

Running Head: NEWS VALUES

Rehashing the Gate:
News Values, Non-News Spaces,
and the Future of Gatekeeping

Abstract

The thesis of this paper, simply put, is that new media spaces and traditional journalism share far more qualities than are usually appreciated. Since the 1950s, both scholars and practitioners examining the gatekeeper function of the news media have sought to explain why some issues and events become newsworthy while others remain obscure. Since 1965, when Galtung and Ruge published a seminal paper on the subject, such discussions have frequently turned upon their notion of “news values”—aspects of events that make them more likely to receive coverage. Galtung and Ruge based their twelve original news values on principles from psychology and human behavior research. In other words, they suggested that—putting aside some key questions concerning influences on the media—the way journalists select and publish news items is not so different from the way the rest of us perceive and discuss the world. The mental processes that unfolded in the press as gatekeeping were, in some sense, just manifestations of our universal human condition. Following this logic, many of the same sorts of decisions about what’s worthy of discussion, what’s not, and why, would seem likely to recur in online spaces—and I present some evidence that they do.

But Galtung and Ruge’s work, while widely cited, was quickly divorced of these theoretical underpinnings in the psychology of perception. Remarkably, given the nature of their original claims, by 1982 scholars like Hartley were citing Galtung and Ruge and in the same breath suggesting that “news values are neither natural nor neutral. They form a code which sees the world in a very particular (even peculiar) way” (p. 80). In this paper I argue that, in treating journalism as a “particular and peculiar” form of communication, both journalism and new media scholars have at times lost sight of the commonalities between journalism and other forms of communication. This failure to reckon with commonalities that have long been present has

left us ill-equipped to deal with forms of new media that share some of journalism's qualities (e.g., blogs, wikis, online video sites, etc. presenting content with reportorial value). It may have simultaneously allowed us to romanticize interactions that take place within self-organizing online communities as being qualitatively different from traditional media forms in ways that they may in fact not be.

My paper will include some results from a pilot study—a content analysis of the popular liberal political blog Daily Kos, patterned roughly after studies that have previously been used to look for evidence of traditional news values in print and broadcast news. While evidence from such a pilot study should be considered preliminary at best, I discuss the implications, should some news values traditionally considered “particular and peculiar” to the news media, ultimately appear not to be unique to journalism at all. Whether these results will hold more generally, and how similar research might be done in a way that better controls for the effects of intermedia agenda setting is a topic for further discussion.

Introduction

One of the most common claims about contemporary online media is that they problematize traditional models of gatekeeping, both in the pragmatic sense of “I-read-it-first-on-a-blog,” and on a theoretical level. This paper is an exploration of “news values” (sometimes called “news criteria”), one of the more common academic models of gatekeeping. I'm interested in news values in particular because they have become one of the more axiomatic concepts in journalism studies (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). As such, to paraphrase Gaye Tuchman below, I cannot prove my assertion that they serve as a barometer of the way journalism studies scholars view gatekeeping, but I continue to believe that they do so. Put more simply, deconstructing news values as a conceptual framework may allow us to grapple in a more

nuanced way with those aspects of a traditional gatekeeping model that have become problematic in the wake of developing online media, and to retrieve some of its key theoretical insights that have long been lost in the shuffle, but which may help us to better understand many new media environments.

I have divided my case for overhauling news values as a conceptual framework into several parts. Part One outlines the literature on news values and details the myriad difficulties scholars have had applying them to real-world situations. Many of these troubles stem from widespread disagreements over the nature of news values and how best to operationalize them. I argue that these squabbles result from the fact that many scholarly lists of news values, including Galtung and Ruge's, have long been promulgated absent or divorced of any theoretical framework that would make them useful from a descriptive standpoint. Before such a theoretical framework can be proposed, however, it is important to know whether "news values" are grappling with a phenomenon that is in fact unique to the news, or whether the tendency to treat journalism as a special case has, in fact, masked similarities between the press and other forms of communication, unnecessarily balkanizing the academic literature—a difficulty that becomes especially glaring as we enter the world of new media, where the boundaries formerly surrounding journalism are becoming increasingly fuzzy. In Part Two, I reflect on a number of coherence problems within the news values literature, which further underscore the need for an underlying theoretical framework. In Part Three, I briefly recap the results of a pilot study in which I attempted to apply news values to a new media environment, introducing in the process a final conceptual difficulty, which I'll call "the problem with tennis on Sundays." And in a concluding section, I point to some alternative literatures that may eventually usurp news values as a conceptual framework, or at least provide theoretical underpinnings for them that extend

beyond the silo of journalism studies. I close out the paper by suggesting areas for further research.

Part One

A Key Role in the Public's Understanding

Scholars who study the news invariably think of it as important—often more than other mass media forms, which may reach larger audiences. For instance, writing in 1996 about media images of health care, Joseph Turow observed that

Policy makers, academic observers, and journalists in the USA have long accepted the idea that journalism has a key role in the public's understanding of health care. ... [They] treat the vivid health-care rhetoric as weapons in a hot debate, yet they virtually ignore the relation of that rhetoric to popular images of medicine in television entertainment. (p. 1240)

Turow's observation holds more generally—many prominent scholars have taken the news to be the most important source of information in public life. For instance, Herbert Gans (1979) describes the news media as the “prime regular suppliers of information about America for most Americans” (p. xi). Gaye Tuchman, slightly more reflexive, states, “I cannot prove my early supposition that the news media set the context in which citizens discuss public issues, but I continue to believe that they do so” (p. x).

As both Scheufele (2000) and Shoemaker and Reese (1991) have noted, more studies have focused on the audience effects of mass media content than on “what sets the media agenda,” but since the 1950s, when the news media were identified by Lewin (1951) and White (1950) as gatekeepers, there has been a growing interest in how journalists and news organizations “decide what's news.” Research on this question has been conducted using a wide variety of methods, including interviews, surveys of journalists, case studies, newsroom ethnographies, content analyses, and simple introspection by journalists-cum-academics. While

these varied approaches have yielded many responses, a surprisingly common feature of the various treatments has been the delineation of lists of “news values”—aspects of events or issues that purportedly make them more likely to be covered in the news media.

News Values

News values, sometimes called “news criteria,” are commonly held to be active at several stages in the gatekeeping process. First, as mentioned above, they supposedly make a story or event more likely to be chosen as news (the “selection” hypothesis). Second, they're said to be underscored, or even exaggerated when a news story is written (the “distortion” hypothesis), and finally, they are purportedly further emphasized as a news item passes through each stage of the production process (the “replication” hypothesis; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Sande, 1971; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Moreover, it is commonly suggested that the more news values a given event possesses, the more likely it is to become news (the “additivity” hypothesis), and that an event that is lacking in one news value must make up for this absence by being particularly strong in one or more others (the “complementarity” hypothesis; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Sande, 1971). Readers of the literature hoping for a common, agreed-upon list of news values, however, will be sorely disappointed. As Charlotte Ryan (1991) puts it, “There is no end to lists of news criteria” (p. 31). This overabundance of lists is a topic I'll return to in Part Two. Presently, for the sake of illustration, we'll stick to one set of news criteria.

Far and away, the most commonly cited list of news values is also the (arguably) first-ever list: that of Galtung and Ruge (1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Watson (1998) concludes that

The names of [the] two Norwegian scholars, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, have become as associated with news value analysis as Hoover with the vacuum cleaner. Their model of selective gatekeeping of 1965, while not carrying quite the romance of the apple that fell on Newton's head, is nevertheless a landmark in the scholarship of media. (p. 117)

Galtung and Ruge's twelve criteria were originally intended to help explain why the news media in a given country might choose to cover some international events and not others. Since its original publication, however, their set of news values has been applied far more broadly to many types of news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Tumber, 1999, p. 4). The criteria are as follows:

1. FREQUENCY—Events that unfold conveniently within the production cycle of a news outlet are more likely to be reported.
2. THRESHOLD—The larger the event, the more people it affects, the more likely it is to be reported. Events can meet the threshold criterion either by being large in absolute terms, or by marking an increase in the intensity of an ongoing issue.
3. UNAMBIGUITY—The fewer ways there are of interpreting an event, the more likely it is to be reported.
4. MEANINGFULNESS—The more culturally proximate and/or relevant an event is, the more likely it is to be reported.
5. CONSONANCE—If a journalist has a mental pre-image of an event, if it's expected to happen, then it is more likely to be reported. This is even more true if the event is something the journalist desires to happen.
6. UNEXPECTEDNESS—If an event is unexpected, it is more likely to be considered newsworthy and to be reported.
7. CONTINUITY—Once an issue has made the news once, future events related to it are more likely to be reported.
8. COMPOSITIONAL BALANCE—News editors will attempt to present their audience with a "balanced diet" of news. An event that contributes to the diversity of topics reported is more likely to be covered than one that adds to a pile of similar news items.
9. ELITE NATIONS—Events that involve elite nations are more likely to be reported than those that do not.
10. ELITE PEOPLE—Events that involve elite people are more likely to be reported than those that do not.
11. PERSONIFICATION—Events that can be discussed in terms of the actions of individual actors are more likely to be reported than those that are the outcome of abstract social forces. By the same token, social forces are more likely to be discussed in the news if they can be illustrated by way of reference to individuals.
12. NEGATIVITY—An event with a negative outcome is more likely to be reported than one with a positive outcome.

Galtung and Ruge's news values have received some—often mixed—empirical support where they have been tested (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Sande, 1971; Peterson, 1979, 1981; Bell, 1991, pp. 155-156), however they are more often deemed axiomatic, endlessly anthologized, and taken

for granted in reviews of the literature (Harcup & O'Neil, 2001). This does not, however, mean that their list, or news values as a conceptual framework, have escaped criticism.

Some Critiques of News Values

Gatekeeping vs. News Gathering

One criticism of news values as a way of understanding news decisions is that they are sharply limited in their explanatory value. A number of authors have commented that news values, as a construct, ignore the news gathering process, portraying events as though they presented themselves in reportable fashion to journalists, who in turn gave each a simple up or down vote based on how well they fit a predetermined list of criteria (Tunstall, 1971; McQuail, 2000). This may be true of, say, an editor's choice of Associated Press stories, or selective coverage of so-called "diary events," which are scheduled in advance—and studies which have supported news values have tended to focus on exactly these sorts of settings and situations, a potential research bias that Tunstall (1971) roundly criticizes as placing "researchers at the mercy of those very journalism news values which their research reports subsequently decry" (pp. 264-265).

Reliance on Simple, Discreet Events

McQuail (2000) points out that real-world events are generally complex and are likely to score high or low, not simply on one or two news values, but a whole host of them. As such, it becomes particularly difficult to isolate any given news value well enough to determine its validity or predictive value, especially when one considers that such stories are competing with, and often eclipsed by, a constantly changing flow of equally complicated news items (p. 341). Moreover, Hartley (1982) notes that events and issues often become news without scoring highly on *any* news value (p. 79). Harcup and O'Neill (2001) further critique Galtung and Ruge's list

of news criteria for focusing strictly on events in the news, when many news items are not, in fact, about discreet events but about trends, speculation, issues, and so forth. Other authors make the point that many reported events are not natural happenings with a life of their own, per se, but are staged and exist solely for the benefit of the news media, implying a level of reflexivity in news decisions not appreciated by news values (Curran and Seaton, 1997, pp. 277-278; McQuail, 2000).

Values vs. Value Judgments

More convicting, though, than the notion that news values don't explain all that they set out to, is the claim that they in fact disguise important aspects of journalism as an enterprise—namely, the ideological assumptions under which news workers labor. According to Hall (1973), “News values appear as a set of neutral, routine practices, but we need, also to see formal news values as an ideological structure—to examine these rules as the formalization and operationalization of an ideology of news” (p. 182).

This is not to say that Galtung and Ruge (1965), or other progenitors of lists of news values entirely ignored the question of journalists' values. Galtung and Ruge's original list was published with the explicit suggestion that journalists use it to recognize which types of events they favored in their coverage, in the hope that they would attempt to counteract these tendencies. But the lists do often assume that the event-qualities journalists favor or exaggerate in their stories exist independently of the judgment of the reporter or news organization (McQuail, 2000, p. 279). Hall asserts this masks the “cultural map” that underlies journalists' decisions (Hall et al., 1978, p. 54). Hartley (1982) follows journalistic critic Anna Coote in suggesting that news values enforce cultural biases, marginalizing—to give one example—the

culturally feminine or excluding it altogether, and instead focusing news coverage on issues predominantly of interest to white, middle-class men.

As Part Two of this paper will explore, the question of ideology in the news, while valid, has at times eclipsed other important aspects of the way in which the news media operate (Palmer, 1998, pp. 388-389). All the same, inquiries about ideology are useful in that they raise questions about where news values come from and whether they are unique to the journalism at all.

(How) Do Journalists Use News Values?

McQuail (1992) rightly points out content analysis is incapable of determining “what journalists and editors really think about relevance” (p. 216). This complicates attempts to examine the decisions of news workers from the perspective of finished texts, and as such, researchers have attempted to triangulate using other methods. Unfortunately, while a number of non-content analysis studies, such as those conducted by Peterson (1979, 1981), provide at least mixed support for Galtung and Ruge’s list of factors, these results fall amid a larger disagreement among newsroom ethnographers as to whether news values are used by journalists at all, and if so, consciously or unconsciously, and in what capacity.

Hetherington (1985) says “most journalists, in my experience, will resist formalised ‘news values,’ lest these cramp their freedom of decision. ... Obviously journalists working at speed against edition times or programme ‘on-air’ times do not go through any mental checklist of factors such as Galtung and Ruge have listed” (p. 7). That said, he does leave open the possibility that news values may describe in broad terms the trends in journalists’ output, if not their decision-making process.

Other authors have suggested, somewhat awkwardly, that news values still operate in journalists' decision-making, but on a subconscious level. According to Bell (1991), news values "approximate to the—often unconscious—criteria by which newswriters make their professional judgements as they process stories." Warner (1970) also suggests that news values are a largely unconscious phenomenon, saying that they are indeed present, but that "personnel in...newsrooms have difficulty articulating them" (p. 163). Similarly, Hall (1978) writes, "Although they are nowhere written down, formally transmitted, or codified, news values seem to be widely shared as between the different news media,...and form a core element in the professional socialisation, practice and ideology" (p. 54). Elsewhere, he continues:

"News values" are one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society. All 'true journalists' are supposed to possess it: few can or are willing to identify and define it. Journalists speak of 'the news' as if events select themselves. ... We appear to be dealing, then, with a 'deep structure' whose function as a selective device is un-transparent even to those who professionally most know how to operate it. (Hall, 1973, p. 181)

Tunstall (1971), on the other hand, suggests that journalists readily cop to using a set of news values, and may even be able to articulate them, but that these criteria are highly contextual, specific to a given journalist's work environment, and further are open to discretion on many organizational levels from that of the individual reporter all the way up to the corporate owners of news outlets (pp. 263-264).

Still other authors, like Golding and Elliott (1999) view news values as well-defined, and readily available to journalists on a conscious basis, but suggest that they have little to do with "deciding what's news" and far more to do with rationalizing news decisions that are made for far more mundane reasons:

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. ... 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 thus working rules, comprising a corpus of occupational lore which implicitly and often expressly explains and guides newsroom practice. It is not true as is 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. (pp. 118-119)

What's clearly needed is a sorting out of all these conceptual disagreements. Unfortunately, says Tunstall (1971), the problem appears intractable, due to the nature of the news business and the difficulty of gaining access to journalists at the moment of decision:

[T]he number of variables, the time pressures, and the problems presented by confidentiality, the telephone, and by other basic characteristics of news gathering would constitute formidable difficulties for such studies; certainly established 'participant observation' techniques would be quite inadequate. (p. 263)

Moreover, he says, even an effective list of news values, were it to be generated, would "never do more than show broad probabilities," having little explanatory value on the order of individual cases (Tunstall, 1971, p. 23).

Whose Values are News Values?

If for the moment we buy the notion that journalists employ news criteria in some capacity, and we acknowledge that these news values correspond to value judgments, as their name indeed implies, of whose preferences specifically are they reflective? The response, "white, middle-class men" risks being a truism, and not a terribly valuable one. "Journalists" would be far too simple, as well.

Herbert Gans (1979) tells us "the values in the news are not necessarily those of journalists" (p. 39). This turns out to be a far-reaching problem for news values as a concept.

McQuail (2000) elaborates:

There have been numerous attempts to distil the essence of [newsworthy] qualities of events, although there are some fundamental reasons why it is impossible to reach any definitive account of 'news values' that has great predictive or explanatory value in accounting for any particular example of news selection. One problem lies in the fact that value has to be attributed and there are competing sources of perception. Although by definition, journalists and editors are the most influential judges of value (since they decide on relative value), the actual perceptions of diverse audiences cannot be ignored, nor can the views of powerful sources and others affected by the news. (p. 341)

Tunstall (1971) expands the above enumeration of "sources of perception" to include publishers, publication owners and proprietors, business executives, and advertisers, along with journalists (p. 23). In making a similar point, Hetherington (1985) further grows this list to a full-page catalog of the various actors who touch news content on its way to publication (pp. 20-21).

Matters become even more complex when we realize that, not only does each one of these people and groups have a hand in what gets published, their opinions are constantly influenced by what it is they perceive all the other parties as desiring.

So, whose values *are* news values? It is possible, as the authors above loosely suggest, that they are simply a probabilistic value judgment resulting from the aggregate decisions of myriad news workers. Then again, it is also possible that they are not unique to the news at all.

Tunstall (1971) frames the question in such a way that it bursts the confines of journalism altogether:

Are the 'news values' in relation to which correspondents shape their stories merely a projection of the suburban values and neuroses of the journalists themselves? Are news values completely arbitrary and unpatterned (as some journalists sometimes contend)? Or are news stories socially patterned (as sociologists would claim)? Or are news values simply a mass media version of social values held by millions of audience members? (p. 261)

This quandary, put forward by Tunstall, is the question on which I focus in the remainder of this paper.

Part Two

It should be clear by this point that news values, as an intellectual enterprise, are riddled with difficulties, both at the theoretical level, and in their application. Some of these difficulties may be repairable, while others appear not to be. But it's still unclear as yet what type of theoretical framework we might use to fix or replace news values. This picture will remain murky, however, until we've made some progress in answering Tunstall's query as to whether the entire process by which journalists decide what's newsworthy is in fact unique to journalism. If the logic of news selection is indeed wholly unique to news work, then perhaps a solid account of the process from media sociology, like Gaye Tuchman's (1978) *Making News*, or Herbert Gans' (1979) *Deciding What's News*, produced in collaboration with newsroom actors, is adequate to the task. If, however, it turns out that journalists' decisions about newsworthiness are (in some ways) akin to the decisions the rest of us make about what events are important enough to discuss in public, or share in conversation, then we'll likely need a theoretical framework to replace "news values" that extends beyond the relative silo of journalism studies.

Is Newsworthiness Unique to the News?

An examination of the existing literature suggests it may not be. Gans (1979) says that the "preference statements" embodied in news stories are not "necessarily distinctive to journalists," but that they in fact frequently begin with the institutional sources on whom journalists rely (p. 39). Bell (1991) also concedes that news values are not unique to journalism, but attributes them more broadly as "ideologies and priorities held in society" (p. 156), a view pioneered most influentially by Hall (1973; 1978). Tunstall (1970), while deeming Galtung and Ruge's original article on news values an "instant classic," encourages readers to consider

the broad question of whether 'news values' differ from 'dramatic values,' 'cultural values' or perhaps merely human values? Personalization and conflict are to be found

not only in factual and fictional crime, but in humour, sport, art, and politics. Many of the factors which Galtung and Ruge find as predisposing foreign events to become news—elite persons, negative events, unexpectedness-within-predictability, cultural proximity—are also to be found in Shakespeare’s plays. ‘News’ indeed existed before either newspapers or the earlier newsbooks. The word ‘news’ occurs frequently in Shakespeare meaning information. This usually word-of-mouth ‘news’ already had the familiar negative connotations. A contemporary of Shakespeare, William Drayton, wrote: ‘Ill news has wings, and with the wind doth go, Comfort’s a cripple and comes ever slow.’ (pp. 20-21).

All of this is unsurprising, if we examine the nature of the claims Galtung and Ruge (1965) originally made about news values. The authors did *not*, in fact, consider their first eight values—FREQUENCY, THRESHOLD, UNAMBIGUITY, MEANINGFULNESS, CONSONANCE, UNEXPECTEDNESS, CONTINUITY, and COMPOSITIONAL BALANCE—to be specific to the news media, but instead claimed they were general aspects of human perception in a mediated world, basing them on principles from human-behavior research. Using the example of a person tuning a radio dial, they hypothesize that, absent the ability to listen to everything at once, the listener will tend to pause on strong signals (THRESHOLD), clear (UNAMBIGUOUS) signals, stations she finds culturally MEANINGFUL, stations playing what she was hoping to find (CONSONANCE), and stations playing something unusual (UNEXPECTEDNESS). Moreover, once the listener has found a station, she’ll likely stick with it for awhile (CONTINUITY), though she may seek variety next time she turns on the radio (COMPOSITIONAL BALANCE). By analogy Galtung and Ruge expected that journalists use the same logic in tuning into events (as opposed to stations), and that they are likely to employ the same selective behaviors in their reporting, simply by virtue of their human nature.

While, as we’ve already begun to see, this system of news values comes with some inherent difficulties, Galtung and Ruge’s original logic that journalists-are-people-too is unimpeachable. And it’s an important point to underscore here. Scholarly discussions of the

news media frequently revolve around the technologies employed in publishing, or the structural, organizational, ideological and commercial environments in which journalists operate (Herbert, 2000, pp. 60-64). Certainly these are valuable areas to consider, but not to the exclusion of the role of individual actors. As Tunstall (1971) puts it, “The recurrent weakness of so much ‘academic’ discussion of the news media is a preference for over-sophisticated explanations in general and conspiracy theories in particular; conspiracy theories are all the more damaging, a weakness in much academic writing, for usually being implicit rather than explicitly stated” (p. 264).

As his quote—written a scant six years after Galtung and Ruge’s original publication—suggests, discussion of news values quickly moved away from the logic that newsworthiness may be part of a phenomenon that extends beyond journalism. Gans (1979), for instance, asserted that the role of the individual in news production is effectively insignificant, in that news workers are all socialized to think in identical patterns. This overly deterministic framework has recently become less popular. Herbert, writing in 2000, argues for a balanced view of the situation, which appreciates the role of the individual without ignoring the influence of the social structures in which she operates: “What is news to one journalist or editor is not news to another. ... [W]hat is worth reporting to one editor may be of no interest to another. ... News selection, though, is a group activity. No one person actually exercises inordinate control over the news, because all the way back along the news chain the checks and balances of those involved work very successfully. ... Out of this constant stream of argument comes a finished product that is in no sense the wishes of an individual” (pp. 63-64).

Despite claims like Herbert’s, the proposition that newsworthiness is tied to human perception—that journalists and non-journalists may make decisions in a similar fashion

regarding how to converse about their world—has gone largely unexplored in the news values literature since Galtung and Ruge’s original publication. As such, it’s a problem that requires empirical attention.

Following Herbert (2000), it stands to reason that some aspects of news decisions are indeed unique to the professional culture, economics, and political situation of mainstream journalism, while—as Galtung and Ruge originally suggested—others may be far less specific to the news. Given the conceptual difficulties we’ve seen with news values, however, it stands to reason that whatever theoretical framework replaces them may not look like a list at all.

News Values After Galtung and Ruge

To simply mention Galtung and Ruge’s 1965 list of news values would be to ignore over 40 years’ worth of additional literature. Landmark or not, the popularity of the authors’ original paper has not stopped scholars and journalists from generating list upon list of alternative and supernumerary criteria (examples include Warner, 1970; Ruehlmann, 1979; O’Sullivan et al., 1983; Hetherington, 1985; Bell, 1991; Ryan, 1991; Gregory & Miller, 1998; Herbert, 2000; McQuail, 2000; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). Some of these additional lists, such as Herbert Gans’ (1979) have been informed by and incorporated into substantial bodies of research and scholarship. Others are far more prosaic, terse, and off-the-cuff—a few even stand alone without explanation. All are reasonably well-informed by one source or another, whether that be fieldwork, survey research, content analysis, professional expertise, or some combination of these. As such, there is often little to recommend one list over another, or to suggest whether a given list is “complete”—a difficulty chronicled by O’Sullivan as early as 1983:

Numerous attempts have been made over the years to pin down news values more specifically. But it is hard to collate these into a hard and fast list of values, because different studies have approached the idea from different standpoints, using different assumptions and terminology. (p. 154)

Coherence Problems in the News Values Literature

It's worth taking a moment to discuss some additional difficulties with news values that have emerged as new lists have proliferated. The following issues I identify are distinct from those enumerated in Part One, which primarily concern the limited explanatory power of news values, and difficulties with their operationalization. The present critiques instead revolve around the internal coherence within and among lists of news criteria. I label these coherence issues the binary problem, collapsibility, and false typification.

The Binary Problem

Many news values, when taken together, appear as oppositional binaries. For example, take the two Galtung and Ruge (1965) news values, CONSONANCE and UNEXPECTEDNESS. Consonance suggests that events are more likely to be reported if they conform to a journalist's mental pre-image of what's likely to happen, or better yet, if the event is something the journalist wants to happen. The UNEXPECTEDNESS value, on the other hand, says an event is more likely to be reported if it's surprising. Together, though, these values appear to work against one another. After all, if an event isn't consonant with a journalist's beliefs, then it's safe to say it's unexpected. Galtung and Ruge (1965) realized this, and suggested that UNEXPECTEDNESS was only a value insofar as it occurred within the subset of those events that were also CONSONANT. An example of this might be the Milwaukee Brewers winning the World Series. It's never happened before, and it is, perhaps, unlikely. But a journalist at the *Journal Sentinel* would no doubt view it as within the realm of possibility, even want it to happen. This solution to the paradox—UNEXPECTEDNESS within CONSONANCE—predates news values themselves, having been remarked upon by Park as early as 1940 (McQuail, 2000, p. 338). It has not, however, gone uncontested. Tuchman (1978), Hetherington (1985), and McQuail (2000) for instance, have all

pointed out that truly unexpected (i.e., not consonant) events are often prominent news items, while other authors, like Watson (1998), simply state that CONSONANCE and UNEXPECTEDNESS coexist in unresolved opposition.

Other binaries go unresolved as well. For instance, if an article isn't part of CONTINUING story, then it's likely to contribute to COMPOSITIONAL BALANCE—another value proposed by Galtung and Ruge. And the situation only becomes more complex when their factors are considered alongside additional and alternative news values that have since been added into the mix.

If something isn't NEGATIVE, in Galtung and Ruge's terms, then it may be GOOD NEWS (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001), or perhaps HUMOROUS (Herbert, 2000). If a news segment contains few references to individual persons, as Galtung and Ruge's PERSONIFICATION factor would prescribe, it often describes its subjects with NUMBERS (Hetherington, 1985) or STATISTICAL AGGREGATES (Gans, 1979). Bell (1991), in building off of Galtung and Ruge's original list, proposes the value PREDICTABILITY and even goes so far as to say that it exists in paradox with their value of UNEXPECTEDNESS.

The existence of oppositional binaries among news criteria implies that rather than a system in which news criteria are met or not met by a given event, we instead have one in which virtually any event meets one criterion or the other of a given pair. Because such a scheme deems all events newsworthy in one way or another, it effectively renders binary news values unfalsifiable, sharply curbing their explanatory value.

Moreover, beyond tensions between specific pairs of values, there are also broader oppositions between entire groups of news values. McQuail (1992; 2000), for instance, points out that some news values are oriented toward producing news stories about events and issues

that have consequences for people's lives, while others lend themselves to stories primarily aimed at interesting the audience—feature writing, gossip, and human interest stories, which draw audiences for other reasons. Hetherington (1985) broadly agrees with this notion, though he points out that what interests people and what is of consequence for their lives are just as often in concert as in tension with one another—a point McQuail (1992) concedes. Hetherington also suggests that where such values are at odds, hard news wins out over human interest, though McQuail (1992) contests this.

It is entirely fair to argue that news production is full of competing tensions, and that news workers must sometimes worry about not only what is newsworthy, but also what is salable. Unfortunately, neither the root of these conflicting impulses, nor the manner in which they are negotiated is adequately addressed or encapsulated by simple lists of news values.

Collapsibility

Not all news values are positioned in opposing binaries, however. In fact, in many cases the problem is quite the opposite. More often than not, news criteria are not operationally distinct, but instead appear to be different formulations of the same value, or to contain heavy overlap. This was first noted by Galtung and Ruge themselves in their original 1965 article. While their first eight news values were intended to be operationally distinct, and to operate worldwide, the last four—ELITE NATIONS, ELITE PEOPLE, PERSONALITY, and NEGATIVITY—were said to be culturally determined and aimed at describing the press of Western nations. As such, they are in fact intended as shorthand for some common ways in which the other eight factors are utilized in combination by Western journalists. NEGATIVITY, for instance, is ostensibly a value in the American and European press because progress is the norm in wealthy nations, and negative events are UNEXPECTED. The authors also considered negative events to be LESS AMBIGUOUS

than positive ones, and to be more CONSONANT with expectations (a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy—people expect news to be negative; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hartley, 1982).

Other authors have picked out additional overlaps in Galtung and Ruge's values. Palmer (1998) suggests that news values like CONTINUITY and CONSEQUENCES are related, in that the consequences of an event may play out over time, keeping a story alive in the news. McQuail (2000) offers several examples: Events that affect ELITE PERSONS or ELITE NATIONS are also likely to rate higher on Galtung and Ruge's THRESHOLD factor, referring to the size of an event's impact. The actions of individual people meet the PERSONIFICATION criterion, but individual actions are also generally reportable within a single news cycle (FREQUENCY), and are less ambiguous (UNAMBIGUITY) than the actions of a multitude. Negative events (NEGATIVITY), such as natural disasters, often happen quickly (FREQUENCY), lack ambiguity (UNAMBIGUITY), and tend to produce many personal stories (PERSONIFICATION; p. 341).

Once again, the situation becomes yet more complicated when we begin to consider the additional and alternative news values added by authors after Galtung and Ruge. The use of NUMBERS and STATISTICS (Hetherington, 1985; Gans, 1979), for instance, is often a way at getting at an event's IMPACT (Ryan, 1991; Ruehlmann, 1979; Herbert, 2000; Gans, 1979), and hard numbers often make a story more clear cut and LESS AMBIGUOUS (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Herbert, 2000). The NOVEL (Herbert, 2000; Ruehlmann, 1979; Ryan, 1991) and UNEXPECTED (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hetherington, 1985) are often HUMOROUS (Herbert, 2000). ORGANIZED PUBLICS (Ryan, 1991) and GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS (Gans, 1979) are frequently positioned in CONFLICT (Herbert, 2000; Gans, 1979) among and between one another. A CONTINUING STORY (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) is often described by the media as a DRAMA (Hetherington, 1985; Ryan, 1991) building to an expected (e.g., CONSONANT; Galtung & Ruge,

1965) outcome. ELITE PEOPLE (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Ruehlmann, 1979; Ryan, 1991) are often part of the GOVERNMENT (Gans, 1979; Ryan, 1991), and tend to live and work in ELITE REGIONS (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Moreover, a reference to ELITE PEOPLE is most certainly a REFERENCE TO PERSONS (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979). An event that happens in close PROXIMITY (Herbert, 2000; Ruehlmann, 1979; Hetherington, 1985; Ryan, 1991) to a paper's readership is often more RELEVANT to that audience (Herbert, 2000; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Ryan, 1991). CONFLICT and ACTION (Herbert, 2000) are often related. And so on and so forth.

Some, but not all such reductions (as well as some binaries) may be alleviated by drawing from a single set of news criteria, rather than from a composite list as I have generated here—and perhaps the quality of individual lists might be judged in part by the coherence of their constituent parts. However, as I have already begun to argue, the search for a better list is, in the end, unlikely to be the best solution to the conceptual difficulties posed by news values.

False Typification

It should be clear by now that news values do not work well as distinct, coherent categories, of the sort that can be discerned with a dichotomous key. Nor, according to authors like McQuail (2000) and Tunstall (1971) is there much hope of deriving a set of news values that operates in this way. That said, there may be another way to look at the enterprise. Channeling Schutz, Tuchman (1978) has suggested, quite helpfully, that news decisions have more to do with typification than categorization—a distinction that seems sensible to apply to news values. In other words, instead of applying hard and fast categories to decide whether a story is newsworthy, news workers are more likely to use a process resembling casuistry, comparing an issue or event with those that have gone before in order that they may decide how to rate it

against various news criteria. Questions of threshold or situations calling for compositional balance are identified and decided by appeals to their rough resemblance to a jumble of news items that have gone before. Typifications are not categories, but families of related concepts, à la Wittgenstein.

Conceptualizing news values in this manner alleviates some of the definitional difficulties I've touched upon so far. But it also raises additional problems. Typifications are usually valuable insofar as they are actor-categories (or actor-typifications, as it were), imprecise, but allowing us a useful peek inside the social world of our research subjects. Some lists—Gans' for instance—were formed in conversation with journalists and may represent true actor-typifications. But many lists of news values were devised by academics, and while some of them include typifications that may carry over to the world of the working journalist, for the most part we're left with a set of items that tell us more about the people studying and critiquing journalism than about journalists themselves: researcher-typifications, not actor-typifications. Such typifications run a high risk of proving specious when applied to journalists themselves. Indeed, as we saw in Part One, propping up the apparent conceit that these researcher-typifications are employed in the newsroom has required several rather awkward assertions on the part of scholars, such as the notion that journalists use news values, but don't know they're using them, or that journalists' use of news values is so context-specific as to preclude the possibility of a valid general list.

Part Three

What would happen in the event that an empirical study showed news values not to be distinct to the news? It might be tempting to argue in turn that news values were *more* valuable as a theoretical construct, not less, because they would then appear to describe gatekeeping

processes, not just in the news, but in other forms of discourse as well. In this section, I argue against the logic of this interpretation, using an analogy to a well-rehearsed problem in applied ethics.

The Problem of Tennis on Sundays

Many readers will be familiar with some of Kant's basic reasoning regarding ethics. He suggested that people's actions are morally correct only when it's conceivable that everyone could routinely act in a similar manner. For instance, for Kant, breaking a promise is morally unacceptable because in a world where everyone broke promises routinely, promises as an institution would cease to have meaning, and soon the very act of breaking a promise would become impossible—no one could make them to begin with. Simply put, Kant's rule for determining ethical actions is "don't make an exception of yourself." And this rule can be used to derive laws against many of the things we think of as morally wrong—deception, killing, theft, and so on—just as news values like NEGATIVITY or THRESHOLD seem to accord with many of our notions about what's newsworthy. Enter the problem of tennis on Sundays.¹

Say you like to play tennis on Sunday mornings because fewer people are on the courts. If we apply Kant's logic, this would be unethical, because if everybody then played tennis on Sunday mornings, the courts would be crowded, and there would be no reason to play that day. Tennis on Sundays does not work in Kant's formula because it is not an issue of ethics. But this implies that Kant's system has a potentially damning circular quality to it. It is intended to define ethical problems, but to make it work properly we must *know in advance* what an ethical problem looks like. And that in turn means that the system has failed at its cardinal task. What good is a definition that requires you to know the concept in advance?

¹ This famous thought experiment is described in more detail in Herman (1993).

Similarly, news values are intended to be a definition—to answer the question, “What is news?” And likewise, to get news values to work, we must know in advance what news looks like. If we really believe that the product of news values is “particular, even peculiar” to the news, then we must also believe that the cases where news values aptly describe the subject matter of, say, a knitting forum or a dinner table conversation are tennis on Sundays. But saying as much similarly admits a circular quality of news values. They are intended to tell us what’s newsworthy, but we must have some prior sense of newsworthiness to operate them correctly.

In fact, I did conduct a small pilot study, searching for news values in a non-news forum (Braun, 2009). I chose as my subject the “front page” of the liberal community blogging site, *Daily Kos*, which actively eschews the notion of gatekeeping in new media contexts. The founder, for instance, co-authored a book about the political blogosphere entitled *Crashing the Gate* (Moulitsas, 2006), and as recently as last year prominent authors on the blog claimed that its success marked a “descent into irrelevance of the gatekeeper model” (Jaikumar, 2008, para. 3). Despite this protestation, a qualitative analysis of one hundred posts to the front page of the site revealed intermediate to strong support for the presence of over half of a list of 22 common news values. There were some sizable limitations and potential confounds to this study, among them an inability to control for the effects of intermedia agenda setting (*Daily Kos* depends heavily on the traditional news media for much of its mill grist). Nonetheless, despite its limitations, the pilot study provides ample encouragement for further empirical investigation, and suggests that news values may indeed be subject to the problem of tennis on Sundays. How much more valuable would it be, then, to begin building a conceptual framework for gatekeeping that did not depend so heavily on a prior sense of news, but instead sought to capture long-ignored commonalities between old and new media forms of discourse.

Discussion

While the problem requires empirical attention, I would venture to say that clearly not all news values are unique to the news. As Tunstall (1970) points out, they recur in many contexts, and many of the things that make an event newsworthy within Galtung and Ruge's are also likely to make it fodder for a Wikipedia entry, a blog post, or simply good dinner table conversation. That said, any empirical search for news values in non-news spaces would have to consider the following potential confounds.

Intermedia agenda setting.

Previous research has shown that the news media continue to have an agenda setting affect on other forms of media. Intermedia agenda setting between the mass media and online communities, for instance, has been documented in a number of studies now (Messner & Watson, 2006; Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002; Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). The mass media increasingly get story ideas from blogs and other online sources, but more often than not, online communities discuss issues that are covered in the news media. Thus, any analysis confronts a potential confound, in that it may not always be clear whether participants are discussing a topic because they themselves are selecting issues based on criteria similar to traditional news values, or whether they are discussing that same topic because it appeared in the news—or for that matter, because reporters read and participate in new media forums. In any case, the effect would be that a new media community's choice of topics would likely resemble that of the traditional news media.

Competition with traditional news media.

Some online forums view themselves as being in competition with traditional news media outlets. Boczkowski (2008) notes that competition between news outlets sometimes breeds

similarity. And while, even among traditional news media new technological platforms frequently provide opportunities for journalists working in alternative mediums to present audiences with different information agendas, Gans (1979) has noted that this seldom comes to pass:

While print and electronic news media rest on different technologies, every news medium uses its technology primarily to compete against other news media, and it does so selectively. Television could limit itself to tell stories [stories read by the anchor, as opposed to filmed on location] if it did not have to compete against the newspaper or the radio. Besides, the stories which different news media select are sufficiently similar to suggest that technology is not a determining factor. (p. 80)

Hierarchical structure.

According to Shirky's (2008) observations, any ability of online communities to provide a greater diversity of goods than traditional media is, in part, predicated on the notion that such communities are largely self-organizing, allowing users to vote on subjects of interest with their feet—or rather, with their tags and keywords—“like the apocryphal university that lets the students wear useful paths through the grass before it lays any walkways” (p. 235).

Much of the competitive advantage these self-organizing communities might enjoy over news media is owed to the fact that they do not have the managerial overhead that comes with hierarchical structure, and they're not paying for the sort of infrastructure that makes it expensive to publish in the first place. Many successful blogs and other online forums, however, have in fact sprouted hierarchies of authors, contributors and managing editors. Though they may be small and loosely bound organizations, such arrangements do smack a bit of the sort of organizational structure Shirky says online communities are good at avoiding. Furthermore, for proprietors of large sites, there is a cost to publishing. The archives of the large liberal community blog, Daily Kos, to give one example, are replete with postings by the site's owner detailing the financial burden and other irksome aspects of maintaining and upgrading the site's

web servers, and illustrating the pains he's taken over time in hiring a full-time staff responsible for maintaining the site's hardware and software. All this together means that, while publications to the front page of the site are not constrained by column inches or minutes of airtime, there are a finite number of staff hours that go into producing it and there is a premium involved in publishing it—hence there are limits to the front page's resources. This means that, by necessity, filtering of information is going on prior to publication. As Gans (1980) put it in describing the traditional news media,

[Publishers] can learn about only a tiny fraction of actors and activities; and having limited air time and magazine space, they must select an even tinier fraction. More important, they cannot decide anew every day or week how to select the fraction that will appear on the news; instead they must routinize their task in order to make it manageable. (p. 78)

These same conditions pertain, *mutatis mutandis*, to many new media outlets. According to Shirky, the persistence of an online community relies both on its core value to users—a “plausible promise” in Raymond's (2001) terms—and on the bargain it strikes with those who participate in it—i.e., the norms established both for participation in, and administration of, the community. Thus, the right of users to expect some sort of consistency to the content provided by contributors means that the latter “cannot decide anew every day or week how to select” the sorts of things they will talk about. A popular site, by its nature, must develop a set of conventions—it's the same problem that ostensibly generates news criteria in the traditional media.

Conversing vs. broadcasting.

Lastly, a final point from Shirky (2008) suggests another reason that large websites may be likely to resemble traditional news outlets in some ways. After pointing out some of the ways in which “many-to-many” communication tools, like blogs, have broken media categories, which

have long obtained with the telephone (one-to-one) and the television (one-to-many), he goes on to say that “it turns out that the difference between conversational tools and broadcast tools was arbitrary, but the difference between conversing and broadcasting is real” (p. 95).

In other words, while technology may previously have constrained the number of people who could hear a speaker, there are real cognitive limits to the number of people with whom a single speaker can converse. For instance, a blogger on a popular site may receive hundreds or thousands of web responses and many more email responses to their posts daily. And, according to Shirky, once a website surpasses a certain audience size, it effectively becomes broadcasting all over again in many ways. Thus, such sites may counterintuitively share this structural similarity with the conventional news media. And if so, it may be that the constraints shared by the two types of media also lead to similarities in the values they use in selecting content.

The uniqueness question.

All of the above explanations for the appearance of news values in a non-news environment point to ways in which new media may be similar to, or influenced by, the mainstream news media. But as was discussed early in this paper, it is also possible that some news values aren't describing the press at all, but general features of the way people communicate, for which we may already have better, more coherent theories. This possibility is discussed at some length in the conclusion.

Conclusion

News values have been around in the academic literature since 1965, and have always received mixed support. They've proven hard to apply for a variety of reasons. Some of these, discussed in Part One, have to do with difficulties in the way news values, as a literature, conceive of the gatekeeping process and the behavior of professional journalists. Others stem

from a lack of coherence among and between lists of news criteria themselves—a focus of Part Two. Lastly, the news values literature has come to be formulated in such a way that it masks similarities between the news and other forms of communication. It is reasonable to conjecture (and important to test the notion) that many of the phenomena described by news values are not unique to the news. If so, the long development of scholarly lenses that set journalism apart from these other forms may not continue to serve us well as we venture further into the world of new media.

While there are real and important distinctions between new and old media, there are also similarities, which are frequently abused in attempts to draw a bright line between media forms. This artificial distinction was not an original feature of the literature, however, but is one that has come into play gradually. As we've seen, Galtung and Ruge's (1965) original list of news values did not conceive of them as unique to the news media. In fact, their first eight values were based on psychological research on human perception and behavior, which they hypothesized would play out in the news media as gatekeeping, but which they also saw as being important in non-news contexts. In order to re-appropriate the real insights of the news values literature, it is that underlying theoretical framework which must be reclaimed. Galtung and Ruge's list of values continues to be widely cited in the 21st Century, but the psychological theories on which they drew are over 40 years old—and have surely been supplanted by a great deal of useful research and theory, all of which can be brought to bear on the problem in a way that illuminates journalism, in all its increasingly diverse forms, without treating the news as a special case. At the same time, Galtung and Ruge believed that several of their values were attributable to cultural influences on the media. And certainly here, too, the literature can benefit from reclaiming and updating the underlying theoretical assumptions they applied.

Of course, as we saw in Part Two, there have been four decades' worth of additional lists of news criteria, many formed in the absence of any sort of theoretical framework. Some of these may be unique to the news. Others are most certainly not. The various mechanisms of action and theoretical lenses that underpin them must be identified and sifted through. Surely, some are structural in nature, others cultural, still others social or psychological—and many owing to a combination of factors. New studies will be necessary to begin identifying the media contexts in which these values do and do not appear. But as proper theoretical frameworks are identified this work will likely be accelerated, with each theory knocking down and subsuming a host of formerly “independent” values. There are many theoretical approaches and angles of attack that may be valuable in such endeavors, including literatures and lenses from scholarship on economics, online communities, discourse analysis and legitimation, technology studies, framing, agenda building, narrative, and social movements. In short, far from descending into irrelevance, the future of gatekeeping promises to be a fascinating and cross-disciplinary one.

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