

The Norman Lear  
**CENTERTAINMENT**  
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## **SPORTS & WEATHER, CRIME, FLUFF DOMINATE L.A. TV NEWS**

New Study Shows Local Government Coverage Suffers: Only 1.9% of News Hole

*More L.A. Government News in L.A. Times, But Not Much More: 3.3%*

LOS ANGELES, California (March 11, 2010) – Los Angeles may be hemorrhaging red ink, but “if it bleeds it leads” doesn’t apply to news coverage of its fiscal woes. Though crime led local TV news in Los Angeles on one out of three broadcasts, stories about L.A.’s budget crisis topped local news only one time out of 100.

An average half-hour of L.A. local news packed all its local government coverage – including budget, law enforcement, education, layoffs, new ordinances, voting procedures, personnel changes, city and county government actions on health care, transportation and immigration – into 22 seconds.

But crime stories filled 7 times more of the broadcast, averaging 2:50. Sports and weather took the most time: 3:36. Soft news – human interest, oddball stories and miscellaneous fluff – took up the next-largest chunk after crime, averaging 2:26.

The findings come from a study of nearly 1,000 half-hours of local news on 8 stations in the L.A. media market: KABC, KCAL, KCBS, KCOP, KNBC, KTLA, KTTV and the Spanish-language KMEX. The study, released today by the **Norman Lear Center** at the **USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism**, and sponsored by the **Los Angeles Civic Alliance**, recorded all local news programs, round-the-clock, on 14 days in August and September 2009. Over 11,000 news stories were analyzed.

A companion study of the *Los Angeles Times* on the same 14 days was also carried out.

Other highlights of the TV findings:

- Coverage of business and the economy in Los Angeles averaged 29 seconds. Teasers (“coming up on the Southland’s best news...”) lasted more than four times that amount (2:10).
- The time spent on ads (8:25), teasers, and sports and weather takes up nearly half of a typical half-hour of local news. Of the time left for everything else (15:44), almost half (8:17) was made up of stories taking place *outside* the L.A. media market.
- If you add up all the time given to all stories focused on L.A. government, business and economy; all crime-related stories of civic importance (e.g., rewards offered, public corruption, police shootings); all stories about people dealing with local issues like traffic and the environment; all local public health news; and all coverage of the L.A. wildfires and water main breaks (which occurred during the study’s sample), all that news combined took up about 4 minutes of a composite half-hour.

“All the L.A. TV stations tell the FCC that they’re serving the local public interest,” said **Martin Kaplan**, USC Annenberg professor and Lear Center director, who was principal investigator on the project, along with Seton Hall professor **Matthew Hale**. “These numbers decode what they actually mean by that.” He added, “Local television is a profitable business, despite the recession, and newscasts are a big reason why. If stations spend only 22 seconds covering local government, they must really believe it’s ratings poison.”

“There is serious cause for concern here,” said Manatt, Phelps & Phillips attorney **George Kieffer**, who is a member of the **Los Angeles Civic Alliance**. “Most people get their local news from television. If local television isn’t doing the job, we can hardly expect our citizens to be aware of what is going on with our governments.” Kieffer said that he expected the civic community now to begin to weigh in on license renewals based on the degree of local hard news coverage.

Local TV used 1.9% of its news hole – total time, minus ads and teasers – to cover L.A. government. The *L.A. Times* news hole – total space, minus ads and teasers – used 3.3%.

Other comparisons between print and TV on the 14 days of the study:

- The *L.A. Times* devoted 10% of its front page stories to local government, compared to 2.5% of TV news lead stories about it.
- The paper allocated 7.8% of its news hole to L.A. business and economy, compared to TV’s 2.3%. Six percent of the *Times*’s front page stories focused on local business and economy, compared to 0.5% TV leads about L.A. business/economy.

- TV spent 9 times more of its news hole on soft, odd, and miscellaneous stories, and almost three times more on crime, than the paper. Fourteen percent of the paper's front page stories were about crime, compared to more than a third of TV's lead stories.

Differences among the 8 TV stations emerged. Among them:

- KCOP carried the most crime, more than 5 minutes per half-hour, compared to an average of 2:50. KNBC and KCBS spent the least time on crime.
- The most entertainment news, about double the average, was on KTTV (over 4 minutes). The least was on KCAL (0:42). KTTV also ran the most stories coded as soft, odd or miscellaneous (3:26); the least in that category was on KABC (1:52) and KCBS (1:31).
- KCAL carried the most coverage of local government (49 seconds in a half-hour) and of the local economy and business (0:46).
- KNBC and KCBS aired the most coverage of the L.A. wildfires and water main breaks. KMEX aired the least.
- KMEX spent 6 times more time covering international news than the average of the 7 English-language stations.

A full report of the findings can be found at [www.learcenter.org/pdf/LALocalNews2010.pdf](http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/LALocalNews2010.pdf).

**The Norman Lear Center** is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center studying and shaping the impact of entertainment and media on society. From its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Lear Center builds bridges between faculty who study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. For more information, visit [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org)

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