Live, but at What Cost? An Analysis of Live News Reporting in the Indianapolis Television News Market

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Butler University

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Live, but at What Cost?
An Analysis of Live News Reporting in the Indianapolis Television News Market

A Thesis
Presented to the Eugene S. Pulliam School of Journalism
College of Communication
and
The Honors Program
of
Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Robert Kyle Inskeep
March 30, 2012
During the summer of 2010 I had the opportunity to work as a news intern at WTHR-TV. This experience not only provided me with extremely valuable professional experience, but it also introduced me to one of the most common elements of local television news: the live shot. During my internship I would accompany reporters into the field and assist them in the newsgathering process, a process that was often cut short to ensure that the reporter and videographer had an adequate amount of time to return to the news station to put together their story and then travel to a location relevant to their story for a live shot. At times, this meant that reporters had less time to gather background information about their story, speak with sources, and it even affected the amount of time they could spend writing their story. After witnessing the negative impact that live shots often have on the newsgathering process, I became interested in investigating whether or not live technology capabilities are driving story-selection in newsrooms today.

It was originally thought that live coverage of news events would be extremely rare, but today “live coverage has become so pervasive that researchers and practitioners suggest that the use of the technology itself, rather than news editorial judgment, is frequently what drives the news gathering process in television” (Tuggle, 2001 p.335). Live reporting first emerged in the television news industry in the 1970s when news organizations across the United States began turning to news consultants for help winning the increasingly competitive ratings wars (Coffey, 2004). Consultants advised news directors to incorporate as many live shots as possible into their newscasts, because of the widely-held belief that news stories with live elements can help a station distinguish itself from others in the market and build viewer interest (Tuggle, 2007 p.59). As a result, a
reporter’s ability to report live from the scene of a story now plays a significant role in the story-selection process.

Two separate studies conducted by Tuggle & Huffman (2001), revealed disturbing information about the use of live shots in newscasts. Through interviews with news directors and veteran broadcast journalists, Tuggle and Hoffman discovered that “there is clear difference between legitimate live reporting and “live for the sake of live” and the latter takes place with disturbing frequency in newsrooms across the country” (p.337). The studies also found that the information conveyed by reporters during these live shots is rarely compelling or of any value to audiences (p.342). This led the researchers to the conclusion that live reports are often included in newscasts without journalistic justification and that “many stories are covered live because technology makes doing so relatively easy” (p.336).

This topic is significant because of the impact that live shots are having on news coverage. In an effort to increase their ratings, many news organizations are including what some scholars consider to be an excessive amount of stories that contain live shots in their newscasts. As a result of this, news directors and producers are disregarding the journalistic value of news stories and instead are focusing on a story’s live shot capability. Ultimately, this is causing news organizations to “commit time and resources to pieces with little news value simply because the stories lend themselves to live coverage” (Tuggle, 2001 p.336-337).
**Thesis Description**

In this study I analyzed the use of live shots by two of the four television news stations in Indianapolis (WTHR, WISH), to determine whether or not the availability of going live for a story impacts that story’s priority in a newscast. By analyzing the use of live shots within these newscasts I was able to determine how and why these news stations are using live technology, and whether or not technology is driving story-selection in newsrooms today.

The two stations included in the study were selected because of their reputations as the television “news leaders” in Indianapolis, Indiana. According to the May 2011 Nielsen ratings, in the 6 p.m. timeslot WTHR had the most viewers in the market (9.7 rating), followed by WISH (4.7 rating), and WRTV (2.7) (Schoettle, 2011). WXIN was not included in this ratings timeslot due to the fact that it does not have a newscast at that time. These two stations are regularly atop the ratings for local television news in Indianapolis.

The research questions I will strive to answer through this study are:

1. How many times does each station use live shots during their 6 pm newscasts?
2. Is the information communicated to viewers in the live shot also included in the reporter’s news package?
3. Do stories with live elements appear more often in the beginning, middle, or ending block of the newscasts?

Research by Tuggle & Huffman (2007) shows that news stations often incorporate stories with live elements into their newscasts as a way to distinguish their
broadcast from others in the market (p.59). Live reporting gives viewers the impression that a news station is “on top of the news” and is working to bring its viewers the most current information available for every story. Understanding the great value news stations place on live reports, I hypothesized that all of the newscasts I analyzed for this research project would include live shots. It is the goal of all news stations to come across to viewers as being “on top of the news,” therefore it is likely that the news stations in Indianapolis are using live shots within their newscasts to achieve this goal. In a second study by Tuggle & Huffman (2001), they asserted that news stations across the United States are incorporating more live shots in newscasts than ever before. As a result of this increase, they found that a high number of live shots in local television news are classified as being “live for the sake of being live,” (p.337). The study goes on to say that these particular live shots provide viewers with little, or no, new information or video (p.342). Therefore, it is important to study the content communicated to viewers during live shots in this study. I anticipated that the majority of the live shots analyzed as part of this study will not provide viewers with any additional news content. Tuggle & Huffman (2001) also found that live reports are frequently done from the scene after everyone involved has gone home, because of the great importance that news directors and producers place on live shots. While this type of live shot has become extremely pervasive in the news industry, many local news consumers consider it “meaningless” (p.337). I expected that several of the live shots included in the newscasts for this study will be “black hole” live shots because of the pressure placed on reporters by news directors to “go live.” For the purpose of my research I defined a “black hole” live shot as
a live shot where nothing is happening in the background of the shot that is related to the news story.

Methods

To find answers to my research questions I used content analysis and in-depth interviews. I recorded and analyzed five consecutive weekday newscasts (Monday-Friday) from WTHR and WISH, over two week-long periods. The first week of the study analyzed the two station’s 6 p.m. newscasts from January 23- January 27, 2012. The second week of the study analyzed the two station’s 6 p.m. newscasts from February 6- February 10, 2012. The weeks are not consecutive, and that was intentional. Indianapolis, Indiana, the location of both WTHR and WISH, hosted Super Bowl 46 on February 5, 2012 and I did not want the data for this study to be skewed as a result of the extremely newsworthy event coverage. All of the newscasts represented each station’s 6 p.m. offering. The 6 p.m. newscast was chosen for the analysis because it is typically a local news station’s top priority (Coffey, 2004). Many stations cater their 5 p.m. newscasts towards a predominately female demographic, and 11 p.m. newscasts often contain fewer stories than other newscasts because of larger daytime staffing.

In an effort to gather a better understanding of why news stations include live shots in their newscasts, I interviewed news managers from both stations involved in the study. From WTHR, I interviewed the station’s Assistant News Director Jeff Rosetti and from WISH, I interviewed the station’s News Director Patti McGettigan.

For the purpose of this study, a live shot will be defined as a shot that involves a reporter who delivers part of a story by adding their physical presence via technology,
usually from a remote location. Typically, live shots involve the reporter appearing twice. They will often say something before and after their package airs. Although the reporter may appear live twice, this will only count as one live shot. “Phoners” will also be considered a live shot in this research study. This type of a live shot involves a reporter who is live at a scene but is communicating to viewers via telephone. As the reporter speaks to viewers their head shot often appears next to a map showing their location. Ultimately, “phoners” allow the live presence desired in situations where live equipment cannot go or is not permitted (Coffey, 2004).

To determine whether or not the availability of going live for a story impacts that story’s priority in a newscast, I analyzed the placement of stories with live elements within newscasts. Thirty minute newscasts are typically divided into 5 “blocks” that are separated by commercials. Recognizing this commonly-used format, I decided to categorize stories in the following manner:

Stories Appearing in Block A- Highest Priority  
Stories Appearing in Block B- High Priority  
Stories Appearing in Block C- Moderate Priority  
Stories Appearing in Block D- Low Priority

I examined whether or not live technology is driving story-selection by determining if stories with live-elements are truly newsworthy. Traditionally, stories that are considered newsworthy contain one or more of the following characteristics: timeliness, proximity, impact, prominence, unusualness or novelty, and conflict (Kolodzy, 2006 p.57-62). I considered news stories with two or more of these “news values” to be
newsworthy. For the purposes of this study I provided an operational definition of each news value (Kolodzy, 2006 p.57-62):

**Timeliness**- This refers to how current the facts or information provided to viewers are.

**Proximity**- This refers to the physical or emotional closeness of a news story to a media outlet’s audience.

**Impact**- This refers to the shock factor of a news story and generally requires a story to affect a large group in a large way.

**Prominence**- The famous, infamous, and eccentric have a special appeal for viewers.

**Unusualness or Novelty**- This news value is about finding parts of a story that are unusual or out of the ordinary.

**Conflict**- This news value refers to a conflict or dispute between two or more parties featured in a news story.

**Results**

*How many times does each station use live shots during their 6 pm newscasts? (Research question #1)*

Both WTHR and WISH included at least one live shot in each of their 6 p.m. newscasts during the weeks of January 23-27 and February 6-10. On eight separate occasions, out of 20 separate newscasts, both stations included more than three live shots in their 6 p.m. newscasts. The highest number of live shots used in a single WTHR 6 p.m. newscast was nine. In comparison, the highest number of live shots incorporated into a WISH 6 p.m. newscast was seven. Overall, WTHR used a total of 42 live shots in their 6 p.m. news coverage between the weeks of January 23-27 and February 6-10 (*Week 1*: 31 live shots; *Week 2*: 11 live shots). Over the same course of time, WISH included 36 live shots into their 6 p.m. newscasts (*Week 1*: 21 live shots; *Week 2*: 15 live shots). These findings support my hypothesis that each of the newscasts in this study would include at least one live report.
“Black hole” live shot frequency

“Black hole” live shots were present in nearly every newscast that was analyzed for this study. They were most prevalent in live reports produced by sports reporters or anchors. During week one of the study, WTHR included 13 sports stories, which all had live shots, in their 6 p.m. newscasts. All 13 of these live shots were considered to be “black hole” live shots. Eleven of the 13 WTHR sports live shots for this week were based at the Indianapolis Colts Practice Complex. This location was likely used several times because of the fact that the organization was interviewing and later named Chuck Pagano the team’s head coach that week. Once again, these findings support my hypothesis that several of the live shots analyzed for this study would be “black hole” live shots.

Nearly all of the WTHR sports live shots from week one of the study were shot at the entrance of the Indianapolis Colts Practice Complex, with the reporter positioned directly in front of a large Indianapolis Colts logo. Due to the time of day the newscasts was broadcast (6 p.m.), it was nearly impossible for viewers to recognize the team’s logo because of how dark it was outside. On January 25, while reporting on Chuck Pagano, WTHR placed their sports reporter inside the Indianapolis Colts Practice Complex directly in front of what the reporter described as a “corporate cocktail party” that was in no way affiliated with the Indianapolis Colts organization or the team’s new head coach (2012, January 25).
Frequency of sports-related live shots

During week one of the study, WISH included seven sports stories in their 6 p.m. newscasts, five of the stories included live shots, and four of those live shots were classified as “black hole” live shots. In fact, during a WISH sports live shot on January 26 the reporter was positioned inside the Indianapolis Colts Practice Complex in an empty ballroom that had a large Colts helmet mounted on the wall. As the news photographer panned to show viewers the helmet on the wall, viewers can see another sports reporter in the midst of his live shot and a completely empty ballroom where the team’s new head coach was introduced earlier that afternoon (2012, January 26).

This trend continued during the second week of the study. Of the seven sports live shots included in WTHR’s 6 p.m. newscasts between February 2-10, five were considered “black hole” live shots. During the same time period, WISH incorporated only two live shots into their news coverage and both featured relevant and visually-engaging backdrops. For example, on February 7, 2012 WISH’s lead sports story was a preview of the Indiana Pacers vs. Utah Jazz game at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. The reporter delivering the live news report was positioned on the side of the court directly in front of players from both teams who were warming up for the game, making them clearly visible in the background of her shot (2012, February 7).
Do stories with live elements appear more often in the beginning, middle, or ending block of the newscasts? (Research question #2)

The majority of live shots, from both WTHR and WISH 6 p.m. newscasts, were placed in either the A or B block of the broadcasts. During week one of the study (January 23-27), WTHR Placed 11 live shots in the A block, 14 in the B block, 5 in the C block, and 1 in the D block. (See chart below)

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During week two of the study (February 6-10), WTHR placed four live shots in the A block, four live shots in the B block, three live shots in the C block, and zero live shots in the D block. (See chart on next page below)

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In comparison (See chart below), during week one of the study (January 23-27) WISH placed 13 live shots in the A block (s), five in the B block (s), three in the C blocks, and zero in the D block (s).

![Figure 3](image)

**WISH Live Shot Placement Week 1: (January 23-27)**

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During week two of the study, WISH placed ten live shots in the A block (s), two in the B block (s), three in the C block (s), and zero in the D block (s). (See chart below)

![Figure 4](image)

**WISH Live Shot Placement Week 2: (February 6-10)**

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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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</table>

The high concentration of live shots in the A and/or B blocks of WTHR and WISH’s 6 p.m. newscasts shows that stories with live elements are viewed as more prominent, and therefore placed near the start of the newscast. In comparison, stories placed in the D block of a newscast typically are viewed as having a low priority. Throughout the duration of this study, only two live shots, both from WTHR, were included in the D block.
One surprising finding of the study was the high concentration of live shots associated with sports stories from both WTHR and WISH. Over the course of the first week of the study (January 23-January 27) WTHR incorporated 13 sports stories in their 6 p.m. newscasts, all 13 of those sports stories included a live shot (100%). During week two of the study (February 6-10), WTHR placed 10 sports stories in their 6 p.m. newscasts and seven of those stories included a live shot (70%). Of the 42 live shots WTHR incorporated into its 6 p.m. newscasts throughout this study (January 23-27 & February 6-10), 23 of those live shots were associated with sports stories (54%).

According to a study by Terje Gaustad (2001), “televised sports are products that only have value to the viewers in “real time”- while the actual event is taking place,” (p.107). This philosophy acknowledged by Gaustad seems to hold true also when looking at live coverage of sporting events.

WISH also included a high number of sports-related live shots into their 6 p.m. newscasts during the study. During week one of the study (January 23-27), WISH ran seven sports stories in its 6 p.m. newscasts and utilized live technology in five of those stories (71%). During week two of the analysis, WISH included eight live shots in its 6 p.m. newscasts and incorporated live shots into two of those stories (25%). Over the course of this study (January 23-27 & February 6-10), WISH included 36 live shots in their 6 p.m. newscasts and seven of those live shots were during sports stories (19.4%).

All of the stories with live elements in this study were deemed to be “newsworthy” based upon the operational definition of “newsworthy” for this specific research study. This shows that live technology is not driving story selection in either of these newsrooms. Additionally, this means that the stations involved in this study were not
devoting valuable resources to covering non-newsworthy stories, simply because they
lent themselves to live coverage.

Another unexpected finding of this research study was the fact that a vast
majority of the information provided to viewers during live news reports in this study was
information/details that was not included in the reporter’s actual news package. WTHR’s
6 p.m. newscast on January 23, 2012 included a live report outside the Indiana Statehouse
on Indiana potentially becoming a “Right to Work” state, a charge led by Indiana
Governor Mitch Daniels. The reporter concluded his live report by informing viewers
that Governor Daniels would be delivering the Republican response to the President’s
State of the Union Address later in the week (2012, January 23). This finding shows that
both WTHR and WISH are utilizing live coverage as a way to distinguish themselves
from other news stations in Indianapolis. This data does not support my hypothesis that
live shots in this study would not provide viewers with any new information, and
therefore proved it wrong.

It is important to note that the data from week one of the study (January 23-27)
may be slightly skewed “in-favor” of extended live coverage as a result of both WTHR
and WISH providing continuous coverage of Super Bowl 46. This extremely newsworthy
event was held in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana and commanded the complete
attention of both WTHR and WISH for nearly ten days.

Interview Data

Both Rosetti (Assistant News Director, WTHR) and McGettigan (News Director,
WISH) agreed that the primary purpose of incorporating live shots in a newscast is to
give viewers the sense that their stations are out in the communities they serve telling the stories that matter most to the people of Indianapolis and its surrounding areas. Rosetti explained that a live shot, which "shows something to a viewer or brings new or relevant information, is still the best way to make a newscast feel big," (J. Rosetti, personal communication, March 6, 2012). McGettigan made the point that in breaking news situations, live shots are often the only way for a station to communicate news and information to viewers due to time constraints. In addition, McGettigan believes that live news coverage is a distinct feature that separates television news from Internet-based news and information. "Live shots equate to interactive viewing, which is something Internet news sites cannot provide," McGettigan said (P. McGettigan, personal communication, March 5, 2012).

When asked about the factors that determine whether or not a story will receive live coverage, both Rosetti and McGettigan had strikingly similar responses. Rosetti (WTHR) explained that deciding whether or not a story warrants live coverage involves a variety of factors:

1. "Is the live shot necessary for the storytelling?"
2. "Can the reporter walk and talk, show me things that I couldn’t see or do something that enhances my understanding?"
3. "What will the shot cost the station?" (i.e. overtime pay for reporters and news photographers).

(J. Rosetti, personal communication, March 6, 2012)

McGettigan (WISH) said, "if we can (go live), we will," (P. McGettigan, personal communication, March 5, 2012). In addition to that philosophy, she explained that she also considers four other factors when deciding if a news story will include a live shot:

(See list on next page)
1. Logistics *(Is the live shot physically/technically possible?)*  
2. Story Content  
3. Available Staffing  
4. Visual interest of the live shot location  
   (P. McGettigan, personal communication, March 5, 2012)

One particularly unexpected finding from the interviews with Rosetti and McGettigan was the fact that both of these news managers denied feeling any pressure to include more/less live shots in their respective newscasts, based off of their local competitor’s live shot usage. Rosetti even went as far as saying “we pride ourselves on setting our own agenda. There will be days when we’re covering the same stories, but I’d never let them dictate what we do,” (J. Rosetti, personal communication, March 6, 2012). McGettigan acknowledged that Indianapolis is an extremely competitive television-news market, but was adamant that her station’s competitors did not dictate the number of live shots included in a newscast. In a broader context, these responses show that at both WTHR and WISH live news coverage is neither influenced nor dictated by what other stations in the market are, or are not, covering live.

**Discussion**

Before beginning this study I hypothesized that:

a. All of the newscasts I analyze would include live shots.  
b. Several of the live shots included in the newscasts analyzed as part of the study would be “black hole” live shots.  
c. The majority of the live shots analyzed for this study would not provide viewers with any new information or video.

After an in-depth analysis of the study data I found that the results, for the most part, support my original hypotheses.

Over the course of this two-week study, every newscast that was analyzed included at least one news story with a live shot. This non-surprising finding shows that
live reporting is quite prevalent among two of the top-rated news stations (WTHR, WISH) in the Indianapolis television news market.

However, a somewhat surprising finding of the study was the high frequency of live shots included in each station’s sports-block. Ninety-one percent of WTHR’s sports stories during the study included live shots. In comparison, 46% of WISH’s sports stories included a live element. This data shows that there is a high concentration in WTHR and WISH’s traditional sports-blocks. Both of the news managers interviewed for this study offered possible explanations for the high number of sports-related live shots in both WISH and WTHR newscasts.

Rosetti (WTHR) provided a more general explanation, saying that “being live in sports is twofold, first it’s probably necessary because your people are already in place covering it and two, they usually provide some of the most active backdrops,” (J. Rosetti, personal communication, March 6, 2012). McGettigan offered a more market-specific explanation, citing the fact that Indianapolis is arguably one of the largest sports markets in the country (Indianapolis Colts, Indiana Pacers, Indianapolis 500, Brickyard 400, Super Bowl 46, Big 10 Men’s and Women’s Basketball Tournament). Overall, this data show that both of these stations find journalistic value in including live shots, both sports and news-driven, in their newscasts, and as a result incorporate them frequently.

“Black hole” live shots were extremely prevalent in this study. Political reporters at both WTHR and WISH frequently went live from the second floor of the Indiana Statehouse, where there was no movement in the background and the only visible object in the background was a well-lit crystal chandelier. Many of the sports stories examined
during the two-week analysis also included “black hole” live shots. Nearly all of the sports stories examined during this analysis dealt with the search for, and hiring of, a new head coach for the Indianapolis Colts. On multiple occasions, sports reporters from both WTHR and WISH reported live from outside the Indianapolis Colts Practice Complex. Frequently, the reporter was positioned in front of a large Colts helmet which was difficult to see due to the time of day of the live shot (6 p.m.). It is important to note that many of the stories that included “black hole” live shots (i.e. Right to Work Legislation, Drafting of Indiana Smoking Ban Legislation, Statehouse Stalemate, New Indianapolis Colts Head Coach) were newsworthy and important to viewers in the Indianapolis television market. There is no denying that these stories deserved comprehensive news coverage, but it seems the “black hole” live shots were included in an effort to show viewers that the news station was closely monitoring these important news stories and not because of the journalistic merits of going live.

I did not expect to find that reporters were providing viewers with new information and video during their live shots. However, this finding shows that both WTHR and WISH are using live shots to provide additional context to stories they are covering. By doing this these stations are helping their viewers better understand the often-times complex news and information they are consuming on a daily basis. This was a definite positive finding of this study.

An overwhelming majority of the live shots examined as part of this research study were placed in either the A (38 total live shots) or B (25 total live shots) blocks of their respective newscasts. Over the course of the two-week study, 78% of WTHR’s live shots were placed in either the A or B block of their newscasts. Similarly, 83% of
WISH’s live shots were placed in either the A or B block of their newscasts. This data set shows that there is indeed a connection, at least in this study, between news stories that include live shots and priority placement within a newscast.

**Conclusions**

The results of this study led me to the following conclusions: 1) multiple live shots are included in nearly every WTHR and WISH 6 p.m. weekday newscast; 2) throughout the duration of this study WTHR and WISH frequently utilized “black hole” live shots during a live news report; 3) there is an undeniable connection between stories that include live shots and priority story placement in a newscast.

In order to fully determine the “cost” of going live and its journalistic benefits and disadvantages, much more research on the topic would need to be conducted on a much broader scale. Several newscasts from stations located in different parts of the country, and of various market sizes, would need to be analyzed for more substantial results. Conducting in-depth interviews with reporters and anchors, as well as news managers, regarding their experiences, opinions, and feelings regarding live shots would also be of value to other researchers looking to answer this question in the future.

The findings of this study are intended to stimulate discussion between television news reporters, producers, anchors, assignment editors, and news managers regarding the real “cost” and journalistic benefits and disadvantages of including live shots in a newscast. I also hope the results of this study lead to a deeper exploration, and elimination of, “black hole” live shots in local television news.
References

http://www.uiowa.edu/~journal/graduate/phd_docs/Coffey_04convention.pdf


Works Consulted


