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News Content Development and Research

By

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NEWS CONTENT DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

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For the practicing journalist the definition of news has not been a big problem. He goes about news gathering in a practical way, as a matter of daily routine. Perhaps most journalists would understand what US TV anchorperson, David Brinkley, meant when he said "News is what I say it is". News is the discerning verdict of the news specialist.

However agreeing on a common definition of news among academics and intellectuals has not been easy. This was very dramatically seen in the recent UNESCO debate on the New World Information and Communication Order. This debate highlighted the great divide between the North and the South on the interpretation and the function of News and Information. The South being dissatisfied with the environment in which news stories are produced and transmitted called for a New World Information and Communication Order which would facilitate not only free flow of information but also balanced flow of information between the North and South.

What is so controversial about definition of news? Let us take text book definition of news.

"News is accurate and timely intelligence of happenings, discoveries, opinions and matters of any sort which affect or interest the reader" (Quoted by Haque, 1988:9).

Nobody would quarrel with this definition except that different people tend to give different meanings or attach different degrees of emphasis to key words in this definition such as "accurate", "timely", "interest of readers", "intelligence", etc.
This I think is one of the important reasons for the differences in what passes on as news in different parts of the world, more specifically between the developed and industrialized North and the poor and less industrialized South. Perhaps in order to understand these different interpretations of news we should first of all stop applying any kind of universal definition of news, however, theoretically and philosophically, appealing such definitions would be. Instead of trying to evaluate news in terms of universal definitions we should begin to look at news as it is being produced. This way we will be looking at news as a social phenomena — as a social construction of reality. In other words we should evaluate news not in terms of an abstract and absolute ideal of what news should be, such as objectivity, fairness and neutrality, (though these values are important) but as a "social construction of every day occurrences viewed in the light of cultures' priorities, preferences, concerns, sensitivities and in an invisible but powerful undercurrent of attitudes, values and norms" (Mazharul Haque, 1988:2).

This view of news does not allege that news is typically a fantasy or fabrication, which has little to do with objectivity, fairness or neutrality. Nor does it assert that news is necessarily without a reasonable resemblance to actual happenings. What it points out is that reality as depicted in news comprise events passed through several cultural and organizational screens. "News production requires debatable decisions about priorities and depiction of events and issues. These decisions are made within the confines of cultural, legal
political, technical and commercial interests" (William C. Adams, 1978:14).

The sum of research and commentary proposes a wide variety of variables influencing the selection and shaping of news stories: from fairness and objectivity to deadlines, from political views of owners, managers and journalists to transmission costs; from audio/videos technology to shareholders returns. Factors in this complex equation are given vastly different priorities by different scholars.

To understand news content we have to, therefore, also look at these cultural and organizational screens that invariably impinge on news production.

At this point let me illustrate what I have been saying with some examples. The Gannett Foundation Media Centre in the US has recently published a research report entitled Media At War: Press and the Persian Gulf Conflict. It is a study of the role of US media during the Gulf crisis. One chapter of this report is a bibliometric survey of the reporting of the conflict in selected US media. Bibliometrics is the counting of key words in a piece of communication and is a means of ascertaining the frequency of references, to various aspects or factors that are important to the event being reported. The researchers were very surprised by their findings. The word that occurred most frequently in the media during the period of the study (which was August 1, 1990 to February 28, 1991) did not have anything directly to do with the protagonist of the war, nor the causes leading to the conflict.
The most frequently cited word was Vietnam. Let me quote Craig LaMay the author of this chapter. "Easily the most striking finding of this analysis, if not also the most telling, was the number of times the word Vietnam appeared: 7299 times, overall more than any other word or term and nearly three times as often as the runner up, 'Human Shields' (2588 times).

Obviously factors, other than the actual events in the Gulf, influenced the reporting of this crisis in the US media. News was couched in familiar metaphors. It was a good example of news as a social construction of reality. La May concludes that the Persian Gulf conflict as reported in the media was a "Holier than thou war, a sort of new millennium crusade" (LaMay, 1990:41).

While we are on the Gulf crisis I would also like to mention briefly its reporting in the media of a Southern country, viz Pakistan. According to a recent writer the Gulf crisis touched a raw nerve in Pakistan's ideological roots because the crisis concerned fellow muslim states and Pakistan's complex relationship with the United States - a relationship of dependence as well as defiance (Javad Jabbar, Quoted in Goonasekera 1991). The way the media covered this event reflected the complexity and volatile nature of the events unfolding at the time. The government controlled print media parrotted Government policy and refused to reflect and acknowledge the scale and depth of mass dissent being openly exhibited throughout the country. The popular outpouring of disquiet over government policies took a dramatic media turn in
January 1991 with the proliferation, throughout the country, of a flood of photographs of Saddam Hussein which appeared in houses, on rooftops, t-shirts, buses, cars and motor cycles. The official media reports had been utterly rejected by the people who had made up their own minds about the issues irrespective of what Pakistan radio, TV or CNN said.

I want to take two more examples, one from Africa and the other from Asia to illustrate the sort of criteria that goes into news selection in these two regions. It will also help us to understand the commonalities in the reporting of news both in the North and the South.

Alcino Louis da Costa, (1979) an African media scholar, in a contribution to a UNESCO publication on News Values and Principles of Cross Cultural Communication, mentions three criteria for the selection of International News by the African Media. These are:

1. News that provides psycho-political security ie reassuring news from friendly countries
2. News that promote community of interest, ie good news from countries sharing the same political, economic and ideological interests
3. News that is compatible with the imperatives of national policy, ie news that legitimize government positions.

An interesting question here is are these news criteria confined only to Africa or poorer countries in the South or do they appear in some subtle garb in the more developed Western countries such
as the US? Can one explain the unusually high occurrence of references to Vietnam in the coverage of the Gulf crisis in the US media as being an attempt to use news to provide psycho-social security in times of a crisis? In the absence of research data nobody can say for sure. But it is an interesting question to be researched.

The other example I want to take is from Asia. Perhaps you have heard of Asiavision News Exchange Programme (AVN). It is a union of some 11 TV stations in Asia that have agreed to exchange TV news on a reciprocal basis. Some of these countries participate on a daily exchange of news items whereas others participate on an ad hoc basis. One of the main objectives of Asiavision was "to reduce the imbalance of the flow of news between North and South, to increase the opportunities for presenting the Asian viewpoint in world news and to establish a South-South dialogue" (Maletzke, Valbuena et al, 1988:1). AVN attempted to structure such exchange with a greater degree of independence from large commercial news/film agencies. It was one small step in the realization of the concept of a New World Information and Communication Order.

In an AMIC/FES survey of the impact of AVN, conducted in 1988, a group of media specialist, mostly from TV and radio, in Malaysia, India, China and South Korea were asked to name what they would consider to be criteria specific to their countries in the selection of material to be used in Asiavision bulletins. These were in addition to general news criteria such as topicality,
timeliness, significance, good editing, etc. The following were their responses:

**Malaysia**
1. Item must adhere to government policy on flow of news and information outside the country.
2. Item should not be too controversial or favouring any country
3. Item should not offend racial, religious and cultural beliefs of the countries and people receiving it.

**India**
1. Items must reflect the governments achievement in development.
2. Item must serve the political interest of the government.
3. Item must reflect some aspects of cultural identification...

**China**
1. Item must reflect China's achievement.
2. Item must reflect China's stand on domestic and world issues.
3. Item must reflect China's continuing participation in World events.

**Korea**
1. Item must be of world wide significance.
2. Item must be "genuine" news of development in a country, not propaganda or government publicity.
3. 'Soft' items must reflect the cultural lifestyles of the people.
The responses of Malaysia, India and China reflect the importance of political priorities in the selection of AVN news items. Being an 'association' of government managed television stations, most of the AVN news items reflect the political priorities of the member countries and it is at times dominated by political personalities making ceremonial statements at workshops and public openings. Soft news items dominate the package. Whereas most AVN members request hard news items, they are themselves unable or reluctant to contribute hard news items. This is due to perceived government control of news and information and/or self censorship as well as different conceptions of what constitute hard news. (Goonasekera, 1990)

So far in this presentation I have looked at the production of news content. I have described this production process as a social construction of reality. In this process there is a confluence of cultural, political, legal, technical and commercial interests.

In conclusion I would like to briefly touch upon the reception of news stories by their intended audiences. Here again we could see a social process similar to that of news production. A socio-psychological process of construction of meaning.

We all know that news is not absorbed in a vacuum. It is received in a rich context of social networks and reference groups that serve to delineate and remould the messages in the news. In some subtle way news stories are reconstructed not only at the point of production but also at the points of reception.
As we all know news is embedded as an element in a larger image of message systems which include music, drama, documentaries, commercials and other types of content. Therefore, news analysis in isolation as a discrete element can be misleading for news content is not the main source of viewers information. This is seen dramatically in TV news where heavy TV viewers are non-selective viewers. They watch by the clock rather than by programmes. In this situation they are generally most exposed to TV drama which comprise the largest segment of prime time TV. "One must suspect that news that fits the world basically shaped by drama would probably find a more receptive framework and be assimilated by most viewers" (Gerbner, 1978:190).

One way of understanding the conceptions of news both in the North and the South is, therefore, to look at news both at the level of production and reception, as an element embedded in the wider symbolic and message systems of society. It is a sociological process. Perhaps looked at this way you might be tempted to call it 'news from nowhere' (Epstein J., 1973) because of the multiplicity of intervening variables. Yet if we are to understand news production and its reception we cannot pluck it out of the social system of which it is a part. Diagram B explains this relationship in a rather simplified form.
NOTES

1. Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media observe that the "US media do no function in the manner of propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather they permit - indeed encourage - spirited debate, criticism and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness" (p.302). Using a propagandist model of mass communication the authors depict how an underlying elite consensus largely structure all facts of US news. They contrast the double standards underlying the US medias' treatment of such vital issues as human rights, free elections, free press, government repression between friendly countries such as El Salvador and unfriendly countries such as Nicaragua.
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Perceptions and attitudes of Gatekeepers and Audiences Towards Asiavison. Singapore: AMIC
* NEWS IS WHAT I SAY IT IS

* SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

* GULF WAR REPORTING

* US

* PAKISTAN

* NEWS SELECTION CRITERIA

* AFRICA

* ASIAVISION

* NEWS FROM NOWHERE?
SOCIAL FRAME
(Culture, Norms, Values)

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAME
(Law, Technology, Commerce)

INDIVIDUAL FRAME
(Attitudes, Ideology)

UNIVERSAL NEWS VALUES
(Objectivity, Fairness, Neutrality, Timeliness)