

## TV Adwatch Stories: On The Rise

Results of a survey of TV news directors

Conducted by Bob Papper, Hofstra University, for the Annenberg Public Policy Center, summer 2007

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A survey of TV news directors finds that more and more stations are running adwatch type stories ... and even more plan to do so in the upcoming election cycle.

### Among the findings:

- **More stations are running adwatch type stories.** Of the local TV stations responding to our survey, 38.8 percent said they ran adwatch type stories in the 2005/2006 election cycle, up sharply from the 5.7 percent who said they had run such stories a decade earlier.
- **The upward trend will continue:** 45.6 percent of respondents say they'll run adwatch type stories in the next election ... with another 34.2 percent unsure.
- **Viewers like adwatch stories:** Nearly half (49.2 percent) of news directors who ran them reported positive viewer reaction, including 13.6 percent who said reaction was *strongly* positive. Only 3.4 percent reported moderately negative reaction, and none said they encountered strongly negative responses. About half said reaction was neutral.
- **Adwatch stories boost community standing:** Almost two-thirds of news directors (64.5 percent) reported that adwatch type stories improved the reputation of the station in the community, and 85.5 percent labeled it good journalism.
- **Adwatch stories can be good for ratings:** One-third of news directors say adwatch type stories increased viewership ... and the rest say viewership remained the same.
- **State races get the most attention:** Stations that ran adwatch stories most often said they critiqued ads in state-level elections (67.7 percent) ... with U.S. House (48.4 percent) and U.S. Senate (46.8 percent) next ... followed closely by state ballot issues (43.5 percent) and local elections (40.3 percent).
- **Stations assign a pro:** Adwatch type stories were usually done by one, experienced reporter – typically a reporter with more than 10 years experience.

**Note:** These results are based on responses of 161 news directors who responded to the survey. We believe the survey provides strong evidence of an upward trend in this type of reporting, and valuable insight into the experience of stations that run such stories. However, this should not be mistaken for a scientific sample of all 777 TV news stations that originate local news. We believe news directors who run adwatch stories may have been more likely to respond to our query and follow-ups than news directors who don't run them. For that reason, it is likely that somewhat less than 38.8 percent of *all* local TV news departments ran adwatch stories in 2006, for example.

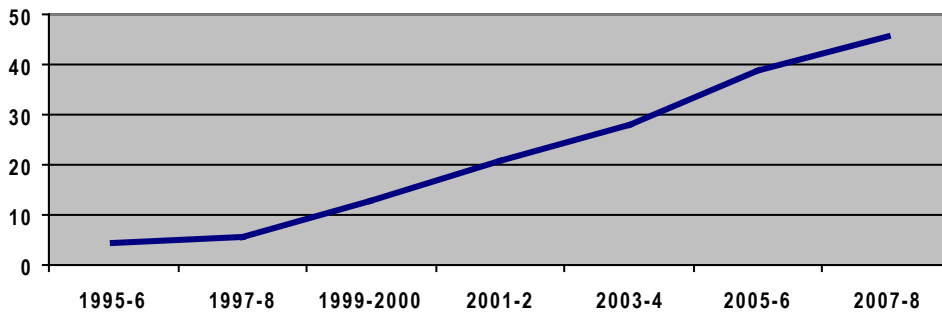
**Methodology:** The adwatch survey was sent to all 777 TV news directors at stations which originate local news. A follow-up fax was sent to every news director who didn't respond to the mailing, and a follow-up email was sent to every news director who didn't respond to the mailing or the fax.

A total of 161 news directors returned the mail or fax survey or filled out the online version. The news directors participating represented an even distribution based on market size. Network affiliation was representative of the total station population, but stations in the northeast were slightly underrepresented.

## The details:

### More and more TV stations are running adwatch type stories.

Percentage of responding TV stations running adwatch type stories\*



\*2007-8 projected based on news director plans, with another 34.2 percent saying they're unsure

Almost 40 percent (38.8 percent) of responding stations report running adwatch type stories in the last election cycle. In the upcoming election, even more plan to run adwatch type stories: 45.6 percent said yes, with another 34.2 percent unsure.

The trend is more pronounced in larger cities. More than half the responding news directors in the top 100 markets say they plan to run adwatch type stories in the upcoming election cycle.

### Stations are running more adwatch stories

Of those that ran adwatch stories, the average station aired 8.4 reports. The median number was 6. One station reported running 54 adwatch type stories. Stations in the top 100 markets averaged 9.3 with a median of 7; stations in smaller markets averaged 4.7 with a median of 4.

NBC affiliates ran more adwatch type stories, with an average 10.8 versus 6.6 for all the other network affiliates and 5.0 for other commercial stations. Stations in the South ran fewer stories, averaging 6.1 versus 9.4 in the rest of the country.

Overall, 38.3 percent of responding news directors report running more adwatch stories in the last election cycle than they did in the past, while just 10.0 percent say the number was lower, and 51.7 percent say it was unchanged.

Of the stations that plan to run adwatch stories, almost two-thirds (62.9 percent) say they'll run more of them than they did last time. Only 2.9 percent said they expect to run fewer adwatch type stories.

## **Stations are most likely to check state and local political ads**

State elections were the ones most commonly targeted: 67.7 percent of stations that ran adwatch stories ran at least one about a state-level race. That was followed by U.S. House (48.2 percent), U.S. Senate (43.5 percent) state ballot issues (43.5 percent) and local elections (40.3 percent).

## **Stations call these stories by a variety of names**

The most common name for the stories is *Truth Test* (38.5 percent), followed by *Ad Watch* (23.1 percent) and *Fact Check* (5.1 percent). 33.3 percent used other, assorted names.

ABC, NBC and Fox stations most often used *Truth Test*; CBS stations split between *Truth Test* and *Ad Watch*. Only ABC affiliates reported using *Fact Check*.

## **News directors say viewers like adwatch type stories**

Stations experiencing positive viewer reaction to adwatch stories eclipsed the handful to reported negative reaction. Of those news directors who ran adwatch stories, 49.2 reported positive reaction (including 13.6 who reported “strong positive” reaction), while only 3.4 percent reported negative reaction, and none reported “strong negative.” There were 47.5 percent reporting neutral response.

A third of the news directors who ran adwatch stories (32.8 percent) said they increased viewership, with the other two-thirds reporting no change. Not one news director thought the stories resulted in fewer viewers. News directors in the largest markets, 1-25, were the most likely to say that adwatch type stories increased viewership (53.3 percent)

Almost two-thirds of news directors who ran adwatch stories (64.5 percent) reported that they improved the reputation of the station in the community, with 80.0 percent of the news directors in the top 25 markets reporting an enhanced reputation. Not a single news director reported that adwatch type stories hurt the station’s reputation.

News directors varied on what kind of viewers adwatch stories attract. A third (32.4 percent) said they attracted more highly valued viewers, 0.7 percent said they attracted less highly valued viewers. Almost half (46.8 percent) said they attracted the same viewers, with 17.3 percent saying they didn’t attract viewers at all, and 2.9 percent saying they repelled viewers.

## **Most stations use one, experienced reporter for their adwatch type stories**

In almost three-quarters of the cases (73.8 percent), one person was responsible for the adwatch stories, and that person was experienced. Over 70 percent (70.8 percent) said the one person had more than 10 years experience, and 20.8 percent reported that the person had 5-10 years of experience.

## **Political campaigns sometimes encourage adwatch type stories ... try to use them to their advantage ... and often distort them in their own ads.**

43.6 percent of TV news directors who ran adwatch stories said that one side in an election encouraged the station to run them. No station reported running adwatch type ads on just one side in response to such a request. Stations either ran adwatch ads on both sides (78.1 percent) or didn’t run any (21.9 percent).

Adwatch findings are often quoted by one side or the other in later political ads: 29.0 percent of TV news directors who ran adwatches reported that one side in an election used the material for their own ads. Another 14.5 percent of news directors didn’t know. This happens most commonly in the largest markets (1-25), where 46.7 percent of news directors reported that a campaign used their adwatch material, and 13.3 percent didn’t know.

News directors report that campaigns using adwatch findings often distort them. In two-thirds of the cases where campaigns used adwatch type material in political ads (68.4 percent), news directors said the stations' findings were accurately reported, but in 31.6 percent of the cases the campaign ads did not accurately reflect the station's findings.

### **Few news directors felt pressured NOT to run adwatch type stories**

News directors reported that there have been few pressures from outside not to run adwatch type stories: only 3.8 percent reported pressure from politicians not to run the stories, and just 1.9 percent reported pressure from businesses or advertisers not to run them.

### **News directors say they run adwatch type stories because they enhance the station's reputation, and they're good journalism**

Why run adwatch type stories? More than half (55.6 percent) of TV news directors reported that they ran them out of a sense of responsibility to viewers. 27.8 percent reported that it's popular and enhances the station's reputation ... and 27.8 percent that it's good journalism.

Overall, 85.5 percent of TV news directors labeled adwatch stories as good journalism; only one said it was bad journalism.

### **Most news directors who don't run adwatch type stories say they just don't have the staff or resources to do it**

Half of those who responded to why they didn't run adwatch type stories say they don't have the staff to do it, and a quarter reported a general lack of resources. A few said viewers should make up their own minds, and one news director said that adwatch stories usually have an agenda.

## The survey

### Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania

News Director:

The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania is conducting a short survey about “adwatch” type stories on political ads to see whether stations are running these kinds of stories and, if so, to gauge viewer response. The survey will take less than 5 minutes to complete, and your answers will be completely confidential.

We define a political “adwatch” story as one in which a reporter or anchor characterizes the content of a campaign commercial, issue ad or other political spot with such terms as “accurate,” “inaccurate,” “true,” “false,” “misleading,” or “not the whole story.” We do not include in our definition stories which merely report accusations by one side or another that an opponent’s ad is untrue, or stories in which a reporter or anchor reports on the content of a political spot or the strategy behind it. We’re only interested in reports in which there was an independent judgment of a spot’s accuracy or truthfulness.

1. Did your station run any “adwatch” type stories in the most recent election cycle (2005/2006)? (circle one)
- |     |       |
|-----|-------|
| YES | 38.8% |
| NO  | 61.2% |

**(If NO, skip to Q2)**

a. How many? \_\_\_\_\_ Avg: 8.4 Median: 6.0

b. Was that number: (circle one)

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| • Higher than in previous election cycles? | 38.3% |
| • Less than in previous election cycles?   | 10.0  |
| • About the same?                          | 51.7  |

a. If you labeled/branded these stories (for example, “Channel 1 AdWatch”) by what name did you call them in 2005/2006? \_\_\_\_\_

Truth Test	38.5%
Ad Watch	23.1
Fact Check	5.1
Other	33.3

b. What kinds of ads were critiqued? (circle all that apply)

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| • US House Election Campaign (candidate, party or other)        | 48.4% |
| • US Senate Election Campaign                                   | 46.8  |
| • State Election Campaign                                       | 67.7  |
| • Local Election  | 40.3  |
| • Federal Issue (ex: Supreme Court nomination; Social Security) | 4.8   |
| • State Ballot Issue  | 43.5  |
| • State Issue, non-ballot.                                      | 6.5   |

a. How would you characterize the amount of viewer response (1 = no reaction, 5 = substantial reaction):

1	2	3	4	5
12.9%	21.0	30.6	29.0	6.5

b. How would you characterize the tenor of viewer reaction (1 = strong negative, 5 = strong positive):

1	2	3	4	5
0.0%	3.4	47.5	35.6	13.6

c. How would you characterize news staff reaction (1 = strong negative, 5 = strong positive):

1	2	3	4	5
0.0%	3.2	27.4	41.9	27.4

h. Has one side of a political campaign (issue or candidate) encouraged you to run "adwatch" stories on the other side? (circle one)

YES, frequently	YES, occasionally	NO
6.5%	37.1	56.5

i. If yes, did you end up running an "adwatch" report? (circle one)

YES, on one side	YES, on both or all sides	NO
0.0%	78.1	21.9

j. Has a campaign ever used material or information from your "adwatch" report in an ad for that campaign? (circle one)

YES	29.0%	NO	56.5	Don't know	14.5
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k. If yes, did the ad(s) accurately characterize your findings?

YES	68.4%	NO	31.6
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l. Was one person primarily responsible for reporting the "adwatch" stories? (circle one)

YES	73.8%	NO	26.2
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m. If "yes," how many years of reporting experience did that person have? (circle one)

- Less than 5 8.3%
- 5 to 10 20.8
- More than 10 70.8

n. What effect do you personally believe that your "adwatch" stories had on the number of viewers who watch your newscasts? (circle one)

- Increased viewership 32.8%
- Decreased viewership 0.0
- No change in viewership 67.2

o. What effect do you personally believe that your "adwatch" stories had on the reputation of the station in your community?

- Improved reputation 64.5%
- Damaged reputation 0.0
- No difference 35.5

Why? no additional response

2. Does the station intend to run "adwatch" type stories in the current election cycle (2007/2008)? (circle one)  
YES 45.6% NO 20.3 Don't know 34.2

a. Why or why not?

Why: Responsibility to viewers 55.6%  
Enhances reputation/Popular 27.8  
Good journalism 27.8

Why not: General lack of resources 25.0%  
Lack of staff 50.0  
Viewers should make up own mind 16.7  
Adwatch stories usually have an agenda 8.3

Reasons for doubt about running adwatch stories:

Depends on resources 36.8%  
Depends on the ads being run 36.8  
Depends on staff availability 26.3  
Depends on whether there is something to cover locally 5.3

b. (If "Yes"): How many, compared to 2005/2006? (circle one)

- More 62.9%
- Fewer 2.9
- About the same 34.3

3. Did your station run "adwatch" stories prior to 2005/2006? (circle one)  
YES 34.4% NO 40.1 Don't know 25.5

(If "NO," skip to Q4)

a. (If "Yes"): When? (circle all that apply)

- 2003/2004 81.5%
- 2001/2002 61.1
- 1999/2000 37.0
- 1997/1998 16.7
- 1995/1996 13.0
- 1993/1994 9.3
- 1992 or prior 5.6

4. Some people have said that politicians or advertisers apply pressure to stations NOT to run "adwatch" type stories.

a. Have you felt pressure from any politician not to run "adwatch" type stories? (circle one)

YES 3.8%                      NO 93.6                      UNSURE 2.5

Explain: no response

b. Have you felt pressure from any business advertiser not to run "adwatch" type stories? (circle one)

YES 1.9%                      NO 94.2                      UNSURE 3.8

Explain: no response

c. When working on "adwatch" reports, have political campaigns been: (circle one)

- Generally cooperative and helpful                      29.8%
- Generally uncooperative and defensive                      7.4
- Varied a lot from campaign to campaign                      62.8

5. Some people have said that "adwatch" stories are bad journalism; that journalists should just let candidates fight it out and leave judgments about the truth or accuracy of their ads to the public. Do you personally believe that "adwatch" stories are:

- Good journalism                      85.5%
- Bad journalism                      0.6
- No opinion                      13.5

6. Considering the demographics of your news viewership, do you believe "adwatch" stories :

- Attract viewers who are more highly valued by advertisers                      32.4%
- Attract viewers who are less highly valued by advertisers                      0.7
- Attract viewers with about the same demographics as before                      46.8
- Don't attract viewers at all                      17.3
- Repel viewers                      2.9

Your answers will be kept completely confidential, but if you would like to comment further on the issue -- either on or off the record -- please provide your name, phone number and email:

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Please mail the survey in the enclosed postage page envelope or fax it to: Bob Papper at Ball State University at 765-285-3597.

Note that Bob Papper is now professor and associate chair of journalism at Hofstra University and can be reached at 516-463-5226 ... [bob.papper@hofstra.edu](mailto:bob.papper@hofstra.edu).