

Routinizing the acquisition of raw materials:
A comparative study of news construction in a single community

By

Lee B. Becker
Heidi Hatfield Edwards
Tudor Vlad
George L. Daniels
Edward M. Gans
Namkee Park*

James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research
Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

Questions or comments on the manuscript should be directed to the first author at
lbbecker@arches.uga.edu.

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ABSTRACT

In order to gather the raw material used to create news, according to the news construction literature, media organizations structure their news coverage using a beat system. The beat, defined either by geographic or content parameters, allows the organization to efficiently acquire and assemble the substantive materials that become news.

Beat structure, in this literature, has been treated as largely nonvariable. The exception has been in observations of television news operations, where beat systems usually have been found to be primitive or nonexistent. Alternatives to a beat system, despite this observation, have been largely unexplored.

This paper begins with the observation, based on a close reading of the literature, that beat structures are variable, and certain media organizations, namely television news organizations, do not depend on them because they have developed alternative methods of acquiring the raw material of television news. It raises questions about the functional nature of news beat structures and about alternative mechanisms for acquiring the raw materials of news.

The paper reports the results of a detailed analysis of the news gathering operation of three media organizations, a daily newspaper and two television stations, in a selected community. Investigators observed the activities of key news personnel in each of these organizations for two days in April of 2001, interviewed key reporters and newsroom managers, and examined the news programs and publications each organization produced.

The analysis showed that each organization indeed had developed routines that guaranteed that it had sufficient raw material to produce its news product each day. Those routines varied across the media organizations, though they also had elements in common. The newspaper, for example, employed a fairly traditional beat structure, while the two television stations did not. The television stations, however, designated specialists within the newsroom to create news "packages" from predetermined content areas or domains, assuring that predetermined sections of the newscasts would be filled in predictable ways even before the news day began. The television news organizations also assigned individuals to make routine observations of activities in the community as the day progressed so as to guarantee that certain types of materials, namely those associated with the police and other emergency services, were included in the final news product.

Differences did emerge between the two television news organizations, as expected based on understanding of the product differentiation strategies employed by the two organizations. One of the stations employed routines that allowed it to represent more fully events in the community, while the other used techniques that resulted in a more selective presentation of community activities. The differences between the two stations were not great, however, in comparison with the routines of the newspaper.

The results are interpreted in the context of a theoretical position that likens news production to the manufacture of various types of consumer products. The role of consumer demand as a determinant of the manufacture of news is discussed.

Finally, the results are interpreted in the broader context of media creation of a stimulus that has the potential to alter public opinion. The influence of the routines used to acquire the raw materials of news on the final news product are outlined, as are their consequences for what the public ultimately is told about key community issues.

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Media organizations that produce and distribute news must have the means to obtain the raw materials that become that news. In a system where news is defined based on observable events, activities or occurrences, the media organizations must acquire the raw materials of news through contact with the observable world in which they operate.

Media organizations gain an advantage from routines that are efficient producers of the raw materials of news, for they guarantee that the media organizations, at relatively fixed costs, can obtain the materials they need to produce the news and that the organization will not go lacking in its quest for materials to fill its newscasts and news columns.

The literature on news construction suggests that media organizations have developed beat structures as a response to this need for routines. The beat structure, based on geographical and topical parameters, assures a steady supply of observations, interviews, and records that can be used to create news.

What the existent literature on news construction leaves unexplored, however, are questions about alternatives to beat structures, the variability of beat structures within and across organizational types, and the compelling advantages a beat structure offers media organizations in their quest for efficient and inexpensive sources of news materials. The literature also does not explore the consequences of variations in beat structure for the final news product.

These questions are at the heart of this paper and the empirical investigation reported in it. Observational data and interview data are used to explore the nature of the news generation or news ideation process as it varies across media types. The data gathered shed light on alternative routines and the role they play in the media organizations observed.

The Nature of Beats

The origins of the term “beat” as used to describe the organizations structure of news gathering are not known. One possibility is that the term is borrowed from police work, where police officers are assigned geographical areas or beats that they cover in a routine way. In fact, one dictionary definition of

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the word “beat” is “a habitual path or round of duty: as, a policeman’s beat.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1964).

Certainly one of the most common news beats is the police beat. Reporters, often those with the least amount of experience, are sent to the police station where they observe police activities, interview police, and peruse police files in an effort to obtain materials that they can use to write news stories. The police beat provides a ready, accessible, predictable and inexpensive source of the raw materials of news.

The literature examining the construction of news has given extensive attention to beats. Fishman (1980), in his now-classic observational study of news gathering, notes that while there are multiple ways in which news organizations could organize themselves so as to gather materials for news, “for at least the past one hundred years American newspapers have settled on one predominant mode of coverage known as the beat.” Fishman says that the beat system of news coverage was so widespread when he did his observational study in the late 1970s that not using beats was a distinctive feature of being an experimental, alternative, or underground newspaper.

In Fishman’s view, the beat is a journalist’s concept, grounded in the actual working world of reporters. Beats have a history in the news organization that outlives the histories of the individuals who work the beats. Superiors assign reporters to their beats, and, while the reporter is responsible for, and has jurisdiction over, covering the beat, the reporter does not own that beat. For Fishman, the beat is a domain of activities occurring outside the newsroom consisting of something more than random assortments of activities. Finally, Fishman argues, the beat is a social setting to which the reporter belongs. The reporter becomes part of the network of social relations which is the beat. In Fishman’s view, beats have both a topical and territorial character. Journalists talk about their beats as places to go and people to see and as a series of topics one is responsible for covering.

For Tuchman (1978), news organizations use a “news net” as a means of acquiring the raw materials that become news. The net, she argues, was originally designed to “catch appropriate stories available at centralized locations.” It assumes that the audiences of news are interested in occurrences at

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these locations, that they are concerned with the activities of specific organizations, and that they are interested in specific topics.

For these reasons, Tuchman argues, the news net is “flung through space, focuses upon specific organizations, and highlights topics.” Of these three methods of dispersing reporters, geographic territoriality is most important. A beat, for Tuchman, is a method of dispersing reporters to organizations associated with the generation of news and holding centralized information.

For Gans (1979), the key process in news creation is story suggestion. Reporters have the responsibility for thinking up story ideas. To this end, they are required to “keep up with what is going on in the beats they patrol or in the areas of the country assigned to their bureaus, and they are evaluated in part by their ability to suggest suitable stories.” Other staff members, including top editors and producers, are also expected to come up with story ideas, and nonjournalists are encouraged to do so as well, Gans notes.

Gans’ conceptualization is informative, for it focuses on the generation of the idea that lies behind the story. In this view, raw material has the potential to become news only if it is recognized as having that potential by someone in the news construction business. Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) have termed this process of story idea generation story ideation. Something became news, they observed in the television newsroom they studied, as a result of a process that began with the story idea. Individual newswriters assessed the information flowing into the newsroom from various sources, such as press releases, general mail, newspapers, magazines, reporter ideas, police-fire-FBI radios, and phone calls to determine what could be a story. These story ideas were then discussed in the daily story meeting, where decisions were made on which of the raw material would become news.

Beats and Television

Much of the literature on beats assumes their existence in news organizations. Yet there is considerable evidence that television newsrooms do not make use of beat structure as frequently as newspapers or that the beats television newsrooms use are generally not as well developed as those used by newspapers. Fishman (1980) noted that “few television journalists seem to work from beats in

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the sense that print journalists do.” He argued, however, that this does not mean that most stories are detected and interpreted by reporters working on general assignment. Rather, he argued, television journalists are less likely to use beats because they depend on print media for their sense of newsworthy events. Thus, newspapers and wire service reporters, who largely work beats, indirectly determine what most of the newsworthy events are for television journalists, Fishman says.

While the literature on television news is replete with content studies on such issues as the relationship between product and market size (Atwater, 1984; Carroll, 1985), level of sensationalism vs. human interest coverage (Adams, 1978; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1987) and consonance or similarity of media messages (Atwater, 1986), few scholars have zeroed in on exactly how local news content is generated. Two studies that come close to this issue examined the gatekeeper function of television news editors (Buckalew, 1969-70) and the influence of such factors as business and commercial concerns and concerns on television news reports (Altheide & Rasmussen, 1976).

Buckalew (1969-70) observed the process of news story selection in 12 Midwestern television newsrooms. By coding each possible news story for news values such as timeliness, prominence and visual quality, Buckalew was able to ascertain the factors that influenced the decisions made by television news editors to retain and reject news items from the pool of news stories available. Stories most often used in the newscasts contained conflict, proximity, timely and video facets. In general the wire services and news releases were the source of the greatest number of possible stories to include in the newscasts. Television’s heavy dependence on visual elements in creating news has been well documented by Putnis (1994), among others.

Altheide & Rasmussen (1976) found in their study of two television newsrooms in the early 1970s that press releases, wire services and newspapers provided the majority of story ideas. At the two television stations, there was little investigative reporting. Rather, the stations relied on institutional news sources that emphasized scheduled and planned news events. News items at the television stations were selected on the basis of their value or relevance to viewers and schedule procedures designed to guarantee that the stations had materials to use in their newscasts.

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McManus (1990), in a study of three television news operations, found that most reporters at the three stations were assigned to specific “areas to search for news,” which he called news beats. The demands of filing daily stories assigned by the news managers, however, resulted in no more than a few minutes a day of looking for newsworthy events. At one station, reporters were supposed to have one day a week to catch up on their beats, but that day was routinely reclaimed by the assignment editor for a pressing story. The size of the station is important in the process of gathering information. A larger station will have more highly active discovery. McManus argues, however, that all television stations consume much more air time on stories discovered relatively passively than on stories resulting from active discovery.

The Complexity of the Beat Structure

While the literature on news construction focuses on the utility of beats as a means of gathering news, beats may serve additional functions for newsrooms. Becker, Lowrey, Claussen and Anderson (2000), in fact, have argued that there are at least three different ways in which beats can be viewed. In one view—the view of the literature on news construction reviewed above—beats exist in news organizations because they are efficient—if not essential—tools for gathering news. From the perspective of the sociology of organizations literature, Becker and his colleagues argue, beats are a form of job differentiation. That is, they are a way of putting people into positions in which they can most efficiently operate for the betterment of the overall organization. In this view, newsrooms would be expected to create beats as they increased in size for the simple reason that job differentiation allows an organization to function more efficiently. Finally, beats can be viewed as part of the managerial reward structure. Beats may be ranked hierarchically and, as a result, used to reward those who have performed well and punish or discipline those who have not.

These three definitions of a beat are not in conflict. Beats can serve as the means of generating story ideas as gathering news. They also can reflect job differentiation and be used as a reward structure. Becker and his colleagues found little evidence in their newspaper newsroom study that beats are used for this third function. Beat structure did vary by size of organization however, though it retained its basic

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fabric as it grew in complexity, consistent with the view that beats are essential tools of news construction.

Though not considered by Becker and his colleagues, beats also could be used in product differentiation, particularly in television, where the presence of a specialist or specialized content area could be used to promote the news product. Atwater (1984) found that television news operations do differentiate their product to compete more successfully in a competitive market. Specifically, stations used more or less soft news stories as a way of distinguishing their offering from that of other stations. Such product differentiation is often achieved through a creative process called branding, which consists of the development and maintenance of sets of product attributes and values appealing to customers. Branding in the television industry has only recently received attention by media scholars (Chan-Olmsted, 2000; Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001). Most local station general managers surveyed in 1998 said branding was an important tactical function for promoting a station and/or its news. Chan-Olmsted and Kim argue that ninety percent of the managers said they discussed the branding concept with department heads such as news directors, promotion directors and sales managers.

Clearly, then, beats can have consequences beyond those intended by their creators. For examples, some have commented on the consequences of the relationships that develop in beats. Soloski, (1989) notes that "beat reporters are drawn into a symbiotic relationship of mutual obligations with their sources, which both facilitates and complicates their work." Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor (1989) argue that "Writers who regularly covered that beat shared a system of meaning within an inner circle, so that stories could be produced efficiently with reasonably similar results." Eliasoph (1988) says that "Reporting on beats does not necessarily have to be uncritical, depending on the power relations between reporter and source." For Breed (1955), the importance of beats is the power it gives to reporters. "Beat reporters gain the 'editor' function," he concludes.

In sum, the existent literature suggests that the focus on beats per se as the means of generating story ideas is somewhat limiting. The beat can be viewed as a means of story idea generation or ideation, but it isn't likely to be the only way of generating story ideas. What is important is the organizational

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structure—whatever its characteristics—that the organization uses to generate story ideas. A beat structure is one such organizational structure and set of routines. But it most likely is not the only such structure. In this sense, a beat can be defined as one type of an assigned domain for generating ideas and gathering news. Other types of assigned domains may well exist and await discovery and identification.

Premises and Derived Hypotheses

Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) have argued that the television newsroom can be profitably viewed as a news factory, but there is no reason not to consider all news organizations in this light. The key to such an approach would be to understand the news generation process in manufacturing terms.

In fact, the literature on news construction and the related literatures reviewed above suggest the appropriateness of just such an approach. Such an approach leads to a series of linked premises that can be used to explain the existence of beats and the necessity to develop an alternative structure if beats per se are not in place.

First, all manufacturing organizations need raw materials for production, and news organizations need the raw materials of news—the ideas that are used to generate news stories.

Second, the need to obtain the raw materials creates acquisition costs. News and other organizations have to spend precious resources to obtain the raw materials they use to create their products. Third, uncertainty in the availability of raw materials increases costs for manufacturing organizations (Barney and Hesterly, 1996), including news organizations, and, fourth, organizations seek to reduce uncertainty (and costs) by routinizing the acquisition of the raw materials. News organizations create routines to generate news ideas to reduce uncertainty and the corresponding costs of news production.

Fifth, in a consumer economy, consumer demand shapes the characteristics of the manufactured product. The types of cars manufactured, the style of clothing created, the news produced, in other words, are shaped at least in part by consumer demand.

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Sixth, market forces are not the only determinant of the characteristics of manufactured products. The organizational structure, past histories of organizations, and even professional norms can play a role. This is no less true for news organizations than for others.

These premises lead to the specific expectation that all news organizations will have some routines used for generating story ideas. If they don't use beats to this end, they will have others. A likely explanation of variation in the routines or procedures used to generate story ideas will be organizational histories and market forces.

Specifically, organizations can be expected to differentiate themselves in a competitive market. Newspapers and television stations would be expected to employ story generation routines or strategies reflective of their strategies for competition within the market. In other words, variability in types of structures or strategies or routines of story ideation would vary across organization because the news organizations are seeking to create slightly different products to compete successfully in the market.

Method

To test these expectations, three news organizations from a single market were selected for study. Researchers spent two days observing the newsrooms in two television stations and a newspaper within a medium-sized metropolitan community in the Southeastern United States.¹ The television stations were chosen because they were roughly comparable in newsroom size and number of newscasts produced per week, with similar network-related resources. But there was reason to expect differences in approaches to the final news product. The newspaper represented the single daily newspaper for the metro area.²

Two researchers observed each setting, and all observations were conducted concurrently so as to allow a comparison of how each news gathering organization used its routines to generate story ideas

¹According to the A.C. Nielsen Company, the region is a medium sized designated market area (DMA).

²Another smaller daily newspaper covers a community within the metro area, but does not have the same scope as the metro paper.

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and produce the news from the same basic materials. Prior to the observational visits, a list of questions was developed to focus researcher observations. Specifically, the researchers decided to observe how the newsroom was structured and who reports to whom; the process of story ideation; the process of assigning stories; and how journalists worked. The news products (i.e., the daily newscasts and the newspapers) for each day of the observation were used to compare the news generation and gathering activities and the subsequent products.

During the two days of observations researchers took detailed field notes as they attended meetings where story ideas were discussed, observed reporters and news managers, and observed the editors who handled story assignments. Researchers positioned themselves at different points within the newsroom so as to gain a broader perspective of newsroom activity. The two members of each of the teams then compared notes to clarify their observations.

In addition to making observations, the researchers conducted informal interviews with newsroom managers and journalists. Managers were asked about the organization of the newsroom, the beat structure or the lack of such a structure, and story ideation. Journalists explained how specific story ideas in the newscast/newspaper were generated. The newscasts and the newspapers created during the time of observation were viewed/read, and any discrepancies between the actual news product and what was observed as the product plan were noted. When necessary, newsroom employees were asked to clarify origination of stories that were not tracked during observation. Each of the two members in the teams compared observations and integrated field notes into a narrative about the operation of the three organizations.

Each narrative attempted to answer the following questions: How is the newsroom organized? Does the organization claim to have a beat structure? Are there assigned domains? If so, what is the nature of assignments? Where do the stories that are used in the newscast/newspaper originate? How are the mail, public relations tips, phone tips, etc. distributed? Who is the most influential in selecting and rejecting story ideas? Who are the gatekeepers? What kinds of wire services, scanners, and other observational tools are used? How are story ideas generated? How is international news covered? How

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is international news localized? What stories did they have but not use? What is the news “philosophy” of the station/newspaper?

Findings

TV Station 1

At the head of the news division is the news director, whose office is separated from the newsroom. He can look through a glass door at the desk of the executive producer and the assignment manager. (See Figure 1.) The news director does not get involved very much in the daily activities of the reporters. For example, he did not participate to the staff meeting on Day One, though he was in the office. At the next level are the executive producer and the assignment manager. Seven producers are under the executive producer, while nine reporters are under the assignment manager. Each of the eight news broadcasts has two anchors. Two of the anchors are also producers, and four of them do some reporter work. The station has 56 employees. According to Nielsen, this station had a 13.4 rating in July 2001, the most recent data available before the observation period, making it the number one station at 6 p.m. The slogan of the station is “News you can depend on.”

The station has one weather person and a sports reporter/anchor. Both work autonomously. The sports reporter/anchor appeared in the newsroom infrequently during the two days of observation. He did not speak in person with the assignment manager or attend any of the news staff meetings. The weather person’s desk was near the assignment desk, and he was visible in the newsroom.

Regular features in the areas of health and law were taken as packages from a news service, or from a contracted producer, and were introduced by a reporter who had been assigned the feature area. The traffic report was also contracted out to a pilot with a helicopter.

The consumer reporter was a long-time reporter at the station (nearly 20 years). “[The consumer reporter] is a star,” the assignment manager said. “He also can be very difficult and demanding.”

On both days of observation, the assignment manager arrived at the station at 8 a.m., an hour earlier than the other daytime members of the newsroom. He contributed most of the information or

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stories to the day file. The day file consisted of telephone tips called in by citizens, e-mail suggestions from viewers and contacts in organizations, questions from viewers, and developing stories monitored by him or by the executive producer from the scanners. In addition, the day file included notes on stories appearing in the metropolitan newspaper and other local media. It also contained suggestions on follow-up opportunities from the previous days' stories or stories that appeared in earlier newscasts. Court and city records, and government committee and council meeting schedules and agendas were checked every day by the assignment manager. Everyone in the newsroom had access to the shared day file via the computer at her or his desk.

The executive producer also looked for story ideas on the wire and in e-mails that he received from sources such as contacts in organizations and from the general public. The station prides itself on its Web page, claiming that it is the most popular page in town. The assignment manager said on Day One that this station got many tips and story ideas by e-mail as a result of having this Web site. According to the news director, "Some people feel that e-mail is more anonymous than the telephone, I guess because there's no direct human interaction. What they probably don't remember is that every e-mail has a return address." Despite the contention that the station used e-mail tips, no stories originating from e-mail tips made the evening newscast on the days of the observations. (See Table 1.)

During the two-day observation period, the assignment manager and the executive producer monitored the police scanners. On the assignment desk were television monitors tuned to the newscasts of the other stations. No one in the newsroom, however, seemed to pay much attention to the news programs of the competitors. "We don't care very much what they are doing, as long as we have something compelling in our newscasts," an anchor said.

The daily news ideation process took place at the morning meeting at 9:30. Everyone was invited to the meeting, and on the two days of the study all levels of the news staff were represented, from the news director to cameramen. The meetings began with the assignment manager on Day One and the news director on Day Two talking about the most important stories of the day so far. These were breaking news, follow-ups from the previous day, or a past event that was "back in the news" because of

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the anniversary of a crime or the sentencing of a criminal. Next, the stories in the day file were reviewed. Finally, individuals were encouraged to suggest stories. One reporter offered a story about a charity fund. He met the father of the child that the fund was named after at the gym. Another reporter offered a story about hardware stores catering to women. Someone else drove by the new Wal-Mart site on her way to work and saw a sign announcing the new tenants of the shopping center.

Almost all of the news ideas went through the assignment manager. The producers made proposals, but they were discussed with the news director and the assignment manager. The final word in rejecting story ideas came from the assignment manager on Day One and from the news director and the assignment manager on Day Two.

During the two days of observation, unless the caller asked for a specific reporter or producer, all calls coming into the newsroom were directed to the assignment desk. Three times during the two days of observation the station received a call asking for help in finding a runaway child. The callers were instructed to call the police. Another time, on Day One, a woman called to complain about the abuse her nephew was experiencing at school. The assignment manager spent nearly 15 minutes on the phone listening to the woman recount how the boy was being criticized by his teachers because he refused to learn about Dr. Martin Luther King. On Day Two there was also a call from a woman who said she knew who robbed a bank the day before. She was told to call the FBI. None of these calls resulted in a story.

Faxed press releases and media alerts came into the newsroom during the observation period on two fax machines located directly behind the assignment desk. Anyone who walked by could pick up the pile and go through it. At different times each day of the observation, the news director walked out of his office and checked the faxes. The assignment manager and some of the news producers also looked through the pile several times on both days. During the two days of observation, a reporter went through the releases on only three occasions. After the assignment manager looked through the pile, he threw away those faxes that he was not interested in. In the two days of the study, only two stories were selected from the fax pile. Both were followed up with telephone calls. One made the 5:30 newscast on the second day.

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The station broadcast two international stories during the two days of observation, one about new, “personalized” French stamps and the other on the American spy plane detained in China. The focus of the first story was a decision by the French postal service to create a new type of stamp in an effort to generate more revenue. This new product allows the sender to personalize a stamp with his or her picture. The news director explained that the executive producer used the French story as a follow up in contrast to a story about the U.S. Postal Service considering Saturday closures as a cost-cutting measure. In the French stamp story, no explicit reference to the U.S. Postal Service was made, but there was a comment on the effort made by the French to increase revenues with this product innovation.

The second story concerning the American spy plane was not localized. The news director said after the noon newscast in the second day that the topic was important and relevant enough to be presented based only on what was on the network feed.

The special interest reporters, such as those for consumer news, health, weather and sports, had a clearly defined subject area and specific time slots in the newscasts. These reporters and anchors had a responsibility to fill their allotted time, but they did not have complete autonomy in story ideation and selection. For example, during our first day of observation, the executive producer decided to pick a network story about a product that basketball player Shaquille O’Neal was promoting, to make sure that there was enough material to fill the news slot allotted for sports. The story was used in the 5:30 newscast. The assignment manager later offered no explanation for why that particular story ran at that time and said he did not think the story was a good choice.

The news director of Station 1 said the station had considered creating a beat system to cover the news, but this idea was rejected because it would lead to a lot of stories they would not use. “It’s not an efficient way to cover 18 counties,” he said. “The advantage of a beat system is that it’s a good way to find stories, but not for a TV station.” The assignment manager, whose job was to generate and disseminate news ideas, said before the morning meeting on the first day that the station was trying to develop new ways of generating story ideas so that the station did not have to get ideas from the metropolitan newspaper. “We want to be original. If we can compile an entire news broadcast without

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using a story from the [metropolitan] newspaper - that's an accomplishment," he said. After the morning meeting on the first day, the assignment manager was asked about the reporters' contribution of story ideas. He said that reporters were encouraged to compile a list of sources with whom they will be responsible for maintaining contact. They were given two hours every week to make phone calls to improve their network or to generate story ideas.

TV Station 2

The station has seven producers, six reporters and eleven anchors. The station has 41 employees and five half hours of news. During the July 2001 ratings period, the station had the second highest viewership for its 6 p.m. newscast. According to Nielsen, 12.2 percent of viewers watched this station's six o'clock news. The promotional phrase of the station was "Coverage you can count on."

The news director should have an assignment editor under him, but that position is vacant. One of the producers also has the title of managing editor, and he has assumed most of the responsibility as assignment editor. The relationship between the anchors and the others in the newsroom is vague. Such talent is hired by the news director, of course, and assigned to a particular program, or combination of programs. According to the producers, the anchors do very little editing of copy. During the two days of observation, the anchors came in late in the day and pretty much "read" the news, it seemed. The anchors, however, said they did edit and write. For the most part, however, the producers did the bulk of the actual writing.

Some of the people working in the newsroom were assigned to produce stories in selected areas. One person was assigned to produce a segments on education. Another was assigned to produce consumer news. Another was assigned to produce medical stories. Each of these persons was also a part-time anchor. The sports anchor and a part-time person working with him were assigned to sports. The main anchor did a crime-stoppers segment in collaboration with the police department. This was an assigned area for producing news. In addition, one of the photographers assumed a lot of responsibility for crime news. The station also contracted with a person who did traffic reports. He was airborne, and he sold the ads for slot, but it filled fixed segments of the newscasts.

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The assignment editor was assigned the “domain” of monitoring the police monitors, which were located on the assignment desk. (See Figure 2.) During the two days of observation, the assignment editor also watched the newscasts of the competitors, two of whom produced a noon newscast.

The nature of the “domain” structure was illustrated by the work of the medical reporter. She said she had a “franchise,” i.e., medical news. She had to come up with materials for three of the four evening newscasts, 5, 6 and 11, each day. At 5, she did a live interview with a doctor as part of the program. She “fronted” a national health package at 11 on several days a week. The stories were part of a network package, and she simply did the voice. Each of the two days at 6 she was responsible for a local health story. She relied heavily on public relations people to help her do this. She also said doctors called her, and viewers called her with story ideas. She also said she looked on the AP wire for ideas, and she used newspapers to find national stories that she can localize.

The 9 a.m. daily meeting was an opportunity to observe where did the stories that were used in the newscasts originate. On the first day, six people attended the meeting. (One producer stayed in the newsroom to listen to the scanners and answer the telephones.) The news director stayed only for a couple of minutes. The producer of the 6 p.m. newscast, who also held the title of managing editor, ran the meeting. Also present were the producer for the 5 p.m. program and three general assignment reporters. The station had a total of six GA reporters. Two were sick on Day One. A fourth was already on a story. The managing editor reported that the missing reporter was on a story on a train derailment. He sent the reporter out after he had heard about the derailment on the scanner. The managing editor asked each of those present to offer story suggestions. The reporters’ ideas came from phone calls from viewers, other media, and some of the suggested stories are follow-ups. (One of the reporters put it succinctly: “I scan the papers. They cover every little meeting.” She said she also listened to radio.) A reporter talked about a story she planned to do about chiropractors who were calling people who had been in accidents and offering their services. The reporter had learned about this because a woman called her for another reason—to get access to some film that had been shot at an accident—and the reporter asked

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about it. The reporter knew to ask because a judge had told the photographer (who specializes in crime) about this.

Another reporter then suggested a story about sewage. He had done something on this a week ago, and he thought it could be followed. The managing editor then passed out a list that contained 19 items. These came from a computer file the newsroom maintained. It also contained items known to be underway for the “franchise” sections. The managing editor put many of these items based on faxes or mail he had received. He also used a web site produced by a former reporter for the local paper. It contained tips on local stories, and he said he checked it every day.

Reporters were encouraged to put items into it each day, tipping the station off to things in the future or things that were scheduled. In fact, the assignments changed during the day. The reporter working on the chiropractor story could not get an interview previously scheduled. Basically, the person she needed could not take the time that day for the interview and the filming. So it was postponed, and she was assigned to cover a chase, which developed later in the day and was heard on the scanners. In the interim, she actually switched to another story about an acid spill, but she was switched again as the day developed. The producers also suggested stories: some of them either originated in other media or were follow-ups of previous materials. For example, on the first day of observation a producer said he noticed how much pollen there was in the air on his way to work and suggested that the station do a story. In fact, the story was used by the station in the 6 and 11 p.m. newscasts. (See Table 2.) The story ideas presented were ideas to be discussed—excepting in the “franchise” area, where they already were claimed and in the works. At the end of the meeting, which lasted 30 minutes, the producers and reporters went back to the newsroom. Clearly each of the reporters was expected to offer ideas, and clearly there was some need to sort out who did what, but it didn’t take place in the meeting. Rather, the reporters started working the telephones to see what they could make of the story ideas suggested. After a few minutes, one of the reporters, following a phone call, yelled out to the managing editor: “That stolen car is a go!” This was one of the story ideas the managing editor had brought to the meeting on the list.

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(He later explained that he learned about it through a web site he scanned.) It was a localization of a national story about the types of cars stolen each year.

Police scanners ran on the assignment desk all day. People stopped and listened to them, as the voices got louder. The assistant to the news director subbed in the newsroom during the day by listening to the scanners. The assignment desk was supposed to log phone tips, mail tips, PR tips into the computer database. The station also subscribed to a business data resource.

Some ideas came from newspapers, AP wire, and from the network. For example, during the observation period, the station used a story on the Ford Explorer, on privacy legislation and stocks from network feeds. What got into the newscast during the observation period also was heavily influenced by what people outside the station did by way of suggestion. When asked how they could find news items, a reporter and a photographer mentioned “enterprising news”: according to them, many people that they met during their work provided good news items.

The international story covered on the second day of observation was related to the American spy plane detained in China. At the morning meeting, the news director opened by saying he saw a story over the weekend on Fox about how there were a number of ways of saying I am sorry in Chinese. “There are different degrees of I am sorry,” he said. “Try to localize this story. Find a linguist. Go to a Chinese restaurant.” One of the reporters said he would do it. The person at the Chinese restaurant did not want to go on camera, so the reporter ultimately called the local university public relations office to try to locate anyone Chinese and was finally successful. The story that aired was based on the contacts that the university PR office provided to the reporter.

There was something of a “beat” structure in that people were assigned to produce stories in selected areas such as education, consumer news, sports, crime news. The nature of the “domain” structure was illustrated by the work of the medical reporter. She said she had a “franchise,” i.e., medical news.

The producers assumed these “franchise” pieces were going to be there. It was the responsibility of the “franchise” reporters to get the news and fit it into the program. The health reporter’s training for

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this “franchise” was marginal. She said: “One day I waded in and they said ‘You’ll be our health reporter.’” She has taken some courses since to help her understand the subject. The producers had near total control over their programs, but the process by which the reporters fed stories to them was consensual, rather than directive. For the “franchise” reporters, there was near autonomy. The news director said proudly that there were no rules in the station on the number of packages a reporter had to produce each day. The assignment editor and the producers were the major gatekeepers. So were the franchise reporters.

Newspaper

The newsroom has an executive editor, a managing editor, a deputy managing editor and five editors (one for each section: city, region, lifestyles, sports, business). There are 48 reporters. The newsroom is open, with the editors, reporters and layout personnel working together in cubicle-style areas without walls. The executive editor, managing editor and deputy managing editor have offices in a line along an inner wall that faces the newsroom. (See Figure 3.)

The editors referred to a beat structure in conversation and pointed out reporters who had been assigned specific beats. Beats were assigned in terms of geography and traditional topics. Nine geographic beats were covered by regional reporters: one of them focused on police and another one on education in specific areas, and the remaining seven beats were generally assigned for their respective geographic areas. In addition, the city desk was divided into beats based both on geographic and topical distinctions. The geographic beats were city government, county government, police, courts, and the state legislature. The topical beats were education, children, technology, food, health, neighborhood, and home and garden. The city editor had responsibility for reporters who covered stories in the state capital, the capital of a neighboring state, and the federal capital in Washington.

The newspaper had a sports department, with beats in the following areas: college athletics, highschool athletics in three states, pro football for two nearby NFL teams, pro baseball for one nearby major league, and minor league baseball.

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The lifestyles staff members also were assigned an area or beat and were expected to come up with a story with that particular theme each week. For example, the health reporter had a story on Power Bars (health food) in the Lifestyles Section on Day Two.

During the period of observation, reporters covered their beats, but some also were assigned stories outside their domain. The city government reporter worked at his desk, making telephone calls and writing until late in the afternoon, then he went to cover the council meeting for a story that ran the next day. The same reporter was later asked by the executive editor to cover an editorial board meeting at the newspaper and write a story about the speaker at the editorial board from a local government agency--an assignment that was outside his assigned territory.

The police reporter monitored the police scanners for potential stories. During the observation on Day Two, the police reporter heard a report on the scanner about a toxic chemical leak and left to cover the event. The reporter got approval from the city editor before pursuing the story.

Many stories that came from regional bureaus were generated by the reporters from meeting agendas, press releases and tips. One regional reporter worked on a story about an ongoing zoning battle in a nearby municipality. The meeting agenda had been sent to her by mail. She was planning future stories on the same topic as she noted them in the agendas. Similarly, political and legislative reporters also generated their own stories. The legislative reporter worked on a story generated by covering the General Assembly of the state legislature.

The organization operated on a daytime schedule. Editors came in by 8:30 a.m., and most reporters came one hour later. The newsroom became significantly more active when the make-up staff (those who layout the pages) and the copy editors (who work evening shift) came in around 3 p.m., and reporters filed their stories. After editing the stories, the editors distributed layout instructions to the make-up staff. Only a skeleton staff remained during the evening, with mostly make-up staff and one city editor assigned to manage reporters covering events that could occur overnight.

On the two days of observation, the morning budget meeting began at 10:30. The purpose of the meeting was to plan the next day's paper. Before the 10:30 meeting, each of the editors had already

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talked to the reporters to assign them stories from tips, news releases, calendars and follow-ups or to allow them to pitch their own story ideas. The editors then produced a list of potential stories and presented them in the morning meeting. The assistant managing editor ran the budget meeting, as the managing editor was absent on the days of observation. All the editors participated.

At the beginning of the meeting, the assistant managing editor gave a verbal critique of that day's paper. In the critique, he noted stories that should be followed for the next day's paper. He talked about how he liked a front-page story on car tags and vehicle registration. He then asked what kind of follow-up possibilities existed for this story. After the critique, the editor distributed a list of budgeted stories for their sections, with story slugs and two-sentence descriptions. The photo editor brought possible photos for the paper. Each of the editors of the five sections (or their designees) went down the list of stories on the budget. On both days, there was minimal discussion during the morning meeting about the definite plans for stories.

During the afternoon meeting at 4, the assistant managing editor elicited more detail from the section editors, with definitive story angles and possible placement in the paper. At this meeting, the editors finalized plans for the next day's paper and began discussing ideas for future editions. On the first day of observation, the paper was working on a breaking story about a worker killed at an industrial plant. The story had been discussed at the morning meeting. The story developed during the day after the city desk received an anonymous phone tip about an industrial accident and fatality. By the afternoon meeting, editors equipped with more details were able to decide where to place the story, how long it should be and what photographs would run with the story. One story that was planned for the metro section in the morning on the second day of observation because of its strong artwork (photographs) was held for a metro front page later in the week, when there was the possibility of a "slower" news day.

Many of the stories that were published on the front page and in the metro section in the two days of observation were editor-driven. For example, after the initial morning meeting, the city editor asked the neighborhood reporter to work on a story about the unseasonably high temperatures and record high

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pollen count. Pollen count information was received by fax from the local environmental agency. A lifestyle reporter was assigned to work on a story about an upcoming performance by a Christian comedian. The newspaper had received a press release which was distributed by the receptionist to the lifestyle editor, who finally gave it to the lifestyle reporter.

Wire services were also a major source of content for the newspaper during the two days of observation. During the four meetings observed, the wire-editor brought a list of the wire stories to be considered for inclusion. On the second day of the observation, the "Wire Budget", as it was called, included stories about the end of an 11-day standoff between China and U.S., how President George W. Bush handled the crisis, U.S. international relations, the relatives of the crew members and plans for Bush's welcome of the crew members. Also on the list were stories about an organ exchange program, a tobacco company's lobbying campaign, President Bush's campaign promises, and violence in Jerusalem.

During the meetings, the editors made decisions on how specific stories would be localized or adapted. On Day One, one story included the president's tax proposal making its way through Congress. In the morning meeting, the editors decided to get a local angle, by having a story about families contemplating lower federal tax payments next year. The newspaper used Associated Press, Scripps Howard, New York Times, and Cox wire services. In addition, the business editor mentioned that many stories in the business section originated from PR Newswire.

On the second day, the editors identified an Associated Press wire story to use as a basis for a local story on gas prices. In the budget meeting, they made the decision to have a reporter pursue a story on reports that gas prices were rising at some local gas stations.

International news was primarily covered through the wire services. The most important international story at the time was the American spy plane detained by the Chinese government. In addition to the wire copy, the editors in the budget meeting on Day Two chose to localize the story by getting local reactions from Chinese-Americans and visiting Chinese tourists. The executive editor assigned the story to a woman who was usually a lifestyles section reporter. The reporter was asked to investigate how Chinese-Americans in the local community felt about relations between the two countries

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and to interview some Chinese tourists. The Chinese tourists were found by an editor whose neighbor tipped him that the tourists were in the area and would be visiting a local attraction. The next day's paper included the wire stories and the localized story. (See Table 3.)

The editors, hierarchically, from the executive editor to the sectional editors appeared to be the most influential in selecting the stories during the two day observation. One example of this influence occurred on Day Two. The police reporter had been given two stories to follow. One broke during the overnight and early morning hours (anonymous phone call about unrest at the local jail overnight due to overcrowding) and another one came from a phone tip reporting an industrial accident. In both cases the anonymous tips had to be confirmed by the reporter calling official sources at the police department, in the first case, and the company's spokesperson, in the second case. The assistant managing editor came over to the reporter to discuss the overnight story--a sewage problem because of jail overcrowding --and said the story would be "a short" (a two-three paragraph story). The reporter was told to focus on pursuing the second story because it appeared to be a bigger story. This conversation did not involve the city editor, who would be considered the reporter's immediate supervisor.

Some of the stories assigned by editors originated with other media. The executive editor said he read other publications and found story ideas. In the afternoon budget meeting on the first day he assigned a story idea on a proposed change in a state insurance law first discussed in a political newsletter to which he subscribed. In the two days of observation, the business editor spent some time every morning reading business newspapers and business sections of national newspapers. Another editor said she woke up every morning and watched the local news to see if the newspaper missed anything. During the day, reporters watched the noon newscasts aired on two of the local television stations. They watched for the way the television stations covered stories that they (the newspaper reporters) were working on that day. The editors did not watch the newscasts.

On the second day of observation, as many as six or seven faxes came to the receptionist's desk during a 20 minute-period. The receptionist indicated this was fewer than usual. She indicated that on most days she saw an average of 10-15 faxes come into the newsroom every half-hour during business

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hours. The receptionist sent the faxes to the addressees in the newsroom and kept one copy in a desk folder. The receptionist said: "I see the beginning of many stories here." If she did not know where a lead should go, she gave it to the assistant city editor. The editors received tips, mail and press releases, then distributed them to reporters. On the city desk, the assistant city editor noted that rather than mail, many of the tips came via fax. The assistant city desk editor noted that "70 to 80 percent of what we get is worthless. You know at a glance whether something is useable."

The newspaper had recently begun publishing e-mail addresses, so reporters and editors also received e-mail tips. The neighborhood reporter said she received a lot of tips via e-mail. During the observation, she received an e-mail about a controversy between a neighborhood association and the local government from one of her contacts (a person in the neighborhood organization).

The newspaper is the result of the merger of a morning and an afternoon paper. When the papers were combined, both editorial pages (one liberal and one conservative) were retained. In the words of the executive editor, the two editorial pages have become a "branding element" of fair and balanced coverage. He said: "Our hallmark should be fair and balanced coverage bringing in as many voices as you can so readers can form whatever position they want to."

Conclusions

Some simple answers to the questions posed about the importance of beats emerge from this study. First, though television newsrooms do not seem to have as obvious of a specialization structure as newspapers, with their often elaborate beat systems, they do have specialists. For example, specialists cover weather, sports, consumer news, and health, as the two television stations observed in this study illustrate. These specialists are responsible for generating story ideas and stories or other content in their special areas.

The observations also suggest that television newsrooms do not have the elaborate beat structure of newspaper newsrooms simply because they do not need them. The television newsrooms need fewer stories than the newspapers, and they can generate the story ideas and the stories from

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scanners, from the casual observation of their general assignment reporters, from web sites, from press releases, and from listings of community activities that are readily available to them.

The data suggest that when news organizations decide they need specialized kinds of content on a regular basis, they create a system to generate it. This is done by designating individuals whose job it is to create this type of content. At one of the television stations studied, these specialists were called “franchise” reporters. Their job was to generate story ideas and then report and produce stories about such topics as consumer news and health issues. Though the sports reporter or even the weather person wasn’t called a “franchise” reporter, she or he functioned in the same way. The station decided it needed a steady diet of sports and weather, and it also decided the best way to get that was to have a specialist whose job it was to create it.

At the newspaper studied, the editors had decided they needed a steady stream of copy from a geographic area outside the metropolitan area, so they created a beat for that area. The reporter assigned to the beat was expected to regularly suggest story ideas, and to regularly send in stories. In fact, the paper counted on the stories for its Metro and Regional section.

As these beats grow at papers, they can become bureaus or departments, the research by Becker, Lowrey, Claussen and Anderson (2000) shows. In fact, the sports department at the paper studied had many reporters, and they specialized in terms of coverage of a professional team in the area and in coverage of athletics at the local college. The newspaper also had a features department, with many specialists within it. For example, one of the features reporters generated story ideas to present to her editor on fitness issues. Accepted ideas became stories.

The creation of a geographic beat at the paper served a very specific need for the newspaper studied. The paper wanted copy from that region, because it wanted to increase its circulation in the region. In addition, the newspaper wanted to satisfy the internal desire to be regional in focus.

The television stations studied created specialists also to meet needs. The first need, as with the newspaper, is to generate stories to fill the newscast or, in the case of the newspaper, the news hole. But the television stations also felt a need for specialized content because they felt it met the interests of the

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viewers. By offering consumer news and health news, by consistently providing weather reports, by running sports stories, the stations felt they were offering content that would attract audiences.

The two television stations studied differed in terms of how they generated story ideas. The smaller of the stations relied more on its reporters and producers, while the larger of the two stations relied more on the talents and expertise and organizational skills of the key assignment person. The assignment manager was responsible for maintaining the data base listing story ideas and guaranteeing its richness. During the time of the observations, the station also was working hard to encourage reporters to contribute more fully to the data base. The reporters were not asked to specialize in doing this, however, but rather to be more aggressive in searching out potential sources and stories ideas. In other words, the effort was not overly systematic.

It isn't possible from the data at hand to know precisely why these two stations differed as they did in terms of story ideation and creation. The news directors did articulate somewhat different philosophies. The larger station was seeking to be more comprehensive, characterizing its newscasts as "News you can depend on." The smaller station, according to the news director, was interested in creating a newscast that provided "Coverage you can count on." The slogans seemed to mask a difference in philosophy at the first station to provide coverage more reflective of the community, while, at the second station the philosophy was to select pieces of the community that were interesting to the audience, though not necessary reflective of all that had gone on in the community that day. The journalists at the first--the larger--station articulated in conversation a sense that the station's newscasts should represent the activities of the community on any given day in at least a general way. The reporters and editors at the second station made no such claims. Their goal was to assemble a news package that the community would find attractive. If that meant leaving out the workings of government because the audience wasn't interested in them, so be it. The more structured approach of the larger station does seem to be more consistent with the "news philosophy" of that station.

Clearly a major difference between the newspaper and the television stations is reflected in news philosophy. Conversations in the newspaper newsroom reflected an interest in comprehensiveness,

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completeness of news coverage, and breadth of topics covered. In the television newsrooms, the focus was much narrower. In both cases, the news directors recognized the limited scope of what they could do in a newscast. Fundamentally, they were interested in a newscast that was interesting to the audience, rather than a newscast that reflected even the major features of the activities of the community.

The research reported upon here is limited, to be sure, by the small number of organizations observed. Great caution is necessary in making generalizations. On the other hand, the study is unusual and maybe unique in focusing in detail on the activities of three organizations in the same community at the same period of time. The differences observed in the three organizations are most striking because they were of the activities of three organizations with in at least a general sense a similar mission. They all generate story ideas. They all create stories from those ideas. They all distribute those stories to their audiences. Clearly, however, they go about these tasks in rather different ways. The differences begin with story ideation or idea creation and run through to the final product.

The data at hand are rather clear in differentiating story ideation and creation in the daily newspaper from story ideation and creation at the television stations. They provide less clarity regarding the differences between the television stations. Those differences are small, but they seem to be significant, in part because they do seem to reflect differences in news philosophy. Future work on news philosophy and product branding might well tell much about variations in newsroom organization and structure and the ways in which these variations impact news construction.

The findings of these case studies are consistent with the basic premises generated from the news construction literature. Each of the news organizations observed began each news day with a need for raw materials, namely, the ideas to be used to generate news stories. The organizations had limited resources available for the acquisition of these materials, and they developed routines or procedures to guarantee their availability. For the newspaper, these involved beats. For the television stations, they involved less elaborate specialization, but specialization nonetheless. The television stations assigned individuals to produce "packages" on a routine basis, and they assigned individuals within the organization the specific task of creating, assembling and organizing story ideas.

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Anticipated consumer demand helped shape the characteristics of the news product. Each of the media organizations seemed to have a news “philosophy,” or a sense of its mission, that was shaped by what was successful in the market. They sought to “brand” their products accordingly.

Clearly, however, market forces were not the only determinants of the characteristics of the news operation and resulting news products. The past histories of organizations, and even professional norms, played a role. Journalists and editors talked, particularly at the newspaper, about the traditions of the organizations and their relationship to the communities they served.

In sum, there is a good fit between the premises spelled out at the beginning of this paper—the theoretical model it offers—and the observational data gathered. The news product—one of the stimuli for the shaping of public opinion in a given community—is profitably viewed as the consequence of a series of activities of the news organization designed to allow it to efficiently operate and routinely produce its product. A defining characteristic of such organizations is their need for story ideas, as they are the raw material of news. The structure of the organizations and their routines result from this need, and they, in turn, shape the final news product.

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Figure 3: Newspaper Newsroom Layout

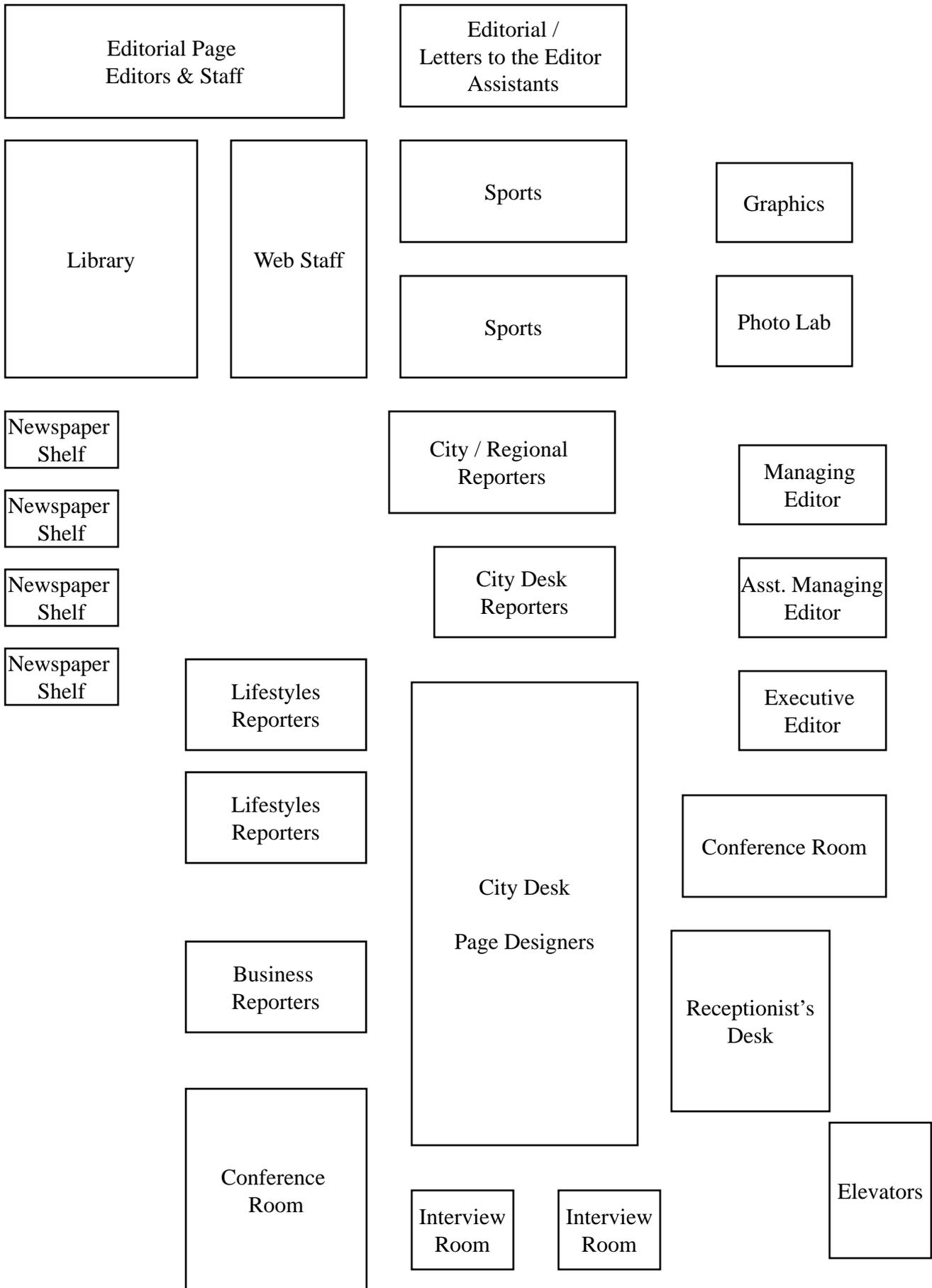


Table 3: Newspaper Day 1

Story	Section	Page	Source
Car tag laws paying off	Main Front	A1	Beat reporter from sources on suburban beat
Reviving reactors/TVA	Main Front	A1	Newsmaker visit for editorial board meeting
City's pollen count soars	Main Front	A1	City editor from a tip about pollen count
Prescription drug abuse	Main Front	A1	Scripps Wire
Hospital tax exemption	Main Front	A1	From congressional beat reporter in Washington
Beijing statement regret	Main Front	A1	AP Wire
Page wins council runoff	Local Front	B1	Beat reporter covering routine election
City council marks decade	Local Front	B1	Agenda item from beat coverage of city council
Faculty fellows technology	Local Front	B1	Higher ed. Beat reporter from sources at university
Affordable housing effort	Local Front	B1	Beat reporter from sources on metro beat
Pub/Priv school partnership	Local Front	B1	Education reporter generated story
Dow jumps Sharply	Biz Front	C1	AP Wire
Robotics company moves	Biz Front	C1	Sources to business editor
Zurich criminal investigation	Biz Front	C1	Wire
Bull semen exporter	Biz Front	C1	Wire
The motley fool	Biz Front	C1	Wire Syndicate
Football wide receiver returns	Sports Front	D1	Sports beat reporter
Local football recruits	Sports Front	D1	Sports beat reporter
Column on Michael Jordan	Sports Front	D1	Columnist reaction to national news
Jack Nicklaus/Tiger	Sports Front	D1	AP Wire
MLB feam brutal beginning	Sports Front	D1	Calendar item coverage of game
NCAA 20,000 loans	Sports Front	D1	AP Wire
Library diverse programs	LifestyleFront	E1	Generated by lifestyles beat reporter who noticed trend
Abstinence popularity	LifestyleFront	E1	Scripps Wire
Creepy insects at university	LifestyleFront	E1	Wire
Justice of Slobodan Milosevic	LifestyleFront	E1	Columnist reaction to international news

Table 1: Station 1 Newscasts Day 1

Story	Newscast	Source
Highway wreck	5:00	Scanner
Amtrack in the state	5:00	Metropolitan newspaper
Tiger Woods	5:00	Network feed
High speed chase	5:00	Scanner
Winery murder	5:00	In file: follow up
Fashion show	5:00	Press release
Walker fire	5:00	Scanner
Personalised stamps in France	5:00	Network feed
Traffic report	5:00	Contracted feed
Striker - one year after crime	5:00	In file
City voting	5:00	In file
Acid spill	5:30	Scanner
Walmart tenants	5:30	Reporter
Pollen	5:30	Press release
Hardware stores and women customenrs	5:30	Reporter
Elections for mayor	5:30	In file
Earnhardt - new death explanation	5:30	Network feed
Teenager high speed chase	5:30	Scanner
Traffic report	5:30	Contracted feed
Costs of sports tickets	5:30	Press release
How to keep a car running	5:30	Consumer reporter
Weather report	5:30	Weather anchor
Health watch	5:30	Network feed
Car chase: Teenager leads police on high-speed chase	6:00	Scanner
Winery unsolved murder: one-year anniversary	6:00	In file: follow up
Child molester is sentenced	6:00	In file: court
Toxic spill at local plant	6:00	In file
Hazardous material spill	6:00	Scanner
Comissioner criticises judge	6:00	Metro newspaper
City council: last meeting of the session, votes to raise golf fees	6:00	In file: council calendar
Election Day results	6:00	In file
Weather	6:00	Weather anchor
High pollen count	6:00	Press release
Consumer report: how to take care of your car	6:00	Consumer reporter
Food drive: hospital collects canned food for the hungry	6:00	Press release followed by telephone
New basketball coach at University	6:00	Press release
Election results	11:00	In file
School superintendent speaks with parents	11:00	Local newspaper
Beer board reviews local bar	11:00	In file: follow up
Motorcycle accident	11:00	Scanner
Car accident	11:00	Scanner - follow up
Toxic spill at local plant	11:00	Scanner - follow up
Unsolved murder anniversary	11:00	In file: follow up
Comissioner criticises judge	11:00	Local newspaper - repeat
Winner of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire"	11:00	Network feed
Weather	11:00	Weather anchor
Hardware stores and women customenrs	11:00	Reporter generated idea
Health Watch	11:00	Network feed
Ashcroft/Oklahoma City	11:00	Network feed
China update	11:00	Network feed
Eminem trial	11:00	Network feed
Earnhardt - new death explanation	11:00	Network feed

Table 1: Station 1 Newscasts Day 1

Sports	11:00	Sports anchor
University ticket price	11:00	Press release
Coach leaves University	11:00	Press release
Golf hole-in-one	11:00	Internet

**Figure 1:
Station 1
Newsroom
Layout**

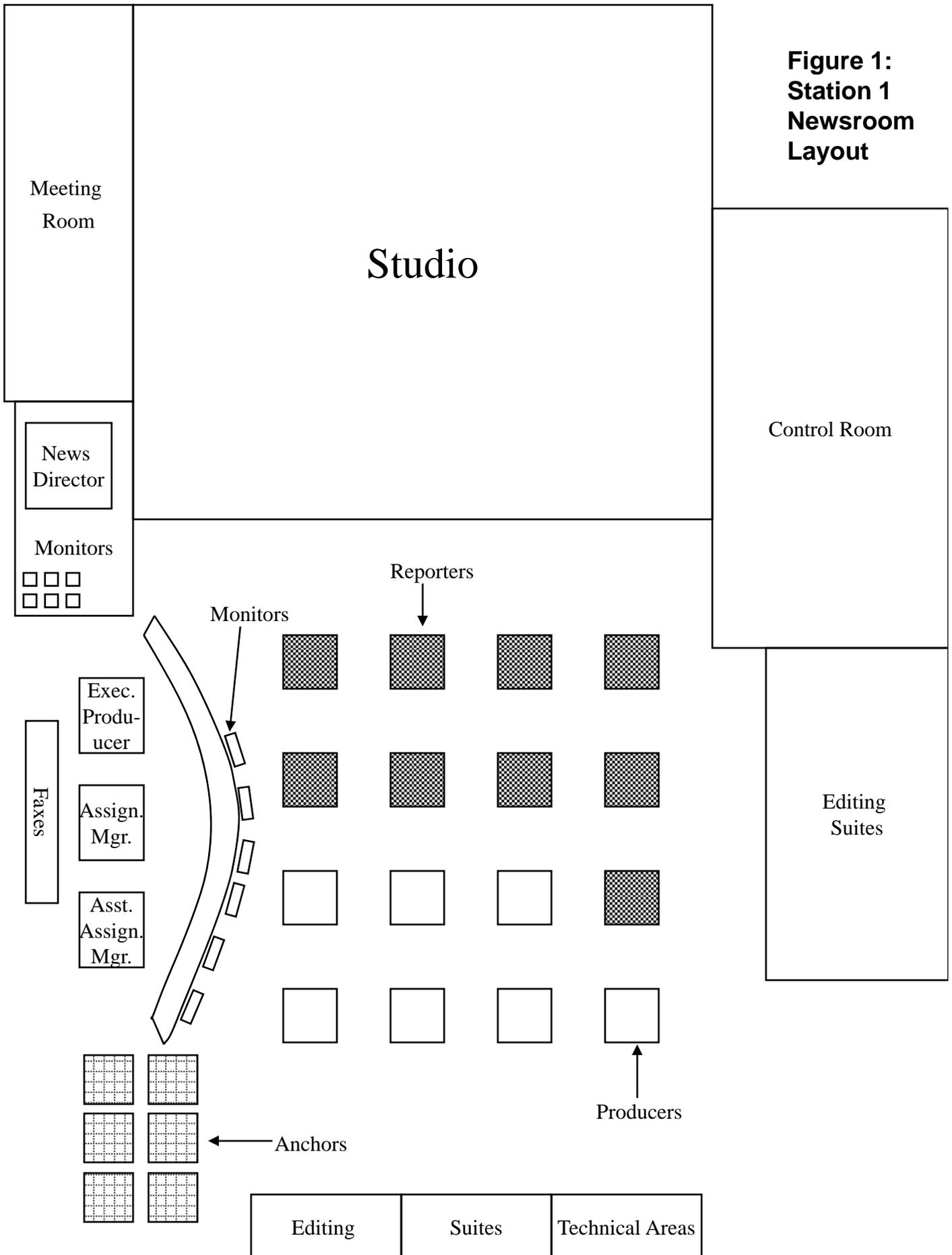


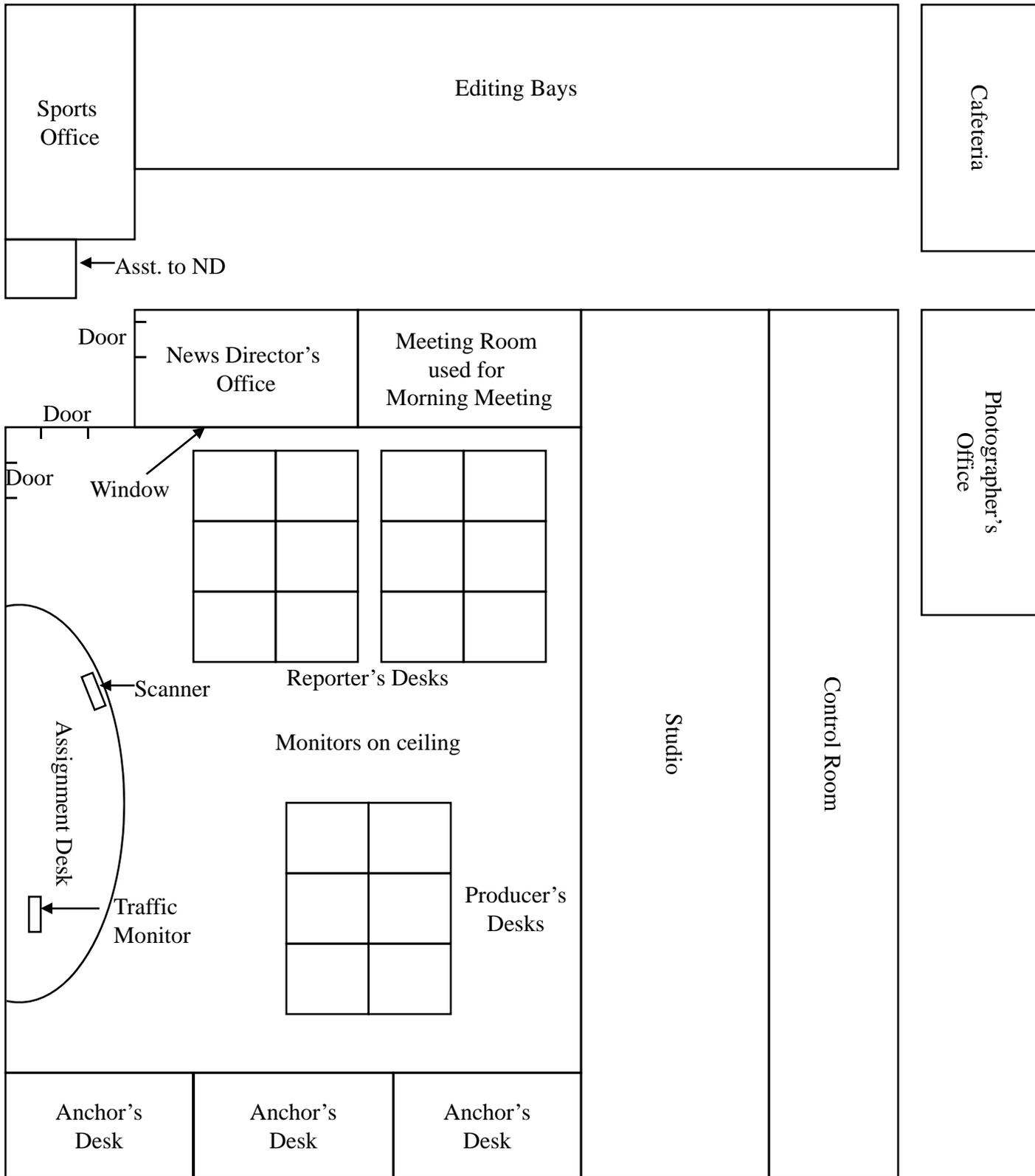
Table 2: Station 2 Newscasts Day 1

Story	Newscast	Source
Police chase Story	5:00	Scanner middle of day
Acid Spill	5:00	Scanner early in day
One year since murder	5:00	In file: update of old story
Court decision in case in neighboring state	5:00	Network feed
Deadly wreck update	5:00	In file: update of old story
Stolen cars--state story localized	5:00	In file: government news release
Runoff race for city council	5:00	In file: Updated by producer
Weather tease	5:00	Weather anchor
Traffic report	5:00	Contracted feed
Jesse Jackson Offers to Help Settle China Conflict	5:00	Network feed
Rap Music Star feature	5:00	Network feed
NASA story	5:00	Network feed
Weather	5:00	Weather anchor
Eye surgery tease	5:00	
Tease to Eye on Health	5:00	
Pollen Count Story Tease	5:00	Producer noted pollen on drive to work
Tease to Principal on Roof	5:00	
Health Story	5:00	Health Reporter
Eye surgery story	5:00	Health Reporter: From PR source
Tease to stroke story	5:00	
Tease to Food Bank Story	5:00	
Food Bank Story	5:00	In file: Tip from organizer
Ford Explorer Story tease	5:00	Network feed
Tease to Pollen Story	5:30	
Runoff race for city council	5:30	In file: Updated by producer
Stolen cars--state story localized	5:30	In file: government news release
Ford Explore Story	5:30	Producer from net feeds, papers, wire
Privacy Rights Vote in Bill	5:30	Producer from net feeds, papers, wire
Stocks Ended Higher	5:30	Producer from net feeds, papers, wire
Tease to Consumer Reports Next Day	5:30	
Principal on Rooftop	5:30	In file: Teacher wife of anchor gave tip
Tease to Traffic	5:30	
Tease to Weather	5:30	Weather anchor
Weather	5:30	Weather anchor
Adopt a Pet Feature	5:30	Weather anchor
Tease to 6 p.m. news	5:30	
Traffic report	5:30	Contracted feed
Jewish pilgrims at Wailing Wall	5:30	Network feed
Pope taking small role in Easter	5:30	Network feed
Network may lose actress in series	5:30	Network feed
Alcohol awareness month	5:30	Producer from net feeds
Poster contest	5:30	Local interview in set--arranged by producer
Egg hunt for home for elderly	5:30	In file
Tease to 6 p.m. news	5:30	
Deadly wreck update	6:00	In file
Police chase Story	6:00	Scanner middle of day
Auto accident	6:00	Scanner
Acid Spill	6:00	Scanner early in day
Stolen cars--state story localized	6:00	In file: government news release
Stolen construction truck update	6:00	In file
Computer web site launch	6:00	In file
Runoff race for city council	6:00	In file: Updated by producer
Tease to stroke story	6:00	
Weather tease	6:00	

Table 2: Station 2 Newscasts Day 1

Stroke story	6:00	Health Reporter: From PR source
Food Bank Story	6:00	In file: Tip from organizer
Weather tease	6:00	Weather anchor
Tease to Health Report at 11	6:00	
Weather	6:00	Weather anchor
Pollen Count Story	6:00	Producer noted pollen on drive to work
Tease to sports	6:00	
Sports story on local game night before	6:00	Sports anchor: local team source
Professional sports story regional team	6:00	Sports anchor: network
NASCAR story	6:00	Sports anchor: network
Ticket price increase likely	6:00	Sports anchor: source tip
New coach hired college team in neighboring state	6:00	Sports anchor: network
Police chase Story	11:00	Scanner middle of day
Runoff race for city council	11:00	In file: Updated by producer
Stolen cars--state story localized	11:00	In file: government news release
Acid Spill	11:00	Scanner early in day
Trailer overturns	11:00	Scanner
Pollen Count Story	11:00	Producer noted pollen on drive to work
Weather	11:00	Weather anchor
Deadly wreck update	11:00	In file
China conflict update	11:00	Network feed
Wall street summary	11:00	Network feed
Racial riots in Cincinnati	11:00	Network feed
Tease to health Report	11:00	
Sports medicine story	11:00	Health Reporter: Voice Over of Network feed
Stem cell research	11:00	Health Reporter: Voice Over of Network feed
Tease for sports	11:00	Health Reporter: Voice Over of Network feed
Local baseball team summary	11:00	Sports anchor
Local university team football scrimmage	11:00	Sports anchor: local team source
Local university softball game	11:00	Sports anchor: local team source
New coach hired college team in neighboring state	11:00	Sports anchor: network
Principal on Rooftop	11:00	In file: Teacher wife of anchor gave tip

Figure 2: Station 2 Newsroom Layout



Routinizing the acquisition of raw materials:

A comparative study of news construction in a single community

By

Lee B. Becker

Heidi Hatfield Edwards

Tudor Vlad

George L. Daniels

Edward M. Gans

Namkee Park

James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research

Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication

University of Georgia

Athens, GA 30602





Beats & News Construction

- In order to gather the raw material used to create news, according to the news construction literature, media organizations structure their news coverage using a beat system.
- The beat, defined either by geographic or content parameters, allows the organization to efficiently acquire and assemble the substantive materials that become news.



Variability of Beats

- Beat structure, in this literature, has been treated as largely nonvariable.
- The exception has been in observations of television news operations, where beat systems usually have been found to be primitive or nonexistent.
- Alternatives to a beat system, despite this observation, have been largely ignored.



Gans' Perspective on Beats

- For Gans the key process in news creation is story suggestion.
- Reporters have the responsibility for thinking up story ideas.
- To this end, they are required to “keep up with what is going on in the beats they patrol or in the areas of the country assigned to their bureaus, and they are evaluated in part by their ability to suggest suitable stories.”



Story Ideation

- The process of story idea generation is called story ideation by Bantz, McCorkle and Baade.
- Something becomes news as a result of a process that begins with the story idea.
- Individual newswriters assess the information flowing into the newsroom from various sources to determine what could be a story.



Differing Views of Beats

- The view of the literature on news construction: beats exist in news organizations because they are efficient—if not essential—tools for gathering news.
- From the perspective of the sociology of organizations literature, beats are a form of job differentiation.
- Beats can be viewed as part of the managerial reward structure.
- Beats can be used in product differentiation.



Summary: News Factory Model

- Manufacturing organizations need raw materials for production, and news organizations need the raw materials of news—the ideas that are used to generate news stories.
- The need to obtain the raw materials creates acquisition costs. News and other organizations have to spend precious resources to obtain the raw materials they use to create their products.
- Uncertainty in the availability of raw materials increases costs for manufacturing organizations, including news organizations.
- Organizations seek to reduce uncertainty (and costs) by routinizing the acquisition of the raw materials.
- In a consumer economy, consumer demand shapes the characteristics of the manufactured product.
- Market forces are not the only determinant of the characteristics of manufactured products.



Expectations

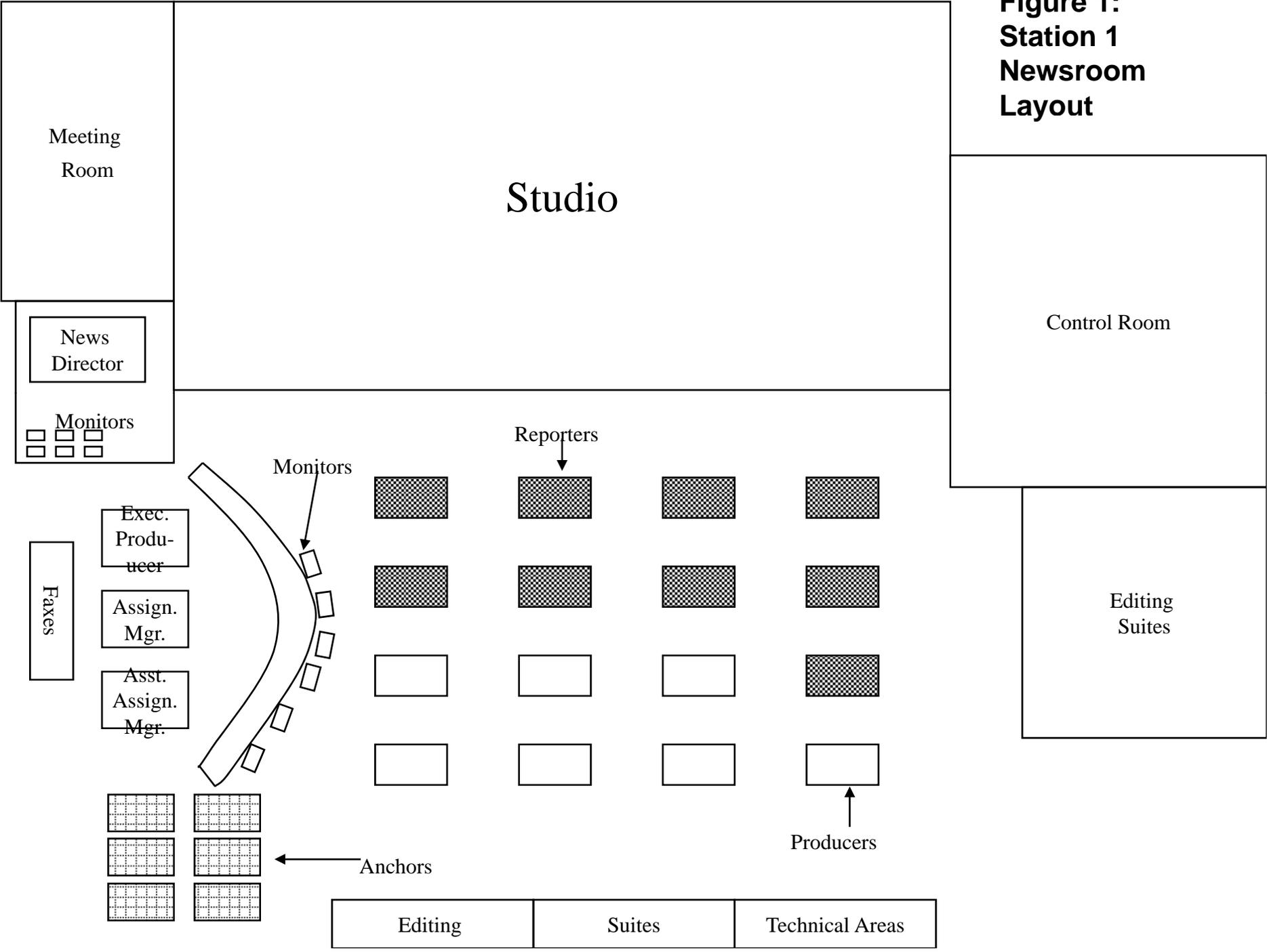
- All news organizations will have some routines used for generating story ideas. If they don't use beats to this end, they will have other routines.
- Newspapers and television stations can be expected to employ story generation routines reflective of their strategies for competition within the market.



Methodology

- Selected a single community served by a daily newspaper and three-plus television stations
- Visited the two top rated television stations and the newspaper
- Spent two days observing in the newsrooms
- Focused particularly on the techniques used to create story ideas
- Monitored the newscasts and papers produced
- Goal was to observe how the media organized themselves

**Figure 1:
Station 1
Newsroom
Layout**

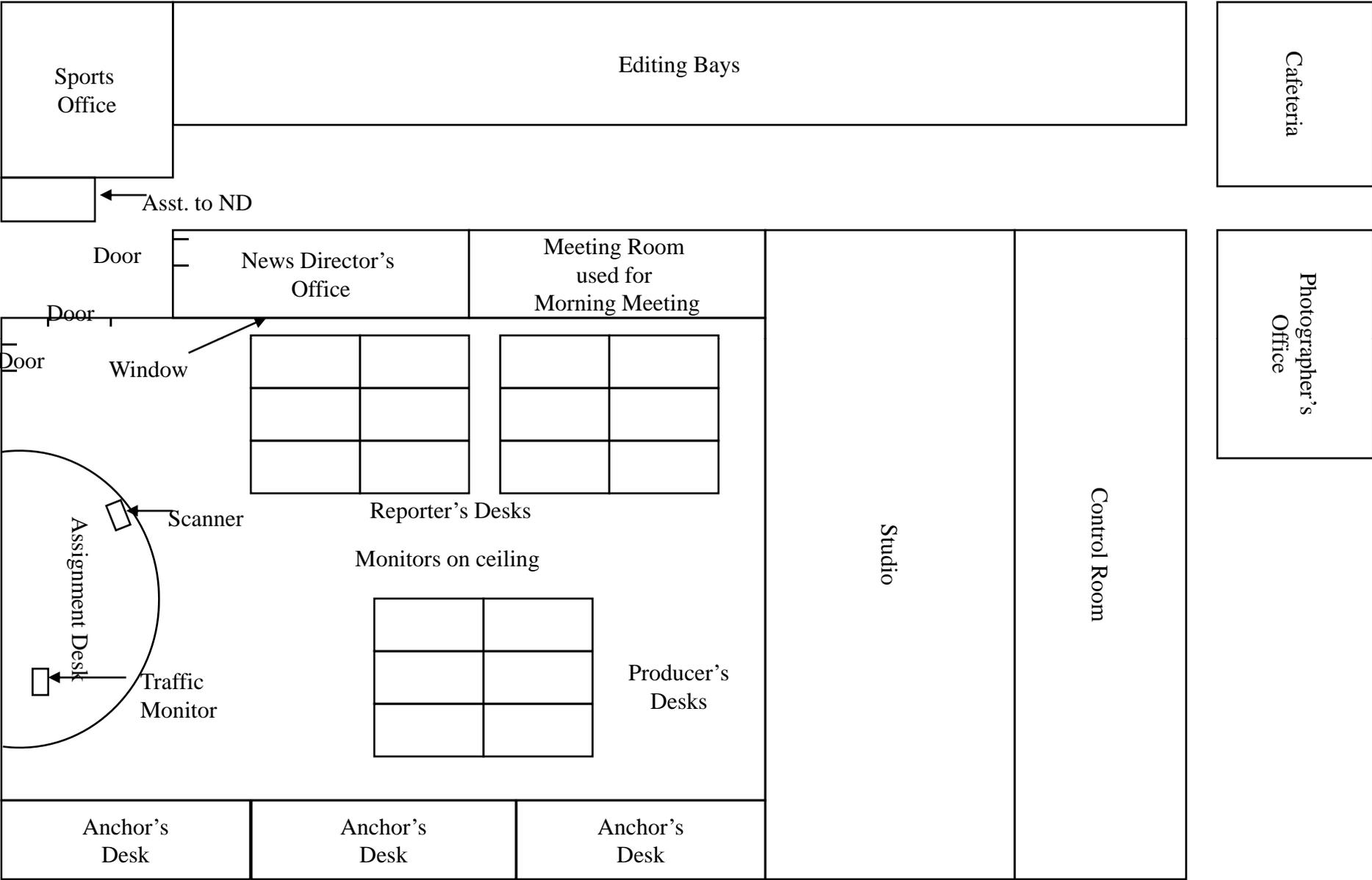




TV1: Story Meetings

- The assignment manager arrived at the station at 8 a.m., an hour earlier than the other daytime members of the newsroom.
- He contributed most of the information or stories to the day file.
- The day file consisted of telephone tips called in by citizens, e-mail suggestions from viewers and contacts in organizations, questions from viewers, and developing stories monitored by him or by the executive producer from the scanners.
- In addition, the day file included notes on stories appearing in the metropolitan newspaper and other local media. It also contained suggestions on follow-up opportunities from the previous days' stories or stories that appeared in earlier newscasts. Court and city records, and government committee and council meeting schedules and agendas were checked every day by the assignment manager.

Figure 2: Station 2 Newsroom Layout





TV2: Story Meeting

- The producer of the 6 p.m. newscast, who also held the title of managing editor, ran the meeting.
- The managing editor asked each of those present to offer story suggestions. The reporters' ideas came from phone calls from viewers, other media, and some of the suggested stories are follow-ups.
- The managing editor passed out a list that contained 19 items. These came from a computer file the newsroom maintained, tipping the station off to things in the future or things that were scheduled.
- The producers also suggested stories: some of them either originated in other media or were follow-ups of previous materials. For example, on the first day of observation, a producer said he noticed how much pollen there was in the air on his way to work and suggested that the station do a story. In fact, the story was used by the station in the 6 and 11 p.m. newscasts.

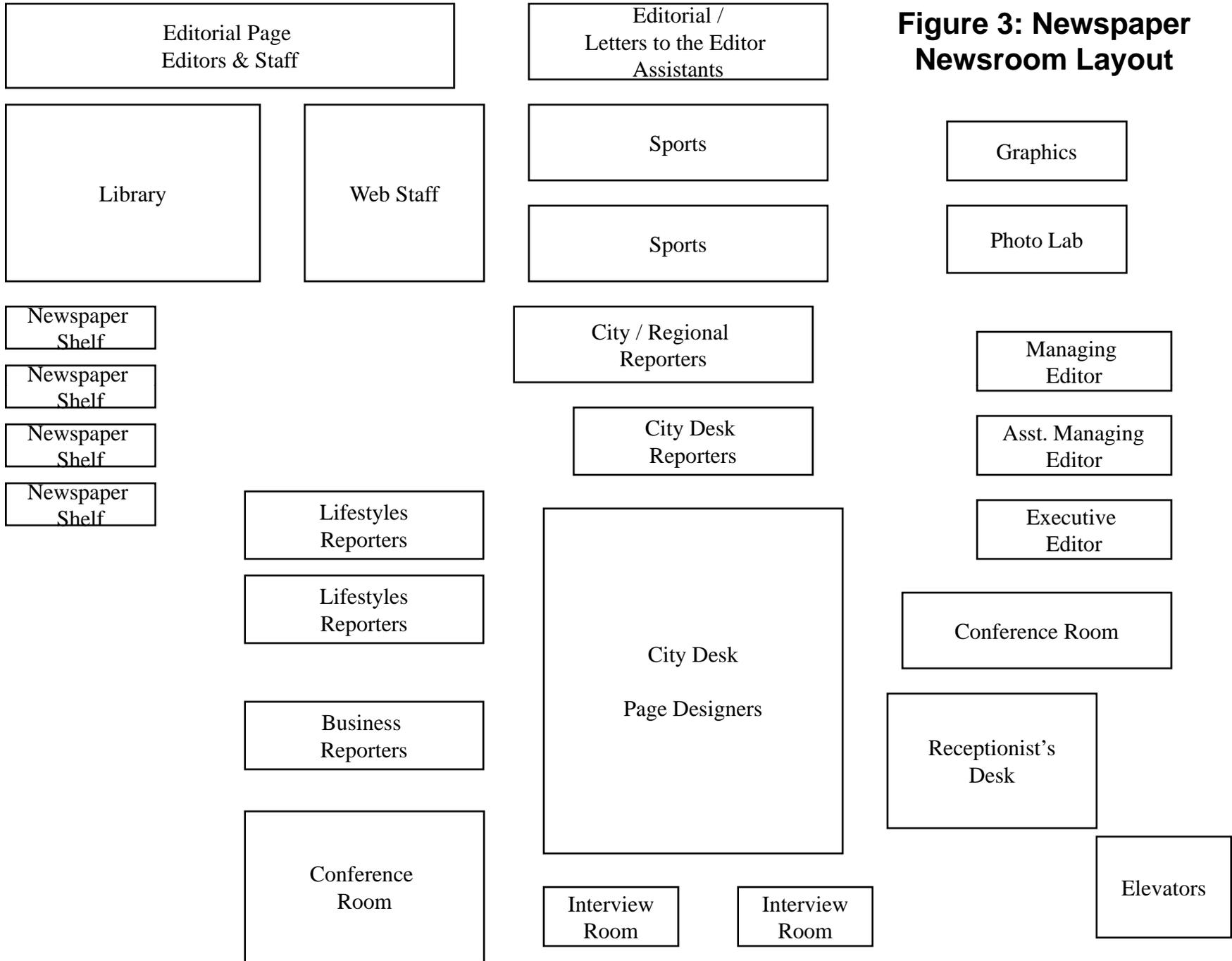


Figure 3: Newspaper Newsroom Layout



Newspaper: Budget Meetings

- The morning budget meeting began at 10:30. The purpose of the meeting was to plan the next day's paper. Before the 10:30 meeting, each of the editors had already talked to the reporters to assign them stories from tips, news releases, calendars and follow-ups or to allow them to pitch their own story ideas. The editors then produced a list of potential stories and presented them in the morning meeting.
- At the beginning of the meeting, the assistant managing editor gave a verbal critique of that day's paper. In the critique, he noted stories that should be followed for the next day's paper.
- During the afternoon meeting at 4, the assistant managing editor elicited more detail from the section editors, with definitive story angles and possible placement in the paper. On the first day of observation, the paper was working on a breaking story about a worker killed at an industrial plant. The story had been discussed at the morning meeting. The story developed during the day after the city desk received an anonymous phone tip about an industrial accident and fatality.



Finding: TV Has Specialists

- Though TV newsrooms do not seem to have as obvious of a specialization structure as newspapers, they do have specialists.
- Specialists cover weather, sports, consumer news, and health, as the two television stations observed in this study illustrate.
- These specialists are responsible for generating story ideas and stories or other content in their special areas.



Finding: Beats Not Needed

- TV newsrooms do not have the elaborate beat structure of newspaper newsrooms simply because they do not need it.
- The TV newsrooms need fewer stories than the newspapers, and they can generate the story ideas and the stories from scanners, casual observation of their general assignment reporters, web sites, press releases, and listings of community activities that are readily available to them.



Finding: When TV Needs Specialization, It Creates It

- This is done by designating individuals whose job it is to create this type of content.
- At one of the television stations studied, these specialists were called “franchise” reporters.
- Sports reporter and even the weather person functioned in the same way.



Finding: Beats Can Grow

- As beats grew at the newspapers, they became bureaus or departments.
- The sports department at the paper studied had many reporters, and they specialized in terms of coverage of a professional team in the area and in coverage of athletics at the local college.
- The newspaper also had a features department, with many specialists within it.



Finding: News Philosophies Matter

- The philosophy at the first station was to provide coverage reflective of the community.
- At the second station the philosophy was to select pieces of the community that were interesting to the audience.
- The newspaper was concerned with comprehensiveness, completeness of news coverage, and breadth of topics covered.



Conclusion: Need for Material

- Each of the news organizations began each news day with a need for raw materials, namely, the ideas to be used to generate news stories.
- The organizations had limited resources available for the acquisition of these materials, and they developed routines or procedures to guarantee their availability.
- For the newspaper, these involved beats.
- For the television stations, they involved less elaborate specialization, but specialization nonetheless.



Conclusion: News Philosophy

- Anticipated consumer demand helped shape the characteristics of the news product.
- Each of the media organizations seemed to have a news “philosophy,” or a sense of its mission, that was shaped by what was successful in the market.
- Market forces were not the only determinants of the characteristics of the news operation and resulting news products.
- The past histories of organizations, and even professional norms, played a role.



Summary

- There is a good fit between the premises offered and the observational data gathered.
- The news product is profitably viewed as the consequence of a series of activities of the news organization designed to allow it to efficiently operate and routinely produce its product.
- A defining characteristic of such organizations is their need for story ideas, as they are the raw material of news.
- The structure of the organizations and their routines result from this need, and they, in turn, shape the final news product.

Thank you for your attention, from



Ed, Tudor, George, Heidi, Lee, Namkee

