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DETERMINANTS OF NEWS CONTENT

Comparing journalists' perceptions of the normative and actual impact of different event properties when deciding what's news

Jesper Strömbäck, Michael Karlsson, and
David Nicolas Hopmann

While there is a large body of research on news values and news selection, most research does not clearly distinguish between the concept of news and news selection, on the one hand, and news values and criteria of newsworthiness on the other. These concepts are often treated as synonymous. This is problematic, as there may be many other factors aside from news values or criteria of newsworthiness that determine what becomes news, and as there may be differences between what journalists think should be, and actually is, important when deciding what's news. Against this background, this study investigates what Swedish journalists think is, and should be, important event properties when deciding what's news, and whether there are differences across journalists working for different kinds of media and depending on whether they work with online publishing. The results show that there are significant differences between the perceived normative and actual importance of investigated event properties when deciding what's news.

KEYWORDS criteria of newsworthiness; news factors; news selection; news values

Introduction

One of the key processes in journalism is the process of selecting the news. Every day countless events happen, but only a minor share of all these eventually become news stories. As long as media formats remain restricted, news selection and gatekeeping will remain among the most important functions of the news media (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

While most potential news never makes it through the gates, some does, and research suggests that there are certain criteria of newsworthiness or news values that news media apply when selecting the news. However, most research does not clearly distinguish between the concepts of *news* and *news selection*, on the one hand, and *criteria of newsworthiness* and *news values*, on the other. This is problematic since, as Shoemaker and Cohen noted (2006, p. 337), "news and newsworthiness are theoretically distinct", and "what people—even journalists—think is newsworthy is not necessarily what becomes news". In other words, the actual news selection may deviate from journalists' news values or criteria of newsworthiness. Yet, there is virtually no research exploring the difference between what journalists think *is* and *should be* important event properties when deciding what's news.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate what journalists perceive to be the *normative* and the *actual* importance of different event properties when

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deciding what's news, and whether news and newsworthiness is not only theoretically, but also empirically, distinct. As a first step towards explaining potential differences between what journalists think should be and is important when deciding what's news, we will also investigate whether there are differences across journalists working for different media types and with different media technologies.

News Values and News Selection

In one of the first attempts to understand factors that have an impact on what becomes news, Galtung and Ruge (1965) hypothesized that events become new to the extent that they are characterized by a number of event properties, such as frequency, absolute intensity or intensity increase, meaningfulness, cultural proximity, unexpectedness, composition, and reference to elite nations, elite people, and something negative. Since then, many other and similar "taxonomies of news values" have been offered (Campbell, 2004; Golding and Elliot, 1979; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, 2009; Palmer, 2000; Staab, 1990).

Most research does not, however, distinguish between *news* and *news selection*, on the one hand, and *news values* or *criteria of newsworthiness*, on the other. It is instead assumed that the final news selection reflects the news values or criteria of newsworthiness that journalists hold, and that the news values or criteria of newsworthiness that journalists hold are the major factor deciding what becomes news.

Conceptually, *news* and *newsworthiness*, or *news selection* and *news values*, should however not be treated as synonyms (Nord and Strömbäck, 2005; Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). While *news* and *news selection* refers to the selection of news actually published, *news values* and *criteria of newsworthiness* are cognitive and normative concepts that refer to what journalists believe should constitute the news. In the rest of this article, we will use news values and criteria of news worthiness as synonymous, and news and news selection as synonymous.

News values are, however, not the only factor determining what eventually becomes news. Other important factors include, for example, format considerations, audience interests, resources, source considerations, and the need for a mix of different kinds of news (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

The conflation of news selection and news values is not only a conceptual problem, making it unclear whether various factors included in different taxonomies refer to news or newsworthiness, news selection or news values. It has also made scholars overlook the distinction between the normative and actual impact of various event properties when deciding what becomes news.

While it may be the case that the factors journalists think *should be* important when deciding what's news actually *are* important, it may also be the case that there is a gap between what journalists think should be, and actually is, important.

Factors Shaping the News

While most scholars would agree that news values are important in news selection processes, other factors may be equally important and even override different normative considerations (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Strömbäck, 2005). First, the tougher the

competition for advertising revenue and audiences, the more the media have to take into consideration what audience segments advertisers are interested in reaching and what kind of news these audience segments are interested in. McManus (1994, p. 85) thus suggests that rational news departments "should compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the largest audience advertisers will pay to reach." Hamilton (2004) has similarly proposed that the most important questions for commercial media are not the traditional "five Ws", but rather: "1. Who cares about a particular piece of information? 2. What are they willing to pay to find it, 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?" From this perspective, whether the news is important matters less than whether they are profitable.

Second, it is well known that news journalism is highly reliant on *news subsidies* (Gandy, 1982), defined as any measures taken by source organizations to make it convenient for news organizations to cover the news. Typical examples include press releases and press conferences, but as professional sources become increasingly skilled in news management, they have learned what kind of news stories typically attract the news media (Franklin, 2004). Thus, these professional sources often attempt to make sure that there are good visuals and that the news they present include conflicts and drama. When professional sources adapt to the media and their logic in attempts to capture the media's interest, it may also be considered a news subsidy.

Third, research suggests that the news media tend to favor stories that involve elite and official, or at least already famous, organizations and actors (Bennett, 1990). According to Gans (1980, p. 117), there are at least four reasons why official and established sources may have an impact on the news: they have incentives to shape the news, they often have power which is considered newsworthy, they have the ability to supply information that journalists are interested in, and they are often geographically and socially proximate to journalists. While newsworthiness partly is decided by the information these kinds of sources may be able to supply, important or famous individuals and organizations may in addition be considered newsworthy *per se*. They may also have an impact extending beyond their normative newsworthiness.

Fourth, it has also been established that an important determinant of news content may be format considerations in conjunction with the processes of news production (Altheide and Snow, 1979). For example, audiovisual media such as television are heavily reliant on visuals; all media are reliant on access to events that may become news; and all media have a "thirst to be first" (Lewis and Cushion, 2009) and for exclusive news. The single fact that a particular news organization has exclusive information may lead them to push the news, while another news organization may ignore the same potential news just because they did not break the story.

The rise of digital media and online journalism has also highlighted the potential importance of media technologies for what becomes news. Research on online news indicates, for example, that user participation in news production processes has become more important (Domingo et al., 2008; Karlsson, 2011), and that online news puts a premium on sensationalism and "talker news" which may increase traffic and brand loyalty (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011; Thurman and Myllylahti, 2009). The increasing speed of publication as well as the use of multimedia and interactive features may also affect the news selection processes (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2010).

All things considered, the final news selection is shaped by several factors on different levels of analysis, some of which have less to do with the news value of potential stories and more with practical, economic or format considerations. Hence, it cannot be assumed news values equal news selection. It has to be investigated.

Previous Research, Hypotheses and Research Questions

While there is reason to expect that there may be differences between what journalists think *is* and *should be* important when deciding what's news, there is virtually no research systematically exploring such differences. The only exception is a couple of studies based on surveys with Swedish journalists (Ghersetti, 2001, 2007; Petersson et al., 2005). According to these, there appears to be a pattern where event properties related to the *importance* of events are perceived as less important than they should be, while event properties related to audience interests, news supply and production processes are perceived to have a greater impact than they should have when deciding what's news.

Based on the above, we expect (H1) that there will be significant differences between what journalists think should be, and are, important event properties when deciding what's news. We furthermore expect that event properties related to how important events or information are perceived to be less important for the news selection than they should be (H2), while event properties related to perceived audience interest, production routines and economic considerations will be perceived as more important for the actual news selection than they should be (H3).

As a first step towards explaining potential differences between what journalists think should be and is important when deciding what's news, we will also explore whether there are differences across journalists working for different media types and with different media technologies. The rationale for investigating whether media type matters is the finding that news selection differs between, for example, morning newspapers (the "quality press") and tabloids (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). The rationale for investigating whether working with online publishing matters is the claim that online journalism is characterized by different news selection processes than traditional journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2010).

How potential differences may play out is less clear, however. Instead of posing hypotheses, we thus ask: Is there a correlation between what type of media journalists are working for (RQ1), or whether journalists work with online publishing or traditional media formats (RQ2), and the actual and normative importance of different event properties when deciding what's news?

Methodology and Data

This study draws upon a national mail survey among journalists in Sweden. The sample was generated in collaboration with the Swedish Union of Journalists, organizing about 85 percent of Swedish journalists. From the member rolls of the union, a sample of 1200 journalists was randomly drawn. Excluding respondents who had left the profession or could not participate resulted in a net sample of 1187 journalists. The survey was in field between October 5 and December 31, 2009. In total 632 valid questionnaires were returned, resulting in a net response rate of 53 percent.

In terms of gender, 50 percent is male and female, respectively; 40 percent is younger than 40 years, 50 percent between 41 and 60 years, and 10 percent is 61 years and older; 82 percent has some kind of university education, mostly in journalism (46 percent) or other media-related programs (6 percent). The mean number of years working as a journalist is 17.

Results: The Normative and Actual Importance of Different News Factors

As outlined above, our overall expectation is that there will be significant differences between what journalists think should be, and actually is, important event properties when deciding what's news. To investigate this, respondents were asked to rate the importance of 19 event properties on a scale from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (Very important). The first question asked for the *actual* importance of the different event properties: "There are different factors which influence whether an event will be covered by the news media. How important do you think that the factors listed below are?" The second question asked for the *normative* importance of the same event properties: "How important do you think the factors should be?" The results are presented in Table 1.

The results show that there are clear and, in all but one case, significant differences between how important journalists think different event properties *are* and *should be*. The event properties that journalists think *should be* most important are: "That the event increases people's awareness of problems in society", "That the event has consequences for people's daily life", "That the event increases people's insights and knowledge", and "That the event is of interest to many people". These event properties were the only ones where the mean values exceed 4. With respect to the perceived actual importance, seven event properties received mean values exceeding 4: "That the event is sensational and unexpected", "That the event is dramatic and thrilling", "That it is an exclusive story", "That their own media organization is the first with covering the event", "That the event is of interest to many people", "That the event is about famous persons/organizations", and "That the event is about important persons/organizations". Only one event property—that the event is of interest to many people—was considered to be among the most important both normatively and factually.

The last column reports the difference in mean values between the actual and the normative importance. This column shows that the difference exceeds 1 with respect to 10 out of the 19 event properties. The greatest differences relate to the importance of the event being of interest to editorial managers, inexpensive to cover and about famous persons/organizations. The results furthermore show that only in three cases does the normative importance exceed the actual importance: "That the event has consequences for people's daily life", "That the event increases people's awareness of problems in society", and "That the event increases people's insights and knowledge". With respect to these three event properties, journalists think they should be more important than they actually are, while in all other cases, the event properties are considered to be more important than they should be.

These results provide support for all three hypotheses: there are significant differences between what journalists think should be, and is, important event properties when deciding what's news (H1); event properties related to how important events or information is, are perceived to be less important for the actual news selection than they

TABLE 1

Actual and normative importance of different event properties (mean values)

	Actual importance	Normative importance	Difference
That the event is sensational and unexpected***	4.68	3.94	+0.74
That the event is dramatic and thrilling***	4.47	3.70	+0.77
That it is an exclusive news story***	4.33	3.45	+0.88
That their own media organization is the first with covering the event	4.28	3.18	+1.1
That the event is of interest to many people	4.24	4.23	+0.01
That the event is about famous persons/ organizations***	4.08	2.55	+1.53
That the event is about important persons/ organizations***	4.05	3.52	+0.53
That the event has consequences for people's daily life***	3.90	4.61	-0.71
That the event involves conflicts***	3.82	2.80	+1.02
That the information comes from an official, reliable source***	3.81	3.47	+0.34
That the event is of interest to the editorial managers***	3.69	1.97	+1.72
That the event increases people's awareness of problems in society***	3.67	4.68	-1.01
That there are good pictures available***	3.64	2.95	+0.69
That the event is scheduled by the news department***	3.58	2.24	+1.34
That a single journalist is very interested in the topic***	3.40	2.34	+1.06
That the event increases people's insights and knowledge***	3.22	4.59	-1.37
That there is a good press release available***	3.16	1.69	+1.47
That the event is easy to explain to the audience***	3.14	2.20	+0.94
That the event is inexpensive to cover***	3.03	1.35	+1.68

N varies between 613 and 622.

*** indicates significant differences at the 0.001 level (paired samples *t*-test).

should be (H2); and event properties related to perceived audience interest, production routines and economic considerations are perceived to be more important for the actual news selection than they should be (H3).

Does Media Type or Online Publishing Matter?

Turning to our research questions, RQ1 asked if there is a correlation between what type of media journalists are working for and the actual and normative importance of different event properties. To investigate this, we recoded what kinds of media company respondents are working for into morning newspapers, tabloids, public service broadcasting, and commercial broadcasting. Those working for other kinds of media were excluded, leaving us with a sample of $N = 290$. Unfortunately the N for public service and commercial broadcasting is low, so the results should be interpreted with great caution.

TABLE 2

Significant differences between journalists working for different media types with respect to the perceived normative importance of different event properties (mean values with standard deviations in parentheses)

	Morning newspapers	Tabloids	Public service broadcasting	Commercial broadcasting
That the event increases people's insights and knowledge**	4.59 (0.65)	4.22 (0.76)	4.37 (0.71)	4.81 (0.40)
That there is a good press release available***	1.59 (0.76)	1.50 (0.74)	1.83 (0.96)	2.54 (1.03)
That the event is about important persons/ organizations*	3.59 (0.96)	3.61 (0.80)	3.04 (1.08)	4.09 (1.04)
That the event is dramatic and thrilling*	3.91 (0.96)	4.17 (0.91)	4.21 (0.93)	3.36 (0.92)
That the event is inexpensive to cover*	1.30 (0.64)	1.36 (0.83)	1.26 (0.62)	1.90 (0.83)
That their own media organization is the first with covering the event*	3.51 (1.22)	3.44 (1.23)	2.74 (1.35)	3.00 (1.09)

*, ** and *** indicate statistically significant differences at the 0.05, 0.01 and 0.001 level. The number of responses vary slightly across event properties, but the baseline *N* is 219 (morning newspapers), 36 (tabloids), 24 (public service broadcasting) and 11 (commercial broadcasting).

Beginning with the normative importance of different event properties, the significant differences are shown in Table 2. While journalists working for morning or tabloid newspapers report fairly similar evaluations of the normative importance of event properties, there are differences between journalists working for public service or commercial broadcasting. These differences are found with respect to production factors (whether a good press release is available, the production costs) and with respect to the substance of an event (which persons or organizations are involved).

Turning to the actual importance of different event properties, the results show that significant differences can be found with respect to only four event properties (see Table 3). These differences indicate that journalists working for more commercially oriented media—tabloids and commercial broadcasting—perceive the actual importance of events involving famous persons or organizations and that there are good pictures available as greater than journalists working for morning newspapers and public service broadcasting, while internal scheduling is perceived to be less important. The overall pattern, however, is that there are greater differences with respect to the normative than with respect to the actual importance of different event properties across journalists working for different media types.

Turning to RQ2, this research question asked if there is a correlation between whether journalists work with online publishing or traditional media formats and the actual and normative importance of different event properties when deciding what's news. To investigate this we used as independent variable a question asking respondents how often they work with publishing on the Internet—Daily, Several times a week, More seldom, or Never. The results, however, show that the extent to which journalists work with online publishing hardly matters at all. With respect to the normative importance of

TABLE 3

Significant differences between journalists working for different media types with respect to the perceived actual importance of different event properties (mean values with standard deviations in parentheses)

	Morning newspapers	Tabloids	Public service broadcasting	Commercial broadcasting
That the event is about famous persons/ organizations*	4.07 (0.91)	4.33 (0.89)	3.62 (0.87)	4.45 (0.69)
That the event is scheduled by the news department***	3.76 (0.97)	2.92 (1.08)	3.65 (0.83)	3.54 (0.69)
That a single journalist is very interested in the topic*	3.53 (1.02)	2.97 (0.88)	3.41 (0.93)	3.72 (0.79)
That there are good pictures available*	3.65 (0.90)	4.05 (0.86)	3.87 (0.69)	3.91 (0.53)

* and *** indicate statistically significant differences at the 0.05 and 0.001 level. The number of responses vary slightly across event properties, but the baseline *N* is 219 (morning newspapers), 36 (tabloids), 24 (public service broadcasting) and 11 (commercial broadcasting).

different event properties, no significant differences were found. With respect to the actual importance of the event properties, only one significant difference was found: that the event is dramatic and thrilling is considered more important among journalists working with online publishing on a daily basis (mean = 4.68, SD = 0.61) than journalists working with online publishing several times a week (mean = 4.33, SD = 0.80), more seldom (mean = 4.52, SD = 0.59), or never (mean = 4.56, SD = 0.65).

Discussion and Conclusion

While previous theorizing has suggested that there is a conceptual difference between *news* and *news selection*, on the one hand, and *news values* or *standards of newsworthiness*, on the other, this study has shown that there are significant differences between what Swedish journalists think are and should be important event properties when deciding what's news. Hence, the concepts of *news selection* and *news values*, *news* and *standards of newsworthiness* should not be treated as synonymous. These are both conceptually and empirically distinct concepts.

Overall, the results suggest that event properties related to the importance of events are perceived to be less important than they should be when deciding what's news, while event properties related to perceived audience interest, production routines and economic considerations are perceived to be more important than they should be. That the event is of interest to the editorial managers, inexpensive to cover, about famous persons or organizations, and that there is a good press release available are perceived to be substantively more important event properties than they should be when deciding what's news, while whether the event increases people's insights and knowledge, and people's awareness of problems in society, are perceived to be substantively less important than they normatively should be. The most important event properties with respect to what actually becomes news are perceived to be that the event is sensational

and unexpected, dramatic and thrilling, that it is an exclusive news story, and that their own media organization is the first with covering it. This is in sharp contrast to what journalists think should be the most important event properties: that the event increases people's awareness of problems in society, that it has consequences for people's daily lives, and that the event increases people's insights and knowledge.

In essence, event properties related to the democratic role of the media in democracy do not, according to Swedish journalists, matter as much for the actual news selection as they should, while event properties related to perceived audience interest, production routines and economic considerations matter more than they should do.

There are some differences across journalists working for different media types, however. With respect to the perceived *actual* importance of different event properties, the results suggests that tabloids are driven less by individual journalist preferences or news schedules, but more by good pictures, than other media outlets. This might reflect that tabloid coverage is more event-driven and market-driven in general. The broadcasting media have pre-planned schedules of publishing and the morning papers have subscribers, which may put the news department and individual journalists more in the driver's seat while also making them more dependent on scheduling practices.

Regarding the normative dimension, the results are more surprising. On the one hand, journalists working for commercial broadcasters stress some economic dimensions as more important than journalists working for other media types. On the other hand, they are less inclined to stress the normative importance of events being dramatic and thrilling than journalists working for other media types, while they are more inclined to stress the normative importance of events increasing people's insights and knowledge and being about important persons or organizations. The gap between the perceived normative and actual importance of these event properties is at the same time greater for journalists working for commercial broadcasters compared with those working for other media types. One potential—admittedly speculative—explanation for these findings may hence be that the baseline evaluations differ and influences the normative importance of these event properties. However, the low number of respondents working for commercial and public service broadcasting strongly calls for caution when interpreting these findings.

More straightforward are the results pertaining to whether there are any differences depending on how frequently journalists work with online publishing: in only one out of 38 cases was there a correlation between how often journalists work with online publishing and the perceived actual or normative importance of the investigated event properties. Despite all that has been written about the impact of digital media and online publishing on journalism, thus far such differences do not appear to translate into how journalists perceive the importance of various event properties when deciding what's news.

Taken together, the most important results of this study are consequently that there is both a conceptual and empirical difference between *news selection* and *news values*, *news* and *standards of newsworthiness*; that both the actual and the normative importance of different event properties vary substantially; and that there appears to be a hierarchy of news values (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001).

In other words, journalism practice does not equal journalism theory, which needs to be taken into account in further research on news and news selection as well as news values and standards of newsworthiness. The results also suggest that it may be more valid to think about *stratified* rather than uniform taxonomies of news values.

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