



NBC Radio

A Division of
National Broadcasting Company, Inc
News and Information Service

Thirty Rockefeller Plaza
New York N Y 10020 212-664-4444

Diane B. Healey
Station Service Representative

December 29, 1976

To: NIS General Managers
and News Directors

The enclosed broadcast news "style-book"
has been in preparation for several weeks
. . . and is based on consultation with
numerous NBC news and subscriber station
news management people. We hope your
newsroom personnel will find it helpful.

Diane Healey
Diane B. Healey

INDEX

ALL-NEWS

ON-AIR HANDBOOK

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION TO THE ALL-NEWS PHILOSOPHY

- A. Format Integration
- B. Call Letter Identification
- C. Consistency of Sound
- D. News Presentation
- E. News Content

PART TWO - NEWS PREPARATIONS

- A. Writing
- B. Gathering
- C. Tape (What It Is and How To Use It)
- D. Editing
- E. Time Checks, Weather Reports and Traffic
- F. Features

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION TO THE ALL-NEWS PHILOSOPHY

This program style handbook is presented in an attempt to suggest, rather than proscribe, style and delivery appropriate to news anchor persons.

Credit must be given to KOH, Reno, Nevada for some basic guidelines.

A. FORMAT INTEGRATION

A news format is at its best when the listener has the feeling of a totally integrated local - national - world affairs - sports - feature informational flow.

Try to maintain the impression that the product is totally in your station's local control. Everything to the listener originates at your frequency which is in your city. Network or audio service feeds should be staged to sound like an integral part of your overall format.

B. CALL LETTER IDENTIFICATION

Research-minded radio programmers have been acutely aware of "audience-in-transition" dynamics. What this simply means is that a listener knows what he wants to hear ... has a general idea of where to find it ... but will not register in his own mind the call letters of his chosen station (let alone write them in an ARB diary or recite them accurately to

a Pulse interviewer) unless he hears them again and again and again. Listeners' recall of your call letters will determine ratings, and everything else right down to the bottom line of the balance sheet.

This single principle is the reason the jingle business has flourished for the past twenty years.

It is just as important to the All-News station as it is to the music station to establish constant and frequent call letter exposure on the air. Without it, your efforts will not be given their due, and the station thus will absolutely not be credited with all the listenership it really has.

How much is enough? We did a pure call letter count on the established CBS and Westinghouse all-news stations. The composite average for those pretigious all-news stations was 36 mentions of the call letters per hour!

How is it possible to include this number of station ID's? You may incorporate identification in various ways:

- " ... The Senator told (call letters) that ... "
- " ... (call letters) learned that ... "
- " ... this report from (call letters) reporter, Sally Smith ... "
- " ... weather outlook for the (call letters) area ... "
- " ... (call letters) news-time is 7:17 ... "
- " ... this word from the (call letters) sports desk ... "
- " ... from the (call letters) business wire ... "
- " ... (call letters) is following these stories at this hour ... "
- " ... this is George Jones, (call letters) news ... "

- " ... this shopping note from (call letters) ... " (lead into commercial)
- " ... a reminder from (call letters), newsradio 99 ... " (lead into commercial)

Something like 20 call letter mentions per hour should be regarded as an absolute minimum to get the crucial identification job done.

Treat your call letters as an appendage to your name, so that signing on or off, your station becomes part of your own identification.

There is no more unforgiveable reason for ratings failure than the simple lack of call letter identification. This is one of the most simple essentials to execute.

C. CONSISTENCY OF SOUND

Sounders and a very subtle, low-level teletype background, are further aids to format-pacing and, again, identification. When listeners hear these elements, they immediately know that they have found their all-news station. If you don't make some use of sounders or don't utilize a teletype background, you are missing an important way to enhance consistency of the local sound and the accompanying instant identification value.

D. NEWS PRESENTATION

A standardized sound, hour after hour, is precisely what the listener needs to recognize the station, and to get

used to the pattern of news presentation you are offering. In content, it is necessary to be spontaneous. But in form, it is necessary to be precise and consistent over all the hours of the day and night, week days and weekends. The obvious exceptions to this are public service blocks, editorials, special news bulletins, one-time only program specials and play-by-play sports events.

Look for the spontaneous in content of any news story, but avoid the temptation to deviate from format lines. In form, it is important to be precise and consistent. The delivery of news should not be dead-pan, but enthusiasm and interest should be conveyed by voice inflection rather than banter. It really is not necessary to thank other reporters or anchor people for reports, as they are only doing their professional jobs.

E. NEWS CONTENT

One of the myths that we daily confront with all-news is that it is repetitive. As good broadcast journalists, part (a most important part) of your job is to strive for the fresh and original.

In presenting a story which touches a controversial issue, present as many sides as you can. After all, a general news audience has many positions on matters affecting them.

DON'T be repetitious. A good broadcast journalist always finds one more opinion.

DO clearly state whose position you are quoting; and DON'T let it appear that you are giving an opinion when you are quoting others; and, of course, never give an opinion when you are not quoting others.

DO write every story with a beginning, a middle and an end. DO write it with simple, short sentences, because that is the way most of us speak.

The all-news format is a very human format which relates air person to listener person.

DO humanize without acting. For example, if you go to a live line report from a reporter who has been in the snow on a picket line for 5 hours, there is no harm mentioning this fact after the report. Talk to your reporters if a question has been raised that needs to be answered or if they have not said something about the condition of a story that you think might have been said.

DO give credit to the reporter by mentioning their name, the place of origination of the report, and the call letters of your station.

DO audition all tape before it goes on air to make sure, not only that it is cued, but also that the proper "puts and takes" have been written. DON'T repeat their first line as your lead line to the story.

One more point regarding news content. "To err is human." If you make a mistake regarding news content, correct it as soon as possible. That means even if you mis-read a number, or a fact in your copy, go back again and say it right. (Paul Harvey has probably the smoothest way of correcting his own mistakes on the air ... he just pauses and says "make that read ... " and then he makes the correction.) An all-news radio station audience has a passion for accuracy: never underestimate its intelligence and thirst for knowledge.

PART TWO - NEWS PREPARATIONS

A. WRITING

Broadcast news should be written as it is spoken. Remember, the listeners may have only one opportunity to hear what you have to say. You are writing for the ear, not the eye.

Your major goal is to strive for brevity and clarity, eliminating as much as possible commentary or editorial statements except when they are identified as such.

Avoid the word "today." It can unconsciously creep into every story you write. You can almost eliminate the words "yesterday," "today" and "tomorrow." All-news is happening now. If a wire service prints "the governor said

today ...," you say it as "the governor says ...". Use the present tense whenever possible.

Quite often, the use of the present progressive tense "ing" constructive is an effective means of avoiding past or future tenses. For example, instead of saying, "the governor criticized ...," you should say "the governor is criticizing ..." and instead of saying "the committee will meet today ...," you can say "the committee is meeting ...".

Another temptation is the use of the word "we". Use instead your call letters and city name.

Never say anything that gives the impression the news is ending. Eliminate words like "meantime," "meanwhile" and the phrase "in other news". All-news should present a smooth flow, not a start-stop feeling to each section. (Be careful about commercials and lead-in copy in this regard.)

There are several appropriate phrases to introduce mini-summaries (short capsules of between 20 and 90 seconds):

- "here's what makes news ..."
- "these are the stories we are following (watching) ..."
- "these are the developing stories ..."
- "here's what's happening ..."
- "in the news at this hour ..."
- "in the top of the news ..."
- "here's top news in brief ..."

Our job is to communicate accurately, concisely and clearly.

The word "incidentally" does not belong in radio news copy. If something is incidental, it's probably not important enough to be worthwhile.

For sports scores, avoid such phrases as "clobbered," "over-topped," "smashed," "bombed," etc. Simply say who won and who lost. The fans can add their own descriptive adjectives. After you give local team scores, you should always have a sentence or two describing what happened, and then briefly repeat the score again ("49'ers 21, Rams 7").

Use the active voice and avoid the passive voice. News copy should be as direct as possible. This makes your copy clearer and more interesting. For example, you don't say in conversation "the ball was thrown by John," so why write or deliver a news story with something like "the committee has been told by the governor that taxes have to be increased"?

Always think in terms of word economy. If it takes the wire service 10 words to say something, you can say the same thing in 6 words. This will not only make your copy more interesting, but will allow you to make better use of available air time.

Watch the use of personal pronouns because they may be misleading to the listeners. For example, if you say "the governor and the President will meet and he describes the meeting as very productive," how does the listener know who "he" is? You might mean the governor, but the last noun the listener heard was "President".

Don't start the beginning sentence of a news story with a person's name, because it is likely that the listener's ear is not yet "tuned in" to the story. Instead, start with either a title, a clause, or a description to give listeners time to warm up to the context of the report.

B. GATHERING

News on the air is news that is happening. By definition, news is an event or an about-to-occur event of interest to more than one person. The more people interested in an event, the greater its value as a news story.

When a story is news-worthy, people don't want to wait until the reporter gets to the station, edits tape or goes to an official news conference. News is now. And people tune in all-news to be informed.

News does not happen only on the hour or the half hour. Those are the times, however, when most of the other stations in town will be presenting it. Since every station in your market does some news ... ranging from the 2-minutes per-hour "lick and a promise" to the full-service MOR/variety station which may have a long tradition of heavy drive-time news blocks, you are in direct competition with them all for the best local news job.

Efficient and aggressive utilization of your time is a necessity. The key is planning, consistent contact with news making sources, and aggressive telephone beat coverage.

Once the news sources become personal acquaintances and understand that your station is the news outlet in your area ... telephone coverage becomes much easier to accomplish on a consistent basis.

Using the telephone properly allows the broadcast reporter to cover more territory much more quickly than any other medium. If you cover a meeting or news conference in person (which might go on for hours) don't wait until the meeting is over to phone in your report. Attempt at all costs to get your story on the air while the event is still in progress.

If a report comes in on the police or fire monitor, it isn't necessary to wait until a reporter gets there to find out what's happening. For example, when you determine the location of a fire, make a direct phone call to a business concern in the vicinity. Their first hand report, while the event is taking place, is much more dramatic than a report given after the event is over. A criss-cross phone directory is an indispensable tool in your newsroom.

When you do interviews with prominent newsmakers either in person or by phone, think in advance of what the best news angles will be, and attempt to get distinctive cuts. Otherwise, you may get excessive tape which will require time consuming editing.

Each story may communicate essentially the same information, but each story is different. If there isn't enough tape for at least two cuts, do not go on the air with just one story and keep repeating it. Do your own re-write of the tape and present the story so that you have two different versions.

Tape becomes dated quickly if it does not get on the air quickly. So cut as soon as possible, even record direct to cart as it is coming in, and then edit to another cart. When a reporter calls in, try to take the first report direct to cart, then take the rest of his material on reel or cassette.

In news-gathering for the All-News Format, the goal is to get as much news and information on the air as possible, from as many different angles and approaches as possible, without repeating or sounding repetitious.

Some suggestions:

- maintain a daily telephone beat, preferably on a Rolodex file.
- maintain an active "up-coming events" futures file.
- closely monitor police, fire and C.B. receiver equipment.
- make sure that newsmakers in your community have the news room telephone number.
- be aware of newspaper, TV and other serious radio news coverage.

- obtain listings from the Chamber of Commerce and Civic Centers for advance notification of events.

Excellent news gathering is essential.

C. TAPE (WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO USE IT)

There is good tape and there is bad tape.

Use of tape allows the listener to hear the actual sound of news in the making. DON'T use tape for its own sake; it should contribute specifically to the story. By the same token, if it isn't possible to get tape for a particular story, the story still might be "newsworthy."

Bad tape is worse than no tape.

An inaudible or fuzzy tape becomes a tremendous annoyance to your listeners. Use discretion. Balance, judgment and clarity are your guides.

There are two basic types of tape: Actuality and Voicer (sometimes called "VOX," plural VOXES").

An Actuality is tape of the newsmaker. It can be taken from an interview, statement, or news conference, and included in a news story.

There are two categories of Voicers: Question and Answer ("Q and A") or on-scene reports ("O-R").

A Voicer is a report from a news person who is either on location where, or near where, the story is taking place.

Every reporter who files a report from the field should be familiar enough with the story to do a "Q and A" which gives the tape editor or anchor person another angle on the story.

When a reporter is on-the-scene of a developing news story and reports over the "sound" of the event, this is known as "O-R". "O-R's" should be accompanied by the sound of the event whenever possible. DO pause long enough to let the actual background sound prevail or use a descriptive phrase "in the background, you may be able to hear ... " or "above the sound of chanting demonstrators ... " and so forth. Even silence can be an effective element of an "O-R", if the event warrants it.

As a rule of thumb, actualities should run between 20 and 30 seconds, while voicers can run between 30 and 50 seconds. Your best judgment and the importance of the news story should dictate its length.

DON'T depend on a tape to tell the whole story. When introducing a piece of actuality of a newsmaker, always write a lead "set-up", which serves as an introduction to the actuality or voicer. DO get into the actuality early in the story. Introduce the reporter, say what story he/she is covering, where he/she is, and who he/she is. DON'T use the actuality's opening line in your introduction.

Two or three sentences of tightly written copy are sufficient. If you use a lot of copy to tell the story, the tape will be redundant.

When you come out of the actuality or voicer, DO add the name again of the person who has been on tape. If it is a reporter, be sure to say "that was Dorothy Jones for (call letters) news". Time permitting, DO follow every actuality

by what is called a "write out," one full sentence (subject and verb) which identifies, describes and/or summarizes.

If a reporter telephones you while you're on the air, and you know nothing about the news break, simply say "reporter's name is on the (call letters) newslines with a live report" and let the reporter explain. With a story of immediate import, it is better to put them on live, rather than waiting for an opportunity to tape the report in its entirety. Ask the reporter to stand by, after the live line, so that you can then tape another cut. It is a good idea to know where your best reporters will be, and when, so that you have some advance warning of their calls.

D. EDITING

Because news is ever-changing, editing is the constant process of up-dating and determining that vital information becomes part of the news flow.

DO stay aware of news developments and be prepared to change copy minute by minute when necessary.

DO revise material (especially the vital time, weather and traffic reports) as often as possible.

DO play the different angles of a big or developing story by using all available forms; actualities, voicers, written copy and one-liners.

DO relate the order of stories, not only to the local impact, but also the logical flow of pieces of information.

DON'T necessarily load all the "top" stories together. Instead of a straight line descending order, use the minute by minute up and down approach of editing for news radio, e.g. a segment may consist of a major story, a major story, a minor story, a feature story, and another major story all within the space of three or four minutes.

DON'T use a given piece of tape more than three or perhaps four times. Ideally, the best situation would be to have a fresh piece of tape for every news segment.

DO include a time check and brief weather forecast between sections. Structuring local news segments in two sections creates a better flow, helps maintain interest, and allows you to use news and commercial material effectively.

DO remember that if you use the two section approach, each section must be weighted accordingly with leads and tape. You dump stories, therefore, at the end of each section rather than letting one section devour another (hence, destroying the lead of the second section which is the second best local story).

E. TIME CHECKS, WEATHER REPORTS AND TRAFFIC

1. Time Checks

Especially in the morning, time checks should be given at least once every five minutes. Different people will be tuning in at different times, and it is a simple discipline to pause slightly between news stories and say, "(call letters) newstime is _____."

DO, for clarity's sake, state the hour first and the minute(s) second. State time-checks to the closest minute and standardize as follows: "7-40" ... "8-10" ... "4-25". Don't use "quarter-past" ... "ten minutes before" ... etc.

Together with weather and road conditions, time-checks are extremely important to listeners preparing for a busy day ahead. Deliver these ingredients accurately, regularly and consistently.

2. Weather Reports

You should already have an official source of weather information such as the National Weather Service at your local airport. It almost goes without saying, that in many parts of the country, weather conditions are apt to change rapidly. Whether or not you have a window in your studio, you should at least be remotely aware of the conditions outside.

When we inform our listeners about the temperature, precipitation or forecast, they are going to accept our information as the authority. Don't let them down. There is nothing quite so annoying as hearing that there is a 40% chance of rain when it is pouring.

Before each anchor person/reporter goes on duty, they should either call the National Weather Service or read a direct weather wire for the most recent up-dates.

Weather forecasts, however lengthy or brief, should always conclude with a mention of the current temperature and the predicted high or low temperature for the day or night. Weather is one news event that affects everybody in the listening audience. Make frequent and predictable use of long-range (5 day) weather forecasts.

Frequently, another good news transition and call letter identification can be, "(call letters) news temperature is _____, going up (going down) to _____."

You may sometimes be able to get a local story if, for example, the weather forecast appears inconsistent, or if the National Weather Service has predicted it all wrong. Call them to find out what happened.

If the weather is causing bad driving conditions, always be sure to say so. You might be able to explain particular trouble spots as well.

3. Traffic Reports

Next in importance are road conditions and traffic reports. These must be constantly checked out as well, by telephone, with the highway patrol and/or motor vehicle department. Up-date the reports as frequently as possible during drive times when alternate routes are especially critical to your in-car listeners.

When giving road conditions, be as specific and detailed as possible, but brief. Broadcasting of road conditions should cover the major highway and travel arteries giving listeners accurate road travel advice. When you get information from the highway patrol or a citizen band operator put it into broadcasting language, straight-forward and direct.

F. FEATURES

Features, or "soft news", constitute a significant part of the news radio format. To begin with, decide what is essential to your market. Is it farm news? Marine weather reports? Golf or tennis waiting times? Or fishing reports on weekends? Local stock prices? Interviews with community leaders?

Increasing listeners' interest and eliminating news "sameness" is an essential part of your job. The most effective types of news stories are the ones which elicit the listener's response, "did you hear about . . ." or "I am glad to know that . . ."

Feature stories should be handled as "spot" news, worked into the general information flow. Such stories should run about a minute in total length, and rarely more than two minutes (except for a local disaster or hot line).

Features are best handled:

(a) with a line lead in, something like "Newsradio (call letters) reporter _____ (name) _____ has been checking into _____ (subject) _____, and here's the report . . ." or, "here's another (call letters) feature about _____ (subject) _____ from reporter _____ (name) _____ . . ." In a wrap-around story, the reporter should include actuality from the expert in whatever field, and close the report with "I'm _____ (name) _____, newsradio (call letters)".

(b) with a report from an expert in whatever field with their own live lead-in, something like "This is (name and relevant identification) . . . ".

When writing or preparing features, make sure of the accuracy, the reliability of the source, and as always attribute your information to its source.

Suggested feature topics include (but are not limited to):

- (1) Entertainment (Who's appearing, what's happening, local movie or play reviews)
- (2) Young adult activities (18-30 yrs) i.e. ... cars and trucks, music and audio equipment, fads, clothes, decorating, campus events.
- (3) History
- (4) Travel
- (5) Cultural Arts (even a report on your library's most requested books)
- (6) Consumer economics (handling money, getting the most for your buck)
- (7) Services (what's available in the community to help people and how people being served can help agencies do a better job, e.g. prevent fires, join PTA, use zip code, etc.)
- (8) The animal world (caring for pets and wildlife)
- (9) Food (dieting, nutrition, how to prepare food)

- (10) Health care (how to take care of yourself, what professional services are available).
- (11) Music (trends, what's new, what's popular, what's unusual)
- (12) Hobbies (the traditional and the unusual)
- (13) Hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation
- (14) Athletic Activities (participator sports)

If you have ever wondered about something or needed to know how to do something, then you have material for a feature report. Listen to what people are talking about in casual conversations. Feature stories brighten up the local news segment and help attract a younger audience. People listen to features, and getting your audience to pay close attention is vital to the success of the newsradio format.

Start with the premise that practically anything that anyone in your community is involved with is potential grist for a story or a feature.

You'll never run short of material ... and the longer you work at it, the more often the really worthwhile "behind-the-scenes" and unexpected newsmakers will actually seek you out.