

DECIDING WHAT IS NEWS

What is sometimes called the *news-making process* is the result of a daily bargaining process among various personnel in newspapers and broadcast stations. Editors look at the world they cover with particular standards and measures. They attempt to direct reporters to cover the most interesting, newsworthy material. There are some generally accepted definitions of news, and these provide the justification for what appears in the newspaper and on the newscasts. But many competing forces want space in the news columns and on newscasts. Some are self-serving, external persons who want their stories told sympathetically and well; others are reporters who want their work in the paper; still others are subtle influences ranging from values and habits to personal preferences.

The nature and definition of news often become a matter of public concern as people object to coverage of particular topics—for example, in time of war when negative accounts of one's own armed forces are revealed or during heated political campaigns when the amount and tone of coverage of a candidate anger that person's supporters. And as new technologies allow all forms of information to flourish—cable channels, Internet Websites, desktop publishing—news takes on a different character and challenges old definitions and assumptions. Some critics deny that news reports in a controversial media outlet are, in fact, news, but argue that the content in question leans more toward opinion and editorial comment than impartial news. Critics of the news almost often have their own ideas about what the news should be—that is, what should be featured and emphasized and what ignored altogether. Other commentators, including one of the authors here, question whether “news can survive the age of information,” wondering whether the flow of detailed information and the avalanche of new sources made possible by the Internet might diminish the importance of news gathered in an orderly fashion and presented in a context by professional news gatherers and processors—journalists and their kin.

A standard view is that news is determined by editors and that editors' (or other gatekeepers') judgments should, in fact, decide what is news. There can

be no mechanical standard, it is said, because the news of the day is dynamic and its results are uncertain. Therefore, the well-trained editor or news director makes judgments reflecting prevailing journalistic practices and the specific needs of the audience as perceived by upper management. This, it is further stated, is the essence of journalistic (and other media) leadership. It is, after all, the job of editors to edit.

CHALLENGE

Dennis: Market forces, not editors' judgments, should decide what is news.

There is a longstanding debate among media professionals and media critics about what news is and who should make decisions about it. Editors and reporters say with much assurance that they and they alone should determine what will and will not appear in the news columns and on newscasts. Some critics of the press—for example, people in business—say that the sources of news, those quoted in stories or covered in some fashion, should have a role in defining and shaping the news. In actuality, news decisions are made by journalistic professionals with little guidance from anyone, no matter how much their detractors may complain. This situation is changing, though, as intuitive judgments are being challenged more and more by market forces, which we learn about most effectively through market research. In my view, this change is good, and I hope that before long many of today's snug, all-knowing editors will replace their seat-of-the-pants (or skirt) decisions with more thoughtful, better-researched, systematic decision making. To such persons, this position is heresy.

For as long as anyone can remember, editors (with the help of various minions) have decided what will grace the pages of newspapers and appear on newscasts. They have engaged in a hard selection process, elevating some items to importance and public exposure while relegating others to the wastebasket. Editors are hired to make these judgments, and for the most part they do so with the best of intentions. But how are these judgments made and are they the right ones? Against what set of criteria are news items and stories selected? On what basis are others deemed unworthy of coverage?

Most editors would tell you that they make their choices from among those news stories that they assign or that flow in from their regular channels (such as wire services) and that they do so with proper regard for their audience. They would also tell you that they rely heavily on the budgets of the wire services (priority lists of stories deemed important or significant) and take cues from such major national media as the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the major television and cable networks or heavily visited Internet sites such as MSNBC, CNN, or ABC. What will interest the audience is of paramount importance, for,

after all, if readers and viewers are not attentive, newspaper circulation may drop and broadcast ratings may falter. This situation would push revenues down and the editor might be fired or see the paper die.

It came as a surprise to many editors when in 1947 the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, a privately funded blue-ribbon group that evaluated the news media, suggested that the media were failing to give readers a representative account of the day's news, let alone present a representative picture of the constituent groups of society. As with most media criticism, however just, editors rejected these ideas wholesale. The issue raised by the commission, however, continues to surface at professional meetings and in scholarly critiques of the media. The definition of news is the subject of much wrangling—and for good reason. I believe that a new approach to news decision making is needed more than ever.

1. News is a highly complex formulation that requires the best intelligence and a thoughtful strategy for professionals to fashion it properly.
2. Editors and reporters are elitists, unrepresentative of their readers and viewers and unable to act effectively on their behalf.
3. A marketing approach to news is the most effective and efficient way to select and present news that is of interest to and pertinent for the audience. In such a system, market research findings, which indicate reader and viewer preferences, are used to decide news.

Ask journalism students if they know what news is and they will tell you, "Yes, of course." Ask them to define it and confusion sets in. News is difficult to define, which explains why so many people continue to debate this issue. All kinds of people—journalists, sociologists, political scientists, news sources, and others—have engaged in this exercise. It is more than a theoretical discussion, because knowing and understanding what news is can have real payoffs. Imagine the political candidate whose idea of news differs radically from that of the local editor. The candidate is likely to be a defeated candidate if that view persists. The same is true for others who want to place something in the news.

In a rather scornful view of news, Henry David Thoreau once wrote:

I am sure that I have never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who read it or edit it are old women over their tea. (1854, 148–49)

Thoreau clearly identifies some of the negative characteristics of news. Some commentators have tried to explain the difference between facts, truth, and news with less than full success. Walter Lippmann once wrote that "news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded

itself." One famous definition of news is attributed to John Bogart of the *New York Sun*, who famously said in 1880, "When a dog bites a man, that is not news, but if a man bites a dog, that is news!" Former television anchor David Brinkley would seem to agree: "News," he said, "is the unusual, the unexpected. Placidly is not news. If an airplane departs on time, it isn't news. If it crashes, regrettably, it is."

Some of the standard criteria that are said to make up the news are the following:

1. Conflict (tension, surprise)
2. Progress (triumph, achievement)
3. Disaster (defeat, destruction)
4. Consequences (effect upon community)
5. Eminence (prominence)
6. Novelty (the unusual, even the extremely unusual)
7. Human interest (emotional background)
8. Timeliness (freshness and newness)
9. Proximity (local appeal)

Sociologist and distinguished analyst of the news Bernard Roshco says that all news has a dual origin. It is a *social* product that represents an effort to make sense out of what is happening in society, and it is an *organizational* product representing what the news organization decides to do with it.

After reading scores of articles and treatises on news, Melvin DeFleur and I came up with this definition that reflects some of the factors that go into news:

News is a report that presents a contemporary view of reality with regard to a specific issue, event, or process. It usually monitors change that is important to individuals or society and puts that change in the context of what is common or characteristic. It is shaped by a consensus about what will interest the audience and by constraints from outside and inside the organization. It is the result of a daily bargaining game within the news organization that sorts out the observed human events of a particular time period to create a very perishable product. News is the imperfect result of hurried decisions made under pressure. (DeFleur and Dennis, 1998, 446)

We later modified this definition as follows:

News is current or fresh knowledge about an event or subject that is gathered, processed, or disseminated via a medium to a significant number of interested people. (DeFleur and Dennis, 2002, 73-74)

This is not to suggest that a definition of news changes daily. There is considerable consistency over time as to what editors deem newsworthy; the similarity (some would say sameness) of our newspapers and newscasts suggests considerable agreement about what news is, under most conditions.

One aspect of what constitutes news is to be found in the external events that await report. In addition, the consideration of what is news depends partly

on the audience to whom it is directed. The journalist and the editor are supposedly acting as and on behalf of *every person* in deciding what is worth reporting. It is said that they have a built-in understanding of their readers and viewers if they are any good at their jobs; after all, readers and viewers are the journalists' next-door neighbors, friends, and companions at sports. Although this vision of the journalist may be true in very small communities, for the most part it is not true. Editors and reporters are part of an elite. They simply are not like most of the citizens of the community. They are better educated, more liberal politically, less religious, and more likely to be single, to live in an apartment (as opposed to a single-family dwelling), and to have social and cultural values quite distant from those around them. National studies have documented this condition for a number of years, drawing a portrait of journalists as relatively isolated from and out of touch with their communities. As one reporter was quoted in a 1982 study:

It is an inherent problem; inbred newspapers don't trust the people they are writing about. . . . Especially the younger reporters are getting removed from society. They come from different backgrounds than the average public. [Theirs is] a snobbish view of the world. (Burgoon, Burgoon, and Atkin, 1982, 5)

That study, based on a national survey conducted for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, went on to say that journalists underestimate reader intelligence, have a poor understanding of what people will actually read, and simply do not comprehend the role of television in delivering news to people who also read newspapers. The report was a stinging indictment of the press that was not out of line with a more impressionistic speech by Kurt Luedtke, mentioned earlier in this book. Luedtke charges that his former colleagues in the media suffer from the twin perils of "arrogance and irrelevance." Arrogance keeps them unpleasantly off the track with readers; irrelevance could spell doom in an era when other information sources (data banks provided by cable systems or the telephone company) can supply much of the factual information (sports scores, weather reports) that people now gain from newspaper and television news. Editors and reporters can take a number of steps to stay in touch with their communities, but nothing will change the inevitable: Journalists will continue to be elitists, continue to be unlike their readers and viewers.

A marketing approach to news makes news decisions less of a guessing game and more of a thoughtful, systematic process that takes into account the interests and needs of the audience. The marketing approach to news is nothing new. In the 1970s, when newspaper circulation was sliding downward, a national Newspaper Readership Project—which has been written about in many newspapers, news reports, and books such as Leo Bogart's *The Press and the Public* (1989) and *Preserving the Press* (1991)—collected data about reader interests, preferences, and reading habits. As a result many American newspapers changed their formats radically, offering special sections on lifestyles,

neighborhoods, and entertainment. News was packaged differently, with livelier design and more vivid writing. For example, a news story on a zoning ordinance would begin by suggesting the consequences of the news story for potential homeowners, rather than simply summarizing the action of the zoning board in a procedural manner. The story would likely be presented with striking photos or line drawings and readable, attractive headlines.

The marketing approach to news depends on a regular and accurate flow of statistical data about the audience. The data are then used as one factor, a central one, in determining what will be offered to the audience and in what manner. News is matched to the interests and potential interests of that audience. Some critics have called this approach "soft and sexy in the afternoon," suggesting that a marketing approach must always emphasize soft news rather than important news of public affairs. The best papers using the marketing approach, however, have an effective blend of editorial leadership, wherein professional journalists make news selections and prepare material with strategies for reaching the reader. Those strategies depend largely on marketing research data. This process is not a mindless one, whereby journalists succumb to cold statistics while ignoring professional ethics and a desire to be complete in their coverage of a community issue or problem. Information is a calibrating tool that, when used by intelligent people, can result in a higher-quality product. Market information gives news organizations a continuous source of feedback from their readers and viewers, something that is lacking in many places today.

Any discussion of the marketing approach to news naturally revives the old debate of whether the press should give readers what they want or provide leadership that gives citizens what they need. I believe that the two are not incompatible, that the public is ultimately better served if market information plays a more important role in guiding editors' decisions. If today's newspapers and television stations guided mainly by intuition are so far out of touch, it is worth making our best effort to bridge the gap. Market information, intelligently used, will do it.

Even beyond the marketing approach to news comes James Hamilton's economic theory of news that posits that "news is a commodity, not a mirror image of reality." He notes that what information actually becomes news depends on a set of questions (a new 5Ws) that are, in fact, answered in the economic marketplace:

1. Who cares about a particular piece of information?
2. What are they willing to pay to find out, or what are others willing to pay to reach them?
3. Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people?
4. When is it profitable to provide the information?
5. Why is this profitable? (Hamilton, 2004, p. 7)

Another key driver for news that is directly linked to economics is technology and this has inspired much debate since the advent of the Internet. Before