

Introduction

So what is wrong with Galtung and Ruge's News Value system?

Gay vicar in mercy dash to palace

That allegedly was the ultimate English tabloid newspaper headline; it combines suggestions of sexual deviancy, charity and the Royal Family in one neat banner; as close as the tabloid press can get to a full house, the editorial equivalent of a royal flush in poker. It has been impossible to isolate the source of the 'headline'; some say it was a group of bored sub-editors on the *News of the World*, others attribute it to relaxing *Sun* journalists in the pub nearest the office after finishing a shift. Just as likely is that it is an urban myth. But buried deep inside that apocryphal headline is a certain truth; it is the confluence of several contemporary news values.

It is news values that give journalists and editors a set of rules – often intangible, informal, almost unconscious elements – by which to work, from which to plan and execute the content of a publication or a broadcast. In its purest sense everything that happens in the world is a new event, and somebody, somewhere, will have some level of interest in that occurrence. But what takes it from being new to becoming news? The set of values applied by different media – local, regional, national and international, print, television, radio, internet, bulletin board – are as varied as the media themselves. Some form of matrix system is needed to prioritise those events, to filter them into levels of applicability and relevance to the audience. In an attempt to rationalise and analyse this process, Norwegian social scientists Johan Galtung and Mari Hombøe Ruge developed and eventually published a paper on this in the 1965 edition of the *Journal of International Peace Studies*. Entitled *Structuring and Selecting News*, they began by analysing the output of a cluster of newspapers in their native land, and identified a number of common strands – the presence of elite nations or individuals, the cultural proximity of events to the

intended audience and so forth – then went on to create a system for prioritising news. This was ground-breaking research, and from its initial publication has become what is in essence the core text for the process; everything that has followed has been built on those initial findings.

But there are substantial problems with the Galtung and Ruge thesis. Firstly comes the matter of their agenda; both Johan Galtung and Mari Hombøe Ruge were essentially concerned with the reportage of conflicts within newspapers from the perspective of being academics with a specific interest in peace studies. Secondly there is the issue of the narrow range of publications which they studied, and thirdly there is the fact that the research was carried out in Norway. While it appears impossible to argue against some of the findings of this team, there are, we feel, some areas where opportunities exist to develop further some of their key findings with a view to developing a pattern applicable to the media of the 21st century. When Galtung and Ruge were devising their theories broadcast news was still in the first flush of youth, newspapers were still essentially serious publications, and the internet did not exist. There was little trans-national broadcasting (unless one counts Voice of America, which was essentially propagandist, or Radio Luxembourg, which was essentially a popular music station and not one which renowned for either the quality or quantity of its news) and much broadcast news stories based on foreign events relied on film shipped physically from the place of event to the home country of the broadcast organisation, where it would be mediated prior to broadcast. Today the live 'to camera' piece is commonplace in television news, and this brings with it both rewards and problems. As John Simpson pointed out: 'Live reporting is the hardest and most rewarding broadcasting you can do, and live reporting from a battlefield is harder than any other kind' (2002: 408). Simpson was referring to a specific report he had made from a war zone – Afghanistan – which had required him to deliver, via a videophone, a live report for broadcast on BBC Television News. The subtext to his comments is that there is rarely time to consciously mediate the news being delivered, and the process of a live transmission means that there is no room for any process of remediation by the editorial staff in London, thousands of miles away from Simpson's vantage point in the Shomali Valley, near Kabul.

A key element of the work of Galtung and Ruge hinges on the audience; the issues of resonance and cultural proximity discussed in *Structuring and Selecting News* relies on an expectation that the audience will fulfil their half of the bargain. But there are huge sub-divisions in audience within a country – and within a region made up of several nations, such as the Pacific Rim that is covered by Star, Europe as covered by Sky and BBC News 24 – and much of the world that is reached by either BBC World Service radio or BBC World television – the likelihoods of confluence and a common cultural proximity are virtually nil.

An often-used (some might say overused) quotation, 'People everywhere confuse what they read in newspapers with news' (A. J. Liebling: *The New*

Yorker 1965) leads, in an oblique manner, to another problematic area when it comes to any rigid application of Galtung and Ruge's values, the so-called op-ed (opinion-editorial) column. Opinion and editorial is often a longer view of a news item; sometimes this will be dealing with issues for which there was insufficient space in the original item, in others it draws in other, associated, news items which can be converged into a single column. Often charged with the personality of the writer (hence the opinion element of the nomenclature) these are still news items, but can often be quite some way removed from the core values that were applied to the initial story. When it comes to rolling news items – a storyline which gradually unfolds as more information becomes available – then the problems of applying the Galtung and Ruge values can become more problematic still. This is especially true when the 'citizen journalist' is responsible for propagation of news; another trend that did not exist in Galtung and Ruge's day, but is viewed by industry observers as having an increasing value. Citizen journalists are not usually trained or skilled, but they nevertheless abide by some unconscious adherence to conventions. We will investigate those protocols.

Then there is the matter of those strange, sometimes quirky, stories which emerge on a daily basis; typical of these is an item from Reuters news agency's feed on 4 August 2005: 'A bid by Mexican police to polish their image back-fired after youngsters at a police summer camp were filmed chanting that they had killed their dads and tossed their sisters into ditches'. The value of such items can be in direct opposition to one of Galtung and Ruge's core values, that of cultural proximity; it is precisely because such stories are in opposition to the culture of anywhere but other than where they originate, in this case Mexico, that they work.

Further problems arise when proactive media story placement agents, the so-called 'spin doctors' and public relations consultancies, have been involved in the news generation process prior to it reaching the publishing or broadcast organisation. In essence *The Story* has already been through a mediation process and in pure terms is already corrupted; the difficulty is squaring this with 'pure' news values. And so it goes; each new element that has been introduced since that first report was published in 1965 has had an impact on the ultimate value of some of the parameters set by those two Norwegian researchers.

Yet despite these various difficulties, there is still a place for a matrix which sets out the variables and allows them to be applied to news stories as a means of prioritising items. Through the course of this book we will analyse the various branches of the media and its key players, with a view to establishing the values which apply for this great new age of media.

One of the other major changes in the news landscape since Galtung and Ruge is the increasing self-awareness of news, and its growing reliance on considerations of style as well as substance. This manifests itself in differing ways according to which news medium is under discussion. But its effects are

profound on the nature of news values in practice. For instance we shall note how, in broadcast news, issues of programme format contend with more traditional news values in determining which stories are selected for mainstream network television news bulletins. We shall look at specific instances where, for example, stories have been included or dropped for reasons more to do with what might be termed 'aesthetic balance' than on purely journalistic criteria. We shall see how this can take a number of forms. For example, on grounds of subject balance: if there is a story about famine in Niger, how likely is it that another, entirely separate famine in, say, Chad will be extensively reported on the same programme? It may be included as an add-on to the main report, but it is highly unlikely to merit a separate package; whereas, on another night, it would be given much more prominence.

Similarly, we shall examine how stories' inclusion and prominence in television bulletins will be shaped by stylistic factors. We shall investigate the rôle of story treatments in broadcast news – such aspects as the overall 'shape' of the programme package, the live two-way exchange between studio and on-location reporter, live voice-piece. These and other factors affect the editorial decision-making process. We shall then argue that balancing these treatment genres is as important as story selection. This, too, is having a great effect on news values in practice.

We will also consider how far the same issues govern story selection in radio. Here, too, there is an increasingly self-conscious use of these stylistic factors as well as the exercise of more conventional news values judgements. We shall investigate whether these factors play the same prominent rôle as in television news, and whether their effects are similarly far-reaching.

We shall examine the rôle of planning in news output and investigate what might be called the growing grip of the news diary – the tendency for news agendas to be set well in advance, and only exceptionally departed from. Do we see further instances of this in the rise of the 'anniversary story'? and in the increasing popularity of themed news? Are these merely a symptom of a desire to fill a blank news diary well in advance, or a demonstration of the rise of what some see as slanted or biased journalism?

This will lead to a review of another of the huge changes in recent journalistic history: the change in the rôle of the newspaper. Many journalists and academics have remarked upon the evolution from fact to comment in much print journalism – what Andrew Marr describes as 'the growth of an office-based, editorial culture, rather than a reporters' journalism' (2004: 115). There is also a widespread assumption that this has been in response to the rise of the 24-hour broadcast news cycle; and of the change in people's reading expectations, rather than habits. However, the same close attention has not been paid to what this means in practice for the exercise of news values in practice. If we read papers less to find out **what** has happened, and more to find out **why** it happened, and **how** we should think about it, what, then, are the implications for working journalists? Is this simply another version of what

used to be regarded as the divide between 'ideological' newspaper coverage, and 'unbiased' broadcast coverage? Is it, further, a recognition that the old, convenient divide between news and comment – frail at the best of times – is now a substantially meaningless concept?

Finally, there is the specific area of news items used in weekly newspapers, periodicals and magazines. These have less immediacy than hourly or daily news items, but must still be news in some form or other. What criteria are adopted in the decision to include or exclude events? This is an area that has been overlooked, unfairly, in most studies; we intend to rectify that situation.

In order to explore our thesis, we shall conduct a detailed analysis of news output in print, broadcast and new media. We shall also – applying the perspectives of working journalists and broadcasters, as well as academics – pay due heed to the compromises and pragmatic considerations which often inform news judgements. As well as reflecting on the continuing relevance of some of Galtung and Ruge's concepts, we shall also examine their shortcomings as guides to the 21st century news landscape. We will also put forward a set of formulae to replace them, a flexible set of rules which are more appropriate for this digital age of converged media forms.