
Restating news values: contemporary criteria for selecting the news

Judy McGregor
Massey University

Journalism faces a crisis of faith, pressured by technological change, market forces and its own loss of confidence. Journalism must reassess its fundamental tenets. This paper modernises an important aspect of journalism theory, news values.

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) twelve factors define the conditions that had to be present to heighten the probability that a given event would become news. The question is: should this seminal work on news selection be the last word?

This paper argues that news values need to reflect the dramatic, profound changes to the mediascape. A new hierarchy of newsworthiness with four new news values is proposed. A restatement of fundamental theory will not of itself return journalism to a Golden Age but it will better equip journalism educators and student/ practitioners to face the 21st Century.

Here's how television headlines the day's top stories:

“A terrible twist of fate or a new terrorist attack? Disaster again rains from the skies over New York.”

“Afghanistan's opposition rolls on into the capital after striking back at the Taliban.”

“Two lonely lions after a second death linked to poison meat causes uproar at Wellington Zoo.”

“And desperate for Robbie—how the newly crooning sex symbol left Kiwi fans on a high note”.

These were the headlines from Television New Zealand's main news hour on November 13, 2001. So how were lions, a crooning sex

symbol, terrorism and war chosen to be news?

Newsworthiness is fascinating and mysterious in equal parts. A curious public is intrigued to know on what basis news is selected and presented. Journalists, on the other hand, are protective of their news values and only reluctantly publicly account for the values that underwrite what's news. This chapter asks whether old theories about news values are relevant and suggests four “new” news values that are currently in use.

Theory of newsworthiness

Remarkably scholarship about news values has endured uncritically since Galtung and Ruge's (1965) famously perceptive typology of twelve factors. They said the more an event satisfied particular conditions the more likely it would be selected as news. The conditions included the eight general factors of *frequency*, *threshold* including *absolute intensity* and *intensity increase*, *unambiguity*, *meaningfulness* including *cultural proximity* and *relevance*, *consonance* involving both *predictability* and *demand*, *unexpectedness* including *unpredictability* and *scarcity*, *continuity* and *composition*.

For example, it was proposed that the more similar the frequency of the event was to the frequency of the news medium, the more probable that it would be recorded as news by that news medium. An event had to reach a threshold before it became news. Intensity and absolute intensity related to the simple proposition that, say, the more violent the murder the bigger the headlines. The more clarity and less ambiguity the more the event would be noticed, and meaningfulness had two elements; the degree to which ethnocentrism would be operative and the degree of cultural proximity. Relevance refers to the level of meaning implied for news

audiences even if an event happened in a culturally distant place. Foot and mouth epidemics in Europe are highly relevant for agriculturally-based economies such as New Zealand, for example, and are likely to be selected as news despite geographical remoteness of the disease outbreaks.

Four culture-bound factors influencing the transition from events to news were also identified as being important in western developed countries by Galtung and Ruge (1965). These were the more the event concerned elite nations, the more probable that it would become a news item. Similarly, the more the event referred to elite people the more likely it would be chosen as news and if an event can be personalised or personified it has heightened newsworthiness. The criterion of negativity has been popularised in the concept of “bad news sells”, which is no less real for being a cliché.

The twelve factors are not independent of each other and are inter-related. Negative news was said to be more consonant with at least some dominant pre-images of the time and was more unexpected than positive news. Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts (1978) state that events which score high on all of the dimensions such as the Kennedy assassinations which were unexpected, dramatic, negative, involved elite people from an elite nation, and were personalised, have a special status in terms of newsworthiness. In more modern times the Kennedy assassinations are eclipsed in the hierarchy of news, using these dimensions, by the death of Lady Diana, Princess of Wales. A modern example is the coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York (September 11, 2001).

While Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) theory is not “modern” it has not been critically challenged since it was written. The typology has been simplified (Tiffen, 1989) and dressed in ideological trappings (Hall et al:) but it remains fundamentally unaltered. Hall et al: writing about crime, for example, identified an aspect of negativity, violence, as the primary news value with a special status.

Thirty-five years on the question is: should this seminal work on news selection, based as it was on the psychology of perception, be the last word? The ubiquity of television, for example, was unimaginable when the two European researchers examined the structure of foreign news in newspapers in 1965. In 1962 television was sufficiently underdeveloped that American Defense Secretary Robert McNamara did not turn on a television set during the two weeks of the Cuban missile crisis (Hoge, 1994). Nor was the increasingly commercial rationale of the news media, fuelled in part by global media conglomeration, popularly predicted. Changed social and cultural dynamics, audience demands, the broad sweep of technological innovation and convergence were simply beyond the scope of imagination and the scholarship of the time. The potent challenge to the pre-eminence of “old” news formats by “new” news formats was also outside the comprehension of previous theory development about newsworthiness.

The adequacy of the existing typology

Journalists do not adhere to formal codes of newsworthiness that can be identified and promulgated and therefore “learnt” by the public. Instead the informal code of what constitutes a good story is part of newsroom initiation and socialisation. Affirmation for “good stories” is confirmed in the newsroom by the acknowledgement of superiors and by peer envy and praise. Meadows and Ewart (2001) note journalists take their cues for reporting the news from the editorial hierarchy rather than the community. A lack of self-reflexivity within journalism itself does not suggest, though, that either the composition or the hierarchy of news values remains unchanged. Far from it, quite radical change has been driven largely by the influence of television on other news formats, a factor less significant in Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) thinking.

While arguably the majority of their criteria remain salient as part of a contemporary view of news values, at least

one criterion needs modernising. When Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified frequency they concentrated particularly on newspaper dailies to suggest that the more similar the frequency of the event is to the frequency of the news medium, the more probable that it will be recorded as news by that news medium. By the frequency of an event they referred to the time-span needed for the event to unfold itself and acquire meaning. The rise of live, real-time news made notorious by O.J.Simpson on a Los Angeles motorway courtesy of satellite means the synchronicity of events/news has overtaken asynchronous media cycles where the news follows the event. Real-time news began to increase dramatically in live television coverage of international crises with CNN's coverage of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Since then, camcorders in the hands of the general public enlarge the capacity for real-time recording (Morse, 1998). Some of the most compelling and poignant footage of the terrorist attacks in the United States was provided by medical and emergency staff and other rescue workers, such as Dr Mark Heath, who were in behind security cordons with their video cameras. A consequence of real-time news is the collapse of reflective time required by audiences to acquire meaning. The viewing public needs to be instantaneously cued. As far as television news is concerned, the psychology of perception competes with the psychology of the image (Forrester, 2000).

Four new news values

The four new news values proposed as additional criteria against which news is selected are television-driven, impacting on other news formats. They are:

- ? visualness
- ? emotion
- ? conflict
- ? the “celebrification” of the journalist.

Visualness

Perhaps the most dominant news value of our times is visualness. The thesis is that the more the event satisfies the criteria of visualness the more likely the event will be selected as news. The contention moves beyond mere aesthetic considerations. It suggests that the presence or absence of visualness, and the ability of journalists to “get pictures” determines whether an event is selected as news. The hypothesis is as simple as suggesting that an earthquake killing 1000 people in remote Siberia will be not covered as well as an earthquake killing ten people in London, unless by some chance the Siberian disaster was captured in film or a survivor had access to a television studio. Visualness as a primary, elite news value acknowledges the special power of presenting news through pictures. The visual dominates and as Dondis (1973) suggests, language-dominated culture has moved perceptibly toward the iconic.

The primacy of visualness in the selection of one event from another in television news has been widely acknowledged by critics and practitioners in most western developed countries. David Altheide (1987) states that “the upshot is that news content is limited and influenced by access and opportunity to obtain relevant visuals” (cited in Barnhurst & Steele, 1997, p. 54). New Zealand television news, for example copies United States trends. New Zealand's former most senior news executive, Paul Cutler, in a rare glimpse into the state broadcaster's operational routines said there will “always be a bias towards a good picture on television as opposed to what we might call a worthy story” (Campbell, 1989, p. 21). Often television news will decide not to do a story because it is the kind of story that would sit better on page six of a metropolitan newspaper. “We say, what pictures have we got for this story?” (Campbell, 1989, p. 21).

Visualness as a news imperative is not confined to television. Grattan (1998) notes that “most newspapers are increasingly design-driven. Design is used to try and attract readers, especially the young and those who want their newspapers to look like magazines” (p. 3). While visualness is driving

the selection of news in television, and forcing catch-up behaviour in newspapers, the visual aspects of television news are not well understood. Griffin (1992) states that "the visual aspects of TV news presentations remain the least scrutinised and the least understood" (p. 122) and is among those calling for "visual analysis". Two scholars who have engaged in visual analysis, Barnhurst and Steele (1997), examined "image-bite news" and looked at the visual coverage of elections on United States television. They talk of "the rise of evanescent news reports, which are more visual by virtue of their swiftness of pacing and reliance on imagery" and "can be judged by its consequences for the public" (p. 55).

Television audiences in kinetic overdrive experience a variety of elements of visualness such as fast-pacing, heightened graphic imagery including computer graphics, rapid cutting, re-cut film or file footage. Included are techniques borrowed from sport coverage such as action replays, slow motion, and freeze frames. Putnis (1994) calls file footage and recut film used again and again in different contexts, "displaced" film. The pervasiveness of its use is particularly apparent in crime news. In coverage of a comprehensively covered murder trial in New Zealand subject to detailed visual analysis in a recent study, 82% of the broadcast news stories in the extensively-covered trial used recycled footage (McGregor, 1999).

Emotion

Related to visualness is the second new news value-emotion. There is nothing new in this suggestion. Aquinas said that images can be used to "excite the emotions, which are more effectively aroused by things seen than by things heard" (Freedberg, 1989). The thesis in this context is that the more an event exhibits an emotional sub-text the more likely that it will be selected as news. This hypothesis links what is selected as news to both the content inherent in the news story and to its reception by the audience. An event intrinsically has heightened emotion when it

involves common news elements such as tragedy, human interest dilemmas, survivors, victims, children, and animals. Equally such events with emotional appeal evoke emotional responses in the audience, a variation of Aristotle's pathos. Some forms of news, particularly television magazine news, have mutated into a passing parade of "tear jerker" stories that are variations on the theme of grief. If the proportion and significance of crime news increases within the available news time or space as current trends suggest, there is likely to be a commensurate increase in the emotional sub text of news.

It is worth noting in passing that the increased level of emotion in the news has not passed without practitioner comment at least to the extent that it impinges on intrusion on grief and privacy and the ethics of death-knock reportage (Germer, 1995). The old piece of cynicism that "if it doesn't bleed, it isn't news" could equally read "If it doesn't cry, it isn't news". A news subject who cries, expresses anger, or is moved to display some other emotion because of the poignancy, frailty or fragility of the human condition is inherently more visually interesting, and therefore has heightened newsworthiness as a source. Perhaps this is not surprising. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) suggest that the highest calling achieved by television news is "the communication not of information or analysis but of raw human experience" (p. 46).

The contention that emotion is a new news value is supported by the frequency that the reporter's question, "how do you feel?", is asked today of news sources. In fact, sources may be both selected and presented in the news precisely because they will publicly share and demonstrate private emotions and do it on cue. The influence of other genres such as radio and television talkback is evident in the personal, psychological perspective routinely expected of news sources. It is apparent, too, that the evolution of reality television with its instant emotional response by participants to the lived games of rejection, eviction, winning, losing, and courtship rituals, will impact on the level of

emotion in stories selected and presented as news.

Conflict

At one level conflict can be regarded as a permutation of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) criterion of negativity. However, it is not conflict as an outcome that concerns us in this discussion. The hypothesis goes further and suggests that the dynamics of televised political news in particular is driven by a conflict format, a more extreme version of Epstein's (1973) "dialectical model" which he described as "storylines follow(ing) a point-counter-point format" (p.69), to the extent that if there is not an A versus B contest there cannot be a studio debate. The conflict format drives the selection and presentation of political news and news of controversial issues. The notion of "balance" subscribed to by broadcasters requires both the incumbent politician and a challenger, the conservative versus the liberal, a yes vote versus a no vote, one political party representative versus another. Without a conflict format the event cannot be news because journalists cannot satisfy notional fairness required by most codes of practice for broadcasting or statements of principle regulating and guiding press behaviour. There can be little ambiguity or "greyness" about the opposing positions represented, otherwise the potential political story will become too complex to be news. Politicians learn early that the clarity of their adversary position and vocabulary marks them out as good news talent. The conflict format therefore imposes on the news what issues are selected, what sources are used and which events are chosen.

"Celebrification" of the journalist

Part of the folklore which underpins popular thinking about journalism is the mythical reporter who conducts an impartial inquiry by asking questions of all sides on behalf of the public. The rationale, for journalism, at least in theory if not practice, is that it is a craft or quasi profession conducted

in the public interest. This notionally separates the journalist from the subjective involvement in the content of the story, and makes the journalist a conduit for news sources and less visible than the subjects of the news. In news media scholarship, of course, the myth of objectivity has been well punctured (Morrison & Tremewan, 1992) and the "star school" in television journalism has been equally well elevated and scrutinised (Gremillion, 1995). Arguments over objectivity aside, what was unimaginable in the 1960s when Galtung and Ruge (1965) were writing, is the dazzling change in the journalist's role whereby television news depends on a personality system (Morse, 1998). Journalistic mediation now dictates both the selection and presentation of many television news stories. This means the news is relying on journalists not just to bring us the news, but to be the news, to be the source of news and its presenter, even though there may be a news programme host who is separate from the journalist.

The more an event involves celebrifying the journalist the more likely it will be selected as news. A particular television technique, the piece to camera, can be partially credited for this new news value. The piece to camera relies on virtual direct address to the viewer and involves reporters in reasserting the significance of their own contribution. The host links to the reporter in a shared conversation without the need for traditional sources who are external to television's institutional order. The piece to camera gives a new twist to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) notion of personalisation. In this case, it is not personalisation of the third party source as they imagined in their conceptualisation, but personalisation of the journalist. The piece to camera turns the reporter from an anonymous voice and conduit into a personality and central actor in the news. The rise and rise of the piece to camera or "the stand-up syndrome" as it was termed by Taylor (1993) sees journalists become sources of news, instant experts marshalling facts, delivering judgements, advancing opinions, talking with authority

and often having both the only word and the last word in news stories.

Rival broadcasters use pieces to camera to establish that they have an active presence at the scene and to differentiate news channels. The pervasiveness of journalistic mediation in news is linked, of course, to commercialism and the way in which television networks have branded themselves through journalistic ownership and identity. To justify the cost, journalists are elevated to a new status that reaches far beyond the parameters of the reporter's function as traditionally conceived. The cost of celebrification is startling. Katie Couric, the host of American's NBC breakfast programme, the Today Show, negotiated a deal of \$65 million over four and a half years (Donegan, 2002). New Zealand is not immune. An excited front page story in the *Sunday Star Times* reported Paul Holmes' new radio breakfast contract is worth \$2 million over five years (Catherall, 2002) on top of his \$650,000 for evening television.

Discussion

At one level the four new news values are so well known they have a taken-for-granted flavour. At another level they propel theory development about news values into the twenty first century. While the concept of newsworthiness will endure as long as there is news, news values are not necessarily immutable. Clearly this discussion side-steps the vigorous debate (Postman, 1987; Hart, 1996; Stephens, 1998) about the effects of these changes not because it is unimportant, but because the intention here has been to dissect current values underpinning news selection rather than worry about its influence.

The four new news values proposed are as intertwined as those original criteria identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) who said that their factors were not independent of each other. The new news values have interesting inter-relationships with each other and with Galtung and Ruge's early factors. For example, Barnhurst and Steele (1997) note that the use of visuals appears to have

increased in response to their power to attract and hold television news audiences. They cite as a beneficiary of visual change "the television journalists, who through appearances acquire celebrity and its rewards" (p. 55). They suggest also that a faster flow of imagery favours certain kinds of information over others: "the simple image over the complex, the *emotional* over the neutral, the conventional over the contrarian" (p. 55, emphasis added). Complex issues pose difficulties for news telling, so if complexity can be reduced by the dramaturgy and rhetoric of adversary then the conflict format will make this into news. Political reporting in particular, in a notional nod to the time-honoured tenet of balance, is secured as news when it can be presented as A versus B (or A versus B and C).

The cumulative effects of new news values need to be added to the existing criteria of negativity, reference to elite people, personification and so on. The more events satisfy the enlarged criteria, the more likely that they will be registered as news. This explains the selection of news. But it is implicit, too, that there is a new hierarchy of news values operating. Hall et al. (1978) pointed to negativity as the elite criterion with violence as an expression of it. The ubiquity of bad news is seldom challenged. But visualness has become the elite news value in modern news. What is selected and presented as news is driven by pictures and their perceptual and iconic power. Negative events with vivid, graphic pictures and an emotional sub-text, often presented with journalistic self-promotion, will be chosen to lead today's news.

References

- Barnhurst, K.G., & Steele, C.A. (1997). Image bite news: The visual coverage of elections on U.S. television, 1968-1992. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2(1), 40-58.
- Campbell, G. (1989, 6 May). Top of the evening. *New Zealand Listener*, 18-21, 34.

- Catherall, S. (2002, February 10). The two million dollar plus man. *Sunday Star Times*, p. 1.
- Donegan, L. (2002, January 24-30). Undisputed queen of breakfast shows. *Guardian Weekly*, p. 21.
- Dondis, D. A. (1973). *A primer of visual literacy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Epstein, E. J. (1973). *News from nowhere: Television and the news*. New York: Random House.
- Forrester, M. (2000). *Psychology of the image*. London: Routledge.
- Freedberg, D. (1989). *The power of images: studies in the history and theory of response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Galtung, J. & Ruge, M. (1965). The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four foreign newspapers. *Journal of International Peace Research*, 1, 64- 90.
- Germer, F. (1995). How do you feel? *American Journalism Review*, 17 (5), 36-42.
- Grattan, M. (1998). Editorial independence: An outdated concept? *Australian Journalism Monographs*, (1). University of Queensland, Department of Journalism.
- Gremillion, J. (1995). On the fast track to network news star school. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 33 (5), 32-35.
- Griffin, M. (1992). Looking at TV news. *Communication*, 13(2), 121-41.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order*. London: MacMillan Education.
- Hart, R. P. (1996, July). Easy citizenship: Television's curious legacy. *The Annals of the American Academy*, (546), 109-119.
- Hoge, J. F. (1994). Media pervasiveness. *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (4), 136-144.
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. (1987). *News that matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meadows, M., & Ewart, J. (2001). More than skin deep: Australia's indigenous heritage. In S. Tapsall & C. Varley (Eds.), *Journalism theory in practice* (pp. 115-130). Australia: Oxford University Press.
- McGregor, J. (1999). Combating, coaxing and coping with the media: A guide for criminal lawyers. In New Zealand Law Society (Eds.), *Dealing with the media* (pp. 21-34). Wellington: New Zealand Law Society.
- Morrison, A., & Tremewan, P. (1992). Objectivity. In M. Comrie & J. McGregor (Eds.), *Whose News?* (pp.114-132). Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Morse, M. (1998). *Virtualities*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Postman, N. (1987). *Amusing ourselves to death*. London: Methuen
- Putnis, P. (1994). *Displaced, recut and recycled: File-tape in television news*. Bond University, Gold Coast, Centre for Journalism Research and Education.
- Stephens, M. (1998). *The rise of the image, the fall of the word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, S. (1993). The standup syndrome. *American Journalism Review*, 15 (6), 35-38.
- Tiffen, R. (1989). *News and power*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Author Note

Judy McGregor, Department of Communication & Journalism Massey University.

Address for Correspondence: Judy McGregor, College of Business, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Email: J.H.McGregor@massey.ac.nz