

Market Theory Microeconomics

The need to create a daily television news program that will sell audiences to advertisers lies at the heart of this tug-of-war between reporting the news and selling the news. Market theory microeconomics, or microeconomic theory, can help shed light on this debate. McManus (1992a, 1992b, 1994) argued that this theory helps explain changes in habits of broadcast news, and why there seems to be a shift away from public affairs reporting, and toward reporting the sensational. McManus (1992a) applied microeconomic theory in his quest to understand how the conflict between serving the public and serving the market affects journalism. He argued that since advertisers seek public attention for their products, “advertiser-supported news media following market logic compete not in a news market, but in a larger market for public attention” (p. 196). This
market, he noted, "may value entertainment more than information, leading to a conflict with journalism's norms of public service" (p. 196).

McManus (1992a, 1992b, 1994) argued that news organizations have been shifting away more and more from public affairs reporting, but that shift is to be expected in a market where news providers are competing for dollars. Therefore, he went on to note, a news organization's customer is not the viewer, but the advertiser. As a result, a "commercial news organization's goal is public attention rather than public education" (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 292). Berkowitz (1993) argued that motives to turn a profit in the television news industry have an "impact nearly as great as journalistic ideals" (p. 68). News stories aired for the sake of making money, which are most often measured in terms of sensationalism and/or human interest, have been found to comprise up to one half of local television newscasts (Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986; Ryu, 1982). While it is true that sensationalism may attract audience attention, McManus (1992b) argued that it does "little to help consumers make sense of current events" (p. 801). He further contended that the conflict between market logic and the logic of journalism "should be profoundly troubling for those who consider reliable information necessary for proper operation of a democracy" (McManus, 1992a, p. 205). This conflict threatens journalistic integrity. News, he argued, "must observe the public service norms of journalism, even though such observance almost inevitably reduces profits" (McManus, 1992a, p. 205).
The Sensationalism Debate

Sensationalism has been the topic of debate for centuries, and is not a predicament unique to contemporary times. Stevens (1991) argued that elitists accused the popular media of sensationalism as far back as Ancient Rome. He noted that topics like "violence, crime, and sex were staples in our folktales and ballads centuries before there were newspapers" (p. 7). Frank Luther Mott (1950), often referred to as the "dean of journalism historians" (Stevens, 1991, p. 5), noted that yellow journalism, as sensationalism was commonly referred to, began with the New York Journal and the New York World "in 1896, spread rapidly among other papers throughout the nation in 1989, and reached its height at the turn of the century, 1899-1900" (Mott, 1950, p. 539). Most recently, during the 1990's, news reports on television "seemed to erupt with stories of sensation, bad taste, and lurid scandal" (Hachten, 2001, p. 83).

On one side of the sensationalism debate, some scholars have argued that sensationalism can actually be useful by maintaining boundaries, order, decency, and morality in any given community by showing what is not acceptable (Slattery, 1994; Stevens, 1985). Furthermore, Hofstetter and Dozier (1986), in their study of local television news in the Houston area, found that sensational news contained "elements of quality news, information which could serve as an opinion resource for citizens in their everyday activities" (p. 820).

On the other side of the debate, sensationalism has been charged with emphasizing emotion for emotion's sake and has been used to satisfy the
media's wish for making money and the public's desire for entertainment (Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000). The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) argued that the "press emphasizes the exceptional rather than the representative, the sensational rather than the significant" (p. 55). In reference to stories that contain elements of public affairs, the Commission (1947) had the following to say:

In most news media such matters are crowded out by stories of night-club murders, race riots, strike violence, and quarrels among public officials. The Commission does not object to the reporting of these incidents but to the preoccupation of the press with them. The press is preoccupied with them to such an extent that the citizen is not supplied the information and discussion he needs to discharge his responsibilities to the community. (p. 55)

This reinforces the notion that the press tends to focus more on stories with a sensational nature than those stories that deal strictly with public affairs matters.

Ratings in Television News

Eastman and Ferguson (2002) contended:

Ratings exert a powerful influence on the industry, from the decisions of syndicators and station representatives in programming... to network television programming... Broadcast revenues, programs, stations, and individual careers depend on audience ratings. (p. 41)
A rating is an “estimate of the percentage of the total number of people or households in a population tuned to a specific station or network during a specific time period” (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002, p. 47). A. C. Nielsen is the only company in the United States that produces local station ratings for television (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002). Nielsen conducts four nationwide “sweeps” of all local television stations during the months of February, May, July, and November. These are the most important local television reports, allowing stations to compare themselves with other stations in the same size market (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002) and they help set the advertising rates for the station. Advertisers contribute “almost all the income that networks or stations derive from news programming” (McManus, 1992b, p. 788). McManus (1992b) also noted that consumer attention, even though it is intangible, “is extremely valuable. Advertisers spend well in excess of $100 billion per year in the U.S. to capture it” (p. 788).

Fallows (1996) noted that “Local TV news is the most immediately ratings-driven part of today’s news business” (p. 199). One ratings period consists of “four sequential weeks of data, reported week by week and averaged for the month” (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002, p. 42). There are 211 markets in the United States, and Las Vegas is currently market number 51. Nielsen also compiles “nightly ratings called ‘overnights’... publishing this information every morning for the benefit of network executives and purchasing stations” (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002, p. 43). Las Vegas receives overnight numbers, however, the daily reports do not take away from the emphasis placed upon the four sweeps
months. Cathy Hanson, Assistant Professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and former television journalist, said, "Stations use the four sweeps months to set advertising rates, which is how they sell ads, which is how they get money. The realization is that news is driven by economics" (personal communication, September 20, 2004). Similarly, Gary Prager, Production Manager for KVVU Fox 5 News in Las Vegas, said:

There is an extraordinary amount of pressure on both the news and the production departments during sweeps. These months are the most important because they set the advertising rates for the station. We do receive numbers every morning from the day before, however, sweeps months are what we really emphasize. The bottom line is that our news programs have to make money and ratings drive the advertising dollars (personal communication, September 23, 2004).

Leslie Fox-Priest, Local Sales Manager for KVBC Channel 3 in Las Vegas, said the numbers from the four ratings months offer more information than the overnight numbers, specifically in terms of demographics (personal communication, September 22, 2004). "The demographics tell us exactly what audience we want to hit. We base our advertising rates on viewership, so the more people we have watching, the more we charge" (Fox-Priest, L., personal communication, September 22, 2004). Advertisers are interested in ratings, and, more specifically, in the ages and genders of people watching specific programming. That is where key demographics come into play, and why there is
such an emphasis on sweeps months (Prager, G., personal communication, September 22, 2004). The four sweeps months are significant on many levels, according to Matt Smith, Sales Account Executive for KTNV Channel 13 in Las Vegas (personal communication, September 22, 2004). "Sales-wise, everything is based on the four sweeps months. Those months are important because they provide us with demographics; the newscast is worth more if it receives high ratings" (Smith, M., personal communication, September 22, 2004).

During ratings periods, there is an extreme pressure on news personnel to achieve high numbers (Hanson, C., personal communication, September 20, 2004; McManus, 1992b; Prager, G., personal communication, September 22, 2004). Hanson, who spent more than 12 years in the news industry, noted that "there's incredible pressure during ratings. You can't take days off, you plan your life around ratings to a certain extent... I would go buy enough food to have in the house... I would make sure I had enough clean clothes because it was very, very intense" (personal communication, September 20, 2004). Local news is "more closely monitored by ratings, and ratings more closely monitored by station management, than ever before, and that should be a cause for concern" (Barkin, 2003, p. 140). Barkin (2003) also noted that the "careers of reporters, especially anchors, and certainly news directors rest with the ratings" (p. 140). Hanson agreed, recalling a story she had to cover during one ratings period entitled, "Living with Herpes." "At the time, no one wanted to talk about sexually transmitted diseases on camera, and I had to find people to interview. There was no way you could not do the story. So I found somebody to interview. It
was either that or get fired” (Hanson, C., personal communication, September 20, 2004). Prager discussed the emphasis on ratings months from a production standpoint:

Much more pre-production work goes into the news when we are in a sweeps month. The news becomes very graphic-intensive. Right now, it’s September and we are already starting to gear up for November ratings. We are building an entire new news set and developing many new graphics for November sweeps. No one gets any days off during ratings. Also, there can be absolutely no technical mistakes during sweeps. My boss calls it ‘28 days of perfect television’. (personal communication, September 22, 2004)

Throughout sweeps months, news content often sways toward the sensational (Hanson, C., personal communication, September 20, 2004; Prager, G., personal communication, September 22, 2004). Keller (1993) argued that in the news business, “competition for survival is fierce. As a result, programs must excite, anger, and titillate” (p. 195). Scott and Gobetz (1992) echoed that notion:

The economic pressures of earning ratings points have made the practice of delivering the news a vehicle by which to insure profits, so instead of covering stories audiences need to know, the media serves up a diet of stories that titillate rather than inform. (p. 406)

Hanson discussed the change in news content during ratings between the time when she began her career, to what she sees today:
Now ratings have made news basically 'Inside Edition'. I'm waiting for them to do 'How to be a Stripper'... One book (sweeps period), the focus was on animal fighting. One sweeps month saw a lot of series pieces on women who work in strip clubs... these types of series pieces air mostly during ratings periods. (Hanson, C., personal communication, September 20, 2004)

Hickey (2004) also expressed his views regarding news content during ratings:

The idea is to schedule shock-and-awe stories during those four months to boost ratings for those periods and thus raise advertising rates and profits. Everybody, inside the industry and out, knows that this system is a fraud: advertisers are cheated, and the public is either frightened out of its wits by alarmist, hair-raising news features, or inured to real news, or both. (p. 6)

This reinforces the notion that news stories during ratings are often selected due to their sensational content, in the hopes that they will draw viewers, boost ratings, and increase advertising rates.

Purpose of the Study/Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine if the amount of sensationalism in local newscasts increases significantly during ratings as opposed to non-ratings periods. Because stations broadcast news reports during ratings often not for the sake of story significance but rather due to their sensationalistic nature, this could indicate a downward spiral impending on journalism. This study is
significant because journalists may be losing sight of the industry’s responsibility to air a news story based not on enticement, but on the story’s implication on and importance to the audience. Is the news report significant to viewers, or is it aired exclusively for the sake of attracting a large audience in order to boost ratings and set higher advertising rates?

Secondly, since the pressure on those individuals in the news industry is so intense during ratings periods, it is logical to assume that there will be differences in the types of news segments aired during ratings periods and non-ratings periods. This difference demonstrates advertisers’ control over editorial content of the news, which is not consistent with the explicit goal of journalism: to report news to enlighten and inform the public (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). Furthermore, if there is a significant difference in the types of stories broadcast during different months of the year (ratings months as opposed to non-ratings months), and if content during ratings periods are not truly representative of the content over the entire year, this may be a sign that advertisers may be getting shortchanged for their advertising dollar.

In sum, an examination of news content at different points in the year needs to be conducted for many reasons, the most noteworthy of these being the fact that journalists have a duty to report the news, rather than select which news segments are the most sensationalistic and will likely, therefore, capture the highest audience. Many critics charge that television news in general has moved away from public affairs reporting, and toward sensationalism and human interest reporting (McCartney, 1997; Ryu, 1982; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). However, a
gap remains in the literature regarding whether or not there is more sensationalism in local television news during ratings periods than during non-ratings periods. This study will examine the amounts of sensationalism/human interest reporting versus public affairs reporting during those two periods.

This chapter has provided a discussion of market theory microeconomics, which seems to guide editorial decisions made in local television news, a short history of sensationalism in journalism, a look at positive and negative aspects of sensationalism in television news, an overview of ratings in local television news, and an overview of why this topic warrants study. The following chapters will further extend the issues addressed in this chapter, as well as develop specifics of the current study. Chapter Two will review applicable scholarship in the area of sensationalism in network and local television news. Included is a discussion of ethical challenges in selecting news stories as well as a look into the struggle between journalistic ideals and news as a business. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology of the current study, including measurement and coding of data. Chapter Four will provide the results of the study. Finally, Chapter Five will offer a discussion of the findings from the present study, expand upon the implications of the results, and propose directions for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to link previous research most clearly with the proposed analysis, the following literature review will highlight the dominant findings in the areas of 1) the struggle between news as a business and journalistic ideals; 2) ethical dilemmas during ratings; 3) content analyses of sensationalism and soft news in network television newscasts; and 4) content analyses of sensationalism in local television newscasts.

News as a Business vs. Journalistic Ideals

Numerous scholars have discussed the conflict between journalistic ideals and the economics of journalism (Altschull, 1984; Berkowitz, 1993; Carroll, 1989; Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975; Fallows, 1996; Guensburg, 1999; McManus, 1992, 1994; Ryan & Wentworth, 1999; Scott & Gobetz, 1992). Ryan and Wentworth (1999) pointed out that “mass media production in the United states is not, for the most part, about serving the public interest, if we take that to mean creating an informed citizenry. It is, more than anything, about the money” (p. 206). Berkowitz (1993) contended that local television news is often “shaped by tradeoffs between journalistic judgment and the imperatives from the business side of a media organization” (p. 67). Since “profit motives have an impact nearly
as great as journalistic ideals”, Berkowitz argued that “news values generally have not been found as strong predictors of news selection” (p. 68). His study examined work roles in news to explain differences in views about the selection of news stories. Berkowitz separated news managers (those who decide which stories will be broadcast, including assignment editors, producers, and news directors) from information gatherers (anchors and reporters). News managers, Berkowitz argued, are more interested in attracting a large share of the viewing audience than are news gatherers. As news has become more and more business-oriented and economically driven, he went on to note, these work roles have become increasingly differentiated.

Berkowitz (1993) collected data from a mail survey of television journalists in Iowa. Twelve news stations comprised the sample. A total of 46 journalists participated in the survey; 23 were information gatherers and the remaining 23 were news managers. The participants were divided into three clusters. The first cluster was called “business/programming.” They believed news selection is based on audience interests. The second cluster was named “business/resources,” and was comprised of those who believed that resource constraints shape the news. The third cluster was called “journalistic values,” and consisted of those who thought news is the result of “applying traditional journalistic criteria to potential news items” (Berkowitz, 1993, p. 72).

Results concluded that work roles were not significantly linked to different perceptions of how news was selected. Rather, Berkowitz (1993) found that “all respondents held similar views about how news selection should take place:
news judgment" (p. 77). People in the "business/programming" cluster, although they believed in the importance of news judgment, "saw that this was not how news selection is usually practiced" (p. 77). They noted that instead, programming concerns seemed to shape the news. Those in the "business/resources" cluster also felt that business concerns shaped news selection. These two clusters comprised 73.9% of all respondents. So, although work roles are often to blame for how people in the news industry view news selection, such was not the case here; rather, most people in the industry who were surveyed believed that business and economic forces seemed to drive news selection.

Guensburg’s (1999) article highlighted the struggle between news as a business and journalistic ideals. Television news personnel and members of the public came together to explore the challenge of how local television news can meet the demands for high ratings “while providing meaningful, responsible coverage” (p. 1) at the same time. Participants discussed local television news, “the effort it requires, the forces that affect it, and what constitutes responsible coverage” (p. 1). Moderator Robert MacNeil noted that “surveys show respondents trust local television news more than any other source except CNN and public television” (p. 2). Paul Klite, founder of Rocky Mountain Media Watch, argued during the panel discussions that “trivia too often preempts substance in local TV news” and added that during ratings periods, he saw a prevalence of special reports, “some of them cloned and repackaged in multiple markets” (p. 5). He noted that during the previous year “it was taking cameras into public
bathrooms and looking for homosexual encounters” (p. 5). Other news professionals on the panel recognized the pressure placed upon them by ratings. Linda Alvarez, anchor for Los Angeles’ KCBS, called the ratings report from Nielsen Media Research a “nightly report card” (p. 6). She said the news personnel “watch how the viewers responded every 15 minutes” and they will see “whether a particular stow held the audience or not. And if it didn’t, then we will change the format the next day” (p. 6).

During the panel discussions, the moderator asked if it was possible for local television to be responsible while satisfying ratings and profit expectations. Some panelists thought it was possible, while others disagreed, noting that it was a big challenge trying to balance being an entertainment, a business, a profession, and a service, while at the same time providing responsible, respectful, and relevant information to the public (Guensburg, 1999). The panel also discussed “sleaze” in local television news. Noel Holston, a Minneapolis columnist, noted that viewers in his market have a low tolerance for sleaze and recounted “another station’s misguided ‘sweeps’ investigation using hidden cameras to expose a topless maid service” (p. 9). Holston said that story “died” in the ratings. Holding a similar viewpoint, KVUE News Director Cathy McFeaters noted that her conversations with newsroom managers have “convinced her that the tide is turning against salacious local TV news” (p. 11).
Ethical Dilemmas During Ratings

As noted in Chapter One, ratings often present an "ethical dilemma for newsworkers and their organizations in that the explicit goal of sweeps is to maximize audiences and profits" (Ehrlich, 1995, p. 37). Ehrlich conducted a study that compared two television newsrooms during ratings periods. The purpose of his research was to examine whether news personnel and their organizations could resolve the ethical dilemma posed during ratings in order to serve both market and public interests (Ehrlich, 1995).

The study compared a "Top 20 market newsroom with a medium-sized market newsroom during the same November sweeps period" (Ehrlich, 1995, p. 38). The medium-sized newsroom was defined as falling "in the range between the 51st and 100th largest markets" (p. 39). The newscasts of both stations were first in the ratings in their respective markets at the time of the study. The four special series broadcast during the sweeps period were recorded, and reporters and supervisors were interviewed. The study drew on the theoretical perspective of the "social organization of news" (p. 39). This perspective dealt with control that individuals exerted over their work within various organizational constraints, "particularly those dictating that news organizations produce a fresh batch of news daily for mass consumption and corporate profit" (p. 39). The underlying research question asked how television newsrooms and the individuals within them dealt with ratings periods.

The study found that the Top 20 newsroom devoted "considerable resources to producing and promoting sweeps series that tended to be sensationalistic"
Further, a memorandum distributed to station personnel prior to one ratings period noted that the station was planning series stories on topics including criminal clergy, black magic, and X-rated videos. Results also concluded that in the Top 20 newsroom managers did not view their decision to run sexy and lurid series stories during ratings as “necessarily violating the public interest” (p. 44) of their viewers. In the case of “series sleaze at the Top 20 newsroom”, the opportunity to use extra time both off and on the air to “try to seek truth and report it fully was forfeited” (p. 44). Conversely, in the medium-market newsroom, the constraints were not as pronounced. The ratings pressure was much less intense than in the Top 20 newsroom, which allowed reporters and managers to be “freer to use sweeps series to serve the principles of ethical journalism” (p. 45).

Content Analyses of Sensationalism in Network Newscasts

It is logical to look at network television news content prior to the examination of local television news content to help determine if there have been similar questions concerning amounts of sensationalism and public affairs reporting on a national scale, and what conclusions have been made. Slattery, Doremus and Marcus (2001) examined amounts of public affairs reporting and sensationalism on the network evening newscasts over a 28-year period. The authors looked at content of network news during the years 1968, 1980, and 1996. Sixty weekday-evening newscasts were content-analyzed from NBC, CBS, and ABC, and each story was coded for length, location, topic, and subtopic. The study used the
major news categories developed by Adams (1978). The topics were "government," "community affairs," "sensationalism," and "human interest." Two additional topics included were "war/major conflict" and "other." Subtopics were used to differentiate stories within the "government" category. The subtopics were "election" and "non-election." Additionally, non-election government stories and community affairs stories were also "coded as incorporating ‘embedded sensationalism’ if the content included a visual portrayal or detailed verbal description of a topic or topics that, taken alone, would be coded as sensationalism and/or human interest" (p. 294). The purpose in including embedded sensationalism as a coding category was, according to the authors, "to identify stories that were nominally public affairs but also had one or more significant elements of sensationalism/human interest" (p. 294).

Results from the study concluded that the sensational/human interest content and the embedded sensationalism/human interest content "comprised 9.5% of network news content in 1968 and 13.7% in 1980. That figure rose to 37.9% in 1996" (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 298). These findings were significant because, according to Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001):

A sizeable portion of the nominally public affairs stories that producers chose to include in network newscasts in 1996 included undercurrents of sensationalism/human interest; on their face they constituted coverage of community and government affairs, but they incorporated elements of crime, violence, disasters, sexual impropriety, and other emotionally arousing content to a far greater
degree than did stories of community and government in 1968 and 1980. (p. 298)

The authors also indicated a significant difference between network newscasts and local newscasts. They argued that network news producers might not use purely sensational stories as often as local news producers because producers in local news markets “are free to use local murders, car wrecks, fires, and the like in their newscasts, but networks do not consider such stories important unless they are singularly spectacular” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 298). They also indicated that future research may examine “other advertiser-supported news media” that are “affected by the same market forces as network news” to find out if “those media, too, are shifting toward sensationalism and human interest content. If so, the implications for our society and its democratic institutions would be troubling, indeed” (p. 299).

Scott and Gobetz (1992) also examined the content of network television newscasts, most notably because “television news is the most pervasive source of information in Western industrialized societies today” and thus, they argued that the “content of television news takes on increased importance” (p. 406). The authors recognized that many critics charged ABC, NBC, and CBS with increasing the amount of soft news in their newscasts. They defined soft news as “news that really isn’t news, thereby providing the viewing public with a diet of news stories of little consequence” (p. 406). They further defined soft news as “any story that focuses on a human interest topic, feature or non-policy issue” (p. 408). One argument for the increase in this type of news, the authors noted, is
that soft news is often used "as a revenue-enhancing strategy" which "is possible because of an audience preference for soft news, along with an audience demand for news programs to provide entertainment" (p. 407). The authors tested the hypothesis that "there has been increased coverage of soft news for all three networks from 1972 to 1987" (p. 408).

Two one-week periods, March 1st through 7th and October 1st through 7th, were content analyzed for each of the three networks between 1972 and 1987, for a total of 558 broadcasts. Each news story was placed into one of the following categories: hard/timely, soft/timely, hard/not timely, or soft/not timely. Results indicated a "rising trend in the use of soft news by all three networks on average" (Scott & Gobetz, 1992, p. 411). In the early 1970s, the average time devoted to soft news ranged from 59 to 73 seconds, compared with the 1987 average of almost 90 seconds. The researchers provided an explanation for the rise in soft news throughout the years. They suggested that:

Media programmers perceive an audience demand for soft news. If audiences do in fact demand soft news, then it seems understandable in a broadcast system driven by free market forces that programmers would strive to meet that demand. In attempting to attract and maintain large audiences, media programmers might attempt to make a portion of new news diet more palatable, more consumable, more human. (p. 412)

Although this study did not examine amounts of sensationalism in news, it is still applicable to the proposed study in that news content, and reasons why
producers decide to air particular news stories, are important areas of research. If soft news has increased over the decades due to economic pressures, it is logical to inquire as to whether or not sensational news has increased as well due to the same pressures. It is also logical to inquire during what time frames sensationalism is most pervasive.

Content Analyses of Sensationalism in Local Newscasts

Numerous studies have examined sensational and human interest stories in local television news and how the amount of that type of content compares to the amount of public affairs content (Adams, 1978; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986; Ryu, 1982; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994; Wulfemeyer, 1982). Exploring the results of these studies can help establish a context for the current study.

Hofstetter and Dozier (1986) noted that critics often charge that sensationalism in television news has its roots “in the economics of local television” (p. 815) and that news that is sensational does not “provide relevant and prudent evaluations of public events” (p. 816). The researchers conducted a content analysis of three network-affiliated television stations in Houston from July 13th through August 14th, 1981 in order to test those charges, and also to examine the quality of local television news. Early and late evening weekday newscasts were videotaped and coded, for a total of 924 news stories. Intercoder reliability was not computed. Each story within the sample was classified as “government and politics,” “community and economic affairs,” or “sensationalism and human interest” (p. 818). A news story was placed into the sensational category if it
emphasized "crime, violence, disasters, accidents, fires or vignettes about individuals and groups which are not linked to political concerns" (p. 818). Results concluded that 46% of news time was devoted to sensational topics. The NBC affiliate devoted 52% to sensationalism, the CBS affiliate devoted 43% to sensationalism, and the ABC affiliate devoted 42% of its news time to sensationalism.

Next, to test the hypothesis that "sensational news includes far fewer opinion resources than non-sensational news" (Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986, p. 818), the amount of time devoted to eight quality elements was analyzed. These elements included instruction, process, background, consequences, pros and cons, political process, attribution, and multiple sources. Results concluded that sensational news included significant elements of quality news. The researchers found that a "majority of the time devoted to sensationalism involved stories which provided background on the development of events, issues, or problems" (p. 820). So, although nearly half of news time was devoted to sensational topics, many of the stories in that category were deemed quality news stories.

Answering the charge that local television newscasts cover "too much sex, crime and violence" (Wulfemeyer, 1982, p. 481), Wulfemeyer conducted a content analysis of three network-affiliated stations in San Diego, California during 1979. The two primary research questions presented were: 1) "What are the major categories of content on local television newscasts?" and 2) "How much newscast time is devoted to each category?" (p. 482). During the first week in February, 1979, two newscasts from each of the three stations, KFMB,
KGTV, and KCST were selected at random and taped for informal observation. The newscasts were content analyzed in order to develop the following categories: non-news, issues, unexpected events, entertainment, banter, sports, and weather.

Consequently, "videotapes of each station's early evening, 60 minute local newscasts were made during the weekends of March 5-9 and April 16-20" (Wulfemeyer, 1982, p. 483) to comprise the actual sample. Results concluded that issue-related stories "took up a great deal of the local television newscast time in San Diego" and "coverage of unexpected events took up almost as much time" (p. 485). These results were significant because they answered the common criticism that local television news is dominated by sensationalism. Although stories of sex, crime, and violence took up about 13% of news time, stations in San Diego "devoted more of their newscast time to coverage of the significant issues of the day than to anything else" (p. 486).

Dominick, Wurtzel, and Lometti (1975) noted that "many news programs, especially local ones, have slowly evolved a slick, show-business approach to news presentation in an effort to attract larger ratings and revenues" (p. 213). The researchers noted that the most popular method of attracting audiences is the Eyewitness News format, a format that places an emphasis on personalities in news and the on-air interaction of those personalities. The researchers undertook a study of the three network affiliates in New York City to determine if the Eyewitness News format differed in form and content from other local newscasts.
The three main categories utilized for coding were "hard news, feature stories and human interest" (Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975, p. 214). Thirty local 6-7 p.m. newscasts were taped "on each of 10 randomly selected dated during April and May, 1973" (p. 214). The Eyewitness format, "contrary to the suggestion of many critics, did not spend the most time on features" (p. 216). Results also concluded that the three New York City network affiliates devoted almost 75% of their newscasts to "hard news" and only 16% to violence, the category most closely related to sensationalism.

Adams' (1978) findings were consistent with those of Dominick, Wurtzel, and Lometti (1975). Adams also defended local television news from charges of heavy sensationalism use, noting that many critics argue local television news emphasizes sensational and human interest stories over national and international stories. His study sought to answer the following questions: 1) "What proportion of time is devoted to sensationalism and human interest stories?" and 2) "What proportion of news time is devoted to national and international affairs?" (p. 691).

The sample was drawn from 10 television stations in Pennsylvania between August 17th and September 8th, 1976. Taped recordings of 95 early, late, weekday and weekend local newscasts were analyzed. Each story was placed into one of five categories: "education," "government and politics," "economic and community affairs," "sensationalism and human interest," or "national and international" (Adams, 1978, p. 691). Although education was originally its own category, stories that dealt with education were eventually collapsed into the
government and politics category. Sensationalism and human interest stories were defined as those that involved "crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents and fires, along with amusing, heartwarming, shocking, or curious vignettes about people in the area" (p. 691). Results concluded that on average, the stations did not place an emphasis on sensational and human interest stories; the average was 13% of total news time. The main "focus of the early evening broadcasts was nonsensational local news" (p. 692) and the 10 stations analyzed "focused news attention on local public affairs" with a "high degree of consistency" (p. 695). So, contrary to what critics argued, Adams found that public affairs content dominated local news.

Slattery and Hakanen (1994) replicated Adam's (1978) study 16 years later, in 1992. Arguing that the "economic and regulatory environments have changed dramatically since the mid-seventies" (p. 205), Slattery and Hakanen replicated Adams' study to "determine if the amount of time local television news devoted to public affairs information, sensationalism, and human interest stories has changed since 1976" (p. 206).

Early and late evening newscasts from the same 10 Pennsylvania stations were analyzed. Seven stations had half-hour early newscasts, and three Pittsburgh stations had hour-long early newscasts. All 10 stations had half-hour late newscasts. The sample comprised 96 weekday newscasts, and was drawn from the same time frame, August 17th through September 8th. The study used the categories of "government," "community affairs," "sensationalism/human interest," and "national/international" (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994, p. 208). The
authors also developed a category to capture sensational elements that otherwise may be missed. The "embedded sensationalism" category was added so that stories in the government, community affairs, or national/international categories could also be coded in this category if they contained sensational elements.

The results were significantly different in 1992 than in 1976. Regarding the seven early evening newscasts, excluding Pittsburgh, sensationalism/human interest stories increased from 11.6% in 1976 to 40.6% in 1992. This number "jumped to 51.8% when stories in the government and community affairs categories, coded for embedded sensationalism/human interest elements, were included" (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994, p. 214). That number rose to 55.7% when stories in the national/international category, coded for embedded sensationalism/human interest, were included.

In the three early hour-long newscasts in the Pittsburgh market, sensational/human interest stories increased from 16.5% to 28.3%. That figure rose even higher, to 40.8%, when stories in the government and community affairs categories, coded for embedded sensationalism/human interest elements, were included, and to 47.7% when stories in the national/international category, coded for embedded sensational/human interest, were included (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994).

Regarding all of the late evening newscasts, stories within the sensationalism/human interest category increased from 13.7% in 1976 to 29.7% in 1992. When government and community affairs stories containing elements of
embedded sensationalism/human interest were included, that number rose to 42.7%, and to “55.3% when national/international stories containing embedded sensationalism/human interest elements were included” (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994, p. 214).

Using Adams’ (1978) method as well, Ryu (1982) studied local television news in Cincinnati, Ohio. Ryu offered a rationale for the study:

Since controversy over the local television news has been focused on emphasis placed upon either public affairs or sensationalism/human interest stories during the allocated news time, this study analyzes primarily the proportion devoted to each of these two types within the local TV news formula. (p. 75)

Local television news was analyzed in 1976, 1978, and 1980. Adams’ (1978) results were used as the 1976 sample. In 1978, 36 early and late evening newscasts were analyzed from April 3rd through April 9th. In 1980, 20 early and late evening newscasts were analyzed from March 20th through April 7th. Newscasts were coded into Adams' original categories of education, local government and politics, economic and community affairs, sensationalism and human interest, and national and international.

Results found that in 1978, 53.8% of news time was dedicated to sensationalism/human interest stories, whereas 46.2% of news time was devoted to public affairs (Ryu, 1982). In 1980, sensationalism/human interest stories comprised about one-third of the news hole. Ryu contended that these types of stories were utilized “as reserves to maintain high ratings” (p. 78).
In order to determine if local television producers tend to select the same types of sensational stories in their newscasts, Davie and Lee (1995) conducted a content analysis of local television news in Texas. They examined story duplication and differentiation, first in individual topic categories, and then in terms of sensational coverage. The researchers undertook the challenge because “one particular topic of increasing importance in the study of television news content is that of sensationalism, which previous studies in consonance have touched lightly, if at all” (p. 130).

The first research question asked if news items would measure higher in consonance or differentiation according to specific topic categories. The second research question asked if stories with sensational elements would measure higher in consonance or differentiation, according to sensational elements like sex, violence, and human interest.

Late evening newscasts of local television stations in three selected markets were content analyzed. Austin, San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth were selected due to their variation in size and demographic make-up. Two five-day periods were analyzed, and 1,335 news items were coded from 90 half-hour newscasts. Results concluded that local news producers demonstrated a “preference for sensational stories that feature acts of sex and violence and are easy to explain” (Davie & Lee, 1995, p. 128). Overall, 70% of the stories with sensational elements were consonant, suggesting that editors from different news stations select the same sensational stories in their newscasts.
Summary and Implications

This chapter has provided a look into the clash between news as a business and journalistic ideals, ethical dilemmas faced by news personnel, pressures and implications of ratings periods, and content analyses that have examined local and network news. Past literature shows that in the struggle between the journalism side of news and the business side of news, the business side often prevails (Berkowitz, 1993). Guensburg (1999) noted the difficulty faced by local television news personnel as they strive to maintain a balance between responsible news coverage and high ratings. In the examination of ethical dilemmas in news during ratings, research concluded that newsworkers in larger newsrooms (those in the top 20 markets) experienced more pressure to air sensational stories than those in smaller newsrooms (Ehrlich, 1995). Since Las Vegas is market number 51, it is important to determine if it faces the same pressure as large market newsrooms, resulting in more sensationalism during ratings, or if that pressure is less intense.

Previous studies have helped shed light on what types of news stories dominate in television news, on both a local and national scale. These studies also indicate a direction in which sensationalism in news seems to be headed. Nationally, research has shown that sensational content rose significantly from 1968 to 1996 (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). Soft news content has also increased over the past several decades due to economic pressures (Scott & Gobetz, 1992). Locally, research has indicated that almost half of news time has been devoted to sensational topics (Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986) and that
sensational stories were much more prevalent in local television news in 1992 than in 1996 (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). Additionally, Ryu (1982) concluded that more time was devoted to sensational stories than public affairs in local television news. It is still unknown, however, where the difference lies in local television news in terms of sensationalism during ratings compared to non-ratings periods.

The media have a responsibility to report the news in an ethical and unbiased manner, without allowing the pressure of ratings to influence the ways in which they tell their stories. The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) had the following to say:

Our society needs an accurate, truthful account of the day’s events.

We need to know what goes on in our own locality, region, and nation. We need reliable information about all other countries...

These needs are not being met. The news is twisted by the emphasis on firstness, on the novel and sensational; by the personal interest of owners. (p. 68)

Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001) have argued that the primary objective of news is to inform the public and “emphasize public affairs coverage, including stories related to government, community, and foreign affairs” (p. 291). As previous studies have shown, this is often not the case. Therefore, a content analysis of the Las Vegas market should be conducted to determine what types of content dominate during ratings and non-ratings periods.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Journalists have a responsibility to report news that will enlighten and inform the public (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). Even though “ratings exert a powerful influence on the industry” (Eastman & Ferguson, 2002, p. 40), this journalistic responsibility should be upheld, regardless of ratings periods. Additionally, many critics have charged that profit motives often dominate the content of television news to the extent that sensationalism is ever increasing at the expense of public affairs reporting (Dominick, Wurtzel, & Lometti, 1975; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986; Ryu, 1982; Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). The topic of sensationalism in journalism has been debated for centuries (Mott, 1950; Stevens, 1991), however, a gap still remains in the literature regarding whether there is an increase in sensationalism during ratings periods when compared with non-ratings periods. This study examined the amounts of sensationalism and human interest stories compared with local public affairs reporting during those two periods. If results demonstrate higher amounts of sensationalism during ratings, this will provide evidence of economic pressures dictating news content that leans toward the sensational, in order to garner higher ratings.
Hypotheses

This study examined news content during a ratings month compared with a non-ratings month. The eight hypotheses generated for this study examined key variables originally developed by Adams (1978), updated and extended by Slattery and Hakanen (1994), and further updated by Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001). The hypotheses compared the following story-content variables of "sensationalism," "human interest," "government," "community affairs," "war/major conflict," "embedded sensationalism," and "other" between ratings and non-ratings periods. Additionally, each story was coded for the order in which it appears in the newscast (see Appendix). There are eight hypotheses that follow:

H1: There will be more news stories devoted to "sensationalism" in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H2: There will be more news stories devoted to "human interest" in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H3: There will be fewer news stories devoted to "government" in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

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H4: There will be fewer news stories devoted to “community affairs” in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H5: There will be fewer news stories devoted to “war/major conflict” in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H6: There will be fewer news stories devoted to “other” in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H7: There will be more news stories with “embedded sensationalism” in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

H8: Stories containing “sensationalism” will appear earlier (have a lower average rank ordering) in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods.

Content Analysis

Content analysis was the method chosen for this study. This method of analysis is “popular with mass media researchers because it is an efficient way to
investigate the content of the media” and it is a “valuable tool in answering many mass media questions” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 140). Kerlinger (2000) defined content analysis as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Systematic evaluation “means that the content to be analyzed is selected according to explicit and consistently applied rules” and that “all content under consideration is to be treated in exactly the same manner” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 141). Content analysis is also objective, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2003), meaning that if the study were to be replicated by another researcher, the results would be similar. Finally, content analysis is quantitative, allowing researchers to summarize and report results concisely.

Sampling

This study examined late evening newscasts from the following four Las Vegas television network affiliates: KVBC Channel 3 (NBC), KVVU Channel 5 (Fox), KLAS Channel 8 (CBS), and KTNV Channel 13 (ABC). Each newscast that aired during the late evening (10:00 p.m. for Fox, and 11:00 p.m. for the other three affiliates) from Monday through Friday comprised the sample. KVBC, KLAS, and KTNV each broadcast half-hour newscasts at 11:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. KVVU, however, broadcasts hour-long newscasts at 10:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The hour-long newscasts broadcast by KVVU are treated essentially as two half-hour newscasts, with different “lead” stories topping each half-hour (Prager, G., personal communication, October 1, 2004).
The two half-hour newscasts, although broadcast together as one hour-long newscast, are referred to on the air as "Fox 5 News at 10" and "Fox 5 News at 10:30." Therefore, to avoid inconsistencies, only the first half-hour of the hour-long 10:00 p.m. KVVU newscasts were recorded. The first half-hour was selected because it followed more closely the format and story content of the other three stations’ 11:00 p.m. newscasts. The first half-hour puts more of a focus on local news, whereas the second half-hour emphasizes news on a national scale. Since the other three stations tend to focus on local news as well, the 10:00 p.m. half-hour of the KVVU newscast was selected.

Weekend newscasts were excluded from the sample due to their inconsistent nature. During weekend newscasts, news crews, production crews, and story content often do not follow the same format as do weekday newscasts. Furthermore, late evening newscasts were selected for the study rather than morning or early evening newscasts because of two reasons. First, such programs were omitted because KVVU Channel 5 does not have an early evening newscast. Therefore, in order to ensure a representative sample, late evening newscasts were selected. Second, the number of houses using television (HUT) is generally higher during the late evening newscasts than during the early evening newscasts.

Each newscast in the sample typically included daily in-studio segments regarding weather and sports. Weather segments usually covered short-term and extended forecasts, and sports segments usually included a wrap-up of the day’s sporting events. Such segments were not included in the sample,
however, stories that occurred at the end of the newscast, which typically follow the sports segment, were coded. Additionally, stories that were weather or sports related, but did not occur within the daily in-studio weather or sports segments, were coded. Hypothetical examples would include a devastating flood where thousands of residents lost power, or the unexpected death of a UNLV football player. While these stories are weather or sports related, they would likely occur apart from the daily in-studio weather or sports segments, and therefore, they were coded.

Late evening, weekday news programs from the four stations were recorded on videotape for a total of eight weeks: January 5, 2005 through February 2, 2005, and February 3, 2005 through March 2, 2005. The first time period was selected because it was a non-ratings period, and the second time period was selected because it was a ratings period. Each newscast that was videotaped was assigned a number. Numbers were placed into a hat, mixed thoroughly, and selected by a colleague. Ten newscasts from each month from each station were selected randomly for analysis. The entire taped news sample consisted of approximately 40 hours of 80 half-hour newscasts.

Measures

News Story

For the purposes of this study, a "news story" will serve as the unit of analysis. News stories are reports delivered by anchors, reporters, or pre-videotaped news packages. A news story begins with an anchor or reporter introducing the story
content. An anchor, a reporter, or a pre-videotaped news package then delivers the actual story. The end of the news story is the moment the story topic changes, and can be defined by 1) a toss to another anchor for a different story, 2) a transition by the same anchor to a different story, or 3) a commercial break.

Sensationalism

This study used the operational definition of “sensationalism” originally provided by Adams (1978) and updated by Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001). Stories were assigned to the “sensationalism” category “if they were predominantly about violence and crime (up to and including charging of the suspect with a crime in a court of law), accidents and disasters, and sex, and misconduct not rising to the level of a crime, e.g., suicide, scandal, or outrageous behavior” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 294).

Human Interest

The topic “human interest” also adopted the definition provided by Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001). Stories were placed into this category if they “might evoke benign emotional responses, i.e., stories of kindness, generosity, noteworthiness, and pathos; or the humorous, novel and/or heartwarming” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 294).

Government

The next story topic, “government,” was “comprised of the official actions of government entities and actors, i.e., elections (including campaign coverage for political offices), public economics (including monetary policy and revenue collection), and other government actions (including but not limited to public
education, governmental reports, the space program, and the courts)” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 294).

Community Affairs

The next topic, “community affairs,” was comprised of “private economics, medical and health (non-governmental, health-related stories), self-help (actions that can be accomplished by viewers rather than government) and other community-related activities (including, but not limited to, private education, environment/science, religion, and civic organizations)” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 294).

War/Major Conflict

“War/major conflict” was defined as “organized conflict between conventional forces, insurrections, or uprisings and hostage-takings for political purposes. It also included non-violent government action related to war and conflict, e.g., deployment of forces, analyses of strategy, and peace negotiations” (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 294). This category was treated separately, following the example set by Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001), who noted that some argue that war counts as sensationalism, while others view it as public affairs. Due to this conflict, it was treated as its own category.

Other

Stories were placed into the “other” category if they would not fit into any of the aforementioned categories. Examples may include editorials or analyses. Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001) placed teases into this category, however, since this study only analyzed news stories, teases were not to be considered.
Embedded Sensationalism

Slattery and Hakanen (1994) created the final category of the study, which was an extension from Adams' (1978) study. Slattery and Hakanen (1994) noted that "Adams' categories were not mutually exclusive" and, therefore, developed an additional category to capture the elements of sensationalism and/or human interest "that would otherwise be missed" (p. 208). News stories that were coded in the "government," "community affairs," or "other" categories were additionally coded as containing "embedded sensationalism" if such was observed. For example, a story about the city of Las Vegas cleaning up after a flash flood could initially be coded as "community affairs" and further coded as "embedded sensationalism" because the story was set within the context of a natural disaster. Another hypothetical example is the 1996 O.J. Simpson civil trial. While this story was about a government entity (the courts), and would be coded as a "government" story, it also had sensational aspects (the suspect was a national figure and the crime was violent). Therefore, it would be coded as containing embedded sensationalism.

Story Order

Stories were additionally coded for the order in which they appeared in the newscast. Since it was predicted that stories containing "sensationalism" would appear earlier (have a lower average rank ordering) in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods, it was important to assign every news story an ordering number.
Ratings/Non-ratings Data Collection

Data were further coded to indicate the time frame in which the story was broadcast. Stories that were broadcast from January 5, 2005 to February 2, 2005 were coded as “non-ratings,” while stories that were broadcast from February 3, 2005 to March 2, 2005 were coded as “ratings.”

Coding

Coder training and testing was conducted consequent to completion of sampling all newscasts. The primary investigator trained a colleague in coding procedures utilizing the measures reported in this chapter. A random sample of five newscasts, not part of the larger sample, was chosen for coder training and testing. The primary researcher and colleague independently coded the five randomly selected newscasts and then compared results, discussed any conflicts, and resolved any differences. Discrepancies in coding, although few, most often consisted of one coder missing a story due to inattention or failure to distinguish one story from another. The primary researcher and colleague resolved these differences by watching, for a second time, the missed stories and reviewing the definition of a “news story.” Following satisfactory training, 20 episodes of the 80-episode sample were independently coded by both the primary investigator and trained colleague. Inter-coder reliability measures consistent with conventional practices were used. Inter-coder reliability was calculated by means of Cohen’s kappa. For story order, kappa was 1.0; for story
type, kappa was .91; and for embedded sensationalism, kappa was .98. The primary investigator completed the remaining coding.

Analysis Plan

Results from the current study are included in Chapter Four. First, an overview of data is reported, including total number of news stories analyzed. This total number is broken down into the number of news stories examined for each news station, the number of news stories analyzed for ratings and non-ratings periods, as well as the number of news stories classified into each of the six categories ("sensationalism", "human interest", "government", "community affairs", "war", and "other"). Hypotheses one through seven were tested by means of Chi-Square analysis. Hypothesis eight was tested using the t-test statistic.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

General Description

The sample for this study consisted of 1,435 news stories. An overview of results follows. Eighty hours of news programming were analyzed: 40 half-hour news programs from a ratings period and 40 half-hour news programs from a non-ratings period. Table 1 illustrates the number of stories per channel in the sample. Frequencies show Channel 3 (KVBC) comprised 20% of the sample, with a total of 287 news stories; Channel 5 (KVVU) comprised 22.7% of the sample, with a total of 326 news stories; Channel 8 (KLAS) comprised 26.6% of the sample, with a total of 381 news stories; followed by Channel 13 (KTNV) which comprised 30.7% of the sample, with a total of 441 news stories. Of the total 1,435 news stories, 714 stories (49.8%) were analyzed during the non-ratings period (January 5, 2005 to February 2, 2005) compared with 721 stories (50.2%) analyzed during the ratings period (February 3, 2005 to March 2, 2005).
Table 1

*Number of News Stories per Channel (Entire Sample)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KVBC Channel 3</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KVNU Channel 5</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KLAS Channel 8</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KTNV Channel 13</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1435</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of news stories into story type for both sample periods combined. Data analysis revealed that of the 1,435 news stories, 555 stories (38.7%) of the total sample were classified in the sensationalism category; 189 stories (13.2%) of the total sample were classified in the human interest category; 188 stories (13.1%) of the total sample were classified in the government category; 332 stories (23.1%) of the total sample were placed into the community affairs category; 50 stories (3.5%) of the total sample were classified in the war category; and 121 stories (8.4%) of the total sample were placed into the "other" category.
Table 2

*News Stories Classified into Story Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensationalism</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Interest</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Affairs</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1435</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis One

The findings from this study provide support for hypothesis one. Hypothesis one posited that there would be more news stories devoted to sensationalism in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. Results concluded that 174 (31.4%) of the 555 stories coded as sensationalism aired during the non-ratings period, whereas 381 (68.6%) of the 555 stories coded as sensationalism aired during the ratings period. Chi-Square analysis revealed that amounts of sensationalism during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 555) = 250.99, p < .001.$
An additional analysis, as illustrated by Table 3, was performed to determine if one or more stations were culpable of contributing more or less sensationalism than other stations. This analysis sought to examine whether there were significant differences within ratings or non-ratings periods between the four television stations. Results concluded that all four stations were culpable of significantly increasing sensationalism during ratings periods. KVBC Channel 3 aired 25 news stories, or 26.0% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during non-ratings, and 71 news stories, or 74.0% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during ratings. KWU Channel 5 aired 48 news stories, or 36.9% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during non-ratings, and 82 news stories, or 63.1% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during ratings. KLAS Channel 8 aired 45 news stories, or 30.2% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during non-ratings, and 104 news stories, or 69.8% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during ratings. KTNV Channel 13 aired 56 news stories, or 31.1% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during non-ratings, and 124 news stories, or 68.9% of its sensational stories for the entire sample, during ratings.
Table 3

*Crosstabulation of Sensationalism on Local News Channels*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Sensational Stories During Non-Ratings</th>
<th>Sensational Stories During Ratings</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KVBC</td>
<td>25 stories (26.0%)</td>
<td>71 stories (74.0%)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KVU</td>
<td>48 stories (36.9%)</td>
<td>82 stories (63.1%)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KLAS</td>
<td>45 stories (30.2%)</td>
<td>104 stories (69.8%)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KTNV</td>
<td>56 stories (31.1%)</td>
<td>124 stories (68.9%)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ²(3, N = 555) = 3.23, p = .358.

Chi-Square analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between stations within ratings or non-ratings periods, χ²(3, N = 555) = 3.23, p = .358.

**Hypothesis Two**

The findings from this study also provide support for hypothesis two. Hypothesis two predicted that there would be more news stories devoted to human interest in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. Data analysis revealed that of the 189 stories coded as human interest, 49 (25.9%) stories aired during the non-ratings period, compared to 140 (74.1%) stories that aired during the ratings period. Chi-Square analysis
revealed that the numbers of human interest stories during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 189) = 250.99, p < .001.$

Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three posited that there would be fewer news stories devoted to government in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. The findings from the current study provide support for hypothesis three. Of the total 188 stories classified as government, 136 of those stories (72.3%) aired during the non-ratings period, compared to only 52 stories (27.7%) that aired during the ratings period. Chi-Square analysis revealed that the numbers of government stories during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 188) = 250.99, p < .001.$

Hypothesis Four

Hypothesis four, which predicted that there would be fewer news stories devoted to community affairs in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods, was supported. Of the total 332 community affairs stories, 112 (33.7%) stories aired during the ratings period, whereas 220 (66.3%) stories aired during the non-ratings period. Chi-Square analysis revealed that the numbers of community affairs stories during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 332) = 250.99, p < .001.$
Hypothesis Five

Findings from this study support hypothesis five, which posited that there would be fewer news stories devoted to war/major conflict in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. Eleven stories (22.0%) of the 50 stories classified into this category aired during the ratings period, and 39 (78.0%) of the 50 stories classified into this category aired during the non-ratings period. Chi-Square analysis revealed that the numbers of stories in the war/major conflict category during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 50) = 250.99, p < .001$.

Hypothesis Six

The findings from this study provide support for hypothesis six. Hypothesis six predicted that there would be fewer news stories devoted to “other” in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. Of the 121 total stories classified as “other”, 96 stories (79.3%) aired during the non-ratings period, compared to only 25 stories (20.7%) that aired during the ratings period. Chi-Square analysis revealed that the numbers of stories classified into the “other” category during ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(5, N = 121) = 250.99, p < .001$.

Hypothesis Seven

Hypothesis seven, which posited that there would be more news stories with embedded sensationalism in local television newscasts during ratings periods
compared to non-ratings periods, was supported. During the non-ratings period, of the 451 stories that were analyzed for embedded sensationalism, 167 stories (37.0%) contained embedded sensationalism and 284 stories (63.0%) did not. During the ratings period, of the 189 stories that were analyzed for embedded sensationalism, 93 stories (49.2%) contained embedded sensationalism and 96 stories (50.8%) did not. Chi-Square analysis revealed that amounts of embedded sensationalism between ratings and non-ratings periods differed significantly, $\chi^2(1, N = 640) = 8.19, p = .004$.

Hypothesis Eight

Hypothesis eight posited that stories containing sensationalism would appear earlier (have a lower average rank ordering) in local television newscasts during ratings periods compared to non-ratings periods. The findings from this study provide support for hypothesis eight. During the non-ratings period, stories containing sensationalism ranked lower ($M = 8.85, SD = 5.69$) than all other story types ($M = 10.17, SD = 5.95$). During the ratings period, stories containing sensationalism ranked even lower than they did during the non-ratings period ($M = 8.40, SD = 5.93$). During the ratings period, all other story types ranked even higher than they did during the non-ratings period ($M = 11.78, SD = 5.53$). There was a significant difference between ratings periods, $t(719) = -7.88, p < .001$, and non-ratings periods, $t(712) = -2.58, p = .010$. Sensational stories
aired closer to the top and all other story types aired lower to the bottom of the newscasts during ratings when compared with non-ratings.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Overview and General Discussion

The purpose of this content analysis was to determine if local news content alters significantly during ratings periods as opposed to non-ratings periods. The results from this study support that notion. Hypothesis one was supported. During the non-ratings period, 31.4% of the stories that aired were sensational, as opposed to 68.6% during the ratings period. The amount of sensationalism more than doubled during this time, thus lending credibility to the notion that during ratings news personnel include more sensational material in their newscasts. Hypothesis two was also supported. Of the news stories labeled human interest, 25.9% aired during the non-ratings period, compared to 74.1% during the ratings period. These data reveal that during ratings the amount of human interest stories nearly tripled.

Support was also found for hypothesis three. Stories classified as government went from 72.3% during the non-ratings period to 27.7% during ratings. Government stories were cut by nearly three times during the ratings period at the expense of sensational and human interest stories. Results from the current study supported hypothesis four, concluding that 66.3% of the community affairs stories aired during the non-ratings period and 33.7% aired during the ratings
period. The number of community affairs stories was cut approximately in half during ratings in order to allow for more time for sensational and human interest stories. Hypothesis five was supported. News stories in the war/major conflict category decreased during ratings. During the non-ratings period, 78.0% of these types of stories aired, compared to 22.0% during ratings. Hypothesis six, which posited that the number of news stories in the “other” category would decrease during ratings, was supported. The amount of stories classified as “other” that aired during the non-ratings period (79.3%) was almost four times the amount of these types of stories that aired during the ratings period (22.0%).

This study provides support for hypothesis seven, which predicted that the number of news stories with embedded sensationalism would rise during ratings. During the non-ratings period, 37.0% contained embedded sensationalism, and during the ratings period, 49.2% contained embedded sensationalism. Hypothesis eight was also supported. The average rank for stories containing sensationalism was 8.85 during the non-ratings period, compared to 8.40 during ratings. The average rank for all other story types was 10.17 during the non-ratings period, compared to 11.78 during ratings. Sensational stories aired closer to the top of the newscasts during ratings.

Interpretation of Results

All of the above data suggest that public affairs stories, namely those stories classified as community affairs and government, are not aired as frequently during ratings periods as they are during non-ratings periods. This is due to the
large amount of sensational and human interest stories aired during that time. Recall from Chapter Two that Berkowitz (1993) found that most people in the news industry who were surveyed believed that business and economic forces seemed to drive news selection. Furthermore, Ryan and Wentworth (1999) pointed out that “mass media production in the United states is not, for the most part, about serving the public interest, if we take that to mean creating an informed citizenry. It is, more than anything, about the money” (p. 206). This seems to be the case with the current study as well. The economic pressure to garner high numbers during ratings periods drives the type of news content selected for the programming. Data from this study suggest that news personnel place more sensational and human interest stories in their newscasts during ratings periods to achieve higher ratings. This pressure to garner high ratings comes at the expense of public affairs content.

Not only did the current study find that more sensationalism is aired on local newscasts during ratings, but it also discovered that sensational stories were placed closer to the top of the newscast lineup. This story placement caused all other story types to be placed lower in the newscasts. This finding is significant because news stories aired near the beginning of the program are traditionally thought of as more important and more noteworthy than stories placed closer toward the end of the newscast. The current data suggest that during ratings periods, a greater emphasis is placed on sensationalism, not only in terms of amount, but also in terms of importance.
Implications

The current study supports the notion that sensationalism increases during ratings periods. News stations seem to broadcast news reports during ratings often not for the sake of story significance but rather due to their sensationalistic nature. This discrepancy may indicate a decline in journalistic integrity. Journalists might be losing sight of the industry's responsibility to air a news story based not on enticing viewers, but on the story's implication on and importance to the audience. The current study demonstrates that economic pressures during certain months seem to dictate news content that leans toward the sensational in order to garner higher ratings. This is problematic because the media have a responsibility to report the news in an ethical and unbiased manner, without allowing the pressure of ratings to influence story selection. As stated in Chapter One, journalism theories suggest that the "proper goal of news reporting is public enlightenment so that the citizenry can engage in effective self-governance. These theories assume the news media will emphasize public affairs coverage, including stories related to government, community, and foreign affairs" (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001, p. 291). The current study demonstrates that this is not the case. Critics have charged that profit motives often dominate the content of television news to the extent that sensationalism is ever increasing at the expense of public affairs reporting, and the current study supports that notion. The current findings are important because they reveal the decline in local journalistic integrity. News personnel from the analyzed stations are selecting stories based on how much they will lure their viewers, rather than
on how important the stories are to their viewers. This study provides empirical results that reveal, at least locally, an abandonment of journalistic ethics. It seems that pecuniary interests are dictating news practices. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that since ratings dominate local television news and that since many more sensational stories air during ratings periods, the content of the programs during ratings months are not truly representative of the content throughout the entire year. Therefore, those who advertise with local news stations are being mislead.

This content analysis provides a glance into current trends in the local television news industry, which can be compared to trends found in previous research. Recall from Chapter Two that although critics have charged that television news has moved away from public affairs reporting and toward sensationalism and human interest reporting (McCartney, 1997; Ryu, 1982; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994), a gap was still remaining regarding whether or not there is more of this type of content in local television news during ratings periods than during non-ratings periods. This analysis supports the notion that there is significantly more sensationalism and human interest in local television news during ratings periods when compared with non-ratings periods.

Although no previous literature could be found that compared non-ratings news content with news content during ratings, Adams' 1976 study and Slattery and Hakanen's 1994 study looked at news content in general. While Adams (1976) found that public affairs content dominated local television news, the same study replicated by Slattery and Hakanen (1994) 16 years later provided
different results. They concluded that sensational and human interest stories increased from 11.6% in 1976 to 40.6% in 1992.

The above studies provided the impetus for the current study, and are significant in that they offered a map of the amount of sensationalism and human interest stories in a local U.S. market in 1976 and again in 1992. The current study provides a description of the Las Vegas market in 2005. This study demonstrates that the amounts of sensational and human interest stories increased during ratings periods at the expense of government, community affairs, war, and other stories. Also significant is that the current study maps what constitutes local news programming, regardless of ratings periods. As previously illustrated in Table 2, 38.7% of news content for the entire overall sample was sensational in nature. It was followed by community affairs (23.1%), human interest (13.2%), government (13.1%), other (8.4%), and war (3.5%). This breakdown demonstrates that when ratings and non-ratings periods are combined, sensationalism is still emphasized overall.

Strengths of Current Study

The large sample size of the current study was one of its major strengths. Eighty newscasts, consisting of 1435 stories, were analyzed. This sample provided a comprehensive representation of newscasts during the ratings and non-ratings periods selected. Due to the large nature of the sample, the researcher was able to obtain a clear understanding of the types of stories aired
during ratings and non-ratings periods. No technical difficulties were reported, and thus the entire desired sample was recorded and analyzed.

Intercoder reliability for the current study was very high. For story order, kappa was 1.0; for story type, kappa was .91; and for embedded sensationalism, kappa was .98. This high reliability is significant because it reveals the clarity and conciseness of the operational definitions for the measures used. It also demonstrates the diligence of the coders and their comprehension of the measures utilized.

Another strength of the current study was that it drew information from a number of sources, including news professionals. People who have worked in the news industry for many years provided insight into how newsrooms operate, how news story coverage is decided, what type of content prevails during various times, and pressures faced by news personnel. Conducting one-on-one interviews with these news professionals allowed the researcher to gain a more widespread understanding of news, from production, to reporting, to news selection and writing. This comprehensive knowledge benefited the current study in that it prompted the researcher to search for previous studies included in the literature review that may have otherwise gone unexplored.

Weaknesses of Current Study

The sample consisted of eight weeks of news programming, which may not be representative of an entire year of news programming. The non-ratings month of January, for example, might not be a fair representation of every non-ratings
month throughout the year. Conversely, the ratings month of February might not be a fair representation of every ratings month throughout the year. However, other research suggests that cross-sectional trends seem to be stable across studies.

An additional limitation to the current study was that due to its design, it was not possible to measure actual audience perceptions of newscasts. Since this study was solely a content analysis, it did not analyze the impact of the programs on the audience. Perhaps Las Vegas viewers do not understand the role that economics plays in local television news, or perhaps they realize the pressure news personnel face to achieve high numbers during ratings periods. This study did not analyze how the news segments affected audience members. Future research should attempt to incorporate a design that would take into account audience perceptions of news content.

It should be noted that the sample included the first half-hour of the 10:00 p.m. newscasts for KVVU Channel 5, as previously mentioned in Chapter Three. However, if the second half-hour of those programs had been selected for analysis, results may have been altered.

Another limitation to this study was the category of "other" in the coding scheme. Although only a small portion of the entire news sample was coded as "other" (8.4% overall), the study might have been more thorough if that category was eliminated. This elimination would be very difficult, however, as there will usually be at least some stories that do not fit into any of the created categories.
Due to the design of the study it was not possible to determine if the amounts of sensationalism and human interest corresponded to an increase in ratings for the news programs. This information would have been useful to determine if the types of stories selected for ratings periods assisted in higher ratings.

Finally, this study looked only at the Las Vegas television market. Findings from the current study are only applicable to that market and are not generalizable beyond Las Vegas.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because the design of the current study did not allow for it, future research should seek to determine if increases in sensational and human interest stories correspond to higher ratings. This type of information could be very useful to newscasters. If, for example, filling a newscast with more sensationalism does not improve the show's ratings, news personnel could explore other areas to improve ratings and not be dependent upon sensational news for high ratings.

Another avenue for future research would be to conduct interviews with employees of the four examined local news stations to determine if their perceptions of the news industry are in line with what the current research suggests. In light of the current findings, it would be important to find out if those people in charge of news content are aware of how disproportionate content is between ratings and non-ratings periods, why they feel that may be, how they think it corresponds to ratings, and what their feelings are regarding the ethical implications of such a practice.
One of the assumptions of this study was that there would be differences in the types of news segments aired during ratings periods and non-ratings periods. This difference was demonstrated by the current study. The disparity of content between ratings and non-ratings periods is not consistent with the explicit goal of journalism: to report news to enlighten and inform the public (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). Since news content during ratings periods does not seem to be truly representative of the content over the entire year, this could be a sign that advertisers may be getting shortchanged for their advertising dollar. This leads to an additional avenue for future research, which would be to take the results from the current study and apply them to interviews with advertisers. Research should seek to determine if advertisers are aware of this discrepancy in news content throughout the year. Questions could focus on advertisers' thoughts about the ethical implications of such a practice, their opinions on whether or not the disparity of content is a problem, and if so, ideas on how to combat that problem.

Future research should seek to replicate the current study in other news markets across the United States and in other countries as well. Results from future studies could be compared to the results from the current study in order to determine if the results are generalizable beyond the Las Vegas television market.
### Sensationalism in Local Television News Code Sheet

#### Story Type:
1. Sensationalism: violence, crime, accidents, disasters, sex, or misconduct
2. Human interest: stories of kindness, generosity, noteworthiness, pathos, humorous, novel, or heartwarming
3. Government: official actions of government entities and actors, public economics, or other government actions
4. Community affairs: private economics, medical and health, self-help, or other community-related activities
5. War/major conflict: organized conflict between conventional forces, insurrections, uprisings, hostage-takings for political purposes, or non-violent government action related to war and conflict
6. Other: stories that do not fit into any of the above categories

#### Embedded sensationalism: Story appearing initially as #3, #4, or #6 above, but also containing elements of either #1 or #2 above. 1=YES, 2=NO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Air Date</th>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Story Type</th>
<th>Rank in News Cast</th>
<th>Embedded?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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