

By James B. Lemert

## Content Duplication by the Networks In Competing Evening Newscasts

*70% of all stories on weekday newscasts in two-week period were used by at least two networks. Duplication was higher during week than on weekends.*

► Twenty-five years ago, the amount of standardization and duplication of newspaper content was a lively topic for content analysts. In 1948, for example, Stanley K. Bigman<sup>1</sup> declared that the two newspapers he studied were "rivals in conformity." Despite the partial replacement of newspapers by network television news as the country's primary news medium in the 1960s, there remains a striking lack of work directed at whether there is duplication among competing network television newscasts. Technical problems, such as lack of videotape recording capability and of accepted coding schemes for nonverbal communication content, might have accounted for a generally tardy entry by content analysts into the whole field of television news, but probably do not account for the current lack of interest in careful study of possible network newscast item duplication.

This by no means implies that researchers, critics and the Nixon Administration have not reached any conclusions about how much network newscast duplication there is. In their studies of television news, many researchers seem to have assumed that there is a

great deal of duplication. In one type of study, the findings for each network are pooled, along with local news content, for a comparison against other media.<sup>2</sup> Another group of studies does tabulate results separately for each of the networks, but neither focuses on the specific issue of duplicated content nor presents the data in a way to allow straightforward comparisons.<sup>3</sup> A third type of study presents some explicitly comparative data on network newscasts, but makes limited use of it because the study's purpose lies elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> A fourth type compares a selected network's newscast content with that of news systems outside the United States, apparently on the assumption that the chosen

<sup>1</sup>"Rivals in Conformity: A Study of Two Competing Dailies," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 25:127-31 (June 1948).

<sup>2</sup>E.g., J. Lyle and W. Wilcox, "Television News—An Interim Report," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 7:157-66 (Spring 1963).

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971); Dennis T. Lowry, "Agnew and Network TV News: A Before-After Content Analysis," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 48:205-10 (Summer 1971); Richard A. Pride and Gary L. Wamsley, "Symbol Analysis of Network Coverage of Laos Incursion," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 49:635-40, 647 (Winter 1972); The Alternative Media Analysis Center, "Report on Network News' Treatment of the 1972 Democratic Presidential Candidates," The Alternative Educational Foundation, Inc. Bloomington, Indiana, 1972; The American Institute for Political Communication, "'Liberal Bias' as a Factor in Network Television News Reporting," The American Institute for Political Communication, Washington D.C., December 1972; Adnan Almaney, "International and Foreign Affairs on Network Television News," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 14:499-509 (Fall 1970); Frank D. Russo, "A Study of Bias in TV Coverage of the Vietnam War: 1969 and 1970," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35:539-43 (Winter 1971-1972).

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36:176-87 (Summer 1972); Dennis T. Lowry, "Gresham's Law and Network TV News Selection," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 15:397-408 (Fall 1971); Russell F. Harnay and Vernon A. Stone, "Television and Newspaper Front Page Coverage of a Major News Story," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 13:181-8 (Spring 1969); Pride and Wamsley, *op. cit.*

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network's content is reasonably representative of all U.S. network news.<sup>5</sup>

Probably not the least of the reasons for skipping over careful description of network news item duplication is an intellectual heritage which was given extra force by former Vice President Agnew's Des Moines speech. This heritage produced much more concern about biases in reporting of those news events which are covered by everybody than concern about whether everybody covers the same news events.

The present study is directed at news item duplication in network television. As noted, many research decisions seem to have rested on apparently untested assumptions about the interchangeability of network news content. In addition, the ethical and professional issues raised in earlier studies of newspaper duplication hardly would be made less acute if raised about network television news.

### Method

All the early-evening and late-night network newscasts available in Eugene, Oregon, were videotaped and content analyzed for the 14-day period from Wednesday, Feb. 17, to Tuesday, March 2, 1971. Programs analyzed were: 1) the ABC, CBS and NBC early evening weekday newscasts, 2) the CBS and NBC early evening newscasts on Saturday and Sunday, and 3) the 15-minute late Sunday night newscasts by ABC and CBS. Anchormen for the weekday newscasts during this period were Howard K. Smith and Harry Reasoner (ABC), Walter Cronkite (CBS) and John Chancellor-David Brinkley-Edwin Newman-Frank McGee (NBC). On weekends, CBS used Roger Mudd for its evening and Dan Rather for its late night newscasts. NBC used Newman and Chan-

cellor for its weekend evening news, and ABC used either Sam Donaldson or Bill Beutell for its Sunday night news.

With the exception of a single weekend news program, where the videotape recording was incomplete, all of each taped program was viewed at least twice by a team of three coders. In the case of the incomplete VTR, the author had already coded the on-air newscast and his transcript was relied upon to fill in the missing segment of the program.

Monday through Saturday nights, coders assembled on campus shortly after the on-air newscasts had been completed. They then viewed and coded the tape of each newscast, discussed any coding problems concerning that newscast, and then viewed that tape again. Because of limited VTR storage capacity, the tapes were erased after coding was completed. The procedure was the same for the two sets of Sunday news programs, except that coding was done the next day.

After several training and practice sessions, coders used a previously prepared form<sup>6</sup> to record information, including 1) story topic (the principal coding unit), 2) starting time of each item on the newscast, 3) visuals in the story, including details and lengths of any remotes and 4) a number of story characteristics. One characteristic was whether the story topic was *hard* (with significant impact or implications for the public) or *soft* news. Another characteristic was whether the story received *straight* (conventional television news style, e.g., the distanced interview style) or *feature* (e.g., heavier reliance on visual than verbal information) treatment. A third characteristic was the source of the story: *initiated* by the news staff (e.g., "XYZ News has learned..."), a *sidebar* to other news reports, or a result of handouts, press conferences or other contacts with "*official*" beat sources. Also coded was the "time peg" used in the report (e.g., "today," "yesterday," "recently"). Re-

<sup>5</sup>Chris J. Scheer and Sam W. Eiler, "A Comparison of Canadian and American Network Television News," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 16:159-64 (Spring 1972).

<sup>6</sup>The form was designed for quick visual scanning and for hand tallying. Coding assignments were arranged so that, during the first viewing of a taped newscast, at least two coders recorded each entry. Thus the occasional discrepancies could be seen quickly and resolved during second or third viewings of the tape. A limited number of copies of this coding form, and/or of a coding instructions sheet, is available from the author.

TABLE I

Percent of Duplicated Story Topics, Weekday vs. Weekend  
Network News (Percentages Read Horizontally)

	Duplicated All Competing Newscasts	Not Duplicated by All Competing Newscasts	
Mon.-Fri.	57.7%	42.3%	100% (N = 575)
Weekend	38.8%	61.2%	100% (N = 178)

$X^2 = 18.9$ ,  $p < .001$ , 1 df.

ports carried in other media were used to check the actual time peg of stories, whether or not one was given in the television report.

In order not to inflate our estimate of the amount of story duplication, story topics were relatively narrowly defined. For example, "the war in Southeast Asia" was never taken as a story topic. Instead, representative story topics on a given night might be "tank battle for Hill 31 in Laos," "U.S. casualty figures released," "drug raid at Cam Ranh Bay," and so on. Occasionally, an item coded as a separate story topic on one network was mentioned in passing by a second network as part of another, "larger" topic. In the 14 cases where this occurred over the 14-day period, the network which carried the item as a separate story was coded as having its story duplicated by another network. But whether the second network's "larger" story was coded as duplicated depended entirely on whether the "larger" story topic itself was covered by another network.

### Results

From Mondays to Fridays, ABC had a smaller news hole than the other networks. Usually ABC gave six minutes to paid and unpaid commercials, compared to five minutes each for both NBC and CBS. ABC's weekday newscasts carried a mean of 16.9 stories, not including commentaries, compared to 19.3 for CBS and 21.3 for NBC. For the late Sunday night newscasts, ABC had a slightly smaller newshole than CBS, though both networks car-

ried 12 stories each Sunday. As for the Saturday and Sunday evening programs, NBC used many more stories than CBS (means of 19.5 and 13, respectively, for each network) and had at least 30 seconds more news time available in three of the four weekend programs.

Despite the differences in the number of stories carried Monday-Fridays, nearly 70% of the stories carried by one network were also covered by at least one of the other two. Despite carrying fewer stories, ABC's Smith-Reasoner report carried slightly more duplicated stories (72.8%) than CBS (72.5%) and NBC (64.8%). Slightly less than 58% of all weekday stories were covered the same day by all three competing newscasts. However, the amount of duplication dropped dramatically on weekends. As Table I shows, duplication by all competing networks was much more likely weekdays, despite the fact that we are comparing fewer (two, in every comparison) competing newscasts on weekends than weekdays. The decline in duplicated stories held both for 15-minute and half-hour weekend newscasts.

Other results suggest at least two explanations for the weekend decline. Both weekends and weekdays, the kind of story most likely to be duplicated was the "routine" hard-straight-official news item, and these stories didn't appear as often on weekends. Some 83% of the stories carried Monday-Fridays were hard-straight-official, compared to 68% of the stories on weekends. (The chance that a duplicated story would be hard-straight-official was 92 in 100, and this was true

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TABLE 2

Percent of Duplicated Story Topics, by Time of Story (Percentages Read Horizontally)

ABC Monday-Fridays						
Time of Story	Duplicated by					
	1-2 Other Networks	Not Duplicated				
>2 Minutes	46.4%	53.6%	100%			
Less	78.0%	22.0%	100%			
			(N = 28)			
			(N = 141)			
X <sup>2</sup> = 9.20, p < .01, 1 df.						
CBS Monday-Fridays				CBS Weekends		
Time of Story	Duplicated by			Duplicated by		
	1-2 Other Networks	Not Duplicated		the Other Network	Not Duplicated	
>2 Minutes	72.5%	27.5%	100%	16.7%	83.3%	100%
Less	72.6%	27.4%	100%	58.5%	41.5%	100%
			(N = 36)			(N = 24)
			(N = 157)			(N = 53)
X <sup>2</sup> is less than 1.0.				X <sup>2</sup> = 4.03, p < .05, 1 df.		
NBC Monday-Fridays				NBC Weekends		
Time of Story	Duplicated by			Duplicated by		
	1-2 Other Networks	Not Duplicated		the Other Network	Not Duplicated	
>2 Minutes	53.5%	46.5%	100%	18.8%	81.2%	100%
Less	70.1%	29.9%	100%	36.3%	63.7%	100%
			(N = 39)			(N = 16)
			(N = 174)			(N = 62)
X <sup>2</sup> = 3.15, p < .10, 1 df.				X <sup>2</sup> is less than 1.0.		

both for Monday-Fridays and for week-ends.) However, not all of the drop-off in duplication is explained by the parallel decline in these "routine" stories, because there was also a week-end decline (from 76%, weekdays, to 51%) in the likelihood that hard-straight-official stories would be duplicated.

Both weekdays and weekends, hard-straight-official stories appeared about as often on one network's newscast as another's. During the study, major hard-straight-official stories concerned such topics as the new Cambodian and Laotian fronts in the Southeast Asian war, the bomb explosion at the Capitol building, Congressional hearings on the Army Post Exchange scandal, and so on. All networks combined carried a total of only 16 stories which departed completely from all of the

hard-straight-official characteristics: soft-feature-initiated. In fact, "soft" news of any kind did not appear often: the range was from slightly more than 5% of all stories (ABC) to 8.5% (CBS). Initiated stories were about as rare.

A slightly different way of looking at network duplication of routine stories is to compare duplication rates for stories lasting the relatively unusual length of two minutes or longer with the rates for shorter stories (Table 2). Monday through Friday, ABC (p < .01) and NBC (p < .10) were more likely to have their "routine" shorter stories duplicated by competing networks. But on Saturday and Sunday, only CBS was more likely to have its shorter stories duplicated. (ABC is excluded because it did not have any stories of two minutes or longer on its Sunday

TABLE 3

How Weekday Stories Were Not Duplicated, in Frequencies for Each Network

Network	Covered Only by This Network	Story Done by Others, But Not by It	Total
ABC	46	35	81
CBS	53	15	68
NBC	75	19	94
Total	174 (71.6%)	69 (28.4%)	243 (100%)

$X^2 = 13.16, p < .01, 2 \text{ df.}$

night programs. The competing CBS Sunday night news is included in the results for CBS.)

Other results suggest the partial explanation that, unlike the other networks, CBS tended to hold all its longer "unusual" stories until the weekends, and simultaneously devoted longer periods of Monday-Friday time to the stories which were covered by other networks. Only CBS was more likely to carry longer (two minutes or more) stories on weekends than weekdays (data not tabled,  $p .05$  by Chi-Square test). In addition, it will be seen later that CBS tended to treat some weekday stories at greater length than did the other networks.

When one of the three competing networks did not carry a Monday-Friday story covered by the other two, the network most likely was ABC (Table 3). Probably this was because of ABC's smaller news hole, since the 35 duplicated stories not carried by ABC were usually carried by the other two networks deep into their programs. Only six of the 35 stories were carried by NBC before the half-way point in its nightly series of stories, and only seven of the 35 CBS stories were.

If the networks tend to cover the same stories, then, do they also order them the same way in their programs? Considering only stories reported by both the networks being compared, Table 4 presents Spearman rank correlation coefficients for each day of the study period. Nearly two of every three correlations reach at least  $p < .05$  weekdays, while one in every three reaches

that level on Saturdays and Sundays. Nine of the 10 Monday-Friday correlations between CBS and NBC reach at least  $p < .05$ ; the corresponding figures are six of 10 for ABC-NBC and four of 10 for ABC-CBS. Generally, the more newsworthy the story is thought to be, the higher it appears in the nightly series of stories.

Rank-order correlations also can be used to compare day to day changes in the way the networks handled a continuing story. Network coverage of the Lt. William Calley trial occurred nine of the 10 weekdays during the study period. Each network's day-to-day coverage was ranked on two criteria: 1) the time given to the Calley story and 2) the number of different sketches drawn by each network's artist and shown on that day's program. Results are in Table 5.

Apart from the familiar differences in newscast format, were there any network differences in style?

One interesting difference may have related to ABC's weekday competitive position (third, but gaining in the Nielsen ratings) at the time of the study. When ABC did not give a time peg for its stories (especially a "today" peg), you could be sure that there was no recent peg available. When one was available, CBS seemed more relaxed about giving the audience a time peg, and NBC was in between the other two (Table 6).

CBS had fewer remotes but they lasted longer. Some 38% of ABC's Monday-Friday stories were accompanied by out-of-studio remotes, compared to

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TABLE 4

Rank-order Correlations between Networks in Ordering of the Stories  
Both Networks Used

Day	ABC-CBS	ABC-NBC	CBS-NBC
Wednesday, 2-17	.49	.66*	.94**
Thursday, 2-18	.54	.57*	.81**
Friday, 2-19	.73**	.84**	.61*
Saturday, 2-20	—	—	.70
Sunday, 2-21	.00	—	.71
Monday, 2-22	.49	.70*	.72*
Tuesday, 2-23	.16	.48	.60*
Wednesday, 2-24	.54	.83*	.47
Thursday, 2-25	.55*	.36	.54*
Friday, 2-26	.88**	.79*	.62*
Saturday, 2-27	—	—	.79*
Sunday, 2-28	.70	—	.83*
Monday, 3-1	.93**	.49	.61**
Tuesday, 3-2	.62	.61	.52*

\*  $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

Note: Correlations with higher numerical values will often not reach the significance level reached by correlations with lower numerical values, because of fluctuations in the number of cases being ranked.

TABLE 5

Rank-order Correlations between Networks in Treatment of  
Lt. William Calley Trial (N=9)

	ABC-CBS	ABC-NBC	CBS-NBC
No. Sketches	.84**	.77*	.77*
Time of Story	.87**	.71*	.87**

\*  $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

32% for NBC and only 27% for CBS ( $X^2 = 5.97$ ,  $p < .10$  with 2 df). On the other hand, CBS' weekday remotes lasted a mean of 164 seconds, compared to only 122 seconds for ABC and 130.4 seconds for NBC ( $F = 3.394$ ,  $p < .05$  with 2 and 27 df).

### Discussion

We've seen that network newscasts often duplicate story topics, their location in that day's program, and even day-to-day variations in how much emphasis to give a story. Given the importance of network television news as

a source of information for Americans, there may be reason to raise the cries of alarm which once were heard about standardized content in newspapers. These cries arise from rationalist-utilitarian assumptions<sup>7</sup> that diversity in the news flow is necessary to maximize the Good Idea's chances of entering the free market-place of ideas. But how much duplication of network news is "too much"? After all, the networks presumably are covering the same world, and we might be entitled to being a little frightened if there were no overlap at all in what they chose to report. However, it is supposed to be the same world being covered by the networks on weekends. Perhaps the 39% weekend duplication level should be used

<sup>7</sup>Perhaps the clearest expression of this view, as applied to the press, can be seen in Morris Ernst, *The First Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), and in The Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

TABLE 6

Frequency that Weekday Newscasts Used No Time "Peg," When One Was Available

Stories Lacking Time Peg as Broadcast	ABC	CBS	NBC	
Peg Was Available	1	19	11	31
No Peg Available	<u>15</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>23</u>	61
Total	16 (17.4%)	42 (45.7%)	34 (36.9%)	92 (100%)

$X^2 = 7.57, p < .05, 2 \text{ df.}$

Note: Generally, time peg was established from wire service reports. Almost all of the missing time pegs were "today" or "yesterday."

as a baseline for evaluating both the 70% and 58% weekday duplication rates. Though it is not essential to do it, the argument can be made that 70% is the duplication rate which should be compared with the weekend rate, and to do it without resorting to the argument that duplication by two networks on weekends is equal to duplication by two networks on weekdays. More than half of the Monday-Friday stories covered by only two of the three networks seem to have resulted principally from ABC's smaller news hole. It appears that if NBC and CBS had been confronted with ABC's time problem, they might have made the same decision on the stories that ABC did, since both networks carried most of the stories deep into their programs.

The fact that item duplication is higher on weekdays also means that duplicated content is presented to the principal share of television's network news au-

dience, while the more diversified weekend content is presented to the smaller share of the audience.<sup>8</sup>

It appears as if the most routine, cut-and-dried stories were the ones which were covered by everybody, and there weren't many other kinds of stories on the network news. The fact that these hard-straight-official stories were less likely to be duplicated on weekends may or may not be encouraging. The optimist might say that this shows that, given the opportunity, the networks still can dig up "hard" news in an innovative way. The pessimist might say that all it shows is that most government offices are closed on Saturdays and Sundays.

<sup>8</sup>Nielsen major market ratings for these newscasts showed considerable drops from weekdays to weekends at about the dates of these broadcasts, especially for the early evening Saturday and Sunday newscasts. Figures are compiled in separate booklets for each market. See "Viewers in Profile: Average Weekly Television Audience Estimates," *Nielsen Station Index*, March-April 1971.