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# T.V. newsroom gatekeepers : 5pm content selection and exclusion at NBC 11 / KNTV

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T.V. NEWSROOM GATEKEEPERS: 5PM CONTENT SELECTION AND  
EXCLUSION AT NBC11/KNTV

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Stephania R.P. Panayotopoulos

May 2008

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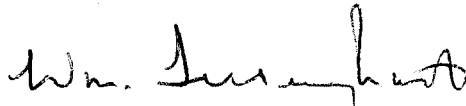
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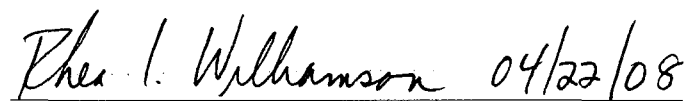
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## ABSTRACT

### T.V. NEWSROOM GATEKEEPERS: 5PM CONTENT SELECTION AND EXCLUSION AT NBC11/KNTV

by Stephania R.P. Panayotopoulos

This thesis was a qualitative analysis of the news selection and exclusion process for the 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast at NBC11/KNTV in San Jose. Examining how television newsroom gatekeepers arrive at such decisions, was also important to the study. The observation period took place from March through May, 2007. The content analyzed was an average of 1,200 stories. The researcher attended editorial meetings and the live show tapings. External factors influencing story selection were also examined. Further content analysis consisted of eight personal interviews. This study was inspired by White's 1949 study, later published in 1950. Although this study takes place several years later, gatekeepers at NBC11/KNTV still face daily obstacles when selecting or excluding content. Today's obstacles or pressures include time, relevance, ratings, advertising dollars and staffing. This study found that there was a consistency in the types of stories being chosen, but not a great deal of variety.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the constant unconditional love and support of my remarkable family. Mom, this is for you and Dad who always encouraged me along the way...and we know Dad is smiling down on us from heaven. And to my sweet husband Argyris, who is always reminding me of my perseverance and innate ability to succeed. I love you all – thank you for always believing in me.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The final product of local television news travels through a decision making process before it is chosen to be on the air. These choices are made by the newsroom gatekeepers, as they select and exclude story copy for the 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast. Story copy is a brief description of facts about a given event. “TV news decision making research evolved from sociologist Kurt Lewin’s gatekeeping concept that was developed to study housewives’ selection or rejection of food and other goods” (Gant & Dimmick, 2001). The process for selecting and excluding story copy can be studied in a similar manner. The selection and exclusion process for news story copy is influenced by several factors. This study will examine what these influencing factors are, and how the television newsroom gatekeepers arrive at such decisions.

Gatekeepers are individuals in the television newsroom who choose which story copy is to be used for a given broadcast. Gatekeepers then decide in which format the content will air. Gatekeepers have the power to affect the flow of information (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). “It was the late Kurt Lewin, truly a great social scientist, who applied the term ‘gatekeeper’ to a phenomenon which is of considerable importance to students of mass communications” (White, 1950). The focus on gatekeeper news selection puts the emphasis on something either getting in or out, implying that proper operation of these gates will yield unbiased news (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). The public does not thoroughly understand the news selection and exclusion process, and can sometimes perceive it as bias or partial. The research question being asked, will answer why it is

imperative for the public and those working in the news business to thoroughly comprehend how this process takes place. The research question will also reveal the factors influencing the news selection and exclusion process itself. People who enjoy their local news expect it to possess certain elements. “The general public is most interested in urgent, breaking news, but there are complaints about the mislabeling of news that was neither urgent nor breaking” (Executive Summary, 2006). This sort of situation can yield miscommunication when trying to maintain the existing audience, and acquire new viewers. If a station is frequently broadcasting stories coded as breaking or developing news that should not be in these categories viewers can become weary, skeptical and disinterested. The general public often feels that most newscasts look similar—thus forcing stations to try and set themselves and their newsgathering techniques apart from the rest (Executive Summary, 2006).

According to Jill Geisler (2006a), “Americans are fond of their TV news—far and away most people cite local television as the place they get most of their news. But they do want the broadcasts to improve.” Therefore, if people know the process of selection and exclusion they can better request the necessary changes from their gatekeepers. Gatekeepers will also be able to see their decisions in retrospect and make changes if need be.

Geisler describes specifics about desired news content: weather, national and international news, and topic-specific news such as politics, education, healthcare and the environment. Viewers are less interested in crime and accidents, money and money saving, and consumer information. They have low interest in sports, restaurant, movie or

entertainment reviews, and are “turned-off” by alarmist newscasts and promotions of unimportant, non-urgent breaking news or insignificant investigative stories.

Geisler (2006a) explained that local news viewers will not watch telecasts that merge product advertising or endorsement into hard news. The same people also find reporters who present such content, less credible. At this time there is little interest in the use of reporter blogs or newscasts delivered to handheld devices. The irony is that so many newscasts are formulated this way, even with the public dislike. Such information also reveals why gatekeepers need to better understand their process of selection and exclusion.

Geisler (2006a) also stated the goal was to see how well the newsroom decision makers understood the interests of their viewers, or potential viewers. Sometimes news directors know the pulse of the viewers, but they underestimate the interest in world and national news and overestimate the interest in blogs and small-screen technology. This is part of a very large problem. Gatekeepers often believe that they know what the viewers want thus creating the content template for their newscasts. The above research suggests otherwise. Because the news director believes he or she knows what the viewer wants, it is possible that content not best suited for a given viewership can make it onto a newscast. When questionable content is aired continuously, viewers begin to look elsewhere for a more reliable and credible news source.

The analysis of this study is relevant when looking particularly closely at NBC11/KNTV in San José and its gatekeeping parameters, practices, and patterns. It proved most beneficial to use a qualitative approach with a combination of participant

observations, interviews, and a content analysis. These three methods allowed close observation of the individual gatekeepers in the organization. Continual observations would allow for a recognizable pattern. The content analysis for the daily story lists of the 5:00 p.m. broadcast by NBC11/KNTV provided even more detailed information. Such information allowed for percentages to be calculated in analyzing what types of story copy are chosen. The types of story copy being sifted through are political news, community affairs, international news, crime, entertainment news, economics/technology, weather/traffic, miscellaneous news and health.

The decisions made by gatekeepers strongly influence content received by viewers. The public is often exposed only to the pieces of news the gatekeepers choose to use. Although people may get news from other sources in addition to their local news, this still remains the main source of content. If the gatekeepers exclude certain stories, it is the public that is losing information and sometimes being under-informed. Viewers need to be educated and understand why they are seeing what they are seeing, and also why they are not seeing what they could be. Furthermore, the research findings have the potential to enlighten the gatekeepers so that they too can improve their practices. They may not realize exactly what they are doing on a daily basis.

This study will examine and learn from authors who have conducted or studied gatekeeping, news selection or related subject matter. This information will be studied using peer reviewed articles and recognizing common themes or ideas that support the study. Common ideas will create a thread and then be highlighted through the literature review, results and the conclusion sections. This thesis is organized with five chapters.

The first three chapters consist of the introduction, literature review and method. Those three chapters made up the proposal. The remaining chapters are the results and conclusion.

The following method was used in this study. Data was collected on each weekday from March through May, 2007. The researcher attended weekly editorial meetings and observed the actions and decision making process of the station's gatekeepers. The informational sheet containing story titles, time codes, anchor assignments, camera shots and graphics descriptions, also known as a story list were also studied for each 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast. Based on both the information displayed in the story list, and general selection and exclusion questions, gatekeepers were queried on their decision making process. Each day's story list was studied, and the following nine categories were analyzed: political news, community affairs, crime, international news, entertainment news, miscellaneous news, health, economics/technology and weather/traffic. A percentage and whole number of what type of story appeared in each story list over the three month period was calculated. Patterns were recognizable when both the percentages and interviews were analyzed together.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

Literature about the gatekeeping process is reviewed and discussed in this section along with news selection and exclusion criteria. The study of gatekeeping encompasses many disciplines not only in the study of journalism but also research conducted by social scientists and sociologists. Gatekeeping is the process by which the array of potential news messages are shaped, and formatted into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media— often defined as a series of decision points at which news items are either continued or halted as they pass through gatekeeping channels (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, et al., 2001). As long as television remains one of the primary news sources, the gatekeepers remain the main decision makers for news selection and exclusion. “As the dominant source of news information, TV news has great potential to influence our day-to-day decisions and cultivate our perceptions of what issues and events are important in society” (Gant & Dimmick, 2000). Several story copy choices can come from any number of sources or wire services, one being the Associated Press. The AP is a non-profit cooperative wire service for news at the national and global level (Phillips, 2006), and a large percentage of story copy at reputable news organizations comes from the AP. Furthermore, the AP has a reputation of credibility, and sets itself apart by being a “distinctive news service with the highest quality, reliability, and objectivity with reports that are accurate, balanced and informed” (Phillips, 2006). Such credibility in story copy selection can be a strong quality in either gaining or losing the attention of gatekeepers. The Associated Press wire service is used by NBC11/KNTV.

The gatekeepers of local television news are particularly important to this literature. Gatekeepers are instrumental in formulating the newscast, and it is their decision making that the public sees on the air. “As checkpoints in the dissemination of symbolic reality information, gatekeepers are important in determining the content and nature of the information available in a society” (Surette & Richard, 1995). When determining the content, two primary actions are said to be imperative to the process:

TV news decision making involves two fundamental activities: sensing and valuation. During sensing, decision makers evaluate a myriad of *news story ideas* against a set of news selection criteria to select *potential news stories*. During valuation, decision makers evaluate *potential news stories* against another set of news selection criteria to select *actual news stories* for broadcast. Conceptually, then, TV news decision making is a filtering process in which a subset of *news story ideas* is selected as *potential news stories*, and a subset of those is selected as *actual news stories* (Gant & Dimmick, 2000).

It is these two activities that create a formulaic procedure for gatekeepers to operate by. It is after the above filtering process that gatekeepers make their selection and exclusion decisions, which are based on the activities of sensing and valuation. “Local television news is based on decisions made in newsrooms about what is newsworthy” (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). The definition of newsworthiness is usually defined by interpretation from gatekeeper to gatekeeper. Confusion can arise in situations where conflicting definitions of newsworthiness are being expressed.

At NBC11/KNTV the gatekeepers working on the evening shift arrive during the afternoon and meet for their daily editorial meeting at 3:00 p.m. to discuss the day’s events. The staff presence in the newsroom for the day is also discussed, along with follow-up story ideas and story pitches. While daily schedules may differ, the editorial meeting generally includes the news director, assistant news director, executive producer,



producer, assignment editor, reporters, and writers. Time and staffing limitations are quite influential in the news selection and exclusion process. While great content may be saturating the wires, if NBC11/KNTV has only two reporters and one photographer for a given time period sacrifices in choosing content must be made.

Furthermore, the gatekeeping role of the press has been noted many times as having limitations as a model of journalistic behavior (Scott, 1999). Gatekeeping does possess some boundaries, in that it is not only about the content selection, but also other influential factors. “They select from staged source material usually furnished by public and private relations people, by government and military sources” (Harmon, 1989). Therefore, some feel that the original story copy is even coming from a filtered place and not in its most pure form when it arrives to the gatekeeper for review. It must be noted that un-tainted information is impossible to obtain. Virtually all news has to begin somewhere, with someone telling a story. Furthermore, the selected story copy can be undesirable for some viewers even though the gatekeepers think they have made the most informed decision. “The quality/sensationalism dichotomy spears again in a 1981 content analysis of local news in Houston, by Hofstetter and Dozier. They found that slightly less than half of the news stories fit the sensational category, slightly more than half were non-sensational” (Harmon, 1989). Different gatekeepers would offer different opinions on such findings. Some believe that it is the public who sensationalizes news. Therefore, quality of selection is also taken into account. Epstein (1973) noted that the selection process is a bit different. News executives hold that there is no need to analyze the way in which a news organization selects material and puts together a broadcast

because, many feel the process has little effect on the end product—there is no grey area here. Many would disagree with such a platform and argue that knowing the process is how change can begin to happen.

Television is an anchor for the American people. “There can be little or no doubt that network television was the dominant medium of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). The public seems to continue to gravitate toward television, despite the ongoing advancements in technology. “Ratings books and academic surveys all point to the fact that local television news is a primary, if not dominant, news source in the United States. On a typical evening in a typical market a half-hour of local TV news will have a slightly larger audience than its network counterpart” (Harmon, 1989). Knowing their audience size is larger than the network’s can create an added pressure for local gatekeepers. As technology advances, somehow television continues to remain the most popular and simple way for people to get their news. And while television may be the simplest way, local news is the most popular outlet. “Overwhelmingly, people say they get most of their news from local TV: 65.5%” (Executive Summary, 2006). Television has a tight grasp on its loyal followers. Furthermore, when people were asked if they could get the same news whenever they wanted through radio, newspaper, online, or handheld electronic devices, 63.3% said they still prefer television (Executive Summary, 2006). People seem to like what they are used to and feel the most comfortable with that medium. “People like traditional media” (Executive Summary, 2006). More specifically, as people continue to gravitate to television as their main source of news, they are particularly attracted to local news. Local news seems to

provide a sense of comfort and familiarity that attracts many people. This sense of home town comfort cannot be felt to the same extent in network news. Furthermore, “news products are experience goods, which means that you need to use the goods to judge its attributes” (Hamilton, 1961). “TV news is still ‘incredibly popular.’ Television will remain a mass medium, even as viewer habits evolve” (Giesler, 2006a).

The television possesses a universal appeal. “Television broadcasts are multisensory communications which appeal to many levels of feeling and intellect” (Frank, 1973). Television has been and continues to be popular and communicative with the masses. Having a gatekeeping policy in television newsrooms is a fundamental element to common local and international newsroom policy. Story copy that comes off the wires travels a long path through various gatekeepers, before ever being considered to be on the air. Several factors influence the gatekeeper when he or she makes the final decision and in which format to do so. Such factors can be intrinsic values, specific newsroom policy and regulations, timeliness, ratings, visual effects and the newsworthiness of a story. Examples of these intrinsic factors are personal values, beliefs, ethics and professional backgrounds. The media are a powerful tool for reaching the audience and journalists function as gatekeepers between the public and statistical agencies (Smith, 1996). Smith (1996) added that only the messages that meet journalistic criteria of newsworthiness will be transmitted to the public.

While agenda-setting may seem similar, it must be noted that gatekeeping and agenda-setting are vastly different areas of research. Gatekeeping is not setting an agenda rather it is demonstrating the gates that content must pass through before it is

delivered publicly. When content is being delivered, the opportunity for agenda-setting can arise. Putterman (2005) noted that agenda-setting by the government can be shown to be permissible so long as the people are free to discuss and oppose. Such a notion can also be applied to gatekeeping, in that although some content may be chosen over other content the viewer may interpret that choice in any way they see fit. Interpretation is what allows the viewer to make the gatekeepers choice into their own. While five people can witness the same crime, each of them has the potential to tell a different account of the event.

Some might say the word newsworthiness has become less prevalent in modern days newsrooms. The American Heritage Dictionary (2006) defines newsworthy as “of sufficient interest or importance to the public to warrant reporting in the media.” Nowhere in that definition does it mention anything about ratings, visual effects, sensationalism or time constraints. And although all factors just mentioned are important, they are not synonymous with a story’s level of newsworthiness. The question of a story being newsworthy or not needs to be brought back into the newsroom; it is too often overlooked because of other factors that contribute to the newsroom as a business instead of a news organization exclusively. Sensationalism and celebrity news have also oversaturated the news. Geisler (2006b) recalled when the Today show announced for several days that Ann Curry had gone to Africa and had returned with an exclusive. Was it a story about Darfur, at that time the most important story out of Africa? No. It was an interview with Angelina Jolie—and an “exclusive” one at that. Some would argue that entertainment has now become a part of hard news.

It is often a misconception by the newsroom and its gatekeepers to feel all knowing about what they think the public wants to see. “Stations that have loaded their newscasts with crime news will be outraged to learn that coverage of crime and accidents also turned out to have low viewer appeal” (Geisler, 2006b). This miscommunication about what the public wants, and what the gatekeepers think the public wants can cause great confusion in the distribution of content through broadcast. This theme was recognizable when asking NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers what their target audience was for the 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast.

Delving even deeper, gatekeeping is more than selection and exclusion of story copy—it includes the shaping of messages, and the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed (Shoemaker, Eichholz & Kim, et al., 2001). “In any organizational environment a singular decision maker functions as the gatekeeper, and the primary phenomenon of interest is that gatekeeper’s psychology, attitudes and values favoring certain choices over others” (Clayman & Reisner, 1998). “Lewin said that gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by ‘gatekeepers’ and in the latter case an individual or group is ‘in power’ for making decisions between ‘in’ or ‘out’” (White, 1950). Therefore, there is much more involved in the decision making process of choosing content, than just which story copy may be considered newsworthy. The independent role of the media and beliefs of journalists play a central role in framing public agenda (Maley, 2000). It is impossible for stories to escape some sort of filtering system. Each person embodies their own perception and interpretation that will inevitably be projected in their personal decision making process.

In addition to gatekeeping being a prevalent practice in the newsroom, it must not be forgotten that newsroom policy also plays a very large role in the news media. Breed (1955) noted that there is always policy in a news organization, whether organizations like to admit it or not. For example, some news organizations may allow footage of dead bodies, while other news organizations may not. NBC11/KNTV keeps a strict *no body* policy when writing crime or war stories. Breed also remarked that newsrooms promote conformity, and this happens through the socialization of a new staffer— “When the new reporter starts work he is not told what the policy is.” *Policy* is all around in the newsroom but not outright taught to the staffer. The staffer is instead forced to learn the ropes as he goes. For example, although no one is taught how to possibly spin a story on certain content—every single employee of the news organization understands how that particular news organization does so (Ibid). This practice was also evident in gatekeepers’ personal interviews. Several gatekeepers agreed that NBC11/KNTV wrote in a certain tone.

Tompkins (2003) noted that most people get their news from television. He explained that although many people get their news from television, they still question the quality of information they see. The public is not as ignorant as some may believe. “Close to 60% of the members of the public surveyed said they strongly or mildly agree with the following statement: ‘Lately, I’ve become more skeptical about the accuracy of anything I hear on the news’” (Ibid). The public seems to be becoming increasingly wary when watching local television news, but remain attracted to the broadcast. Gatekeepers need to take this into account. Accuracy should be the top priority—and should not be

forgotten when creating a newscast. In addition, accuracy should also be the determining factor when omitting certain stories—if the accuracy of content is being questioned even in the slightest, it is advisable that the story be omitted. Unfortunately, this is not always the process that gatekeepers follow. There are several other factors influencing which stories make it onto a newscast and which do not. Ratings play a large role in the newsroom today, and advertisers pay enormous sums of money for seconds of airtime. In a survey by Tompkins (2003), the question “How much of the time do you think news reporting on local television is improperly influenced by advertisers?” resulted in 42.4% of the public stating “often,” and 51% of the news directors surveyed also stating often. Therefore, it is no surprise that the public is well aware of the influence advertising has on local news. Gatekeepers at NBC11/KNTV feel these pressures do not drive their decision making practices.

Although ratings influence content so can a budget. Tompkins (2003) stated news directors admit to having problems covering the news because of budget constraints. In reality, the news is not always chosen because of newsworthiness but is now heavily influenced by numerous outside factors. “The public was far more likely than news directors to say that news content was improperly influenced by profit motives, the race to get the story first, and to increase ratings” (Ibid). Although important, none of the above factors mention anything about the character or potential of the content.

Journalists themselves are also contributing to the problem of producing unprofessional news thus resulting in stories not making it on the air. “News media professionals say the lines have blurred between commentary and reporting” (Striking the

Balance, 1999). Comments based more on an opinion rather than facts can lead to unclear reporting thus confusing the public. “A growing number of reporters, editors and news executives also say that news reports are full of factual errors and sloppy reporting” (Ibid). Those mistakes lead to large problems with newsroom gatekeepers. The news becomes less credible when sloppy reporting and an abundance of commentary overshadows fact. Many gatekeepers argue that such content merits the decision of omitting certain items.

In addition, it should be noted that David Manning White’s 1949 study was imperative to the development of this study. It was White who created interest in the subject of gatekeeping. A number of authors reviewed in this study referred to his initial research in the forefront of their literature. White (1950) explained that the purpose of his study was to closely examine the way gatekeepers operate their gates in complex channels of communication. Although many authors would soon follow, it was White’s original research that sparked interest in wanting to understand reasons for rejecting story copy. This study has reviewed the decision making process in its entirety.

With so many advancements in technology, the public has a plethora of choices when choosing where to get their news. But even with so many choices and so much time since the development of television, the public remains loyal to television as a means of getting news. “Although television news is the product of multi-layered decisions, journalists and their news organizations are responsible for the final news product” (Kim, 2002). Therefore, although television continues to keep its loyal viewers faithful, it still must take responsibility for what it produces and what it ultimately



exposes to the public. Loyal NBC11/KNTV viewers keep coming back because of a certain standard. It is up to the gatekeepers to maintain this level of expectation and credibility. Kim (2002) noted that despite public service rhetoric, television news organizations are businesses that operate as a hierarchical system of news managers and journalists. The news is no longer about the sole exposure of content and the need to inform, it is now run as a profitable business.

Journalists select certain story copy while rejecting other story copy based on many different levels of considerations; personal judgment, newsroom routines, organizational restraints and socio-cultural influences (Kim, 2002). Kim further explained that journalists are gatekeepers who cover and select news that flows along the communication channel, shaping what is finally presented as news to the public audience. Furthermore, Berkowitz (1991) noted that others have found that news selection is the result of a subconscious effort to select a new mix balancing the proportions of available story categories from a wire service or other news sources. This tremendous responsibility in decision making is detrimental when broadcasting content to the public. News organizations are essentially presenting the facts as they see fit and passing that ability for perception onto the public. Kim (2002) also noted that television station gatekeepers are defined as reporters, producers, anchors, and editors. These gatekeepers decide what the public hears, and what form the content will be delivered. The researcher took it a step further in introducing top management as gatekeepers too.

David Manning Whites 1949 study “The “Gatekeeper: A Case Study in the Selection of News” was a groundbreaking study for gatekeeping analysis. White

observed the reasons why one specific wire copy editor, known as Mr. Gates, did not choose certain pieces of story copy. Reese and Ballinger (2001) explained that White was a general assignment reporter in Iowa in 1938, and also noted that White enlisted a wire editor from the *Peoria Star* to keep record of why he chose some stories and discarded others—and he was ready and willing to participate. During the week of examination the wire editor received about 12,000 inches of story copy from three news services, but selected only a tenth from all of this story copy (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). Various reasons for rejection were written onto the disregarded story copy. Some story copy had the phrase no space written on top because it was too lengthy. The reasons for rejection were carefully studied and it was concluded that no less than 168 times, Mr. Gates makes the notation of no space (White, 1950). Other story copy had B.S. on them because Mr. Gates thought the piece was nonsense. Perceptual frameworks observed in two reporters covering the same story will have different perceptions because of intrinsic factors. This relates back to Shoemaker and Reese (1996) when revealing that intrinsic values do indeed influence the gatekeeper.

Reese and Ballinger (2001) noted that in selecting reports from the same event 70% of the time, reasoning dealt with a lack of space. “Having enough space would lessen the need to make choices and thus render news more objective” (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). Of the 423 reasons given for rejecting reports of the same event, the majority of reasons given were mostly stylistic. Similarly, Abbott & Brassfield (1989) noted that, although a number of television gatekeepers mention the importance of visual elements in news stories, it was found that the visual factor did not rank as high as

timeliness, impact or locality in a Midwest television study. Therefore, while visual impact is important in the selection and exclusion process, gatekeepers sometimes make decisions based purely on the timing of a show. Other rejection reasons that Reese and Ballinger (2001) mentioned for the wire editor were “B.S.”—propaganda, clarity, conciseness and angle—are extreme examples of gatekeeper subjectivity. Very interestingly, Reese and Ballinger (2001) noted that the news editor admitted he preferred stories “slanted to conform to our editorial policies.” Because of the previous confession, White concluded that the editor’s choices showed how highly subjective and reliant upon value-judgments based on the gatekeepers’ own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of news really is (Ibid). Gatekeepers are always trying to make objective decisions about news selection and exclusion. However, it is inevitable that their beliefs, attitudes and experiences will always influence their decision making process.

Socialization plays a large role in conforming the gatekeeper to his role as well. The socialization of the newsman in television is important as most have been socialized elsewhere prior (Warner, 1971). The location in which socialization takes place for an individual will be influential in that person’s entire life. The given values and beliefs of a certain area will be instilled in the individual being socialized there. These influences are what shape people into who they are, thus influencing their thought process through life.

While White’s study was highly influential, Snider was also able to find very conclusive results. When comparing the wires from White’s 1949 study, to Snider’s 1966 revision study, there is a large difference in content. Today’s wires (referring to

1966) carry a better balanced news diet, less top heavy in human interest news as compared to 1949 (Snider, 1967). Although today's content does offer variety, gatekeepers are still choosing content to fit a structured mold.

Shoemaker labeled the gatekeeper as the individual journalist with intrinsic values while White named his gatekeeper specifically the wire copy editor. Although both authors speak of "gatekeepers" their definitions were not parallel. This study is using several different kinds of employees in the newsroom and creative service department at NBC11/KNTV as gatekeepers. The definition of gatekeeper seems as though it is defined by the perception and understanding of the individual using the term and in what context they are doing so. White (1950) also noted that when story copy leaves the wire it is transmitted from one gatekeeper after another in the chain of communications. White (1950) explains during the journey story copy takes from reporter to rewrite man, through Bureau chief to "state" file editors, to various press association offices, the process of choosing and disregarding is continuously taking place. Each gatekeeper that story copy passes through has an influence. This influence can be the deciding factor between what viewers want and what the gatekeepers think they want. Each gatekeeper is leaving their thumbprint on the story copy they handle.

There are no written rules for gatekeeping. Complications often arise because there is not a clear understanding of specific policy or gatekeeping criteria in a given newsroom. Policy can vary from newsroom to newsroom. "Lurking in many newsrooms; these days are some quirky, unpredictable rules intended to protect the sensibilities of the 'gentle reader'" (Walker, 2000). Trying so hard to please all members

of the viewing audience can become challenging. This can be time consuming and costly to a journalist. Therefore, the basic gatekeeping rules do not have to be set in stone to help guide the gatekeepers and allow them to feel content with their decision making process. Pyryt (2008) explained that when looking at wire story copy, different stories appeal to different audiences, and you need to know your audience and proceed accordingly. A story that is teased for the 5:00 p.m. news in Alabama will not necessarily be the best choice for the 5:00 p.m. tease in California. Location and demographics are also very influential when choosing audience appropriate content.

While rules are blurred about policy in the newsroom, the rules can also be unclear when it comes to getting story information online. Often, gatekeepers will need to dig deeper into a story online but this may not always be the best way to go. There are rules about the gatekeeper's behavior when on the Internet. "Newsroom policies govern how and when staffers may surf the net" (Noach, 1997). The concept of free-will is no longer existent in the newsroom and rules must be obeyed. Obtaining story information online can potentially lead to insufficient or even incorrect information. In the event incorrect information is leaked to the public the consequences can be substantial.

Although many behind-the-scenes employees are gatekeepers, the on-camera talents can be considered gatekeepers as well. Delivery of content is powerful. The tone of voice, eye contact, speed of delivery and body language also influence the message. If an anchor is reading a tragic script while looking aloof, speaking very quickly and not making eye contact with the audience, the message will not be received properly. However, if the anchor was speaking in the proper tone, making eye contact with the

audience and speaking slowly, the feeling of tragedy in the story would come across more credible. Broadcast reporters and anchors need news events that are predictable, dramatic and easily packaged. In addition, resource constraints also influence the spin on the story (Cameron & Blount, 1996). To understand the gatekeeper as the individual even more, another example of this is seen via the Internet. The role of webmaster as the individual is also one who is primarily responsible for how messages are selected, shaped, and delivered (Beard & Olsen, 1999). Therefore, the media gatekeeper appears in a variety of forms.

Reese and Ballinger (2001) examined the David Manning White study from 1949 and Warren Breed's article on social control in the newsroom from 1955. Reese and Ballinger (2001) also noted White and Breed, although firmly studying gatekeeping on the individual level indirectly addressed the issue of individual liberty within a larger structure. Therefore, although the two above studies are examining gatekeepers as individuals, they are also examining these individuals in the organizational setting, taking into account the limitations of their surroundings.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) discuss several attributes that make up the individual gatekeeper, which will in turn influence the sorts of choices, he or she makes in the newsroom when sifting through story copy. David Manning White (1950) explained the process of news items traveling through certain channels—and within these channels laid certain gates. Intrinsic values have the potential to influence these gates.

Bailey and Lichty (1972) wrote about the NBC's Tet Execution Film, conveying its difficulty in gatekeeping decision making. As an execution was taking place on the

street, an NBC film crew in Saigon filmed color motion pictures of the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner. The prisoner was at the hands of police Chief Lt. Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, and those pictures were available for the next day's program. Also included was the now-famous photograph by AP's Eddie Adams. This photo won the Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography, among many other awards (Bailey & Lichty, 1972). As soon as the photos were released the world had a realization in understanding what was really going on in Saigon. These images captured a historical moment demonstrating what happens during war. These images affected people globally. Here, NBC was faced with another example of a gatekeeping decision, but on a much larger scale. The nature of this execution was explicit, eerie and haunting. NBC pondered the public being able to see such a graphic event take place. In the end the images were released into the public. The uproar around the world was heard instantaneously, because before this people never had such an inside look. Therefore, the gatekeeping decision not only happens in the newsroom, but is also occurs on a much larger scale where the decisions can be felt around worldwide.

Education has the potential to play a large role in the news selection and exclusion process as well. "The journalists' education may influence their stories" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While education is very influential in the newsroom, gender also seemed to play an imperative role in the gatekeeper's choice. One study found that "female students are less likely to pick a news editorial story and more likely to pick public relations story than are male students" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Therefore the perceptual framework can pose very different perspectives to either gender, just to touch

on one of many intrinsic factors. A study on newsroom employment found that women constituted 37% of the newsroom workforce, and that 34% of all newsroom supervisors were also women (Craft & Wanta, 2004). Because women make up a large portion of the workforce, they are bound to have a great influence in the newsroom, and among story selections.

Researchers have found significant differences between male and female reporters in their selection and prominence of male and female sources (Ibid). Craft and Wanta further explained that there is evidence that male and female reporters are routinely assigned stories on the basis of gender. This can lead to two outcomes. Either, having women in newsroom management could lead to covering more stories about women's issues. Or, because women are regulated to "women's news" the extent to which they can bring a "woman's perspective" to other news is limited. Therefore the role of gender in the newsroom can be both hindering, and beneficial. Lundman (2003) also poses the question about gender typifications fundamentally shaping the journalists' assessments.

Livingston and Bennett (2003) feel there are four main influential gatekeeping factors:

1. The reporter's personal and professional news judgment.
2. Organizational news-gathering routines that establish the working relations between reporters and sources.
3. Economic constraints on news production.
4. Information and communication technologies that define the limits of time and space in news gathering.



Each gate is a set of a journalist's norms and practices that affect news content (Livingston & Bennett, 2003). While gender is an influential intrinsic, political affiliation can also affect a gatekeeper's decision making. A gatekeeper may be pulled to one side of a political controversy because of personal political views, which has potential for a personally-slanted outcome in the newsroom. Efron (1971) explained that when broadcasting political news, networks are required to select and broadcast contrasting and conflicting views on major political issues—regardless of their truth or falsity. Therefore as network newsroom policy stands, both sides must be presented to the public in all cases, despite the particular gatekeepers' feelings.

Reese and Ballinger (2001) noted that while Breed's study was concerned with institutional functional analysis, White's study contained a micro-functional problem: How does the editor solve the problem of too much news and not enough space? In both studies, this question remains a problem and needs to be organized and solved in each individual organization.

Related to the issue of space previously discussed, Cameron and Blount (1996) noted there are traditional news values that broadcast journalists must continually uphold:

1. Will the story interest all or most viewers?
2. Can this story be shown to my viewers?
3. How will this story fit with the rhythm, flow and content of the rest of the newscast?

Such questions must be taken in very careful consideration when a gatekeeper is at work choosing content and format. Many stations have a certain voice when telling

stories, also known as a rhythm. The chosen content will be written in the way that a specific station delivers their news. This tone often differentiates stations from one another. Cameron and Blount (1996) also noted that an editor may choose a particular story out of several that are newsworthy based on goodness of fit with a limited timeslot in the newscast. “Numerous studies have shown how newsgathering routines, established news sources, and various commercial and technological factors determine the pool of available stories” (Clayman, et. al., 1998). Sometimes choices in content are very limited. Therefore, the question must be posed—is the public ever getting all of the content that it should, or are the television newsroom gatekeepers more concerned with the rubric of the newscast and all its structural limitations? It is possible that if time constraints were not such a large influence on creating a newscast that content could be more informative and there could be more news that matters? It is a possibility.

Livingston and Bennett explain that news is the result of a series of decisions concerning how a product can be collected, packaged, and presented to maximize the producer’s return on investment and further explain that news decisions rest on the organizational, technological and personal gates and are premised on other defining assumptions (Livingston & Bennett, 2003).

Again, the advancement of technology at a steady rate is also a very large part in gatekeeping decision making. “Deregulation and new technology have tremendously increased the level of competition in the media marketplace, fragmenting audiences and leaving media outlets to battle for decreasing audience share” (Hollifield, Kosicki & Becker, 2001). The news does not have to come from traditional sources anymore. The

public has choices today—there are blogs, online tickers, podcasts, and countless PDA devices. With there being so many choices when it comes to where people can get their news, the content they want is also changing. The media have come a very long way from the time of Mr. Gates, and technology has had a profound influence. When the status of technology rises the bar for competition seems to rise as well.

Visual stimulation is key in attracting viewers to broadcast news. “Television places great emphasis on the visual impact of the story” (Cameron & Blount, 1996). Cameron and Blount (1996) observed that in a study on television’s use of print news releases, gatekeepers considered the visual possibilities of a potential story. These sensational images stimulate the viewer enticing them to tune in more often. Hollifield, Kosicki and Becker (2001) also noted that readership and ratings were both declining. The decline in readership can possibly be attributed to the continual attraction viewers have to television news as opposed to print. A decline of any sort can lead to plummeting ratings. When ratings begin to plummet it is as if an alarm is sounding in the newsroom and changes must be implemented immediately.

Captivating viewers is a difficult task for any news organization. “One of the toughest challenges news directors face is the struggle to attract and maintain viewers, especially young ones” (Murray, 1999). To begin the process of change and maintaining, media organizations must attract the largest audience possible by differentiating their news products from their competitor’s (Hollifield, Kosicki, & Becker, 2001). This means a particular news organization must also produce a newscast that meets expectations of the news consumer which requires some level of adherence to the standards of news

judgment, behavior and reporting that traditionally guide journalistic practice (Hollifield, Kosicki & Becker, 2001). This sort of action would take place when the gatekeeper was notified that the choices he or she had been making thus far were not effective or competitive enough to attract the public.

One factor that remains the same through many news organizations is the notion of sensationalism. The public does not favor admitting it however many enjoy experiencing it. If so many people assume sensational news is not newsworthy, then why do so many people demonstrate its value by spending money on it? (Davis & McLeod, 2003). Davis and McLeod (2003) also noted that the term sensationalism is often viewed as a scathing criticism implying that the news organization has abandoned serious news in favor of cashing in on stories that elicit emotional responses. Sensational news is also not just about content. "The generality of sensational news extends to place as well as time" (Davis & McLeod, 2003).

The balance between information and entertainment must also be covered when discussing the duties of a gatekeeper. Williams and Carpini (2004) explain that alterations in the media environment have eroded the always uneasy distinction between news and entertainment. This erosion has been the catalyst for the partial collapse of the gatekeeping function (Ibid). This entanglement has the potential to be very dangerous to a news organization. The gatekeeper may want to keep the public entertained but an overabundance of this can be unhealthy. While trying to keep up with the competitor and win over the viewer, trying to do so unjustly can create havoc. Offering too much of what some have coined infotainment can send the wrong message from the gatekeepers

to the viewers. This sort of content can prove to be highly un-newsworthy, thus making a particular news organization seem less credible and otherwise overlooking important events that should have made the newscast. But some would also argue that if people are talking about it is then inherently newsworthy. Therefore even though one may not deem Britney Spears newsworthy, if it's what so many are talking about then it can become what the audience wants.

There has been a great deal of literature on television and the strengths and weaknesses of local television news broadcasts, but there has yet been a study conducted to find out just how decisions are made in the newsroom that greatly affect the public audience and gatekeepers alike. When stories are omitted the reasoning should be strong and convincing. If the reason is somehow not compelling there needs to be explanation. If newsworthy information is being withheld from the public for no good reason a change needs to be made. This study will answer the questions of both how and why certain information is broadcast to the public, and why other information is not. Furthermore, this study will examine how gatekeepers make such decisions every day and what influences them while doing so.

## CHAPTER III

### Method

This research study examined the television newsroom gatekeeper's selection and exclusion process when going through story copy on a daily basis for the 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast at NBC11/KNTV in San José. The mission of the study was to answer the following questions; why certain content is selected or excluded, and how do gatekeepers arrive at such decisions? As Harmon (1989) noted, effective research on local TV news gatekeeping always has been difficult to obtain. Harmon (1989) added, those who study this phenomenon are frustrated by the research dilemma of analyzing content and interfering motives. They are also frustrated with analyzing gatekeepers and assuming a reflection of attitudes in news selection. The author's method dealt with this dilemma and asked research questions accordingly. NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers were questioned about how they selected and excluded content. Specifically, this study was conducted to determine how gatekeepers at NBC11 /KNTV make decisions on which story copy they choose and why.

The NBC11/KNTV 5:00 p.m. half-hour weekday newscast was analyzed from March through May, 2007. This time period was chosen to provide the most normal results possible avoiding any elections, large sporting events, or anything else that may alter the outcome. The 5:00 p.m. weekday newscast story list's were studied, assigned into one of nine appropriate categories, tabulated and converted to whole numbers and percentages in order to show what the gatekeepers chose to become news. During the observation period 1,200 stories were analyzed.

This study utilized three methods of qualitative research; participant observation, personal interviews and content analysis. All interviews and observations were conducted during time periods when the researcher was not performing regular duties as an employee of NBC11 /KNTV. Various reasons are cited by newsmakers for not including stories in newscasts such as time restrictions, ratings, interest of the gatekeeper and broad public appeal. Furthermore, the author wanted to determine if newsworthiness and or sensationalism are deciding factors in the news selection and exclusion process.

The content analyzed was the live and recorded version of each show, the official story list for each show, and editorial meetings. After content was gathered and recorded, the following nine categories were created allowing for percentage charts and bar graphs to be created for a more comprehensive and visual understanding of findings.

The nine categories created by the researcher for coding were as follows:

1. Political news encompassed content concerning the President and his administration, political parties, members of any political organizations and politics concerning the Bay Area. This category also covered any content concerning past political figures and news about their passing or their families and any news about domestic government practices and elections.

2. Community Affairs covered any news having to do with community events or concerns in the Bay Area such as news about the environment or developments with Bay Area schools or events going on in the related neighborhoods (excluding the station's self promotion of internal community organizations, affairs, and events). A fire in the community was also placed in this category.

3. Crime included news on local or national accidents, homicides, murders, robberies, rapes, and theft. The crime category also encompassed information on obituaries and breaking news.

4. International content covered happenings outside the United States. The war fell under the international news category, along with stories on foreign oil, foreign disasters and content concerning attentions to figures and places outside of the United States.

5. Entertainment news encompasses content that has no real hard news value and is added for pleasure or infotainment. Information about celebrities, pop culture, music and fashion are also in this category.

6. Miscellaneous encompasses information that does not quite fit into the other eight categories. Miscellaneous information covered content about various developments in the United States professional sports scope, along with any news that may arrive about college and high school sporting events. Sports was placed in this category because it was a sporadic occurrence on a newscast and not covered on every single weekday show. At NBC11/KNTV sports was more heavily covered during weekend broadcasts.

7. Weather/Traffic is a narrowly focused category encompassing information about weather forecasts and updates, along with developing weather in the event there is a severe weather system in transit. This category also includes Bay Area traffic updates or breaking traffic news.

8. Economics/Technology includes content about stocks, gas prices, homes costs and information on technology news. Developments made by companies and or services



such as Apple, Google or MySpace would fall into this category. This category was especially created because of NBC11/KNTV's continual coverage on the subject. Being in the heart of Silicon Valley also fuels the stations want and need to be heavily involved in this category.

9. Health would contain news about medical breakthroughs, quick health tips and disease exposure in the community.

Each of these categories encompasses a very specific body of news and information. Furthermore, these categories were chosen as such because they directly coincided with the normal news coverage at NBC11/KNTV. Once the newscast was viewed live, and then re-reviewed as a recording the researcher was able to assess which content made it on the air. This analysis provided a foundation when gatekeepers were personally interviewed.

At any given time during either a daytime or nighttime shift, the number of gatekeepers at the stations can range from about 40 to 50. Of this large amount, the researcher chose a solid handful to provide specialized information. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with various gatekeepers, several with different broadcast responsibilities. These eight interviewees were chosen because between them they represent the most influential gatekeeping positions. The interviewees were used as primary sources. The interview portion of this study was conducted in a private conference room. The gatekeepers were also questioned about their specific duties and how their positions have evolved over the years. There was no use of a formal questionnaire, instead the researcher interviewed the gatekeepers directly from the

contents of the story list along with relevant conversation that evolved. In-depth interviews allowed the gatekeepers to comment about and defend the selection and exclusion process. Surveys were considered but ruled out because of the hypothetical situations often presented to the interviewee that do not allow for optimal and truthful findings.

The researcher created a professional and casual interview environment. The preliminary questions consisted of basic information about the gatekeepers, name, title, educational background and permission to be tape recorded. Follow-up questions were open-ended and asked specifically to get in-depth answers from each gatekeeper. Each gatekeeper was asked similar questions but none of the interviews produced the same answers. Along with questions about the story list and news selection and exclusion, gatekeepers were also asked about the influence of advanced technology, ratings pressure, revenue pressure, the role and definition of newsworthiness vs. sensationalism, the order in which content is placed and personal interpretation of content. The list of NBC11/KNTV personnel interviews is as follows:

At NBC11/KNTV, 2450 North First Street, San Jose, California 95131:

Assistant News Director Mark Neerman, (February 11, 2008)

Vice President of Creative Services Jim Monroe, (February 5, 2008)

New Media Development Manager Mark Willson, (February 5, 2008)

Executive Producer of New Media Jan Boyd, (February 7, 2008)

Senior Commercial Producer Wendy Collins, (February 8, 2008)

5:00 p.m. Producer Eric Rich, (February 4, 2008)

5:00 p.m. Producer Dan Pyryt, (February 7, 2008)

Editor Gracinda Carvalho, (February 4, 2008)

Mark Neerman, the assistant news director is a white male about 30 years of age. He has been in the news business for several years and at multiple stations in different positions. Neerman has an educational background in journalism. His responsibilities are major. He manages the entire newsroom, along with the news director. He attends each daily editorial meeting, assigns stories to reporters and is involved in the business of the station as well. Jim Monroe, the vice president of creative services is a white male about 40 years of age. He has been with NBC11/KNTV for less than ten years. He too has an educational background in journalism. Monroe is in the creative services department and deals with new media, programming and some special projects. He is involved in editorial decisions but not as heavily as those in the newsroom. The new media development manager Mark Willson has been with NBC11/KNTV for a few years. Willson is a white male about 30 years of age. He has an educational background in radio, television and film. Being so heavily involved in new media, Willson was able to provide a plethora of insight about the influence of technology in news and content production today. Jan Boyd, executive producer of new media has been with NBC11/KNTV for several years. Boyd is one of three women interviewed. She is a white female with an educational background in journalism. Wendy Collins, senior commercial producer is the second of three women interviewed who also has a background in radio, television and film. She has been with NBC11/KNTV for many years starting an intern. The majority of her work is in programming, creating

commercials and promotions. Eric Rich, a 5:00 p.m. producer is a white male about 25 years of age. He has an educational background in journalism and has been with NBC11/KNTV for about two years. Being a producer, he is heavily involved in editorial decisions, writing story copy, and formatting content. Rich has a great amount of gatekeeping responsibility in that he is writing stories with the chosen content. Dan Pyryt, also a 5:00 p.m. producer is a white male about 30 years of age. He has worked in other smaller stations, and has been at NBC11/KNTV for a few years. Pyryt is also very involved in editorial decision making and building the 5:00 p.m. newscast. Pyryt and Rich also contribute their own story ideas during editorial meetings. The third female and last gatekeeper is Gracinda Carvalho, an editor. She has a background in radio, television and film. She has been with NBC11/KNTV for several years but has also worked in smaller stations. Some of her responsibilities consist of cutting video that will be used with specific stories and perhaps feeding video onto a live show. She is a great part of the delivery of content to the audience. Her sequence of video and photo choice is very influential and can many times determine a viewer's level of interest in a given story. Each of these people are principle gatekeepers at NBC11/KNTV and have a tremendous amount of gatekeeping responsibility. Each was chosen to provide specific insight and detail about their personal gatekeeping responsibilities and choices.

These gatekeeper interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The interviews were conducted during February 2008 and not immediately after the observation period in spring 2007. Unfortunately, anchors were unable to be a part of the interviews due to scheduling conflicts. The researcher purposively chose to have a gap in time. It was

noted that there is often a sense of defense immediately after a story airs and not enough time to let the content be absorbed. The researcher also saw that in retrospect some of the gatekeepers voiced their wishes to have done things differently. The researcher was able to study this phenomenon because of the time lapse. During the personal interviews the researcher was able to lay out the story list for each day and question about any specific day during the observation period. In addition, the shows that were observed were recorded and also present during interviews. With such information present it was very easy to refer back to any specific show. The two main breaking news events during the observation period were the Virginia Tech shootings and the paternity case involving the late Anna Nicole Smith's daughter.

While content analysis allows for a thorough collection of data in the news selection and exclusion process, it does not give the public a true understanding of why the gatekeepers chose certain story copy over another. The gatekeepers could be formulating the newscast around their audience and demographic or perhaps just continuously using an age old formula. The interviews give the gatekeepers a voice and the public an understanding. The participant observation portion of this study went as far as observing the actual news gatekeepers in action in the newsroom, while they were creating and putting together the 5:00 p.m. newscast. Furthermore, the author attended weekly editorial meetings to witness story discussions among the gatekeepers.

The original data that was generated provided a plethora of answers for the viewers, members of the media and for social scientists alike. This data was newly collected. This new data can inform both viewers and gatekeepers providing them a

better understanding of why certain decisions are made. This original data was analyzed and the author was able to recognize patterns and consistency in the news selection and exclusion process. The recognized patterns can help reveal why some decisions are made. There was an indefinite collaboration of analyses to ensure a thorough research and original data.

In conclusion, it is the collaboration of all the gatekeepers that decides what content the public will be receiving on a given day. The fusion of all these different people, with different intrinsic values, different educational backgrounds, different genders and different ways of thinking is what contributes to the goal of creating a diverse newscast. Although diversity may be the goal it is not always the outcome. The results were conclusive in showing that crime stories were very prevalent. Furthermore, that researcher noted that the character and personality of the gatekeeper greatly affected their choices. More specifically, the researcher noted that female gatekeepers were often times more attracted to content involving other women and families. On more than one occasion it was noted that one of the very outspoken and boisterous gatekeepers, was always pitching stories that were on the cusp of being offensive. The choices this gatekeeper made did not surprise the researcher because everyone knew the type of person this was. This gatekeeper was always pushing the limit of the news director and other gatekeepers.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

While gatekeeping involves the final choices made in the news selection and exclusion process, the path taken to get to such decisions is traveled differently by each gatekeeper. More specifically, the researcher learned how NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers arrived at their decisions. While the White study of 1949 explored the excluded story copy, this study learned about the process of making decisions. What makes the gatekeeper who they are as a person has a large influence on gatekeeping decisions as well.

The findings for this study were unexpected. When the category totals for each month were added together, crime had the most coverage. This was ironic in that several of the interviewed gatekeepers expressed dislike for the category. The community affairs category received the second largest amount of coverage next to crime. Miscellaneous news came in third ranking the highest in March and April. The other two categories that also received a great deal of coverage were international news in March and entertainment news in May. This is evidence that specific types of stories are always being covered by NBC11/KNTV. While there were nine categories coded five of them appeared frequently. Other categories such as health and political news occurred more sporadically. The researcher noted this finding as odd because health is imperative for everyone and should be a priority when selecting content. In March the most covered categories were community affairs, miscellaneous news and then crime. In April the most covered categories were crime,

miscellaneous news and then international news. In May the most covered categories were crime, community affairs and then entertainment news. Therefore, although story selection during the observation period was fairly consistent there was not a great deal of variety. These results are contrary to what the gatekeepers indicated they are looking for when selecting and excluding story copy.

The major gatekeeping a criterion that White used is very similar to what is used in today's newsroom. However, the White study was done for print. Some of the factors that made a difference to White when selecting or excluding story copy were; timeliness, proximity, story significance, and length. Such factors are also important to NBC11/KNTV. In addition being that NBC11/KNTV produces television news other factors are just as important. These additional factors are reporter/photographer availability, video availability and Internet connection in order to feed content from the field. Competition between stations also influences content selection and exclusion. NBC11/KNTV favors delivering the exclusive story before the other stations. Also differing from White, criteria today includes audience retention or being able to keep the audience attention through the newscast. Furthermore, unlike White, NBC11/KNTV puts a great deal of thought into programming. Stories are also chosen based on what has aired prior to the newscast. For example, if a baseball game is airing before a newscast, expect to find some male driven stories. Content aired before a newscast, really sets the tone for the upcoming content selection.



While gatekeepers are making decisions all day, the editorial meetings are where the majority of collaborative gatekeeping takes place. Every day at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. daytime and evening gatekeepers get together to pitch story ideas and make final decisions for each newscast. Both meetings include a number of different gatekeepers including the assistant news director, producers, editors, reporters, writers and those representing other departments as well. The 9:00 a.m. meeting is held in the middle of the bustling newsroom which also is teleconferencing via telephone and camera with the bureau in San Francisco. Things are happening all around this meeting each morning. Televisions are blaring on every channel, announcements are coming over the radio, and assignment desk editors are answering several phone calls at once to constantly update the staff. All gatekeepers go around in a circle pitching their story ideas and updating the group on what they are currently working on. At the end of this meeting the assistant news director and sometimes news director delegate final assignments for the day. This assignment list is based on what the assistant news director thinks are the best choices for the day. Executive producers sometimes help in making these decisions. The 3:00 p.m. meeting is run a little bit differently. This meeting is held in a large sterile conference room and seems a bit more formal and structured than the morning meeting. This meeting always felt quieter than the morning meeting. Unlike the morning meeting being on camera, this one is on teleconference via telephone only. This meeting also seemed to have fewer attendants. Furthermore, the priorities for the morning meeting are both morning and evening broadcasts. However, the later meeting focuses primarily

on the 11:00 p.m. show more than anything else. It must be noted that a great deal of the content from the morning meeting leaks into the evening meeting fueling later show material.

Often times during these editorial meetings there can be a clash of opinions between gatekeepers. The researcher noted that during one of the meetings a producer and reporter strongly disagreed on a story choice. The reporter had pitched a story about wanting to do an update on a murder case but the producer said the update was not advanced enough. Because an agreement could not be made the assistant news director had to step in. After he listened to both gatekeepers he made the executive decision of not allowing the reporter to do the update. He too felt there was not enough change to report on. This happens often and is inevitable when so many different kinds of people are working together, they are not all going to feel the same way about content.

After each meeting is finished, before assignments are handed out, there was a thought process that aided in choosing content. This process was a ranking of priority in considering the content of each story. The highest priority for NBC11/KNTV was relevance and a story's sense of being current. Many gatekeepers classified relevant stories as stories people were talking about now. And if the story was already happening, a new development had to be available in order to update viewers. Stories that did not fit such criteria were crossed off the list. Next, the gatekeepers wanted to make sure they tried to get a little bit of everything. For example, on March 1, 2007 there was a story about the recall of a certain laptop. Because this story filled the

need for having a story on technology, other technology stories were dropped or put on hold to possibly be used for another time. Once all assignments are made, but more content is needed for the show, the gatekeepers loosely estimate their remaining time in the show. When an estimated time allotment is established, the gatekeepers know what kind of story to choose. Because timeliness is an issue, many times follow-up stories are chosen because they are normally very brief. While this is the routine Monday through Thursday, Friday is treated differently. During Friday editorial meetings the researcher noted that stories were much lighter and a little less conventional. During many Friday editorial meeting's the gatekeeper's response would be something similar to "yes, that would be a fun weekend story, or no, that's too heavy for a weekend story." Therefore, the day of the week that content was being chosen made a large difference.

The way choices are made today and the way they used to be made are still similar. The researcher noted the main difference to be, the urgency for being the first to report something, and the first to report new developments or updates. While there is competition between stations, the need to be different is still a top priority. During editorial meetings NBC11/KNTV often kept in mind what other stations were using in their shows.

The daily routine used for content selection and exclusion at NBC11/KNTV proves to be productive in that the station covers what it collaboratively thinks is most beneficial within staffing and time limitations. The constant communication between all the gatekeepers throughout the day also seems to be a practice that boosts team

morale and keeps everyone equally informed of newsroom happenings and developments.

One may argue that the news media existing today has lost credibility and possess an unfavorable reputation among the general public. The journalists that make up NBC11/KNTV would disagree. While the role of the gatekeeper may be a simple term to define the decisions they make on a daily basis are not. Few understand the actual decision making process performed by the gatekeeper and the amount of elements to be reviewed prior to content selection and exclusion. Organizational constraints can also influence selection when time is limited and content is plentiful. There were many examples of such behavior during the observation period. The limitations observed affected the quality of news NBC11/KNTV was able to produce, although the gatekeepers that were interviewed may disagree.

During the observation period the majority of content being chosen was from the wires and not from the gatekeepers. Furthermore, it was observed that so many interesting and untold stories remained untold day after day because of the stations limitations and other needs to fulfill. Time was often an obstacle for gatekeepers in choosing content. While actual airtime for the 5:00 p.m. newscast is about 30 minutes only about 17 minutes are dedicated to news. On a given day when all the wire services are combined, plus the story pitches made by gatekeepers there are hundreds of stories to choose from. Content is narrowed down even more at the editorial meetings when content is selected and then assigned. This means in one

newscast there are about 25 stories. Of these 25 stories each story can range from 20 seconds, to two minutes. Even minutes before the show, the story is not completely solid. Stories are dropped and moved while the actual newscast is in progress. It must also be noted that unique or breaking stories such as Virginia Tech will generally be given more time than a normal story. Virginia Tech was an anomaly. This story was unfolding faster than it could be reported. The shooter went on one rampage at the school, and then a few hours later committed another shooting. Naturally, the next week contained a great deal of coverage following the story. Victims were being revealed, information about the shooter was being discovered, and the school itself was under constant surveillance. This event then alerted other schools to be especially vigilant in watching for copycat crimes. A story of this magnitude received much more coverage than other every day stories.

The data collection for this study included recordings of each 5:00 p.m. week day newscast, attendance of editorial meetings, hard copies of each show's detailed story list and private interviews. Each story that appeared on the story list was labeled with one of nine categories used to code. The stories were calculated as shown in Figures 1-7, showing a bar graph, pie chart and a cumulative averaged bar graph of all three months combined. The nine categories used for coding were:

1. Political news encompassed content concerning the President and his administration, political parties, members of any political organization and politics concerning the Bay Area. This category also covered any content concerning past

political figures, news about their passing or their families, and any news about domestic government practices and elections.

2. Community Affairs covered any news having to do with community events or concerns in the Bay Area, such as news about the environment or developments with Bay Area schools or events going on in the related neighborhoods (excluding the station's self promotion of internal community organizations, affairs, and events). For example, fires in the community were placed in this category.

3. Crime included news on local or national accidents, homicides, murders, robberies, rapes, and theft. The crime category also encompassed information on obituaries that may be a part of breaking news.

4. International content covered happenings outside of the United States. The war fell under this category along with stories on foreign oil, foreign disasters and content concerning attentions to figures and places outside of the United States.

5. Entertainment news encompasses content that has no real hard news value and is added for pleasure or infotainment. Information about celebrities, pop culture, music and fashion were all included in this category.

6. Miscellaneous content encompasses information that does not quite fit into the other eight categories. Miscellaneous information covered content about various sporting developments in the United States professional sports scope, along with any news that developed about college and high school sporting events. Sports were also placed in this category because it received more coverage during the weekend and was only covered sporadically during the week.

7. Weather/Traffic is a narrowly focused category encompassing information about weather forecasts and updates, along with developing weather in the event there is a severe weather system in transit. This category also includes Bay Area traffic updates or breaking traffic news.

8. Economics/Technology included content about stocks, gas prices, home costs and information on stories about technology. Developments made by companies and or services such as Apple, Google or MySpace would fall into this category. This category was especially created because of NBC11/KNTV's unique coverage on the subject. Being located in Silicon Valley also fuels the stations want and need to be heavily involved in this category.

9. Health contained news about medical breakthroughs, quick health tips, and disease exposure in the community.

In Figures 1-7, the bar graph totals and percentages were calculated by coding every story in the story list designated to each weekday. In Figure 1 on page 49, the total number of each story type for the month of March is displayed. Stories about community affairs took up most of the air time consisting of 85 stories. Crime was still one of the three most prevalent story types consisting of 73 stories. In this graph it is easy to see which type of story spiked during the month of March.

In Figure 2 on page 50, a pie chart for the month of March is broken into categorical percentages. It is evident in the pie chart that the community affairs category and the crime category are comparable. Economics and technology only took up four percent of content for the entire month.

In Figure 3 on page 51, the total number of each story type for the month of April is displayed. For the month of April the crime category was abundant broadcasting 87 such stories. A less popular category for this month was economics and technology, getting only 14 stories on the air which is similar to the previous month.

Figure 4 on page 52, displays a pie chart for the month of April broken into categorical percentages. This chart shows that the second most prevalent story type in April was miscellaneous news taking up 16% of the content.

In Figure 5 on page 53, the total number of each story type for the month of May is displayed. Stories about economics and technology appeared the least, only 20 times. Although 20 seems like a small number, it is a larger number than the previous month. The crime category flourished during the month of May consisting of 92 stories.

Figure 6 on page 54, displays a pie chart for the month of May broken into categorical percentages. Here it is easy to see that the percentage totals for stories about community affairs and crime in the month of May are comparable. Once again, stories on economics and technology appeared the least getting only four percent of the broadcast. This piece of information is especially ironic in that NBC11/KNTV is in the middle of Silicon Valley and competing to be on the cutting edge of such information. Wanting to be the leader in such content cannot be achieved when in three consecutive months it is the content that appears the least.



In Figure 7 on page 55, the totals for each type of each story category are displayed. This graph displays information for all three months. It is easy to see that stories about crime and community affairs were the highest for all three months. Crime was still a large category even when the public continues to express dislike.

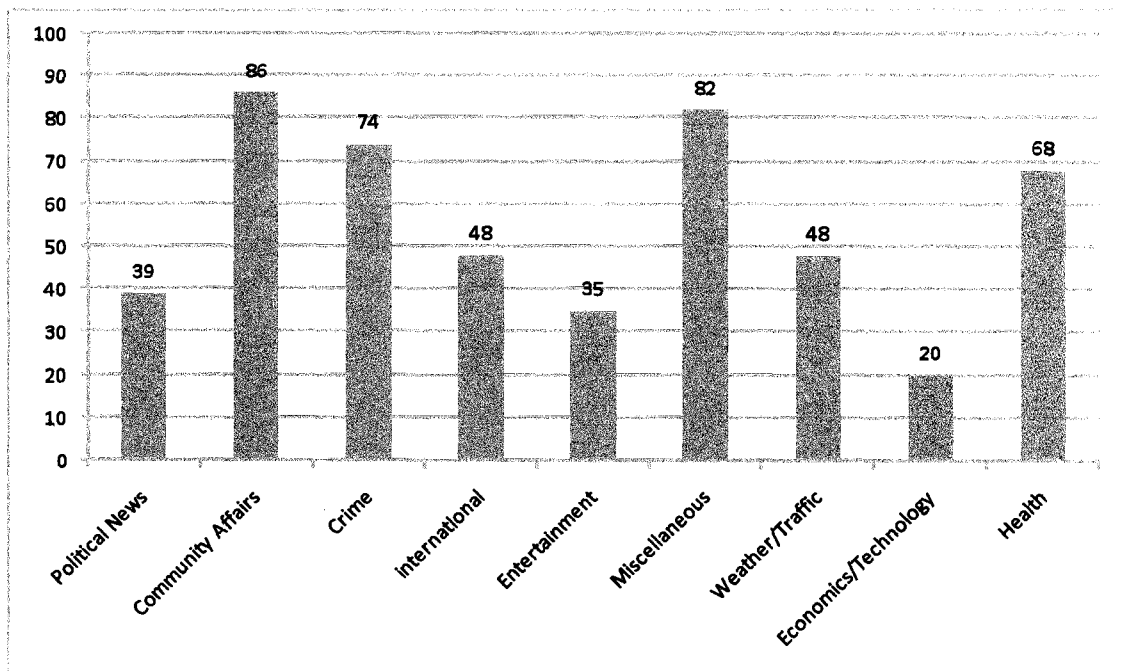
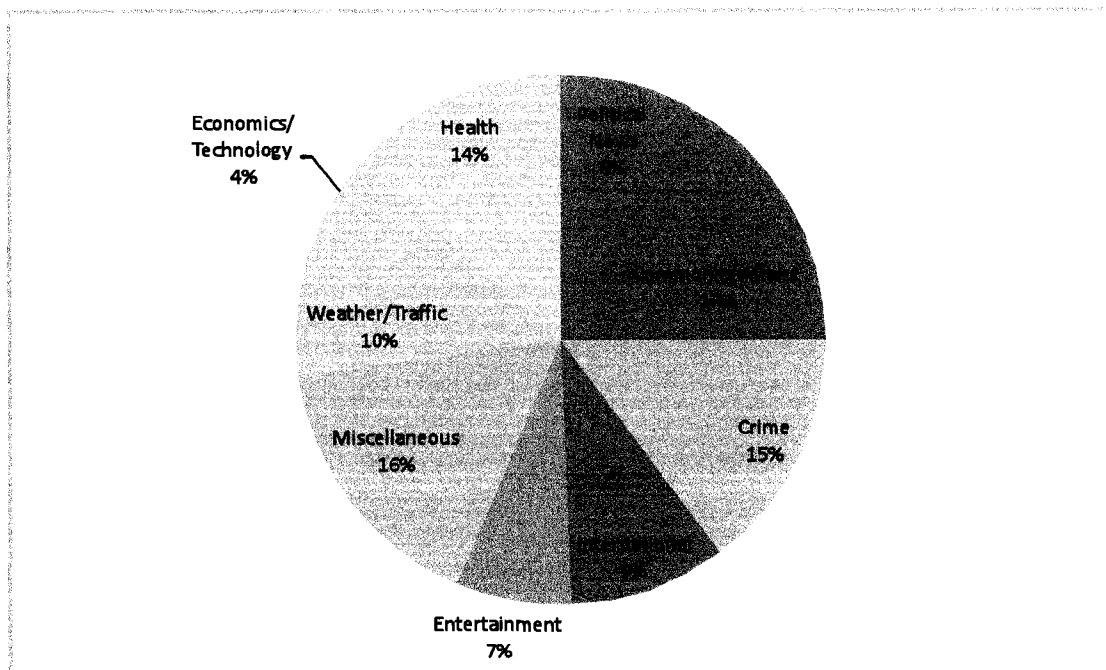


Figure 1

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Totals, March 2007*



**Figure 2**

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Total Pie Chart Percentages, March 2007*

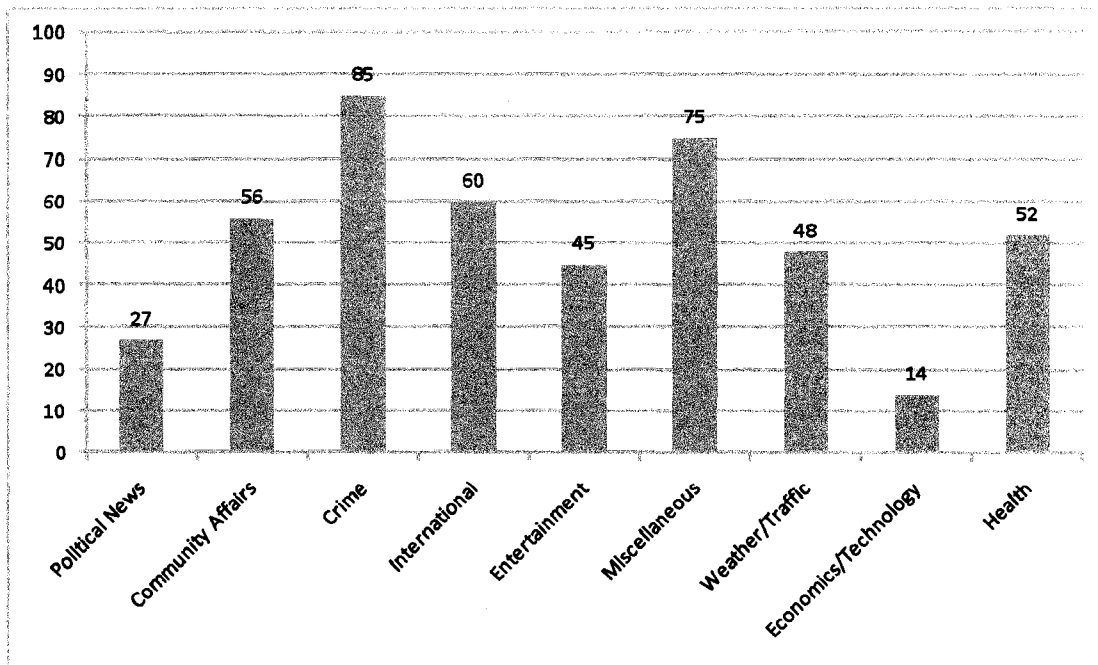


Figure 3

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Totals, April 2007*

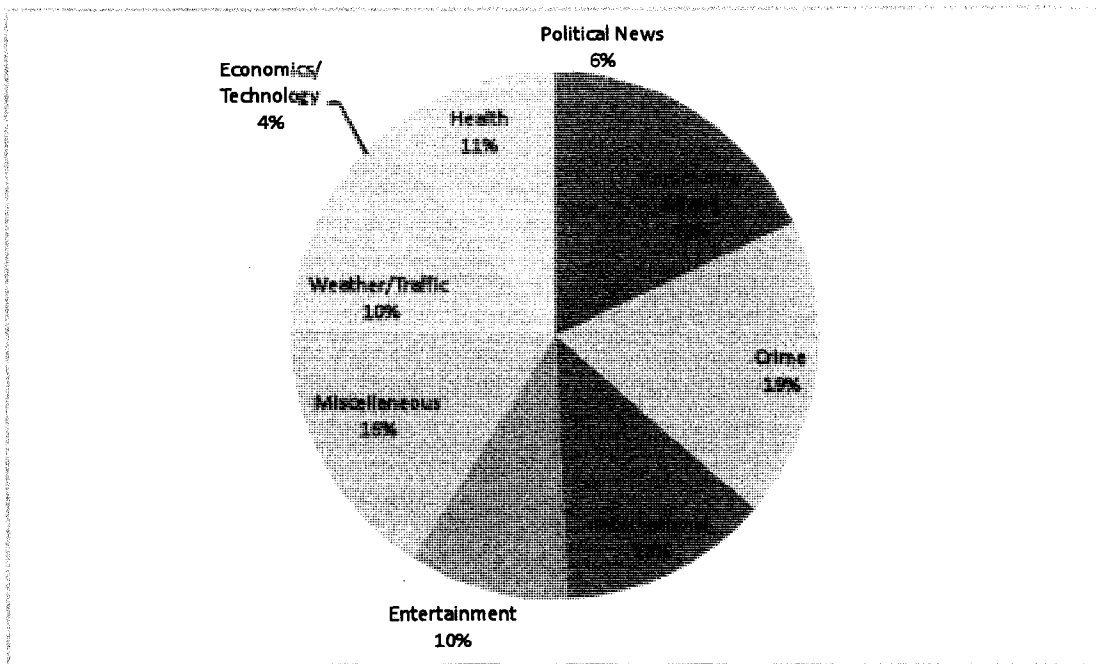


Figure 4

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Total Pie Chart Percentages, April 2007*

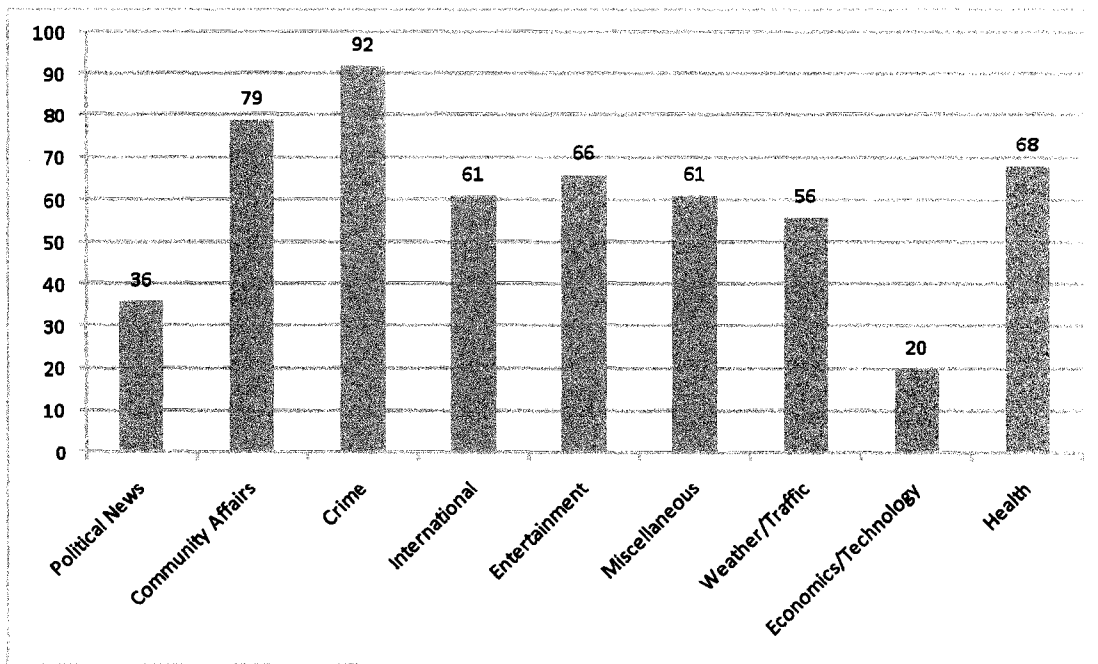


Figure 5

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Totals, May 2007*

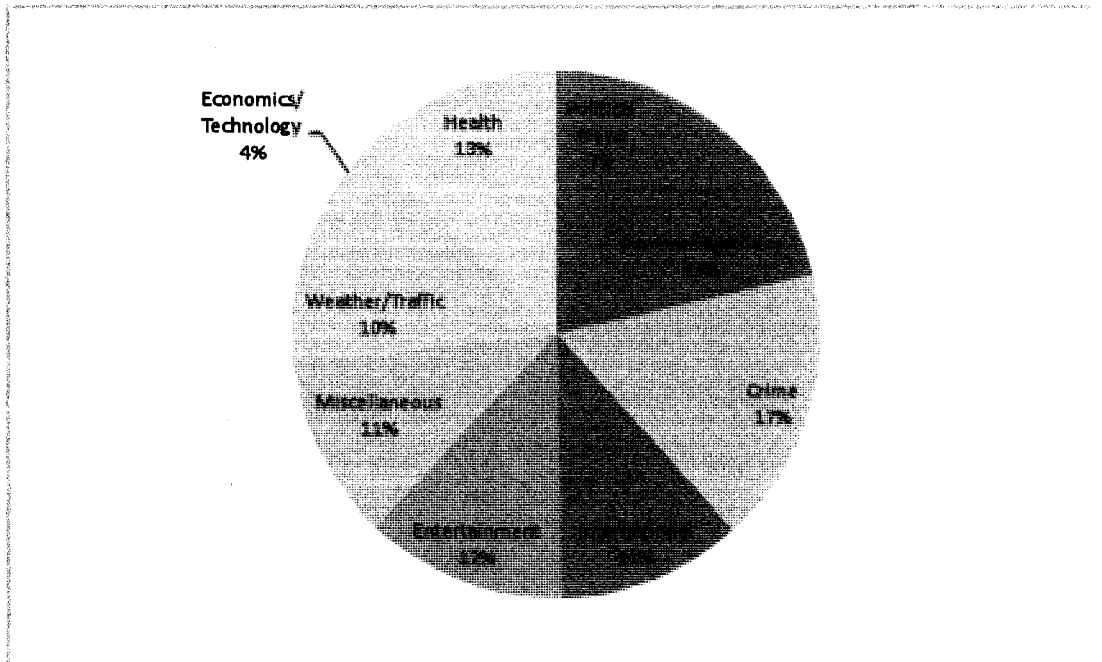


Figure 6

*NBC11/KNTV Story Type Total Pie Chart Percentages, May 2007*

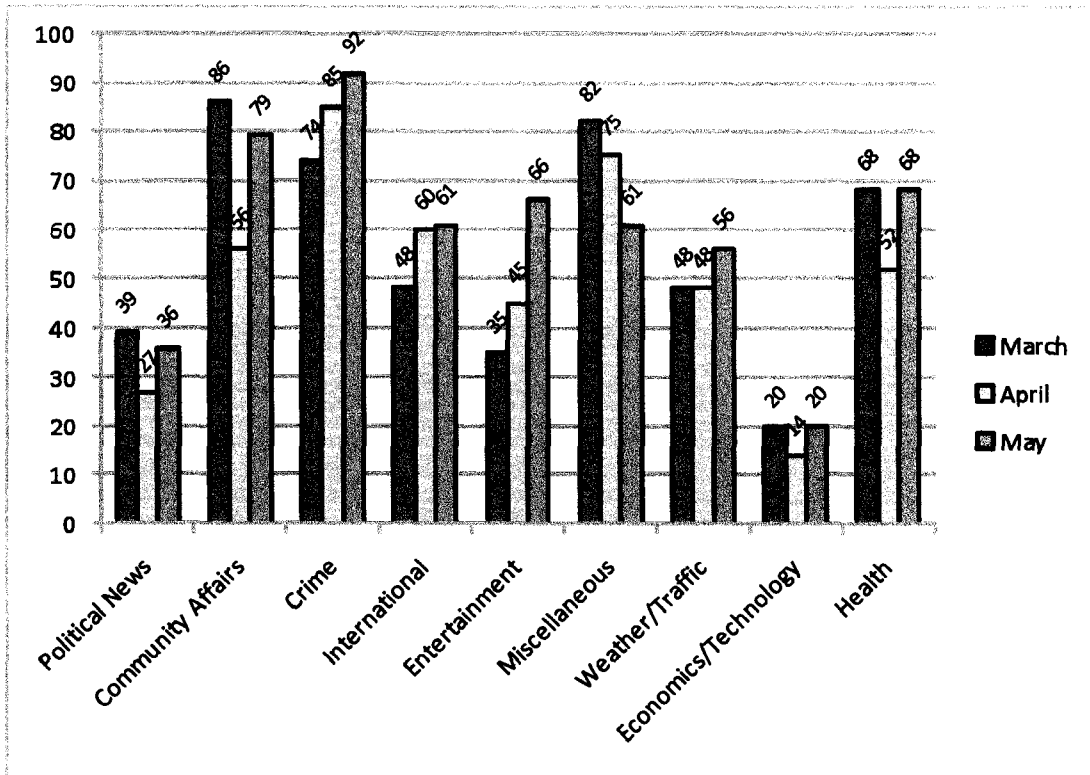


Figure 7

*NBC11/KNTV Three Month Story Type Totals*



In the comprehensive analysis conducted during the observation period it was noted that although there were spikes in certain categories because of major events, the type of content being chosen remained consistent. After the daily editorial meetings, producers, writers and reporters investigate as much as they can in the time they have. It was noted that NBC11/KNTV took the responsibility and obligation of objectivity very seriously. Therefore, the researcher witnessed instances when strong stories were chosen and assigned but dropped during the eleventh hour for lack of thorough information collected.

While a story may be both compelling and newsworthy, without the proper supportive and factual information, it is journalistically unethical to carry on and report an incomplete story. The responsibility of objectivity and thorough reporting was demonstrated during the breaking news of the Virginia Tech shooting. When this surge of information flooded the newsroom on April 16, 2007 NBC11/KNTV had a choice to make. While video and content were getting fed in by the minute NBC11/KNTV remained objective and checked the facts before reporting. In such large national tragedy that is still in the process of unfolding, it is easy to report whatever information comes in. But NBC11/KNTV operated with their responsibility to the public in mind.

All stations are made up of different kinds of gatekeepers, and have different budgets, and different criteria for choosing news. NBC11/KNTV tries to be different in setting the bar higher and catering to their audience. NBC11/KNTV assistant news director, Mark Neerman (2008) said that NBC11/KNTV has a great advantage being

based in the South Bay: We have a larger population here and a good base. We have knowledge of the South Bay that nobody else has. We also have a huge emphasis on business and technology reporting. We are the market leader in that area of content.” Although the assistant news director felt this way, such numbers were not event in the results this study produced.

During the observation period two major stories were chosen several days in a row: the Virginia Tech shooting, and the Anna Nicole Smith paternity court battles. Because the gatekeepers at NBC11/KNTV deemed these stories newsworthy enough for several days, they were often covered. Rich (2008) said “Each day is different and the news of the day dictates what you do.

#### *Audience*

Pyryt (2008) commented on the importance of relevance in choosing story copy: “The content has to be relevant, and it’s important to keep in mind which content has the broadest appeal. And I write for my audience, which is the South Bay and who is home at 5:00 p.m. My audience is a little bit of everything, but my target demographic is women ages 18 to 49.” Monroe (2008) argues that the demographic was women over the age of 50, which is not what Pyryt stated. Neerman (2008) said that there is a misunderstanding in audience demographic and it’s not the housewives. Rich also spoke about writing for his audience when he explained his thought process during story selection: “A story about harmful baby toys is ideal because of our primarily female audience. Some days you are inhibited by what stories are out there and available. It’s about what you select, yes, but it’s also about how you structure

your show.” NBC11/KNTV editor, Gracinda Carvalho (2008) revealed that she as an editor did not really know the audience demographic for the show she was working on.

Such a misunderstanding has potential to cause problems when the target audience is not understood. Carvalho also said that since the 5:00 p.m. broadcast on NBC11 airs after the Ellen show, lead stories are chosen accordingly. This means that the Ellen show usually attracts a primarily female audience, so if there are stories to keep the female audience seated, then often times those stories are chosen. The need for a producer to know the target audience is imperative when choosing story copy for a show. A better universal understanding of the target audience would prove beneficial to NBC11/KNTV. There was definitely confusion among the gatekeepers in knowing exactly who they are writing for. Pyryt (2008) said “Would I choose a child safety recall, over NASCAR? Yes, I would because it would greater serve my audience. I like to do more health and celebrity news.” For Pyryt, this is a personal choice he makes as a producer. Other gatekeepers and viewers feel very strongly about not showing such content. But again, it’s these intrinsic values that make all gatekeepers different from one another during the content selection and exclusion process.

### *Ratings and Advertising*

While Pyryt may know his audience, he also knows that ratings are part of what he does, but he doesn’t always trust the information the numbers in ratings provide: “You can’t judge the accuracy of ratings because its only counting X amount

of households, it's so ridiculous. You just have to hope you are reaching who you want to reach. And, I know who they (NBC11/KNTV) want me to target." It must be noted that Rich may have his own interpretation about who the audience is, while another gatekeeper has a very different opinion. Rich (2008) also commented on ratings and said "For me the ratings aren't as big as a concern for the 5:00 p.m. show as they are for the 11:00 p.m. show." Neerman (2008) said that quality doesn't have to take a back seat because of advertising and ratings pressure.

### *Intrinsic Values*

Pyryt then went on to talk about how he chooses content, and how he influences what content he allows in his show: "Sometimes I agree with the story choices, and I have to say that there is a whole lot of me in my show. To be successful at producing you have to put a whole lot of yourself in your show." Here, Pyryt illustrated that his intrinsic values influence his choices in content selection and exclusion, thus influencing the information the public will receive. Such behavior was mirrored during the White study (1949) in that, White used expletives for conveying his feeling of irrelevance in some story choices. Rich (2008) explained the role of gender during story selection and exclusion: "It's tough because you want to say that you are un-bias but being a male is part of who I am and it influences my decisions. I need to remember to read through story copy as a journalist and pick the stories that are the most newsworthy. Carvalho (2008) disagreed and said that she does not believe her being female influences her editing choices at all: "We are all trained and know what good content is."

## *Relevance*

The theme of relevancy remained through the entirety of Pyryt's interview. When asked about the terms newsworthy and sensationalism, Pyryt quickly responded and said: "Newsworthy is whether or not it has merit, sensationalism is how a story is written. Anything can be newsworthy and anything can be sensational, the delivery is half the process." This principle was especially evident during the observation period when the Anna Nicole Smith paternity battle was chosen several days in a row. While many may argue that such news is not considered newsworthy, it was what people were talking about thus creating relevance. This story ran in the top of the show for several weeks and had follow-up reports for several more weeks. Rich (2008) said that this story remained popular for so long because the death of Anna Nicole Smith was not too long ago and the court battle involving her daughter had become such a circus. Rich (2008) defined newsworthy as having any impact on the world. Rich explained that the definition of newsworthy has always been the same, it is the generations that have changed, because the interest of the people has changed.

This can be attributed to the fact that local markets now do not spend much time on covering international news. Some gatekeepers do not see international content as high on the priority list as they used to. Rich shared his frustration in this practice: "I see things in Kenya as newsworthy, but it doesn't affect my audience. Sometimes I get frustrated, but I need to remember I produce local news." Rich (2008) added that an event that does not directly affect his local audience will most

likely not be selected. NBC11/KNTV executive producer of new media, Jan Boyd (2008) added that a story doesn't need to be unusual to be covered: "And being in the most diverse market in the nation, gauging what is relevant is a lot more difficult. You also have to remember that decisions we make in this newsroom are different than decisions that would be made even in the San Francisco newsroom."

### *Checks and Balances*

Monroe (2008) expressed difficulty in trying to understand what the viewer wants: "Sometimes we get e-mails from local viewers that guide us, but still it's very difficult." The emphasis of geographic location was echoed by several of the gatekeepers. "What makes it through the filter here is timeliness, immediacy, relevance and geographic location. And while we cover nine counties, our emphasis is South Bay. Staffing levels also determine what we choose to cover" (Boyd, 2008). Boyd explained that by using the word levels, she was referring to staff availability at a given time. "We don't just give people what they want – we also give them what we think they should have. But that can become a bit subjective, so you have to be careful there" (Monroe, 2008).

NBC11/KNTV assistant news director Mark Neerman spoke about objectivity: "News will always be accused of not being objective, or being partial to one side. But all in all I think it works itself out. There are so many hands in the mix acting as the checks and balances for the editorial. You catch each other." Such a practice proved to be beneficial during the editorial meetings attended by the

researcher. During some instances, one gatekeeper would select content, while another would chime in and express reasoning why it should be excluded.

Available resources were another factor in selection and exclusion. Boyd (2008) explained: "We have satellite feeds, we use Oasis, we have News browse, we have the web, and viewer e-mail tips. Boyd was referring to all the different services NBC11/KNTV receives content from. There is just so much information coming in all the time. We as news managers also need to be informed. We also act as the filters for all the content coming in." Exclusion is a sensitive practice in the newsroom, Monroe (2008) said: "Sometimes we don't know when to exclude a story, the rules are always changing. Stories defiantly tend to burn out quicker, because people are getting their news all day from other sources." This issue makes selection and exclusion especially tedious because there is a fine line between advancing current stories, and delivering new stories.

### *Proximity*

Pyryt (2008) spoke about the second event during the observation period that was also chosen several days in a row, the Virginia Tech shootings. Pyryt said that news is constantly evolving and something else had to replace Virginia Tech. Monroe (2008) said that when the developments stop coming in, that is where the story ends for local news. Pyryt also made a notable comparison to the war in Iraq: "When we went to war, it was the biggest thing and now it has been reduced to a VO." The acronym VO stands for voice over, which occurs when an on air talent reads a simple explanation or blurb about a given subject. "It's tough because when I

started producing I had Iraq in my show every day, and it was in the forefront. Now it's totally forgotten. It's amazing how this industry changes day to day" (Rich, 2008). Therefore, no matter how detrimental an event may be, it will always be replaced and become yesterday's news. Rich (2008) said "It's a progression. It slowly weeds itself out and there is less to cover." Boyd (2008) still feels very passionate about choosing to cover war stories, unlike many other gatekeepers. She tried to make a conscious effort to select stories on the war. Boyd's attraction to war stories was an example of her intrinsic values. NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers agreed that these intrinsic values are influential and it's impossible for them not to be. Furthermore, several NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers did not want to believe that gender played a role in selection but many realized that it indeed does.

Boyd (2008) added "It's about story-telling, there is always a beginning, middle and end. Boyd and Monroe (2008) also explained how proximity played a large role in selection. The Virginia Tech shootings were covered longer and more in depth in Virginia than here in California. Rich explained that producers also need to keep viewer fatigue in mind and make sure not to over saturate the viewer. Some choices of selection did not affect the gatekeepers the way it affected the public.

Pyryt (2008) said:

Virginia Tech didn't feel real to me because it was 2,000 miles away. I didn't cry about Virginia Tech, or 9/11 for that matter because I have to keep my head in the game and keep going. We build stories, and that's what I needed to focus on, and maybe that's why you took Virginia Tech home with you. We made it real by telling the personal stories, and without the human element there is no point in choosing to cover the story.



Rich (2008) said “When Virginia Tech broke it was the biggest story for about a week and a half, and then it was totally gone and you never heard about it again. That’s the cynical nature of news. And, it’s a very weird cycle.” Gatekeepers are not superhuman though, they too have the potential to be affected. Rich (2008) said “You get jaded very quickly in this business. You get used to what happens every day. I have compassion for the stories I choose. You deal with death and it becomes almost normal – but I still have to put it on the air, it’s my job.” Carvalho (2008) expressed that she was affected by Virginia Tech but not tremendously.

Furthermore, all of the gatekeepers referenced the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. And while national news does not play a large role during the 5:00 p.m. local news “9/11 touched us locally, as several Bay Area families were affected. People need to remember that news is not always nice, and we never dubbed ourselves the family friendly news station” (Pyryt, 2008). Carvalho (2008) also explained how she was affected by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>: “I came in as soon as they called me. It was crazy. We were just getting so much video and having to make decisions right there on the spot. And in situations like that you just have to pull it together and get that content on the air.” The news selection choices that NBC11/KNTV makes will never please everyone. Pyryt (2008) noted that his selections aren’t made to please everyone, but rather to inform people: “After Monica Lewinsky, several parents had to have the oral sex talk with their kids, but even so, it was still something we had to air”.

## *Fluff*

Entertainment news was something expressed differently through each gatekeeper. Some felt it was a real necessity and others wondered why so much time was spent on it. During this study out of 1,200 stories, 146 of them were dedicated to entertainment. Pyryt (2008) expressed strong agreement with selecting entertainment news: "I'm sorry but a lot of young ladies look up to Paris Hilton and talk about her thus making her newsworthy. Rich (2008) added "By default you are going to have some fluff, so I can see why you saw this consistently in your research. You need to drive the show in a way that makes your viewers stay with you. That means including the light and funny stories. You also need to make sure and choose variety." Carvalho (2008) disagreed entirely and said "All the celebrity news, I'm sick of it. And I don't even think a lot of people care about it. Our former news director even put a stop to it." Carvalho explained that she would feel differently about the celebrity stories being selected if they were more philanthropic and talked about celebrities doing good things and not ending up in rehab. Boyd (2008) agreed with Carvalho and said: "The Britney Spears and the Anna Nicole Smith, I just have no explanation for." NBC11/KNTV senior commercial producer Wendy Collins (2008) said News hasn't changed at all. The content has pretty much remained the same, just evolving and advancing with time. Except, now we do a lot more entertainment news. Stories on Britney Spears are now in the 5:00 p.m. news. We went live with breaking news when Anna Nicole Smith died. No, the President didn't get assassinated; we had breaking news for a celebrity death. Collins (2008) went on

to make a reference to entertainment news shows influencing traditional newscasts and making such celebrity gossip appear newsworthy.

### *An Abundance of Crime*

There was an abundance of crime stories during the observation period. With all the crime stories to choose from on a daily basis, only certain types were selected. For example, a story about escaped inmates in April was chosen over a story about a gang member killed in Richmond. “I’m not going to put tic tac crime on my air. And for me there is no real benefit to put someone’s tragedy on the air, if it’s nothing out of the ordinary.” (Rich, 2008). Pyryt (2008) said “Some stories are just cheap crime that we don’t need to cover. And who cares? Their family cares, but does yours? No. If most crime stories are cheap, then the one commanding the attention of the gatekeeper must possess something unusual.” Pyryt (2008) noted that a wow-factor story element does not have to be a freakish factor, it just has to be relevant – it has to affect people in some way.

### *Policy*

The news selection and exclusion process for the gatekeeper is one that does not take long. A trained journalist will quickly know if the story intrigues them enough to cover it. Pyryt (2008) said “I can usually decide right away if I am going to choose something. But sometimes we rush during selection just to get something on television – sometimes we need to let things breathe. If we make the wrong decision it can be very embarrassing.” During the observation period it was evident that stories needed to possess meaning to be chosen. Pyryt expressed this idea when

he said “Give me something to care about in the story.” A story has to touch you and be memorable and relevant. Rich (2008) said “You begin with your own personal filter when you are selecting story copy. I ask myself if this story has impact, if it’s a big story. You also look at other stations and see what your competition is covering. And as you go through the day it becomes readily apparent what the big stories are.” Boyd (2008) said: “Fundamentally it comes down to story-telling and relevance. I don’t look at it and say what does the public need to know. I look at content and see if there is a topic or issue that’s interesting, or if it’s something that a lot of people are talking about.” Neerman (2008) said that it was absolutely typical to look at five televisions all with the same stories at almost the same time. Such a lack of variety is actually something that some gatekeepers spoke against.

Collins (2008) explained the power that news organizations really have: “News is an incredible word. We are the people who actually decide what news is. When people hear stories, it’s because someone in a news station decided it was news; hence newsworthy. Making such decisions comes down to the gatekeepers’ personality.” Collins expressed that there is a little of each gatekeeper in the stories that are chosen. People will select or exclude certain content because of their intrinsic values.

### *Visuals*

The fact that television is visual is an important part of the selection and exclusion process. During several of the editorial meetings attended by the researcher, the question of having available video was often considered before a story

was selected. The kind of video gatekeepers are looking for is footage that is explanatory, able to accompany a story, and sometimes very unusual. For example, during the month of March there was a story about a young girl who had the hiccups for several weeks and could not get rid of them. Visually this story would not be as interesting to watch if the viewer did not see the girl hiccupping all the time on video. “If you have to explain a minute long story on the air with no video, you are pretty much in trouble. The words can only do so much. That’s why we really need to keep video in mind when we are selecting and excluding. And that’s what is hard about this medium, if you don’t have the necessary elements to support your story, it’s tough to tell it.” (Rich, 2008). Although video plays a supportive roll in story telling it is not impossible to tell a story without it: “We tell plenty of important stories without video.” (Rich, 2008). While the researcher reviewed recordings of each broadcast, it was noted that one of the important stories that aired without video was during the month of May. A story on immigration was read, and while there was very important information being told, video of something representing immigration was not available. Carvalho (2008) agreed that NBC11/KNTV often puts compelling stories on the air without video. To the contrary, she also felt that an anchor reading a story can carry the same force as it would if there were video to accompany it. Several other gatekeepers disagreed with this statement. Collins (2008) said “Newsworthy comes down to, what is the good video. While the story with better video is only in the South Bay and doesn’t affect the other areas we cover – we need

to go with what's more visual. We still need to remember to tell the story because something without video won't get nearly as much attention."

### *Ethics in Journalism*

The gatekeepers all felt an obligation and responsibility to the public, and many keep this in mind when selecting or excluding content. Pyryt (2008) said "I don't think you can have a job as a producer without thinking you have some sort of obligation. I inform and clarify. I have a responsibility to be fair and accurate – and maintain the standards our loyal watchers have come to expect." Rich (2008) explained how strongly he felt about his responsibility to the public when telling a story. Rich went on to say that gatekeepers need to tell stories to allow people to formulate their own perceptions. Rich said that he keeps this responsibility in mind when choosing content. While such principles are active inside all gatekeepers there can often be disagreement among the ranks.

Monroe (2008) thinks about his humanitarian obligation in the business and what his responsibility is when selecting content. Monroe conveyed his feeling of needing to be honest with the public. He referenced the Virginia Tech shootings and explained that although it is grim and tragic, it is still something the public needed to be informed of. Pyryt (2008) explained that when it comes to deciding news content, "we give our viewers what they want, not what we think they want". NBC11/KNTV vice president of creative services Jim Monroe disagrees with Pyryt. He explained that sometimes the news gives people what they think people need, not just what they want. Pyryt (2008) explained "I have fought and pushed for stories before when no

one else stands on my side.” Situations where a great deal of disagreement occurs, requires the news director to often make the executive decision. Carvalho (2008) explained how she has often been in situations having to air content she disagrees with: “The writers and producers don’t have time to look at everything coming in. Especially war stories, things that are gory and bloody we usually won’t show. But sometimes I do feel uncomfortable with the clips.” Carvalho (2008) also explained that she was once told by someone in the business that the editor is that last person that sees video before it airs. This continually impacts how she selects and excludes content. She explained the pressure this can make her feel. Immediately before that video leaves her computer she must verify in her own mind that she made right editing decisions. Carvalho (2008) added that sometimes at the last second a change is made after an editor sees the finished project. Pyryt went on to say “Being a gatekeeper I have a lot of people helping me make decisions, and we talk about it all.” Rich (2008) explained “I know my decision affects what information people take in. That’s why in my show I try to include a lot of hard news. And the day I start coming in here and just slapping stories in a story list to get it done, is the day I that I don’t need to do this anymore.”

#### *Content Selection as a Business*

While reporting that news has been around for several years, the way the process is put together now is very different. Fifty years ago news was not as much of a business as it is today. Even though the news was not making a great deal of money, it was okay because no one was saying it had to. The money of a corporation

is now what dictates a great deal of decisions. The priority used to be informing the public, but now with the internet at our fingertips we often know the news of the day before tuning in to the 5:00 p.m. broadcast. Although the news operates as a business, NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers said that quality does not suffer. Pyryt (2008) said “The difference between news back then and news now is that people are already informed when they see our show. They already have their news of the day. Now we have to inform differently and take it to the next step and advance it.” Pyryt also felt strongly about the news being a business: “At the end of the day we are a business because we are owned by General Electric.” Carvalho (2008) explained that the types of stories stations are covering has remained the same over the years. The people and the dates change but the types of stories are similar. In further discussing the subject of finances in the news business, Pyryt (2008) said he kept his budget in mind, but did not let that influence the quality of his show. He noted that having a reporter from Washington D.C. with the capital in the background renders a more credible delivery. Although it may cost more, the money is being well spent.

The researcher asked about the day’s decisions in retrospect. After the broadcast airs and all the news selection and exclusion decisions made by these gatekeepers are seen, both regret and pride can occur. Pyryt (2008) said “I’m proud of what I do but I don’t leave feeling good every day. Sometimes I just don’t like how we are perceived by the public. Everyone is so quick to criticize the news media, and they don’t realize what goes into choosing story copy and writing stories.” And while so much does go into content selection, mistakes can still happen. This



was evident to the researcher during the observation period. During an editorial meeting a mistake read by the anchor was caught and then acknowledged on the air. NBC11/KNTV took responsibility for delivering inaccurate content.

Eric Rich (2008) explained that sometimes during a live show content needs to be excluded for reasons of timeliness: “The stories that go first are certainly not the ones that I have already teased. Anything that’s a feature or national story can get killed first. And I think about what has the least amount of impact on the audience. Those stories have the potential of being excluded.” There are also certain stories that will not be excluded during a live show. Health stories fall into this category because of the broad appeal: “Even if you don’t have Alzheimer’s chances are, you know someone who does” (Rich, 2008).

### *Technology in Journalism*

Technology has also influenced the way gatekeepers select and exclude content. Carvalho (2008) explained that technology has played an exceptional role in what she does specifically: “When I started we used three quarter inch tapes, then we moved to beta, now we are non-linear and all digital. Even the way we get video has changed, we get it right from satellite feeds. Right now we are pretty much tapeless. And soon enough we will be shooting right on memory cards, eliminating the tape altogether.” With video being more readily available now because technology has come so far, the competition between stories has risen as well. More video to accompany stories means that there is more to choose from now, almost making it more difficult for the gatekeeper. Neerman (2008) disagreed and said “Our business

as a whole has not done a good job in figuring out how to integrate the new technology. We're getting passed by. And if we don't find out how to integrate traditional broadcast will be left behind. NBC11/KNTV new media development manager Mark Willson expressed his excitement in the advancement of technology: "It's only going to get better than it already has. People want what they want, when they want it. New technology is able to provide that." While Willson agrees technology has advanced the business, he also believes it can be a disruptive advantage "The computer and the technology is a disruptive technology for our business. The same way the digital camera was disruptive to the film industry. It's something that comes in and does what you do, cheaper, faster and better. And can pretty much push you out of business." Therefore, while technology may be advancing businesses, it can also act as a hindrance.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

The objective of this research was to find out what the television newsroom gatekeeper's news selection and exclusion criteria were. The observation period at NBC11/KNTV was conducted during March through May, 2007. While the news has morphed into more of a traditional business over the years, it faces many obstacles and influences when selecting and excluding content.

While the observation period produced solid results, they were somewhat unexpected. There was true consistency over the three month analysis. The types of stories being chosen were similar, but contained different faces and places. The structure of how content was chosen remained stiff, in that the kind of content gatekeepers were attracted to was the kind of content they would always choose. Content selection and exclusion from gatekeeper, to gatekeeper was very black and white. There were also great similarities when speaking personally with each of the gatekeepers. While they differed on some ideas, they really remained on the same track within NBC11/KNTV. These gatekeepers understood how to choose content and write for their organization. Many would argue that gatekeepers are bias and un-objective, but through the personal interviews it became evident that the gatekeepers try to practice being fair and accurate, as all gatekeepers should. That is why the primary focus was the news selection and exclusion process, and just how gatekeepers arrive at their final editorial selection.

The NBC11/KNTV newsroom housed all of the gatekeepers, but each with a different responsibility and interpretation of the news selection and exclusion process. In general with most content decision making, the gatekeepers were on the same page. However, there were misunderstandings in knowing who the target audience was for the 5:00 p.m. weekday broadcast. Some gatekeepers said they were writing for the stay at home mother, while others said they were writing for adults over the age of fifty. This kind of misunderstanding can be detrimental when gatekeepers have different audiences in mind during selection and exclusion.

While the numbers revealed consistency some gatekeepers were surprised while others agreed with the outcome. This means that after seeing the results, they did not know just how little was being done on economics and technology, especially seeing that this station is located in Silicon Valley. Others were not surprised by the fact that so much entertainment was being covered. The gatekeepers that were not surprised by this fact were those who wanted it to be on the air. Furthermore, several of them did not realize just how many crime stories are on the air each night. The irony was that some of these gatekeepers expressed the importance of variety and giving the people what they want. If in three months there is not much difference in what is being covered then the people are not getting variety.

Competition between stations did not play as large of a role as originally anticipated. The assistant news director even said that selecting the same stories and airing them around a similar time is typical. However, other gatekeepers did mention that they kept in mind what other stations were doing during their decision making.

Newsworthiness and sensationalism were expressed differently by the gatekeepers and they were each passionate about the meaning of such powerful words. Several NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers felt a strong negative connotation about the word sensationalism. The gatekeepers explained that sensationalism can take credibility away from a story.

It was also noted that each of the eight gatekeepers brought up the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 during their interviews. This event still weighs heavily on the gatekeepers and the newsroom as a whole. Several gatekeepers compared the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to the Virginia Tech shooting. Popularity also was a part of newsworthiness, in that people had to be talking about it for it to receive any attention in the newsroom.

While results produced during the White study in 1949 suggested reasons such as no room, or timeliness – those reasons remain similar today. The common theme of the news selection and exclusion process 50 years ago, and the process today are not that different. Although names and dates are different the process of choosing still runs on the same tracks. Gatekeepers then wanted stories that were current and relevant just as they do now. Gatekeepers 50 years ago considered limits such as available staff and time just as they do today. Today's newsrooms operate in a more technologically advanced environment. They also have the ability to send and receive information quicker. However, the same method for choosing content remains. Story criteria for NBC11/KNTV included relevancy, newsworthiness, staff availability, and time. All of these factors were also relevant 50 years ago. It must

also be noted that while criteria remains quite universal for NBC11/KNTV gatekeepers, the individual filters do not. Each one of the eight gatekeepers may have the same or similar content selection criteria, but their results are not always the same. This is because each gatekeeper is so different. What may seem newsworthy and relevant to one gatekeeper can seem irrelevant to another. The internal filter also creates room for interpretation. This personal view of content can be very different to each gatekeeper. Therefore even when two gatekeepers from the same organization are seeking newsworthy and relevant information, who they are as people can render them making opposite decisions.

During editorial meetings, the researcher noted that some stories on technology could not be covered because of time restrictions. Added up over time, this contributes to a large percentage of stories on technology not being covered. Even if this percentage doubled each month, technology would not get nearly as much attention as stories on crime or community affairs. The gatekeepers at NBC11/KNTV also emphasized the idea of story-telling and how imperative that is in this industry. This notion is often forgotten but as many of them said, it's all about telling the story. There is a beginning, middle and an end. The end is usually where the story ends for television newsroom gatekeepers.

#### Limitations of the Study

The limitations for this research involved time, availability, and accessibility. The gatekeepers were only able to speak for a short time during the personal interviews. More time may have allowed for more in-depth questions. Access to

ratings would have also been beneficial. To obtain ratings information, significant cost is involved and it is also considered privileged information. While some management agreed with allowing the researcher to have such information, some disagreed. Furthermore, because the personal interviews were being tape recorded, some gatekeepers originally involved chose to leave the study.

#### Contributions to the Literature

This research is revolutionary, in that it examined one station over an extensive time period and built off prior research. The study was able to take it a step further in being a witness to the actual decision making process in the newsroom. White (1949) stacked up his excluded story copy filled with red pen marks indicating his reasoning for exclusion. Here, the researcher was able to show the coding results to the gatekeeper and ask questions accordingly. White also cited timeliness as one of his main reasons for exclusion, while this study found that relevance played the larger role.

Although many would argue that ratings and advertising dollars drive story selection, few gatekeepers spent much time commenting on the subjects. Many of the gatekeepers were truly journalistically ethical in revealing that relevance and importance rank high in their decision making process. This study has given a voice to the news media that is often criticized for being partial and not being invested in what they cover. This study also reveals that NBC11/KNTV is made up of people who make conscious decisions with a responsibility in mind. This study looked closely at gatekeepers of all different levels from assistant news director and editors

of the newsroom, to the vice president of creative services who is not in the newsroom. This study found that who the individual gatekeeper is as a person, has a profound influence on the content they potentially select or exclude.

#### Future Research

While this study provided a plethora of information in both numbers and personal interviews, future research could go the other way and speak to the viewers instead of the gatekeepers. A wide sampling of everyday people would provide insight that perhaps gatekeepers would not recognize otherwise. Rather than talking to people who were trained in the business, talk to the people that have to listen to the outcome every day. For example, of those who watch NBC11/KNTV a researcher could code a story list again, but then speak to a high school girl, a young mother and elderly woman, a high school boy, a young father and an elderly man. Perspective from these viewers would illustrate just how the decisions gatekeepers make every day are being received. A future study could also conduct the same research at another station such as KGO and compare the outcomes. It would be especially interesting to conduct a comparison with a station outside of the Bay Area market. There is room for much more research to be done in this area of study.



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