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Most of us like to root for an underdog, so here's a story that our local television news stations should eat up.

When the *River Cities' Reader* analyzed Quad Cities newscasts for four days earlier this month, there was one major surprise: The fourth-place local station at 10 p.m. – CBS affiliate WHBF, whose newscast has gotten trounced in the ratings by a syndication sitcom on Fox 18 – might just have the best local television news in the Quad Cities.

In just about every objective and subjective measure, WHBF's late-night newscast beats or presents a strong challenge to established power KWQC, the local NBC affiliate.

That hints at two other minor surprises from our recent sampling. First, KWQC – despite its decades-long dominance of the Quad Cities news market – doesn't appear to be taking its position for granted.

Second, ABC affiliate WQAD is stunningly weak in local news despite making several high-profile strategic moves over the past 18 months – landing former KWQC personalities Terry Swails and Chris Williams, and taking over the news operation of Fox affiliate KLJB. (For a 2009 article on Swails' arrival at WQAD, go to RCReader.com/y/wqad.)

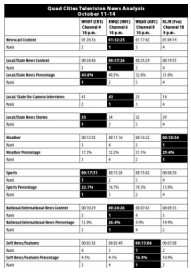
The title of local-news champ is close. KWQC had the most local and state news in time terms (by almost three minutes over four days) and the most local/state-news on-camera interviews, but WHBF devoted a greater percentage of its newscast to local news and – by a wide margin – had the most local/state stories. Beyond those objective measures, it looked to these eyes that WHBF's news operation is generally better at providing relevant context.

Overall, KWQC is undoubtedly more polished, although that also makes it a little more boring.

One cannot imagine somnolent KWQC sports anchor Thom Cornelis interjecting the exclamation “The Rangers!” into an anchor’s unrelated-to-sports teaser the way WHBF’s Jay Kidwell did on October 12. It was an embarrassing mistake, but it was also kinda charming. So in addition to breathing down the neck of KWQC with local and state news, WHBF has that on it side.

The split decision for the title of best local news goes to KWQC in this bout, but upstart WHBF looks hungry, and it made an impressive showing.

Local News by the Numbers



Quad Cities Television News Analysis October 11-14				
	WHBF (CBS) Channel 4 10 p.m.	KWQC (NBC) Channel 6 10 p.m.	WQAD (ABC) Channel 8 10 p.m.	KLJB (Fox) Channel 18 9 p.m.
News and Content	00:28:55	00:32:37	00:27:42	00:00:14
Rank	2	1	3	4
Local/State News Content	00:16:40	00:17:20	00:12:29	00:19:55
Rank	2	1	3	4
Local/State News Percentage	57.8%	53.1%	32.8%	21.8%
Rank	1	2	3	4
Local/State On-Camera Interviews	41	46	31	14
Rank	2	1	3	4
Local/State News Stories	35	35	32	29
Rank	1	1	3	4
Weather	00:13:59	00:11:16	00:16:22	00:10:26
Rank	3	4	2	1
Weather Percentage	17.3%	12.3%	23.3%	20.4%
Rank	3	4	2	1
Sports	00:17:01	00:13:28	00:15:02	00:08:50
Rank	1	2	3	4
Sports Percentage	22.1%	15.7%	19.3%	11.8%
Rank	1	3	2	4
National/International News Content	00:10:23	00:18:30	00:07:41	00:09:35
Rank	3	1	4	2
National/International News Percentage	12.9%	20.8%	9.9%	14.9%
Rank	3	1	4	2
Soft News/Features	00:02:33	00:02:49	00:12:66	00:07:00
Rank	4	3	1	2
Soft News/Features Percentage	4.3%	4.7%	16.9%	12.9%
Rank	3	4	1	2

KWQC remains the formidable force in Quad Cities news in terms of viewership, with a Nielsen rating in February 2010 of 11.3 (and a share of 37 percent of television sets in use) for its 10 p.m. newscast among people 25 to 54. WQAD was second with a rating of 6.9 (and a share of 23 percent), and WHBF was third among newscasts with a rating of 0.5 (and a share of 2 percent). For perspective, more than twice as many people watched *The Office* at 10 p.m. on KJLB as watched WHBF’s news broadcast during the ratings period.

KLJB’s 9 p.m. newscast in February had a rating of 3.1 (and a share of 8 percent). But that was before WQAD began producing that station’s newscast in September.

In terms of number of viewers, KWQC was tops in February, with WQAD second, KLJB third, and WHBF fourth. It’s worth noting that it would require a major viewer shift to change that order.

The *Reader*’s analysis covered four nighttime newscasts each from the four local stations, from Monday, October 11, through Thursday, October 14. A fuller explanation of the methodology

can be found here , but basically I timed each story and slotted it into one of five categories: local/state news, national/international news, entertainment/soft news, weather, and sports. (Last fall, the *Reader* did a content analysis of the *Quad-City Times* and the *Rock Island Argus* / *Moline Dispatch* that can be found at RCReader.com/y/newspapers.)

The sampled week was relatively slow for news in the Quad Cities, so there wasn't much of an opportunity to compare and contrast coverage of major events, as there was no natural local lead story any of the nights. The week's biggest story was the rescue of the Chilean miners. The weather was unseasonably warm but otherwise downright dull, with only a slight chance of rain one night.

Still, the patterns that emerged are instructive.

• KWQC had the largest amount of newscast content each night (between 22 and 24 minutes), followed by WHBF (roughly 20 minutes), WQAD (19 to 20 minutes), and KLJB (roughly 16 minutes).

• KWQC devoted roughly 10 minutes of its newscast each night to local and state news, with the exception of Tuesday – when the first Chilean miner was being brought up and the local news was just more than six and a half minutes.

• Three days out of four, WHBF devoted between nine and 10 minutes to local and state news. (The fourth day was less.)

• Three days out of four, WQAD aired between six and seven minutes of local and state news. (Again, the fourth day was less.)

• And three days out of four, KLJB gave viewers between five and six minutes of local and state news. (And the fourth day was less.)

• Over four days, KWQC had the most local and state news (37 minutes, 26 seconds) followed by WHBF (34 minutes, 40 seconds), WQAD (25 minutes, 29 seconds), and KLJB (19 minutes, 55 seconds).

• WHBF devoted the largest percentage of its newscast to state and local news (43 percent), followed by KWQC (41 percent), WQAD (33 percent), and KLJB (31 percent).

• WHBF ran the largest number of local and state stories over four days (55), followed by the cluster of KWQC (34), WQAD (32), and KLJB (29).

• KWQC had more on-camera interviews (43) for its local and state news over the four days, followed closely by WHBF (41) – with WQAD (25) and KLJB (14) far behind.

• Weather hogged the newscasts of KLJB (29 percent) and WQAD (21 percent) compared to WHBF (17 percent) and KWQC (12 percent).

• WHBF spent the greatest percentage of its newscast on sports (22 percent) compared to WQAD (19 percent), KWQC (17 percent), and KLJB (14 percent).

• Both KWQC and WHBF devoted less than 5 percent of their newscasts to “soft” news and features, with KLJB at 11 percent and WQAD at 17 percent.

A Softer Approach at the Expense of News

Going into this project, I had low expectations for WHBF – because, like the vast majority of people, I'd rarely if ever watched its newscasts.

I also thought that WQAD would be competitive with KWQC on the local-news front. What I failed to consider was that the station has made its investments primarily in personalities (Swails and Williams) and positioning (taking over the KLJB news), and this survey suggests that has come at the expense of news-gathering.

I had hoped that running two late-night newscasts would naturally – through additional news-related revenue for WQAD – lead to a larger newsroom. However, it looks to me that the change has thus far only created two new anchor positions and allowed WQAD to spread screen time among its surfeit of meteorologists. That conclusion is supported by the time devoted to weather during a survey period when the weather was stable.

But it also appears that the newscasts of WQAD and KLJB are by choice less newsy. In the four measured newscasts, both WQAD and KLJB used a two-anchor format – one male, one female – while KWQC and WHBF used a single anchor.

That doesn't have to result in a different sort of newscast, but it reflects the different approach of WQAD and KLJB. The ABC and Fox newscasts were more personable, lighter, chattier, weather-ier, and – to be blunt – dumber than the other two. On Wednesday, both WQAD-produced newscasts closed with an Internet-generated Halloween video featuring news-department personalities – 43 seconds on one station and a minute seven seconds on the other. That doesn't sound like much time, but it's a big chunk of newscasts whose content runs less than 20 minutes.

By contrast, the CBS and NBC news were streamlined, business-like, and to-the-point, and they felt *tonally* newsier as a result in addition to actually being newsier. The lack of soft news on WHBF and KWQC – less than four minutes total for each over four days – reinforces that.

That would be a largely moot point if WQAD's and KLJB's coverage was on a par with KWQC's and WHBF's, but it's not.

In four days, I found only a few stories that WQAD and/or KLJB did better than the other two stations: showing actual footage with sound bites from an Illinois gubernatorial debate, and a Wednesday report on the delay in demolition of the old nurses' school and dorm in Moline. A story on a Citizens Utility Board report about cell-phone usage did a good job directing consumers to a tool they could use. (See the sidebar "Lowlights from a Week of Watching" to see how KLJB botched it, however.)

But beyond those, the highlights came from KWQC and WHBF. Both stations covered the Moline budget crisis fairly well, while WQAD and KLJB didn't cover it at all during the survey newscasts.

WHBF's Monday report on a Farmland Foods expansion in Monmouth, Illinois, touched on incentives and the business itself instead of merely jobs. Its local-reaction story Wednesday to the Chilean mine rescue quoted nursing-home residents (rather than the choice by WQAD/KLJB to talk to American TV employees), and a local mine expert provided some context about the differences between this mine disaster and those we've had in the United States. A Wednesday story about a new riverfront park in Davenport and veterans' desire to have a park in their honor included some incisive comments from interview subjects.

WHBF was the only station with interviews for its story on the not-guilty verdict of Freda Williams, including with Rock Island County State's Attorney Jeff Terronez. It was also the only station that had a local interview in its coverage of the home-foreclosure issue.

KWQC's Monday story on combine safety provided good background on a relatively obscure problem with a news hook. Reports on the District of Rock Island bar-closing times, violence-related expulsions in Galesburg, Illinois, and a Clinton, Iowa, library referendum were relatively thorough and balanced. KWQC was the only local station on Tuesday with the breaking story of a dead body found in the parking lot of Genesis East.

I'd be lying if I said any of the local newscasts was particularly enlightening. At its rare best, local television news tells stories visually in a way that newspapers can't. More often, it's a concise but unilluminating summary of what's happening in our community and the world. And at its worst, it tells viewers virtually nothing useful.

KWQC and WHBF aren't television news at its best. But they're the best we have in the Quad Cities for local news, and they both do well with the task of summary.

And if WQAD's second- and third-place news operations won't push KWQC to do even better, my hope is that WHBF – that scrappy underdog – will continue to, and gather the audience it deserves.

Sidebar: Lowlights from a Week of Watching

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It's fun to make fun of local television news. Here's a sampling of the worst of the week I watched, probably skewed to early in the week because documenting the flubs proved exhausting.

• The WQAD news operation remains strangely fond of live remotes at locations where nothing is presently happening.

• The top teased story on KLJB on Monday was about a new report on cell-phone usage that suggested people were wasting money with their contracts. There were technical problems with the story, however, and it was aborted 50 seconds in with a promise to return to it. The full story or its remainder never aired on KLJB. But a self-promotional, one-minute-40-second piece on awards for anchor Chris Williams and late WQAD (!) broadcaster Jim King did, along with a 40-second closer on a guy who plays piano with his feet. (The full cell-phone story ran on WQAD.)

• On Monday, the WQAD story about King – who worked for the station – included a graphic with a Fox background.

• In a report aired on WQAD and KLJB on Monday, the reporter claimed that the federal government is “cutting Social Security,” when the reality is that there will be no cost-of-living increase.

• All four stations on Monday dealt with the Social Security news, with negative local reactions from senior citizens. However, none articulated why the lack of a cost-of-living adjustment is a problem, especially considering that the decision was based on a lack of inflation. (KWQC was best at explaining why there would be no cost-of-living adjustment.) Three of the stations – KWQC, WQAD, and KLJB – also claimed, with similar phrasing and without a source, that the administrative decision might be a factor in the November election. I smell a press release or wire report.

• WQAD on Monday had three grossly overstated anchor claims: “The EPA says: Let it burn”; “Everyone fell in love with Drew Brees’ son”; and a statement about a “packed” Brady Street stadium directly contradicted by the video.

• On Monday, KWQC led with a two-minute-30-second story on an Iowa City ordinance on bar-entry age. Its relevance to the Quad Cities was never articulated.

• On Wednesday on KWQC, a reporter repeatedly said “libary” ... in a story about a referendum on Clinton, Iowa’s library.

• A Wednesday KWQC story about a coroner’s jury ruling on two teens killed by a train claimed the boys had a blood-alcohol content above the legal limit. They weren’t driving and weren’t of legal drinking age.

• On Thursday, WQAD’s normally insufferable “The Quad Cities According to Jim” segment effectively (if not exactly logically) argued for the death penalty. Except that Jim Albracht alluded to “unspeakable violence” – which he then proceeded to speak about quite explicitly.

• Aside from Jay Kidwell’s bizarre “The Rangers!” interruption of an anchor, WHBF was remarkably gaffe-free. The only other seriously embarrassing thing was the absurd Thursday

"Puppy Picks" segment in which a dog "chooses" a winner in the Hawkeyes game by selecting a dish of food. And slightly embarrassing was an anchor's word choice and syllabic emphasis Monday that a man was shot in the *be*-hind.

• Somewhat surprisingly, KLJB's anchors had few glaring mistakes or cringe-worthy moments ... aside from that whole newscast-staff "monster mash" video.

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Sidebar: Methodology

This analysis was drawn from the 10 p.m. news broadcasts of KWQC (NBC), WQAD (ABC), and WHBF (CBS) and the 9 p.m. news broadcasts of KJLB (Fox) from Monday, October 11, through Thursday, October 14.

Stories were timed and placed in one of the following categories: local/state news, national/international news, entertainment/soft news (including technology and health pieces and human-interest feature stories), weather, and sports. Stories could only be put in one category, so there's no overlap. While there were some judgment calls, they were infrequent and wouldn't have affected rankings.

In addition, identified, on-camera interviews for local and state news were counted as a measure of how much actual reporting stations did.

While this analysis represents only a snapshot, the content patterns varied little day-to-day. This suggests that the stations each work within a relatively rigid template – especially in the time allocations to weather, sports, and soft news – that dictates the amount of time available for hard news.

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