

# News values

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**News values**, sometimes called **news criteria**, determine how much prominence a news story is given by a media outlet, and the attention it is given by the audience. A. Boyd states that: "News journalism has a broadly agreed set of values, often referred to as 'newsworthines'..."<sup>[1]</sup> News values are not universal and can vary widely between different cultures. In Western practice, decisions on the selection and prioritization of news are made by editors on the basis of their experience and intuition, although analysis by J. Galtung and M. Ruge showed that several factors are consistently applied across a range of news organizations.<sup>[2]</sup> Some of these factors are listed below, together with others put forward by Schlesinger<sup>[3]</sup> and Bell.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Ryan, "there is no end to lists of news criteria".<sup>[5]</sup> Among the many lists of news values that have been drawn up by scholars and journalists, some, like Galtung and Ruge's, attempt to describe news practices across cultures, while others have become remarkably specific to the press of certain (often Western) nations.

Galtung and Ruge, in their seminal study in the area put forward a system of twelve factors describing events that together are used as a definition of 'newsworthiness'. Focusing on newspapers and broadcast news, Galtung and Ruge devised a list describing what they believed were significant contributing factors as to how the news is constructed. Their theory argues that the more an event accessed these criteria the more likely it was to be reported on in a newspaper. Furthermore, three basic hypotheses are presented by Galtung and Ruge: the additivity hypothesis that the more factors an event satisfies, the higher the probability that it becomes news; the complementarity hypothesis that the factors will tend to exclude each other; and the exclusion hypothesis that events that satisfy none or very few factors will not become news.

A variety of external and internal pressures influence journalists' decisions on which stories are covered, how issues are interpreted and the emphasis given to them. These pressures can sometimes lead to bias or unethical reporting. Achieving relevance, giving audiences the news they want and find interesting, is an increasingly important goal for media outlets seeking to maintain market share in a rapidly evolving market. This has made news organizations more open to audience input and feedback, and forced them to adopt and apply news values that attract and keep audiences. The growth of interactive media and citizen journalism is fast altering the traditional distinction between news producer and passive audience and may in future lead to a deep-ploughing redefinition of what 'news' means and the role of the news industry.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Defining news values
- 2 Conditions for News
- 3 Audience perceptions of news
- 4 See also
- 5 Notes
- 6 References

## Defining news values

The practical constraints of the newsgathering process, the collective norms of the newsroom and manipulation by external pressure groups all affect the news value given to an event by the journalist and the way it is reported. The news value given to the story by the audience, its impact or interest, is determined by

the degree of change it contains and the relevance of that change to the physical and social security of the individual or group. Major change, coupled with high relevance, gives the story a correspondingly high news value; little, or slow, change, together with low relevance, indicate low news value.

Some commentators (Harcup & O'Neill,<sup>[7]</sup>) argue that as many stories are apparently manufactured, Galtung and Ruge's list of news values should be open to question. The dominance of celebrity and social news, the blurring of the boundary between news and reality shows and other popular culture, and the advent of citizen journalism may suggest that the nature of 'news' and news values are evolving and that traditional models of the news process are now only partially relevant.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Conditions for News

- **Frequency:** Events that occur suddenly and fit well with the news organization's schedule are more likely to be reported than those that occur gradually or at inconvenient times of day or night. Long-term trends are not likely to receive much coverage.
- **Negativity:** Bad news is more newsworthy than good news.
- **Unexpectedness:** If an event is out of the ordinary it will have a greater effect than something that is an everyday occurrence.
- **Unambiguity:** Events whose implications are clear make for better copy than those that are open to more than one interpretation, or where any understanding of the implications depends on first understanding the complex background in which the events take place.
- **Personalization:** Events that can be portrayed as the actions of individuals will be more attractive than one in which there is no such "human interest."
- **Meaningfulness:** This relates to the sense of identification the audience has with the topic. "Cultural proximity" is a factor here -- stories concerned with people who speak the same language, look the same, and share the preoccupations as the audience receive more coverage than those concerned with people who speak different languages, look different and have different preoccupations.
- **Reference to elite nations:** Stories concerned with global powers receive more attention than those concerned with less influential nations.
- **Reference to elite persons:** Stories concerned with the rich, powerful, famous and infamous get more coverage.
- **Conflict:** Opposition of people or forces resulting in a dramatic effect. Stories with conflict are often quite newsworthy.
- **Consonance:** Stories that fit with the media's expectations receive more coverage than those that defy them (and for which they are thus unprepared). Note this appears to conflict with unexpectedness above. However, consonance really refers to the *media's readiness* to report an item.
- **Continuity:** A story that is already in the news gathers a kind of inertia. This is partly because the media organizations are already in place to report the story, and partly because previous reportage may have made the story more accessible to the public (making it less ambiguous).
- **Composition:** Stories must compete with one another for space in the media. For instance, editors may seek to provide a balance of different types of coverage, so that if there is an excess of

foreign news for instance, the least important foreign story may have to make way for an item concerned with the domestic news. In this way the prominence given to a story depends not only on its own news values but also on those of competing stories. (Galtung and Ruge, 1965)

- **Competition:** Commercial or professional competition between media may lead journalists to endorse the news value given to a story by a rival.
- **Co-optation:** A story that is only marginally newsworthy in its own right may be covered if it is related to a major running story.
- **Prefabrication:** A story that is marginal in news terms but written and available may be selected ahead of a much more newsworthy story that must be researched and written from the ground up.
- **Predictability:** An event is more likely to be covered if it has been pre-scheduled. (Bell, 1991)
- **Time constraints:** Traditional news media such as radio, television and daily newspapers have strict deadlines and a short production cycle, which selects for items that can be researched and covered quickly.
- **Logistics:** Although eased by the availability of global communications even from remote regions, the ability to deploy and control production and reporting staff, and functionality of technical resources can determine whether a story is covered. (Schlesinger, 1987)

## Audience perceptions of news

Conventional models concentrate on what the journalist perceives as news. But the news process is a two-way transaction, involving both news producer (the journalist) and the news receiver (the audience), although the boundary between the two is rapidly blurring with the growth of citizen journalism and interactive media.

Little has been done to define equivalent factors that determine audience perception of news. This is largely because it would appear impossible to define a common factor, or factors, that generate interest in a mass audience.

Basing his judgement on many years as a newspaper journalist Hetherington (1985) states that: "...anything which threatens people's peace, prosperity and well being is news and likely to make headlines".

Venables (2005) suggests audiences may interpret news as a risk signal. Psychologists and primatologists have shown that apes and humans constantly monitor the environment for information that may signal the possibility of physical danger or threat to the individual's social position. This receptiveness to risk signals is a powerful and virtually universal survival mechanism.

A 'risk signal' is characterized by two factors, an element of change (or uncertainty) and the relevance of that change to the security of the individual.

The same two conditions are observed to be characteristic of news. The news value of a story, if defined in terms of the interest it carries for an audience, is determined by the degree of change it contains and the relevance that change has for the individual or group. Analysis shows that journalists and publicists manipulate both the element of change and relevance ('security concern') to maximize, or some cases play down, the strength of a story.

Security concern is proportional to the relevance of the story for the individual, his or her family, social group and societal group, in declining order. At some point there is a Boundary of Relevance, beyond which

the change is no longer perceived to be relevant, or newsworthy. This boundary may be manipulated by journalists, power elites and communicators seeking to encourage audiences to exclude, or embrace, certain groups: for instance, to distance a home audience from the enemy in time of war, or conversely, to highlight the plight of a distant culture so as to encourage support for aid programs.

## See also

- Afghanistanism

## Notes

1. ^ Boyd, A. (1994) *Broadcast Journalism, Techniques of Radio and TV News*. Oxford: Focal.
2. ^ Galtung, J. & Ruge, M. Holmboe (1965): *The Structure of Foreign News. The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers*, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 2, pp. 64-91; online edition (<http://www.jstor.org/view/00223433/ap020006/02a00040/0>) (JSTOR access required)
3. ^ Schlesinger P. (1987) *Putting 'Reality' Together*, 2nd edition London: Methuen.
4. ^ Bell A. (1991) *The Language of News Media*. Oxford: Blackwell.
5. ^ Ryan, C. (1991) *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* Boston: South End Press. p. 31.
6. ^ [1] (<http://www.owenspencer-thomas.com/journalism/newsvalues>) News values. IT and citizen journalism. URL accessed March 27, 2011.
7. ^ Harcup T. and O'Neill D. (2001) *What is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited* *Journalism Studies*, vol.2, no. 2, p.277.
8. ^ [2] (<http://www.owenspencer-thomas.com/journalism/newsvalues>) News Values. URL retrieved March 27, 2011.

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