

NEWS VALUES AND NEWS PRODUCTION

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- Discussions of news values usually suggest they are surrounded by a mystique, an impenetrable cloud of verbal imprecision and conceptual obscurity. Many
- * academic reports concentrate on this nebulous aspect of news values and imbue them with far greater importance and allure than they merit. We have stressed that news production is rarely the active application of decisions of rejection or promotion to highly varied and extensive material. On the contrary, it is for the
 - * most part the passive exercise of routine and highly regulated procedures in the task of selecting from already limited supplies of information. News values exist and are, of course, significant. But they are as much the resultant explanation or justification of necessary procedures as their source.

News values are used in two ways. They are criteria of selection from material available to the newsroom of those items worthy of inclusion in the final product. Second, they are guidelines for the presentation of items, suggesting what to emphasise, what to omit, and where to give priority in the preparation of the items for presentation to the audience. News values are thus working rules, comprising a corpus of occupational lore which implicitly and often expressly explains and guides newsroom practice. It is not as true as often suggested that they are beyond the ken of the newsman, himself unable and unwilling to articulate them. Indeed, they pepper the daily exchanges between journalists in collaborative production procedures. Far more they are terse shorthand references to shared understandings about the nature and purpose of

news which can be used to ease the rapid and difficult manufacture of bulletins and news programmes. News values are qualities of events or of their journalistic construction, whose relative absence or presence recommends them for inclusion in the news product. The more of such qualities a story exhibits, the greater its chances of inclusion. Alternatively, the more different news values a story contains, the greater its chances of inclusion (see Galtung and Ruge, 1965). News values derive from unstated or implicit assumptions or judgements about three things:

1. The audience. Is this important to the audience or will it hold their attention? Is it of known interest, will it be understood, enjoyed, registered, perceived as relevant?
2. Accessibility – in two senses, prominence and ease of capture. Prominence: to what extent is the event known to the news organisation, how obvious is it, has it made itself apparent? Ease of capture: how available to journalists is the event, is it physically accessible, manageable technically, in a form amenable to journalism, is it ready-prepared for easy coverage, will it require great resources to obtain?
3. Fit. Is the item consonant with the pragmatics of production routines, is it commensurate with technical and organisational possibilities, is it homologous with the exigencies and constraints in programme making and the limitations of the medium? Does it make sense in terms of what is already known about the subject?

In other words, news values themselves derive from the two immediate determinants of news making, perceptions of the audience and the availability of material. Historically news values come to imbue the necessities of journalism with the lustre of good practice. They represent a classic case of making a virtue of necessity. This particularly applies to the broader values we have subsumed under the title of the occupational ideology – impartiality, objectivity, accuracy and so on. [...] News values are attached to the practice of the job, they are story values. Some of the more important are as follows. The first four derive from considerations of the audience, the remainder from a mixture of the three factors described above.

DRAMA

News stories are, as the term suggests, stories as well as news. Good ones exhibit a narrative structure akin to the root elements in human drama. To recall Reuven Frank, former President of NBC news in America, 'joy, sorrow, shock, fear, these are the stuff of news'. The good news story tells its tale with a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order.

[...]

Dramatic structure is often achieved by the presentation of conflict, most commonly by the matching of opposed viewpoints drawn from spokesmen of

'both sides of the question'. The audience is here felt to be served by being given the full picture as well as an interesting confrontation (cf. Epstein, 1973, pp. 168-9). [...]

VISUAL ATTRACTIVENESS

Television is a visual medium and the special power of television news is its ability to exploit this advantage. Television journalists are not obsessed by notions of 'good television' or 'good film'. They can't be, given the limited number of stories for which film is available. But the temptation to screen visually arresting material and to reject stories unadorned with good film is ever present and sometimes irresistible. In turn judgements about newsworthiness will be shaped by aesthetic judgements about film. A former editor-in-chief of the British Independent Television News has written that 'the key to putting more hard news on to the air effectively lies, I am sure, in putting more pictures and less talk into news programmes'. [...]

Just as audiences often justify their trust in the veracity of television news by reference to its use of film: 'you can actually see it happening', so newsmen refer to this quality in their favourite stories. 'Another good one was a building disaster. Three people died when it collapsed. We were the first station there and you could actually see people being rescued on camera.' (Head of News, WNBC.)

A story may be included simply because film is available or because of the dramatic qualities of the film. A story narrated several days previously will be resurrected as film arrives simply to show the film. Film can also provide concrete evidence of the global surveillance of electronic journalism by demonstrating visually the journalist's presence at an event.

ENTERTAINMENT

News programmes seek, and usually find, large audiences. To do so they must take account of entertainment values in the literal sense of providing captivating, humorous, titillating, amusing or generally diverting material. The 'human interest' story was invented for just this purpose. Broadcast news is generally sober and serious, taking its social responsibility and constitutional position as demanding less frivolity than might be licensed in the popular press. Helen Hughes, who over 30 years ago wrote a book on the human interest story, considered that human interest was a dimension added to other types of story. '... the news signalises [sic] a deviation from the expected, the normal and the traditional, which, when told with human interest is made human and comprehensible' (Hughes, 1942; see also Hughes, 1940). Although she was writing of the press this is especially true of broadcast news. The whimsical or bizarre events that are the currency of human interest stories, or the celebrities, children and animals that are their stars, are frequently too frivolous for broadcast news. But the human interest angle is an important way of making events palatable or comprehensible to audiences of broadcast news.

For some broadcast journalists there is a tension between the desire to ensure audience attentiveness and interest by following entertainment values, and a concern to maintain standards of seriousness and the plain honest narration of facts; between information and entertainment. This debate was alive in most newsrooms and linked back to arguments about how 'hard' or 'soft' news should be. It stems again from the dilemma of the journalist as producer of a marketable commodity, whose presentation and dressing up for the audience may cut across some of the professional ideals of the journalist *qua* journalist. The solution is normally the co-option of one ideal by the other, in the argument that to inform an audience you must first have its attention, and that there's no point preparing serious, well-intentioned, high-minded journalism if the audience registers its boredom by switching off. Thus entertainment is high on the list of news values both as an end in itself and as a means to other journalistic ideals.

IMPORTANCE

The most frequently cited reason for including a particular item in news bulletins is its importance. This is usually taken to mean that the reported event has considerable significance for large numbers of people in the audience. Most often importance is cited to explain the inclusion of items which might be omitted on the criteria of other audience-based news values. That is, items which may be boring, repetitive or non-visual must still be included despite audience disinterest. The item refers to something the audience needs to know. This news value is rooted in theories of the social role of journalism as tribune of the people. In broadcasting it has the further support that state-authorised corporations are expected to behave responsibly, informatively and educationally. Importance is often applied to political and foreign news. Both are assumed to be of greater interest to journalists than to their audience. Both are included however because of their unquestioned importance.

[...]

SIZE

The bigger the story the greater the likelihood of its inclusion, and the greater the prominence with which it will be presented. This simple rule of course begs the question of just how events are measured and which dimensions are relevant. The most common considerations are the numbers or type of people involved, or the scale of the event as an instance of a type. Thus the more people involved in a disaster or the presence of 'big names' at a formal occasion, enhance the initial visibility of such events and hence their consequent news value. Size as a news value normally qualifies other news values. That is, subsequent to the selection of events in the world as news, the criterion of size is applied to decide which are the most important news events. Less commonly events not normally registered as news become eligible by the sheer scale on which they occur.

PROXIMITY

Like size, the criterion of proximity derives partly from considerations of the audience, partly from problems of accessibility. Proximity has two senses, cultural and geographical. Stories are culturally proximate if they refer to events within the normal experience of journalists and their audience. They are the kinds of events which require a wide range of common language and shared cultural assumptions. For this reason they are normally, but not necessarily, domestic stories. Thus in Ireland the importance of the Church in secular life provides a background for stories on church or religion in other countries which might be ignored in more secularised nations. Cultural proximity can be applied to stories by, for example, putting foreign news into a domestic context to explain its importance or significance.

Geographical proximity refers to the simple rules of thumb that suggest the primacy of domestic news and the allocation of news from the rest of the world according to their nearness to the audience (see Schlesinger, 1978, p. 117). Here geography is distorted by the mechanics of news collection. As we have seen, the distribution of news gatherers is far from random, and in journalistic terms Lagos is far closer to London than to, say, Accra. Nonetheless the criterion is applied, and several Nigerian sub-editors adopted a three-tier news geography: Nigeria, Africa, the world. In the other countries, too, there was a sense of concentric spheres of influence. This design was of course totally disrupted by the availability of material. The geographical criterion thus moderates to two rules. Either, the further away an event the bigger it has to be, or, nearby events take precedence over similar events at a distance.

BREVITY

A story which is closely packed with facts and little padding is preferred to loose 'soft' news. Partly this relates to the journalistic role of informing rather than explaining, partly to concerns for what are seen as audience requirements and limitations. Audiences want just the facts and nothing but the facts. Since they also require comprehensiveness clearly no single item can be allowed to drag on too long. [...] News bulletins are normally between 15 and 30 minutes, and contain less than a couple of dozen items. Limiting news stories to their apparently more obvious elements is essential if there is to be room for even a minimal selection of the day's events. This limit seems to emphasise the necessary objectivity of broadcast news while in fact merely disguising the vast edifice of assumptions and cultural packaging which allow such brief items to make sense at all.

NEGATIVITY

- Bad news is good news. As is often observed there is little mileage in reporting the safe arrival of aircraft, the continued health of a film star, or the smooth untroubled negotiations of a wage settlement. News is about disruptions in the normal current of events. In the literal sense it is not concerned with the

derives from two factors. First, traditional journalistic competition puts a premium on the supply of 'earliest intelligencies' ahead of rivals. At its most successful this aim produces the 'scoop', an exclusive capture of a news event ahead of all competition. Second, the periodicity of news production itself sets the frame within which events in the world will be perceived. Thus daily production sets a daily frame, and news events must have occurred in the twenty-four hours between bulletins to merit inclusion. Although this is often impossible, especially for newsrooms dependent on air-freighted news film, the dictum that 'it's news when the audience first sees it' was only offered rather sheepishly, in the certain knowledge that it was an unhappy transgression of a root news value. The main point, however, is that processes which do not fit this daily cycle do not register as news by producing news events. Since daily reports are required the necessity of filling a daily quota becomes a laudable goal, and recency emerges as a journalistic virtue. Speed in collection and processing becomes paramount and is often cited as the particular merit of individual journalists or newsrooms. Conversely it is one of the main complaints against non-journalist broadcasters that they do not understand the need for speed and that technical and other facilities are inadequate for journalistic demands. The favourite accolade for Eurovision was that it permitted same-day film of European events. One of the most frequently cited problems was late arrival of unprocessed film and the inadequacy of film processing facilities.

The broadcasting equivalent of newspaper editions is the sequence of bulletins through the day, or evening on television. Journalists were acutely aware of the need to 'keep the picture changing'. [...] Journalists were fond of the fast-breaking story where the rapid movement of events pre-empted any need for the artificial injection of pace or change. Recency emphasises the task of news in topping up information on those events and institutions already defined as the substance of news.

ELITES

[As a value within 'bigness' news values emphasise that big names are better news than nobodies, major personalities of more interest than ordinary folk. There is an obvious circularity in this in that well-known personalities become so by their exposure in news media. It is this that leads us to root this news value in production rather than in audience interests. Clearly audiences are interested in major rather than minor figures, people they all know about rather than the acquaintances of a few. But [...] elites are only partially exposed, and concentration on powerful or ruling groups is neither uniform nor comprehensive.]

PERSONALITIES

[News is about people, and mostly about individuals. This news value emphasises the need to make stories comprehensible by reducing complex processes and institutions to the actions of individuals. This aim is, like many news

values, a virtue born of necessity. Brief, and especially visual, journalism cannot deal with abstractions and has to narrate in the concrete. Thus it becomes a news value to 'seek the personal angle' or to 'personalise' the news. The effect of this is to treat institutional and international relations either as the interaction of individuals, or as being analogous to inter-personal relations. For example, international political news deals almost entirely with the diplomatic globe-trotting of major politicians, and international relations are seen to depend on how well political leaders get on. The analogies appear in the terminology of the emotions which characterises institutional or national relations. Governments become 'angry', unions are 'hot-headed', nations are 'anxious' or 'eager'. This is most easily portrayed by personalising such acts in the presentation of individuals.

This list may not exhaust all news values but it includes the main ones. Their obviousness can be illustrated by compiling a list of antonyms. It is hard to imagine broadcast journalists anywhere seeking news which dealt with small events, the long term, dull, distant, visually boring, unimportant people, and so on. Yet many of these labels describe events and processes which may well have significance for news audiences, but which are not news. The application of news values is part of the process by which this labelling occurs.

BIAS, OBJECTIVITY AND IDEOLOGY

[...]

It is possible to see broadcast news as simply the result of the bias of individual journalists, committed either to professional notions of how news should be structured, or to social views of the ideas it should convey. For David Brinkley, the authoritative American newscaster, 'News is what I say it is. It's something worth knowing by my standards' (Brinkley, 1964). Whether this is unguarded arrogance, or hyperbole to make a point about the essential indefinability of news, it represents to many people the most likely explanation of news output. The newscaster is the visible tip of the news production plant, a visual or aural reminder that it is a process handled by people; fallible, biased and opinionated, like the rest of us. The obvious weakness of this explanation is that the news changes very little when the individuals who produce it are changed. An occasional shift in partisanship may be detected in the reporting of particular issues, but the events covered, and the nature of their coverage, remain the same. [...] [E]ven in highly varied cultural and organisational settings broadcast news emerges with surprisingly similar forms and contents. In addition the division of labour required for production limits the impacts of individuals on news. [...] Epstein (1973, p. 28) describes how 'News executives

Ibid., pp. 206-11.

decide on the development of correspondents and camera crews; assignment editors select what stories will be covered and by whom; field producers, in constant phone contact with the producers in New York, usually supervise the preparation of filming of stories ... editors ... reconstruct the story on film ...' and so on.

Yet the notion of group, if not individual, bias persists. [...] The notion of bias is often contrasted with objectivity, and for clarity's sake two distinctions should be made. First impartiality and objectivity are distinct. Impartiality implies a disinterested approach to news, lacking in motivation to shape or select material according to a particular view or opinion. Objectivity, however defined, is clearly a broader demand than this. A journalist may well be impartial towards the material on which he works, yet fail to achieve objectivity – a complete and unrefracted capture of the world – due to the inherent limitations in news gathering and processing. Second, the bias of an individual reporter dealing with a single event may be reduced or even eliminated by, for example, the deliberate application of self-discipline and professional standards of process. In other words we should distinguish bias as the deliberate aim of journalism, which is rare, from bias as the inevitable but unintended consequence of organisation.

There are, then, three possible views of journalistic objectivity and impartiality. First, there is the professional view that it is possible to be both, based on the idea that objectivity and impartiality are attitudes of mind. Second is the view that objectivity may well be a nebulous and unattainable goal, but that impartiality is still desirable and possible.

[...]

The third view, that neither objectivity or impartiality are in any serious sense possible in journalism, comes from a change of analytical perspective, from the short-term and deliberate production of news stories to the long-term and routine, unreflective practices of journalism as we have analysed them in this study. Objectivity and impartiality remain the aims of most day-to-day journalism. But we should understand these terms as labels applied by journalists to the rules which govern their working routines. Objectivity is achieved by subscribing to and observing these sets of rules, which are themselves the object of our analysis. We have seen how these rules, both the explicit regulations of organisational charters and newsroom manuals, and the implicit understandings of news values, are derived from the currents of supply and demand which eddy round the newsroom.

The assumed needs and interests of audiences on the one hand, and the truncated supply of information into the newsroom on the other, both exert pressures to which the organisation of news production responds. What are the consequences of these pressures?

When we come to assess news as a coherent view of the world, that is to step up from news values to social values, we enter an altogether more complex and

tangled argument. News is ideology to the extent that it provides an integrated picture of reality. But an ideology is more than this; it is also the world view of particular social groups, and especially of social classes. The claim that news is ideology implies that it provides a world view both consistent in itself, and supportive of the interests of powerful social groupings. This can come about in two ways.

First, news is structured by the exigencies of organised production which are the main concern of this study. These allow only a partial view of the reported world which may or may not coincide with a ruling ideology. The historical process by which this coincidence occurs is more than accidental, and is rooted in the development of news as a service to elite groups. [...] Thus most of the basic goals and values which surround journalism refer to the needs and interests of these groups. Second, in attempting to reach widespread, anonymous audiences news draws on the most broadly held common social values and assumptions, in other words the prevailing consensus, in establishing common ground for communication with its audiences. In the case of broadcast journalism the complex relationship with the state exaggerates this need to cling to the central and least challenged social values which provide implicit definitions of actions and events as acceptable or unacceptable, usual or unusual, legitimate or illegitimate.

[...]

There are two key elements to the world of broadcast news; the invisibility of social process, and the invisibility of power in society. We can discuss these two lacunae separately. First, the loss of a sense of social process. News is about the present, or the immediate past. It is an account of today's events. The world of broadcast news is a display of single events, making history indeed 'one damn thing after another'. Yet in this whirl of innumerable events the lingering impression is of stasis. Events are interchangeable, a succession rather than an unfolding. What is provided is a topping up of the limited range of regularly observed events in the world with more of the same. A reassuring sameness assimilates each succession of events to ready-made patterns in a timeless mosaic.

This fragmentation of social process, evacuating history, has been described as 'a kind of consecration to collective amnesia' (Gabel, 1967, p. 113). In a real sense reason disappears as actors flit across the journalistic stage, perform and hurriedly disappear. [...] Thus industrial relations appears not as an evolving conflict of interest but as a sporadic eruption of inexplicable anger and revolt (Hartmann, 1976; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976). Similarly the political affairs of foreign lands appear as spasmodic convulsions of a more or less violent turn, while international relations appear to result from the occasional urge for travel and conversation indulged in by the diplomatic jet-set.

The second absent dimension in broadcast news is that of power. News is about the actions of individuals, not corporate entities, thus individual

authority rather than the exertion of entrenched power is seen to be the mover of events. News, and broadcast news in particular, is the last refuge of the great man theory of history. Yet faces change, power holders are replaced, and such changes take pride of place in the circumspection of the news. The continuing and consistent power of the position is masked by concentration on the recurrent changes of office-holder.

In domestic news the focus is on central political elites and their daily gamesmanship in the arenas of conflict resolution. Groups which may exert power but which do not make news disappear, by definition, from view, and with them the visibility of power itself. Prominent among the absentees are the owners of property and their corporate representatives. Of all the institutions which contribute to social process none is so invisible to broadcast news as the world of the company boardroom. In international news the world revolves round the news capitals in Europe and North America. For audiences in the Third World their fellows in three continents are invisible, a communality of interest cannot emerge and problems appear particular and separate to each watching nation. Thus it is not the *effect* of the rich and powerful nations on the Third World that is seen, but their attractiveness as models, benevolence as aid-givers and convenors of conferences, or wisdom as disinterested umpires in local disputes.

Power disappears in the institutional definitions the news provides, an agenda of issues and arenas to which attention is directed. In particular politics is separated from power. Power is seen only in the public display of formality, gesture and speech by major political actors. It is defined by reference to government and the central institutions of political negotiation. Rositi has similarly drawn attention in his analysis of European television news to 'the primacy of formal politics' in the television news world (Rositi, 1975, pp. 25-30), and remarks on the absence of financial and business elites. Thus power is reduced to areas of negotiation compromise, and politics to a recurrent series of decisions, debates and personalities. It is removed from the institutions of production. Thus news bears witness to the institutional separation of economics and politics, a precondition for the evacuation of power from its account of the world. Power is absent from news by virtue of this severance of politics from economics; power is located in authority not in control, in the office-holder not the property owner. News thus provides a particular and truncated view of power, and in this sense power is a dimension that is effectively missing from news.

With these two missing dimensions – social process or history, and power – news indeed provides a world view. The question remains to what extent this is a coherent ideology. Analyses which see news as necessarily a product of powerful groups, in society, designed to provide a view of the world consonant with the interests of those groups simplify the situation too far to be helpful. The occupational routines and beliefs of journalists do not allow a simple conduit between the ruling ideas of the powerful and their distribution via the airwaves.

Yet the absence of power and process clearly precludes the development of views which might question the prevailing distribution of power, or its roots in the evolution of economic distribution and control. A world which appears fundamentally unchanging, subject to the genius or caprice of myriad powerful individuals, is not a world which appears susceptible to radical change or challenge.

There are three ways, then, in which broadcast news is ideological. First it focuses our attention on those institutions and events in which social conflict is managed and resolved. It is precisely the arenas of consensus formation which provide both access and appropriate material for making the news. Second, broadcast news, in studiously following statutory demands to eschew partiality or controversy, and professional demands for objectivity and neutrality, is left to draw on the values and beliefs of the broadest social consensus. It is this process which Stuart Hall (1970, p. 1056) describes as 'the steady and unexamined play of attitudes which, via the mediating structure of professionally defined news values, inclines all the media toward the status quo'. The prevailing beliefs in any society will rarely be those which question existing social organisation or values. News will itself merely reinforce scepticism about such divergent, dissident or deviant beliefs. Third, as we have seen, broadcast news is, for historical and organisational reasons, inherently incapable of providing a portrayal of social change or of displaying the operation of power in and between societies. It thus portrays a world which is unchanging and unchangeable.

The key elements of any ruling ideology are the undesirability of change, and its impossibility; all is for the best and change would do more harm than good, even if it were possible. Broadcast news substantiates this philosophy because of the interplay of the three processes we have just described.

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