

What 187 Papers Did With Kennedy Story

By Robert E. Thomas

- Mr. Tolson _____
- Mr. Belmont _____
- Mr. Mohr _____
- Mr. DeLoach _____
- Mr. Casper _____
- Mr. Callahan _____
- Mr. Conrad _____
- Mr. Felt _____
- Mr. Gale _____
- Mr. Rosen _____
- Mr. Sullivan _____
- Mr. Tavel _____
- Mr. Trotter _____
- Tele. Room _____
- Miss Holmes _____
- Miss Gandy _____

(This article is a condensed version of a master's thesis which Mr. Thomas wrote for the University of Florida, School of Journalism and Communications.)

At 1:31 p.m. EST on Friday, November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was shot while riding in a motorcade through Dallas. Twenty-nine minutes later he was dead. Never before had a news event the scope of a presidential assassination occurred at a time and place when such a full-developed mass media system could offer it instant and complete coverage.

The 187 papers in this study include 175 Saturday morning papers or over 56% of all the nation's morning dailies existing at the time of the incident. Twelve papers in the study are Saturday afternoon papers and one is a weekly published on Saturdays.

Saturday papers were chosen because it was thought editors had both ample time and news material. Thus coverage of this event should have represented some of the best newspaper coverage of our time.

Headlines

PART I
Of the 187 newspapers, editors thought up 154 different main headlines. Only 33 papers carried a main or lead headline duplicated by at least one other paper and only 11 main headlines were exactly worded. The most-duplicated headline was **PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED**, used seven times. In all, 187 headlines used 1,142 words or an average of 6.1 words per headline.

The most-used word in the headlines was **PRESIDENT**, used 90 times, followed by **ASSASSINATE** (or form thereof) used 89 times, and **KENNEDY**, used 88 times. **JOHNSON** was used 57 times.

The longest headline went to the *Fairmont* (W. Va.) *Times*, and had 21 words:

LYNDON JOHNSON TAKES OATH AS 36th PRESIDENT AFTER DALLAS ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY; YOUTH, AVOWED MARXIST, CHARGED WITH RIFLE-SLAYING

This headline had nine more words than the most-used AP lead of the day. The shortest headline was none at all. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* used an eight-column by 1 1/2 inch face shot of Kennedy under which was a one-word 24-point outline reading "Martyr."

RAV...
B...

5-1-63

50 SEP 25 1965

Editor & Publisher
September 18, 1965
NOT RECORDED
170 SEP 28 1965
62-11360-11
62-109060

Five categories of headlines were used.

1. Headlines leading with or consisting entirely of a declarative statement that Kennedy was dead. (used 108 times) Example: *Los Angeles Times* — **KENNEDY ASSASSINATED.**

2. Headlines leading with or consisting entirely of the fact that Oswald had been charged. (used 36 times) Example: *San Jose Mercury* — **PRO-RED CHARGED AS JFK ASSASSIN.**

3. A general feature or "soft-sell" headline. (used 28 times) Example: *Morning Call* (Paterson, N. J.) — **A NATION MOURNS; also *Daily Enterprise* (Riverside, Calif.) — "ASK YOUR HELP, AND GOD'S"**

4. Headlines leading with or consisting entirely of a statement that Johnson had taken over. (used nine times) Example: *Knoxville Journal* — **JOHNSON ASSUMES PRESIDENCY AFTER ASSASSINATION OF KENNEDY.**

5. Headlines leading with or consisting entirely of the news concerning funeral arrangements for Kennedy. (used five times) Example: *Eric Daily Times* — **Kennedy's Rites Will Be Held Monday.**

Flat Statements

One question raised from the above breakdown, is why so many editors used a flat statement in their main headline that the event took place. Several research studies show that within eight hours of the shooting, some 90% of the population knew of it. Yet these Saturday papers in the study were being read mostly Saturday morning, or at least 16 hours after the event. The vast majority of the public, studies show, learned of the event 1. by word of mouth; 2. by radio and television the day before. It would seem then in this case, a declarative statement such as **KENNEDY SHOT** would not be news in the true sense, but only telling people what they already knew. Perhaps groups two through five

would serve a better news function.

"Second Coming" Type Perhaps on its way Out?

The main or lead headline that day varied some 200 points from as small as 48 point (*Springfield, Ohio, Sun*) (and others) to approximately 240 points in the *Walla Walla Union Bulletin*. The most-used type size was 72 points (51 times), followed by 60 point (31 times). An interesting note here perhaps would be that papers using a very large type size — over 100 points — numbered only 39, or about 20% of the sample. Newspapers, as a rule, showed reserve in limiting point size of main headlines. There were 97 papers, or well over half, that used a main headline one inch or less in point size.

Some 173 papers (93%) used a banner headline. The study also showed editors have a strong preference for two-line main headlines (114 or 61.3%). Sixty-three used a single line main head. Only nine used a three-line head.

111 newspapers used exclusively upper case letters, while the remaining 75 used both upper and lower case in their main headline. None used an all-down style approach.

Editors seem in favor of placing their main headline below the logotype. Four out of five followed this practice.

Six papers, mostly smaller in circulation, used red in headlines.

PART II

Treatment of Oswald— A Villain is Hanged

Particular interest could be paid the treatment of Oswald after he had been charged. Oswald was referred to directly by 28 terms in main headlines alone, and it is suggested, many of these terms at the time of publication may have constituted libel.

Terms Given Oswald

- a. Killer
- b. suspect
- c. assassin
- d. defector
- e. Castro Sympathizer
- f. Pro-Castro leader
- g. Marxist
- h. Pro-Red
- i. Man
- j. Youth
- k. Avowed Marxist
- l. Prisoner
- m. Texan
- n. Assassin Suspect
- o. Slayer
- p. Red Castro Ally
- q. Slaying Suspect
- r. Oswald

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Kennedy Story

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- s. Rifleman With Russian Leaning
- t. Ex-U.S. Marine
- u. Prime Suspect
- v. "Red"
- w. Fort Worth Man
- x. Admirer of Russia
- y. Red Sympathizer
- z. Mysterious Character
- a. Pro-Castroite
- b. Accused Slayer

Local News Story—A Must

There were 172 or 93% of the papers that carried a local news reaction story. Ninety carried a local story on page one. Only 14 papers, 10 under 15,000 circulation, failed to carry such a story. This perhaps indicates a primary purpose of newspapers today — that of localizing the big story. Most papers simply resorted to sending out a reporter to collect the man in the street's views, while other called local officials to record their feelings and notify the public of postponed events, etc.

Wire Copy

The Saturday papers in this study seemed to show a strong preference for AP copy as the

number one story (accompanying the main or largest headline). Of the 187 papers studied, 119 used an AP story as their number one story. Only 43 used an UPI story in the top spot. The remaining papers used combinations or their own correspondents' accounts. Leads to the stories were generally short, to the point. The most-used lead in the study was written by Frank Cormier of the AP. Only 12 words, it read:

DALLAS (AP) — A hidden gunman assassinated President Kennedy with a high-powered rifle Friday.

The next most-used lead was also written by Cormier.

DALLAS (AP) — A gunman assassinated President Kennedy from ambush Friday with a high-powered rifle. Nearly 12 hours later, a 24-year-old man who professed a love for Russia was charged with his murder.

These two leads together captured the top spot in 88 of the 187 papers.

Front Page Editorial— Not A Thing of the Past

Forty-six papers (24.6%) used a page one editorial. These included many large papers such as *Boston Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Los*

Angelen Times, *New York Times*, and others.

Many editors quoted Scripture, others poetry, still others great men. Majority praised Kennedy, several called him a martyr. Many blamed hatred, prejudice or misunderstanding for sparking the event. Many were written in the "heat of battle" so-to-speak and were thus emotion-packed, tending to oversimplify issues and show lack of objectivity.

A noted reserve appeared from Southern editors in areas where anti-Kennedy sentiment was predominant.

Drop Headlines

169 papers used some form of a drop head leading into the body type of the number one story. Drop heads ranged from a single-column 24 point to banner 72 point (*Miami Herald*). Average column width for primary dropheads was 3.3 columns. Most-used type size for drop heads was 36 point, used 73 times. Next favorite was 30 point, used 30 times and 48 times, used 29 times.

Countless square inches of pictures graphically told the assassination story. Papers averaged 2.79 pictures per front page. The most-used photo was a face shot of Kennedy, used 102 times. Next was Cecil Stoughton's photo of Johnson being sworn in on the plane, used 65 times.

Most popular column width for body type in the main-story was two columns, used 54 times. The *Miami Herald* and *Ashtville Citizen*, however, both ran their number one story body type across banner width. Most popular body type point size was 9-point, used 43 times, followed by 12 point at 37 times and eight point was used 18 times. Papers averaged 6.59 stories per front page.

Most-Typical Page

A two-line, banner 72 point main headline in caps and lower case above the logo, making a declarative statement that Kennedy was dead. Under this, a two-line, three-column, 36 point primary drop head followed by a two-column 10 point body type story by AP. On the page, 6.58 stories, all of Kennedy, plus a local reaction story. Also, somewhere was a Kennedy editorial.