

Priorities of contemporary news journalism



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It is an often asked question, how does a journalist prioritise the selection of news stories. An academic view to perceiving the process of how a news journalist prioritises the selection of contemporary news is Gaulten and Ruge's study "The structure of foreign news". This study can be found in the Journal of International Peace Research in 1965.

I think overall that, Galtung and Ruge's news values model needs to be adapted slightly in order to capture the priorities of contemporary news journalism. For the next part of my essay I will discuss the original 1960s model and identify its concepts.

The pair conducted a study which looked at foreign newspapers and specifically at foreign news. According to Harcup and O'Neill (2001) "The central question at the heart of their paper was how do events (especially, foreign events in their case) become "news?"

They researched what foreign newspapers featured on other world news and found the stories were more likely to be featured in the newspaper if they contained the news values of negativity, threshold, proximity, frequency, unambiguity, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, meaningfulness, composition and reference to elite nations and elite persons.

Generally speaking, news values of a story are based on what relevance and effect a story has on its audience, in other words its newsworthiness. The greater the relevance and effect on the audience, (the higher number of news values the story contains) makes the story more of a priority in the news journalism world. Palmer, cited in Harcup and O'Neill (2001) stated that

Galtung and Ruge's study was "the earliest attempt to provide a systematic definition of newsworthiness".

The story could be based on absolutely anything, from focusing on an individual, to a running story or be totally unexpected etc. However, not all news stories are newsworthy. Stories that are seen as a priority in contemporary news journalism are usually those to do with politics, human interest and disasters etc. A story that is classed as newsworthy is often described as quick, negative and sustains drama etc. According to McNair (1999) "news values act as a cue for the audience alerting them to the importance of the issue".

News values can often overlap with newsroom observation studies, for example, both try to capture the unwritten rules of journalism. News values of a story are not written down in a book. A trainee journalist cannot be taught about what news values apply to each story. According to Lippman (1922) "news values are an informal code". The journalist has to learn to consider what news values a story has and its news worthiness to its audience.

So the reason behind why a certain story has been selected as a front page story for argument sake in a newspaper, is because the editor believes it has high news values and is very newsworthy to its audience, meaning people are going to read it because the story is relevant and/or affects them and, therefore, is a priority in the news journalism world. According to Lippman (1922) "reporters are said to have a good nose or a gut feeling for a good story".

For the benefit of this essay I will define just a few of Galtung and Ruge's news values. Firstly, negativity, which refers to the old cliché of 'the only good news is bad news'. An example of a story that contains this news value is the recession and the continuing rise of the unemployed. Threshold, is another news value which is based on the size of the story for example how many people does it involve? E. g. The Jonathan Ross saga involved a number of people having their salaries cut. Proximity, is another news value this is based on whether the story is close to viewers economically or geographically. Unexpectedness of an event is a news value which is pretty much self explanatory an example of a story that contains this news value is 9/11.

Another news value is what is known as a Continuation story, which is an established sequence, an example being the Madeline McCann story, as this has been an ongoing story since her disappearance in 2007. Galtung and Ruge believe that the more news values a story has, the more of a priority it has in contemporary news journalism. An example of this would be the 2004 Tsunami which included the news values of negativity as many lost their homes and lives. Unexpectedness, as there was no warning to the natural disaster. Threshold, as the story involved a huge number of people. It was eventually a continuation story where it was reported on for weeks after the event happened.

For the benefit of this essay, I am going to compare the similarities and differences of what news stories were selected and seen as a priority to the news journalism world (as they were seen as the most newsworthy to their audience).

I chose to look at BBC Wales Today and ITV'S Wales Tonight. The programmes were aired on Monday 26h October at 6. 00 p. m.

ITV Wales stories were (in a three to four word sum up of each story) a car bomb in Pakistan which has the news values of negativity and threshold as it affects a large number of people. The second story is about 3 pilots dying in a plane crash which has the news values of negativity, proximity (geographically) as the location of the crash was close to viewers and one of the victims lived in Cardiff. The story also held the news value of unexpectedness of the crash. Finally the third story which was about a campaign to lift the spirits of the Welsh people living in the valleys. This story had the news value of proximity, as it is the location of where a large number of people from the target audience live and threshold as it affects a large number of people.

The first BBC Wales Today story was about unpaid benefit, whereby people with disabilities are owed money by the Government. The story has the news values of negativity and threshold as it affects a large number of people. The story was a continuation story as this story has been running for a while. The second story was the valleys campaign to lift spirits, which had the same news values as previously mentioned. Finally the third story was the Teacher of the year award, which is about a secondary school head teacher in Worcestershire winning the award. The news values for this item are proximity, as it is close to where the target audience lives, and unexpectedness of who was the winner of the award.

An interesting point to make is that the only story featured on both news programmes was the one about the valleys campaign even though the angle and where the story was placed in the news programme differed. It was placed third in ITV'S running order and second in BBC Wales Today. This means that BBC Wales Today believes that the story is more news worthy to its audience and, therefore, more of a priority in news journalism to be shown in that particular order. Another factor to consider is why certain stories were chosen for ITV and not selected for BBC Wales? Why were certain stories seen as a priority in contemporary journalism and others were not?

A highly criticised point made by Tunsall (1971) shows how the model definitely needs to be updated, as detailed and better photographs are used more frequently in contemporary news journalism, this may be due to a number of reasons such as the advance of technology. Also, there seems to be a growing number of citizen journalism, where non trained journalists take it upon themselves to take pictures, for example, send them to editors of newspapers and then make money out of them. I would definitely modify the model as I believe news values of a story can also be visual imperatives, as in a picture or video footage.

We may consider that without such visual imperatives some news stories may not have been so newsworthy, for example, 9/11. The story had some amazing pictures taken of the event; of the Twin Towers actually collapsing (The pictures were taken by a citizen journalist which showed how quick, unexpected and shocking the event was).

However, we have to consider without this footage would the story have been so big? Inevitably the story would have been front page news globally without the footage as it would have been a priority story in news journalism but the footage has a definite impact on the story. According to Tunsall as cited in Harcup and O'Neill (2001) they state that “ Galtung and Ruge looked only at content that was explicitly concerned with the selected crises; and their list of factors made no reference to how visual elements, such as dramatic photographs, could affect the content of written material”.

Having visual imperatives makes the story have higher news values than if there was no pictures etc. at all and it was just a written article about the event. I think photographs for such a news story are necessary as it helps capture the priorities of contemporary news journalism.

A criticism of Galtung and Ruge's model is, how do journalists define their news values? This may be made clearer by Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) example. Using one of Galtung and Ruge's news values called threshold. They state “ Isn't this still open to subjective interpretation? Which is bigger, twenty deaths in ten road accidents or five deaths in one rail crash?” So it seems that maybe the model is unclear and that it should be updated to be clearer about their definitions of news values, in order to be able to capture the priorities of contemporary news journalism.

Furthermore, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) argue that “ A number of Galtung and Ruge's factors appear to be problematic to identify while others may be identifiable but less in any intrinsic properties of a potential news story and more in the process of how a story has been constructed or written up”. In

other words they argue that Galtung and Ruge's model is more to do with how a story has been told by the journalist.

However, an alternative perspective to Galtung and Ruge's propaganda news values model is the Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (1988) in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. The pair (who are professors of communication), examine and analyse evidence of US news output and why it works in this way in capturing the priorities of contemporary journalism. This theory proposes a five filter theory which I will now go on to discuss. The five filters are size ownership, advertising, sources, flack and anti- communism.

Basically the Herman and Chomsky theory (from a hand out given in lectures), is based on the organisation of news institutions, as they see the news journalism world, as being set in the market system. The five filters work through independent action and self-censorship instead of direct control. According to Herman (1996) " They work as " filters" through which information must pass, and that individually and often in additive fashion they help shape media choices".

I am going to discuss the five filters, the first being size/ownership which is becoming progressively more concentrated. The pair believes there are a smaller number of proprietors concerned and it seems the big fish at the top eat the little fish. They believe that the market (which is owned by a limited number of wealthy people), is entirely focused in the direction of profit and that there are certain barriers to entry in to the ownership market. They argue that restrictive practices are sometimes activated and that the news

media has a built-in bias because of its common interests with other major corporations.

The second filter is advertising; Chomsky and Herman claim that the news media is in the business of selling audiences to advertisers (especially affluent audiences). Corporate advertisers therefore work as an unofficial licensing authority. A large part of profit made by newspaper companies is from advertising revenue.

According to Herman (1996) “ Newspapers are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment”.

The third filter is primary sources, which the pair claim that journalists are obliged to view official sources (political, corporate, military) as essentially more reliable than others. Alternative sources of news and opinions are therefore marginalized or ignored.

The next filter is flak. This can be negative responses from above to news reporting (phone calls, letters, threats, etc.) all of which constitute ‘ flak’. It receives respectful attention (and is not denounced or ignored for what it is). ‘ Flak’ upsets advertisers so news media strive to avoid doing anything to aggravate it in other words they will not publish anything that will offend the advertiser.

Finally the last filter I am going to describe is anti-communism (also referred to as the ‘ anti-ideology’ filter). It believes the US news media has an inherent bias against communism, in particular, but also against any form of

socialism and it therefore tends to support the US in regards to right-wing regimes abroad.

Many journalists argue there are many critiques of this model such as it doesn't match journalists' own intuitions. They believe that the fifth filter is too restricted (in time and space). They argue that it is a 'conspiracy theory' and it ignores objectivity as a main fear of the journalist. According to Klaehn (2002) Chomsky and Herman's theory is an "overly deterministic view of media behaviour".

I think some of the filters apply in the UK for capturing news journalism, for example, size and ownership, as Chomsky and Herman argue that the news media is increasingly concentrated into fewer businesses. My research (although it only talks about the news medium of newspapers), concurs that ownership is restricted. According to The House of Lords (2008) "In the United Kingdom, the national newspaper industry is run by eight companies-one of which has over 35% of the national newspaper market". I think that second filter advertising is the most influential of all the filters, because without revenue from advertising, the revenue made from the sale of newspapers would not be enough to support the company financially and most likely shareholders of the company would view this as a huge problem as there would be no newspaper.

This fact can be supported by the Chomsky and Herman theory mentioned in the first filter, who state "The market is entirely focused in the direction of profit" and they argue that "restrictive practises are sometimes activated".

For argument sake, if the Royal bank of Scotland were a major advertiser in the Daily Mail, and this newspaper ran a negative piece about how the Royal Bank of Scotland bonus payouts to senior executives were outrageously high, the newspaper risks future advertising revenue from the offence caused. So this shows how certain information is not always captured by newspapers in contemporary news journalism.

To conclude, although I believe that this original 1960s model is suitable in some respects, it does need modifying as it is outdated. A remarkable point to make is that the model does not include anything about celebrities and this would definitely be a modification I would make. Britain's contemporary news journalism now often features celebrity stories in their newspapers. It is often argued that British society has become extremely fascinated with the celebrity life and has developed into a celebrity culture where we want to find out what the celebrities have been up to, who's wearing what, who has just had a baby and who is splitting up etc. It has become very much apparent that celebrity stories have become part of today's news, although a point to think about is whether it is a major priority to contemporary news journalism to feature these types of stories in our news sources.

Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) study states that when Galtung and Ruge's news model mentions the news value, Reference to Elite People they stated that they were "not necessarily the elite people that Galtung and Ruge had in mind. The UK press seems obsessed with celebrities such as TV soap stars, sports stars, film stars and, of course, royalty. In contrast, the "elite people" identified by Galtung and Ruge's model were the politically powerful, people in positions of authority".

With newspapers including more information about scandal and celebrities, there are concerns about the so called 'dumbing down of news' and possible growth of a term called tabloidization. This is where political news is being replaced by celebrity news. So is this really what society wants to read about? Has contemporary journalism come to this?

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