COM 31800: The Construction of News

News often fails to produce balanced and truthful reflections of the world.

News unfortunately can never be unbiased.

However, it is still based on real world events.

What we read and watch is a representation of the world.

Through this representation, we can examine the views and practices of those who produce and consume that news.

News can be viewed as a manufacturing process, with filters to illustrate how events are broken down and selected and then used to construct a representation.

Two sequential stages

* Selection
* Construction

Before decisions of construction can be made about an event, others must select which events to cover and to exclude. This is invisible to the public, but it is substantive to how we view the world.

News organizations act as gatekeepers with the capacity to affect what we know, care and talk about and what passes under our collective radar.

The apparent power to shape public awareness and priorities is known as agenda setting.

Correlation between coverage of an issue and it’s perceived importance.

Could be countered that stories covered reflect public priorities rather than shaping them.

News values – The traits that stories have which denote how well they will be covered or if they will be covered.

8 values, four more specific to developed countries.

Frequency – frequency must be compatible with printing frequency of news. Quick events occurring, such as bombings or crime are more likely to be covered.

Amplitude – refers to a threshold of noticeability. A cat stuck in a tree is less likely to be covered while a fire or explosion is more likely to be covered. Visual graphics and video will aid amplitude.

Clarity - The clearer and one-dimensional an event is, in terms of how it may be interpreted, it will be more appealing to coverage. Clear attributions of right and wrong are easier to cover.

Cultural Proximity – should involve places or things that are familiar to the audience. News is ethnocentric.

Predictability – stories often tend to fit with our expectations and cohere to our world view.

Unexpectedness – Not all news involves mundanities. Any event to be covered must be unusual or unexpected.

Continuity – A story may garner public interest, enough to gain momentum and continue to be newsworthy in the future. This can happen in disappearances, court cases, etc.

This news value can also spread to other news coverers. This is a sign of that momentum it may gain. (Paul Rock)

Allan Bell argues that smaller stories may be covered that the desire to feed an appetite for existing stories prompts the coverage of smaller stories because they relate to the larger story.

Composition – Galtung and Ruge’s final news value emphasizes the need for bulletins and newspapers to fit together as a whole. Similar themes and balance may be sought between editions or stories.

Four criteria significant in capitalist countries, state-controlled media in communist countries might have different priorities as may less developed nations

Elite Nations – events which relate to powerful nations are more relevant than those to poorer or less influential places.

Elite People – Powerful and famous people are more newsworthy than poor or unknown because the actions of the former are of greater consequence than those of everybody else.

Personification – Extent to which stories can be represented by focusing on intentions, actions or emotions of individuals. Rather than focusing on the determination of individual lives by forces such as wealth distribution, news trends to present us with a world enraptured with the moral systems of singular people.

Stories which can be focused on individuals, therefore are more liable to be selected than those which may not.

Negativity – Lastly, negative news is more capable of garnering focus of the public than positive stores. Negatives stories can hold onto the values of news more reliably than positive stores.

Paradigmatic analysis help us understand decisions and the impacts they have on how readers are encouraged to interpret the story.

Language is also important.

Syntagmatic analysis involves an assessment of the semantic impact of the ways in which components of a story have been arranged and combined.

Syntagmatic analysis emphasizes the ways in which meaning can be influenced by the context into which individual components are placed.

Many pieces of evidence offer ways to interpret a piece of media or evidence. However, commentary or editing limits the ambiguity of a message.

Since news revolves around storytelling, narrative analysis is useful.

However, news stories aim to make victims appear idyllic and portrays the incident as disruptive of their life. The perpetrator is displayed as a villain and cruel.

This activates clarity and predictability by drawing on deeply embedded conventions of fiction running through countless fairy tales, cartoons and movies.

Differences between providers – Galtung and Ruge are criticized for shared news values, it glosses over some potentially significant differences between one provider and another that can affect both the selection and construction.

Medium – Greater frequency of news allows updates to be dominated by recency and immediacy as news values. However, concise and fast coverage of topics is a necessity.

While news papers provide structured, prepared, reflective, and detailed presentations of news.

Visual based outlets focus on this aspect. Images and videos will dominate websites and diagrams, or illustrations will accompany some stories.

Style and Market – even similar mediums from different news outlets will use different styles. Some newspapers may be populist or government focused. These distinctions will connect to their target audience.

The differences in target audience could be indicative of the quality or funding a paper or outlet may have for their publications.

Political Stance – many news outlets often associate with a political orientation unless under statutory requirements to be balanced.

News outlets will often be more different than similar.

Galtung and Ruge retain value in mapping out shared priorities that underlie these similarities.

This approach indicates the each provider of news is biased in itself but also that shared priorities can lead to collective bias.

No matter the source, we are likely to be confronted with similar views of the world.

This approach does not go as far Marxist thinkers who argue not only that news collectively produces versions which are vetted heavily to the world. They argue that this system also produces news oriented towards bourgeois, pro-capitalist perspectives.

While this focused and singular view of the world is lamentable, it is argued that this is the result of a complex set of biases attributable to a mixture of journalistic procedures and commercial priorities.

News values are rooted in and inseparable from ideology they emanate from, represent and so reinforce an existing consensus.

Class Bias – It was found in the 1970s and 1980s that UK media outlets favored capitalist and middle-class messages, reinforcing the existing political order.

This kind of bias can be examined by the focus of the news.

Institutional Bias – biases have been attributed to the ways in which media are owned. Subordinate and oppositional voices may be excluded not because of the background of the journalists, but because they are controlled by sponsors who have vested interests on a specific ideology.

(Don’t bite the hand that feeds you).

Infotainment and depoliticization

Concerns of superficiality

Concern that all news outlets converge toward a populist agenda.

Several news outlets (The Times and The Independent) shift toward tabloid to deal with drastic shifts down market.

Increased pressure for news to be profitable in its own right by maximizing viewer appeal prompted a transformation towards infotainment. Informing audiences through thorough, trustworthy, fair-minded manner was no longer sufficient, they must also be entertained.

Stories of infotainment involves stories with depth, context, thoroughness and sometimes even accuracy argued to have become casualties. Tempo is vital to reduce the chance of moving away from the article.

The urgency may be indicated by things such as LIVE captions, or rolling tickers indicating new stories or latest developments.

This in fact is so virulent that without developments, news anchors will speculate to add something rather than sit on a story.