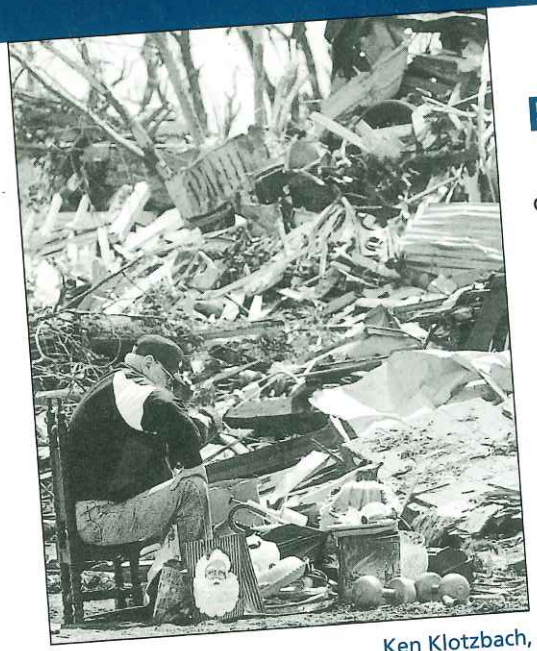
3 What Is News?



Ken Klotzbach, *Argus Leader*

Impact . . . Timeliness . . . Proximity

Preview

We look closely at the news values that guide journalists in determining the newsworthiness of events. These values are

- **Impact, importance.** Most stories fall into this category.
- **Timeliness.**
- **Prominence** of the people involved.
- **Proximity** to the audience.
- **Conflict.**
- **Currency.** The sudden interest people have in an ongoing situation.
- **Necessity.** A situation the journalist feels compelled to reveal.

Some Answers Past and Present

Journalism isn't stenography. Dig.

We know that some subjects draw people to the media. The weather is one of these. Parents want to know how to dress their children for school and themselves for work and for the trip to the shopping mall. The result: Radio gives us the forecast every 10 minutes and some newspapers devote as much as a full page to the weather report.

We know something about the people who look at TV, listen to the radio, read newspapers and magazines and use the Internet for the news. Women over the age of 50, for example, are avid followers of news about health. The result: daytime TV, day and nighttime radio and cable feature news about illness and cures. Men under 40 make up, almost exclusively, the sports followers. The morning newspaper has a large sports section and morning radio and TV are heavy on sports before men leave for work and in the evening when they are at home.

We know something about the news habits of those 18 to 34. Half of them use the Internet to read the news online. We know they want their news presented in tightly written sections.

We have known for a long time what interests people and what they should know about the events that affect them. Realizing that Roman citizens needed to know about official decisions that affected them, Julius Caesar posted reports of government activities in the *Acta Diurna.* In China, the T'ang dynasty (618–906 A.D.) published a gazette—handwritten or printed by woodblock—to inform court officials of its activities. The more immediate predecessor of the newspaper was the handwritten newsletter, containing political and economic information, that circulated among merchants in early 16th-century Europe.

Wars, Dragons and Business

The first printed newsbook, published in 1513 and titled *The trewe encounter,* described the Battle of Flodden Field in which James IV of Scotland was killed during his invasion of England. The Anglo-Scottish wars that followed provided printers with material for more newsbooks. The elements of our modern-day journalism were included in these accounts—names of officers in the wars and their deeds. Adventure, travel and crime were featured, along with accounts of disasters.

As one printer-pamphleteer put it, people are interested in "and most earnestly moved with strange novelties and marvelous things." These early day journalists favored stories of monsters and dragons, not unlike our own day's tales of the Abominable Snowman and the Loch Ness monster.

During the 17th century, news sheets spread to the business centers of Europe, reporting news of commerce. In this country, as historian Bernard Weisberger has pointed out, the newspaper "served as a handmaiden of commerce by emphasizing news of trade and business."

Definition

"Journalism is in fact history on the run. It is history written in time to be acted upon; thereby not only recording events but at times influencing them. Journalism is also the recording of history while the facts are not all in."

—Thomas Griffith, *Time*

Day and Bennett

The newspaper editors of the 19th century understood that to stay in business they had to appeal to a large audience, and this realization led to definitions of news that hold to this day. The papers in the large cities were printing news for the newly literate working class. One of the first penny papers—inexpensive enough for working people—contained the ingredients of popular journalism. In 1833, the first issue of Benjamin H. Day's *New York Sun* included a summary of police court cases and stories about fires, burglaries and a suicide. Other stories contained humor and human interest.

Several years later, James Gordon Bennett—described by historians as the originator of the art, science and industry of news gathering—used the recently developed telegraph to give the readers of his *Herald* commercial and political news to go along with his reports of the everyday life of New York City, its sins and scandals. His formula of news for "the merchant and man of learning, as well as the mechanic and man of labor" guides many editors today.

Pulitzer

Day and Bennett followed the tastes and appetites of their readers, but they also directed and taught their readers by publishing stories they deemed important.

The Library of Congress

Joseph Pulitzer

This blend of entertainment, information and public service was stressed by Joseph Pulitzer, who owned newspapers in St. Louis and New York. He, too, gave his readers what he thought they wanted—sensational news and features. But Pulitzer also used his news staff for his campaigns to curb business monopolies and to seek heavy taxes on income and inheritance. In 1883, Pulitzer charged the staff of his New York *World* with this command:

> Always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.

Hearst

Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst were locked in a circulation war for New York readers when Cuba rebelled against its Spanish rulers. Spain was severe in repressing the insurrection and the New York newspapers seized on the story of helpless Cubans trying to free themselves from ruthless oppressors.

Hearst's *Journal* was particularly imaginative. After the United States declared war in 1898 and the troops were slow in making it to Cuba, Hearst urged them on with inventive news stories.

"Over the next week," writes Arthur Lubow in *The Reporter Who Would Be King,* "the *Journal* reported an exciting sequence of landings, bombardments and fleet battles, all admirably detailed, all entirely fictitious. The *Journal* was selling so well thanks to its apocryphal scoops that its rivals began to play the same game, often rewriting the accounts of the creative *Journal* writers."

Pioneer

In response to criticism of the *Journal*'s fabrications, Hearst ran a front-page editorial about its so-called news from Cuba: "The *Journal* realized what is frequently forgotten in journalism, that if news is wanted, it often has to be sent for . . . the public is even more fond of entertainment than it is of information."

Today's Editors

Modern mass media editors overseeing newsrooms humming with the latest electronic wonders apply many 19th-century concepts of news. They would define their news menu as did Pulitzer—a mixture of information, entertainment and public service. They would also agree with the definition of news offered by Charles A. Dana, who ran the *New York Sun* from 1869 to 1897. Dana said news is "anything that interests a large part of the community and has never been brought to its attention before."

One of Dana's editors, John B. Bogart, contributed the classic definition, "When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, it's news."

Another enduring definition of news was offered by Stanley Walker, a Texan gone East to succeed as city editor of *The New York Herald Tribune* in the early 1930s. He said news was based on the three W's, "women, wampum, and wrongdoing." By this he meant that news was concerned with sex, money and crime—the topics people desired to know about. Actually, Walker's formula is as old as the contents of Caesar's *Acta Diurna* 2,000 years ago, which, along with information about public affairs, offered news of sports, crime and sensational events.

This is News?

A Riverside Road woman reported to police September 25 at 10:37 A.M. that a dog was lying on the ground near Underhill Road.

The woman didn't know if the dog was dead, and she was afraid to approach it.

The dog later got up, and moved to a shadier spot, police said.

—*Newton* (Conn.) *Bee*

Definition Changes By the mid-1970s, the United States had been through three crises: a war in Vietnam that wound down with guilt and defeat for many Americans; the Watergate scandals; and the failure of some political, social and economic experiments of the 1950s and 1960s that had been hailed as solutions to international conflict, racial tension and poverty.

It was not surprising, then, to see a shift in the criteria used to determine the news. Av Westin, the executive producer of the American Broadcasting Company's "Evening News" program, said Americans wanted their news to answer the following questions: Is the world safe? Are my home and family safe? If they are safe, then what has happened in the last 24 hours to make them better off? Is my pocketbook safe?

People not only wanted more pocketbook stories but escape stories as well. Reflecting the interests of their readers, editors asked for more entertainment in the form of copy about lifestyles, leisure subjects and personalities.

In the 1990s, editors devised the "reader-friendly" story. Readers, they argued, want to learn how to diet, how to raise their children, where to invest their money. The news agenda was being shaped to conform to the interests of middle-class readers and viewers who bought the products of media advertisers. Also, editors became aware that a major segment of the female population consists of working women. Coverage followed this awareness.

News in the New Century The 21st century opened with proof of Walker's wampum and Westin's pocketbook theories of news. Stories abounded of the high-flying economy and its new dot-com millionaires. In short order, the news focus shifted to an economy in retreat, dot-coms collapsing, jobs lost, corporate crime, pensions disappearing. Pessimism replaced optimism. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq sent amputees and body bags home.

Subjects once given major play no longer held the public's attention, and those usually ignored made it to the top of the news. A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found significant declines in crime news and considerable increases in domestic news. Religious issues became big news—the disclosure that in many dioceses of the Catholic Church pedophiles were protected and the controversy over gay marriage.

Three Views

"A news sense is really a sense of what is important, what is vital, what has color and life—what people are interested in. That's journalism."

—Burton Rascoe, *Chicago Tribune*, 1920s

"Marketing should be the king of all editors. They should forget what university professors stuffed into their heads, find out what readers really want and give it to them."

—Stuart Garner, Thomson Newspapers, 1980s

"News is truth that matters."

—Gerry Goldstein, *The Providence Journal*, 1990s

Alert

"Never, never neglect an extraordinary appearance or happening. It may be a false alarm and lead to nothing. But it may, on the other hand, be the clue provided by fate to lead you to some important advance."

—Alexander Fleming, discoverer of penicillin

But whatever the particular events that merited news coverage, two general guidelines are constant:

- News is information about a break from the normal flow of events, an interruption in the expected, a deviation from the norm.
- News is information people can use to help them make sound decisions about their lives.

How does a reporter or editor determine what events are so unusual and what information is so necessary that the public should be informed of them? Journalists have established some guides, called news values, for answering these questions.

News Values

The following eight factors determine the newsworthiness of events, personalities and ideas:


EXTRA EDITION
The Knoxville News-Sentinel
'National tragedy'
Terrorists rain chaos on U.S.

1. Timeliness

Events that are immediate, recent. The daily newspaper, cable TV, the online news services and the hourly newscast seek to keep readers and listeners abreast of events. Thus, broadcast news is written in the present tense, and most leads on newspaper stories contain the word today. No matter how significant the event, how important the people involved, news value diminishes with time. André Gide, the French novelist, defined journalism as "everything that will be less interesting tomorrow than today."

The media are commercial enterprises that sell space and time on the basis of their ability to reach people quickly with a perishable commodity. The marketplace rewards a fast news carrier. Although newspapers place less emphasis on speed than do the electronic media, a newspaper that offers its readers too much rehashed news will not survive. Radio, which was being prepared for its funeral when television captured a large segment of the listening audience, staged a comeback with the all-news station.

Online journalism provides Internet surfers with a running report on everything from hourly stock market prices to traffic flows and the scores of games.

Recognizing the importance of timeliness, the Associated Press and online and broadcast news providers pump out a steady stream of news. As we saw in Chapter 1, the AP met the public's need for the latest information with an ongoing flow of material on the World Trade Center bombings. Sometimes, speed leads to misinformation. For a glimpse at the trouble the media encountered in calling the 2000 presidential election, see **Calling Bush or Gore** in *NRW Plus.*

Timely Information Essential There is another side to our need to know quickly. Timeliness is important in a democracy. People need to know about the activities of their officials as soon as possible so they can assess the directions in which their leaders are moving. Told where they are being led, citizens can react

before actions become irreversible. In extreme cases, the public can rid itself of an inefficient or corrupt official. Officials also want quick distribution of information so that they can have feedback from the public. This interaction is one of the reasons the Constitution protects the press. Without the give-and-take of ideas, democracy could not work.

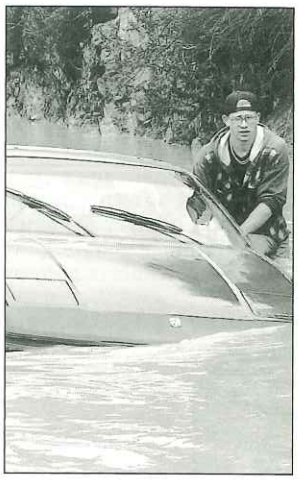
Timeliness is also the consequence of advertising necessities. Because most businesses are based on the quick turnover of goods, advertisements must appear soon after goods are shipped to stores. The news that attracts readers to the advertisements must be constantly renewed.

2. Impact

Events that are likely to affect many people. Journalists talk about events that are significant, important. They talk about giving high priority in their coverage to situations that people need to know about to be well informed. The more people that are affected by the event, the bigger the story. An increase in the postal rates will be given major attention because so many are affected. An increase in a town's property tax will receive considerable play in that town and nowhere else, but a change in the federal income tax rate will receive national attention.

Journalists may take the initiative in digging up situations that have considerable impact. David Willman, a reporter in the Washington bureau of the *Los Angeles Times,* suspected that the federal Food and Drug Administration had lost its effectiveness as the guardian of public health. He spent two years examining the FDA's work and discovered it had approved seven prescription drugs that were believed to have caused the deaths of more than 1,000 people. Despite warnings from its own specialists about the drugs—among them a painkiller, a diet pill and a heartburn medicine—approval had been granted.

In Chapter 1, we saw how reporters for KHOU-Houston found repeated gross incompetence in the police department's lab tests. The impact of the station's reporting was considerable—cases were retried, prisoners freed, the lab system replaced.



Juan Carlos, *Ventura County Star*

Flooded Out

Sudden changes in weather affect large numbers of people and are given major play by journalists.

3. Prominence

Events involving well-known people or institutions. When the president trips disembarking from an airplane, it is front-page news; when a city councilmember missteps, it is not worth a line of print or a moment of air time. A local banker's embezzlement is more newsworthy than a clerk's thievery, even when the clerk has stolen more. The more prominent the person, the bigger the story. Names make news, goes the old adage, even when the event is of little consequence.

Two events that probably received the most massive media coverage of the 1990s were the result of prominence—the pursuit, arrest and trials of O.J. Simpson and the sexual affair of President Clinton with a young White House intern. Never mind that the economies of several large countries were crumbling, that the Middle East and Northern Ireland saw carnage amidst peace efforts, that nuclear proliferation arose and that ethnic warfare killed hundreds of thousands and made refugees of many more. Names made news, big and bigger news.

Prominence applies to organizations as well, and even to some physical objects. The repair of a major bridge in Akron is given coverage in that city and not elsewhere. But when the Golden Gate Bridge shuts down that action merits national coverage.

In 1884, the American poet and journalist Eugene Field was moved by the journalism of personalities to write:

> Now the Ahkoond of Swat is a vague sort of man
> Who lives in a country far over the sea;
> Pray tell me, good reader, if tell me you can,
> What's the Ahkoond of Swat to you folks or me?

Despite Field's gentle poke, journalists continue to cater to what they perceive as the public's appetite for newsworthy names.

4. Proximity

Events that are geographically or emotionally close to people interest them. In Chapter 1, we read about the tornado that ripped apart the small town of Spencer, S.D. The *Argus Leader,* the state's major newspaper, sent reporters and photographer's 50 miles west to cover the story and used 1½-inch type on page 1 over its story. In Lubbock, Texas, the newspaper did not cover the story, but a radio station in Minneapolis, 300 miles away, gave it 60 seconds airtime.

If 42 people die in an airplane crash in the Andes and one of the passengers is a resident of Little Rock, the news story in Little Rock will emphasize the death of the local person. This is known as *localizing* the news. When two tour buses collided in Wales, injuring 75 people, *USA Today* began its account this way:

> Teen-agers from Lancaster, Pa., Houston and St. Louis were among 75 people hurt when two tour buses returning from Ireland collided in Wales.

Emotional Closeness People are interested in events and individuals that seem close to them. The tie may be religious, ethnic, racial. Newspapers and stations with large Catholic or Jewish populations give considerable space and time to news from the Vatican or the Middle East. After the space shuttle Challenger exploded and sent seven crew members to their deaths, the *Amsterdam News,* a weekly in New York with a predominantly black readership, headlined on page 1 the death of the black astronaut who was aboard.

5. Conflict

Strife, antagonism, warfare have provided the basis of stories since early peoples drew pictures on their cave walls of their confrontations with the beasts that surrounded them. People and their tribes and their countries have been at war with each other, and with themselves, since history has been kept, and the tales that resulted have been the basis of saga, drama, story and news.

To journalists today, conflict has a more nuanced meaning. "The most effective stories I've read," says Peter St. Onge, a staff writer for *The Charlotte Observer,* "involved ordinary people confronting the challenges of daily life."

Although critics of the press condemn what they consider to be an overemphasis on conflict, the advance of civilization can be seen as an adventure in conflict and turmoil. Indeed, one way to define, and to defend, journalism is that it provides a forum for discussion of the conflicts that divide people and groups, and that this peaceful debate makes conflict resolution possible.

6. The Unusual

Events that deviate sharply from the expected, that depart considerably from the experiences of everyday life make news. We know that. But here we are talking about the truly different, the bizarre, strange and wondrous.

When a dog bites a man, it isn't news. But when a police dog, a tried and true member of the K-9 Corps, sinks his teeth into the arm of his police handler, that's unusual, and it's news. We've all seen big watermelons in the supermarket, but the 165-pound monster makes page 1 of the B section of *The Freeport News* when the farmer offers it to the First Baptist Church for its annual picnic.

Domestic Violence Domestic spats are not news, unless they are so violent murder is committed. But when Lorena Bobbitt tired of her husband's mental and physical attacks and cut off his penis. . . . Yes, that was news for several weeks.

The wide coverage of the Bobbitt family surgery led Peter Kann, publisher of *The Wall Street Journal,* to condemn "media fascination with the bizarre, the perverse and pathological—Lorena Bobbitt journalism."

But it was over in a few weeks, and today few people can identify Lorena Bobbitt or recall the reason for her 15 seconds of media attention. The bizarre has the lifespan of a firefly's momentary flash.

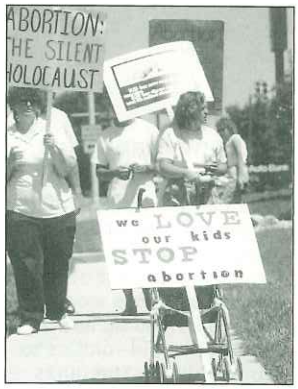
To some, though, the attention was important and worthwhile, for the incident made people think about domestic violence and its victims, and in its wake some governors pardoned women imprisoned for killing husbands who had for years tormented and beaten them. Cause and effect? Possibly.

A Symbol The young man who stood alone before a column of tanks on their way to bloody Tiananmen Square struck everyone who saw the photograph and read the accompanying story as so amazing, so wondrous that the act quickly became a symbol. (See next page.) To some, the act showed defiance of tyranny. To others, it was, as the writer and critic Ian Buruma wrote, a symbol "of the futility of empty-handed opposition to brute force."

7. Currency

Occasionally, a situation long simmering will suddenly emerge as the subject of discussion and attention. Historians might describe the situation as an idea whose time has come. When it does, the media catch up.

In the early 1960s, President Kennedy called attention to the plight of the poor. Then President Johnson declared a "war on poverty." Newspapers responded by covering health and welfare agencies and by going into poor areas of their cities in search of news. Television produced documentaries on the blighted lives of the poor. More than 40 years later, poverty, although as pervasive, receives less attention.



Mike Roemer

Political Conflict

The opponents of abortion do battle with placards, parades and politics. This long-running conflict has erupted in violence.

AP Photo by Jeff Widener

A Lone Man's Plea

As the tanks headed down Cangan Boulevard in the government's show of strength in Beijing, a young man darted in front of the column. The tanks stopped. The man looked up and called out to the soldiers to stop the killing. The tanks tried to weave around him, easing him aside. He cried out again, pleading for no more violence. Bystanders finally pulled him away, fearing he would be crushed under the treads.

The plight of women and members of minority groups in achieving recognition for their talents was long ignored. Victims of the glass ceiling and discrimination in the executive suites, they finally broke through to the media and became the subject of coverage.

Generally, journalists have not been in the vanguard of these discoveries. Sometimes though, journalists will decide that a situation needs attention and will make it newsworthy. We saw a few pages back how a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, David Willman, revealed that a federal agency had approved the sale of prescription drugs that were killing people. He stayed with the story for two years before the agency pulled the drugs from the market.

The work of Willman also falls in an eighth category, a category that stems from the reporter's feelings that he or she must act.

8. Necessity

The seven previous categories of newsworthiness involve people, events and situations that call out for coverage—meetings, speeches, accidents, deaths, games and the like. This final category is of the journalist's making. That is, *the journalist has discovered something he or she feels it is necessary to disclose.* The situation or event, the person or idea may or may not come under any of the previous seven categories of newsworthiness. The essential element is that the

journalist considers the situation to be something everyone should know about, and usually it is a situation that needs to be exposed and remedied.

This is journalism of conscience. The journalists who report and write these stories are on the staffs of small and large publications, network and local stations, specialized publications and magazines.

Here are some examples of their work:

Pensacola News Journal—Exposure of a culture of corruption that led to the indictment of four of the five county commissioners.

The Atlanta Business Chronicle—Sarah Rubenstein and Walter Woods found questionable connections between state officials and landowners whose property was needed for right-of-way acquisitions for a $2.2 billion highway project. After publication, the project was put on hold.

National Public Radio—"We're the only industrialized nation that can't see fit to insure everyone though we spend one-third more per capita on health than the next biggest spender," reported Susan Dentzer, health correspondent for "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer." Dentzer interviewed several of the uninsured among the 40 million who, she said, are receiving "second-rate, third-rate and even zero care."

The Boston Globe—Despite a veil of secrecy, the newspaper uncovered sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests in many parishes. Priests were transferred rather than dismissed. The *Globe* disclosures led other media around the country to investigate.

WMAQ, Chicago—The TV station revealed that U.S. Customs officers at O'Hare International Airport were using racial and gender profiling to target black women for invasive strip searches. The story led to a class-action suit and an investigation by the Customs Service of procedures at all international airports.

Portland Press-Herald—Barbara Walsh examined Maine's care for mentally ill children and found the system was chaotic. After hundreds of interviews, and an examination of thousands of documents, Walsh wrote that children had to wait months and years for help, that some children were placed in juvenile lockup for lack of an adequate placement program. The governor and legislators vowed reform.

WTVF-TV—Despite a budget crisis and the largest tax increase in the state's history, Tennessee was awarding contracts to firms without competitive bidding—and the companies had close ties to the governor. Bryan Staples and Phil Williams of the Nashville station also learned that companies had overcharged the state. The governor retaliated, impeding the reporters from checking records and pulling $160,000 in highway safety advertising from the station. Despite attacks on the reporters' credibility, the FBI and IRS decided to investigate.

The Overlooked For many of these stories, reporters dug into situations that one reporter described as affecting "the least of them," the men, women and children that journalism usually overlooks. Noreen Turyn, an anchor at WSET in Lynchburg, Va., heard about an old state law still on the books that allowed the forced sterilization of men and women. The law had been adopted during the heyday of eugenics, a social movement that used pseudo-science to bring about what it called the "improvement of the race." Under the law, youngsters who had minor offenses and those whose parents said they could not control them were shipped off to Lynchburg Colony where they were forced into sterilization "without any

Labor of Love

Investigative reporting isn't glamorous, says Phil Williams. "There are long hours of tedium—whether it's dissecting computer databases, combing through records and hiding in the back of a van for hours on surveillance without a bathroom break. If that sounds like a great job to you, then it can be."

understanding of what was happening to them," Turyn reported. Turyn interviewed the victims, among them a World War II Bronze Medal winner. The state acted to repeal the law after Turyn's series was aired.

Katherine Boo of *The Washington Post* describes this reporting as traveling through "the shadowlands of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised." In two separate series, Boo disclosed the horrible conditions in which the city's retarded lived—and died. She documented beatings, robberies, rapes and the use of the retarded for slave labor in so-called training programs.

Abortions for All When Heidi Evans of the *Daily News* was told by a caller that every woman who went to a cash-only abortion clinic was informed that she was pregnant, Evans raced over to the clinic the next day with a urine sample of her own.

"The owner, who did the tests himself, told me I was pregnant and tugged at my arm to have the procedure right then," Evans said.

"The following day, I sent another reporter with a sample from one of our male colleagues. The urine also tested positive." After two more weeks of reporting, in which she showed how poor, mostly immigrant women were herded by the clinic owner to a back room where a fly-by-night doctor operated, the state shut down the clinic.

Chris Seward, *The News & Observer*

Hazard

When Hurricane Floyd hit North Carolina, thousands of hogs were drowned. Officials estimated 28,000 hogs were killed. The decaying carcasses became a health hazard and had to be incinerated.

Hog Heaven In Raleigh, *The News & Observer* examined an unlikely source of environmental degradation—hog lagoons.

Raising hogs is big business, and the bigger the hog farm the better the business because the slaughterhouse can be next door, eliminating the expense of hauling the hogs to the meat cutters. But the big hog farms—some have a million animals—do the following, the newspaper revealed:

Contaminate Ground Water

Through the emission of ammonia gas into the atmosphere that is returned with rain, streams are being choked with algae.

Waste from the hogs—which produce as much as four times as much waste per hog as do humans—is piling up in open fields.

The series on the hog farms contamination won a Pulitzer Prize.

Questionable Deaths In North Carolina, disability advocates had complained about the state's mental health system. The governor didn't listen. Parents complained about the lack of services for their children. Legislators weren't interested. Debbie Cenziper of *The Charlotte Observer* listened and became interested. The result: More than 30 stories beginning with a five-part series that revealed that 34 people with mental disabilities—many of them young—died under questionable circumstances while in the care of the state's mental health facilities. "They died from suicide, murder, scalding, falls," Cenziper says. "They

suffocated, starved, choked, drowned." Most of the deaths were never investigated because the state had not been told of them.

The stories led to increased mental health funding, money for hiring 27 inspectors for mental health facilities and two laws to correct the dangerous flaws Cenziper had described.

See **Broken Trust** in *NRW Plus.*

Does It Work? In all these stories the common element is that something was not functioning properly, that something was wrong with the system. David Burnham, a former *New York Times* reporter, says the increased bureaucratization of public life calls for a new approach to news. The media need to spend more time asking: How are the bureaucracies that affect our lives working? Are they deviating from our expectation that they are there to serve us?

Is the police department engaged in crime prevention; is the power company delivering sufficient energy at a reasonable price; are the high schools graduating college-entry seniors?

Dying Lakes The *Times Union* in Albany, N.Y., felt it necessary to track the progress, if any, being made to cope with the effects of acid rain in the nearby Adirondacks Park, the largest wilderness area east of the Rockies. What it found did not make for optimism.

Reporter Dina Cappiello found that 500 of the 6-million-acre park's 2,800 lakes are dead. Unless something is done, she wrote, within 40 years a thousand more lakes will be lost to acid rain, lakes empty of plant and animal life.

See **Dying Lakes** in *NRW Plus.*

All-Out Coverage

When terrorists struck New York City and Washington, newspapers turned away from the bottom line and ordered robust coverage. Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr., publisher of *The New York Times,* said that although cancellations of advertising during September, when the hijacked planes struck, would cost the Times "millions of dollars," coverage would be all out. "It's made a dreadful financial year more dreadful. But who cares?" Tony Ridder, chairman of Knight-Ridder, who had been blamed for asking his papers to return high profits by cutting staffs, told his editors: "Please leave no stone unturned in pursuing this story. Do the right thing by readers."

News Is Relative

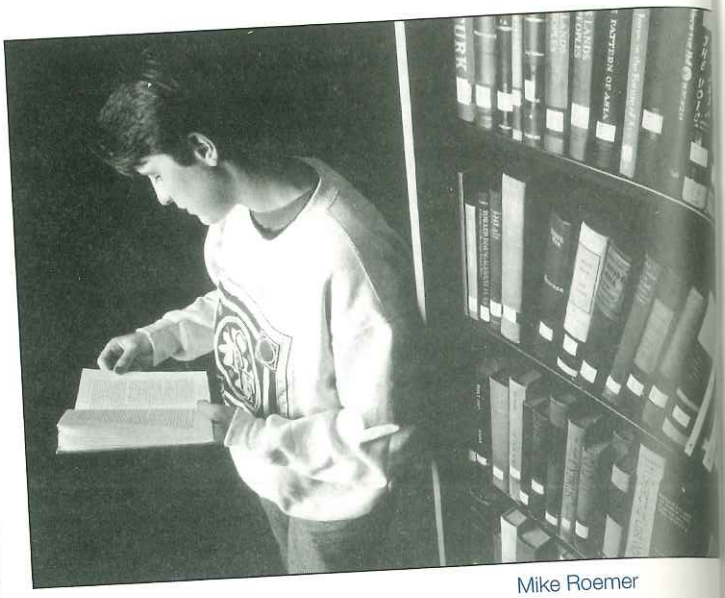
These eight news values do not exist in a vacuum. Their application depends on those who are deciding what is news, where the event and the news medium are located, the tradition of the newspaper or station, its audience and a host of other factors.

Economic Pressures

The media are a business, a profit-seeking enterprise. Most stations and newspapers are no different from General Motors, Microsoft and Home Depot. Their operations are designed to maximize profits.

Advertising is the engine that drives the media. This can be seen quickly enough when the newspaper has 48 pages because the department stores are advertising white sales. The result is a large news hole, with plenty of space for stories. On days when the advertising is slim, the newspaper may run to 32 pages and stories are cut to the bone, or not run at all.

More broadly, when times are good and advertisers clamor for space and time, staffs are large, coverage deep. When there is a hitch in the economy, foreign bureaus are closed, staffs are cut. Some events simply are not covered.



Mike Roemer

Changing Times . . . Changing Beats

A century ago, 50 percent of the workforce in the United States made a living from agriculture. Farm news was big news. Today, with 2.5 percent so employed, farm news is important outside agricultural areas only when the cost of food goes up. At the beginning of the 20th century, fewer than 115,000 students attended college and journalists paid little attention to them. Today, more than 50 times as many are enrolled and higher education is a major beat.

More Than Money

"A newspaper is a business that must produce a decent profit or eventually fail. But a newspaper is more than just a business—it is a public trust with responsibilities to its readers and its community that extend well beyond producing profits."

—James P. Gannon, former editor, *The Des Moines Register*

Increasingly, media outlets are owned by large companies whose stock is traded on the stock market. The result: "The pressure to maximize stockholder return has become ever more intense," says Larry Jinks, for more than 40 years an executive with Knight-Ridder. "That affects how news is gathered and presented."

A Wall Street analyst put the matter bluntly: "Some reporters don't understand that they work for a company that sells advertising. They're in the advertising business, not in the journalism business. They don't get it. Without the bottom line, they don't have jobs. They're in a business and the business is to sell ads and make money. The people that own the company are the shareholders, not the reporters."

Advertisers Muscle the Media Hardly a month goes by without the report of some advertiser or commercial group deciding to hold back on advertising because of news coverage.

In New York, a series of articles in the *Daily News* reported that "more than half the city's supermarkets fail inspections because of vermin, filth and rotting food." The reaction of the markets was swift. All but one pulled their advertising. The *News,* battling declining revenue and serious circulation losses, apologized

Conflicting Goals: Sales vs. Truth

Advertising is the principal source of revenues that supports our media system. That dependence creates an incongruity between the public's preferences and the criteria employed by the people in charge. As consumers of communication, we judge it by its value and meaning for us; advertisers judge it by its efficiency in disseminating what they call "exposure opportunities."

Media content has been driven primarily by the need to maximize audiences for sale rather than by the desire to communicate the truth about our world or express deep thoughts and feelings. To this end, broadcasting and film have vied with each other in pursuit of violence and vulgarity. The largest of our mass media, the daily press, traditionally the forum for contention and irreverence, has undergone a steady attrition of competition and a general retreat to the safety of the middle ground. Left to its own devices, the public persistently drifts toward amusement rather than enlightenment, avoiding confrontation with the pressing, perhaps overwhelming, problems that confront the nation and the world.

—Leo Bogart

in a four-page advertorial designed by the business department of the newspaper. The material, *The New York Times* reported, was "effusively complimentary."

Asked if the section righted matters, the manager of one of the market chains replied, "I'll go back if they fire the reporter and the editor." That, said the *News*'s executive editor, was not going to happen.

At *The Washington Post,* Leonard Downie had been looking into an arrangement between corrupt real estate speculators and local savings and loan institutions to gouge inner-city residents. The bankers got wind of Downie's checking and told the managing editor that if the *Post* ran the series, they would pull their advertising.

Downie, who later became the *Post*'s executive editor, recalls Benjamin C. Bradlee, his editor, telling him about the visit and the threat. Bradlee looked at Downie and said simply, "Just get it right."

The reporting continued, the series ran and the banks pulled their advertising, costing the newspaper $750,000 in lost advertising revenue.

Read and Rip

When owners of a trade show didn't like an article in *Home Accents Today* about the company's debt restructuring and made its displeasure known to the publication, staff members responded by tearing the article out of copies that had not yet been distributed.

The Influence of Owners

In addition to putting their imprint on their products by deciding how much money to take out of the enterprise, owners can exert a powerful tonal influence. Some are cautious, unwilling to dig into news that might stir controversy. Their papers and stations cover the surface of the news, what we describe in Chapter 11 as Layer 1 news, the stenographic report of what people say and do. Some go further, imposing a particular political point of view and slant on the news. And some combine avarice and political slant.

Cave In When the Chinese government was upset by the British Broadcasting Corporation's news coverage of human rights abuses in China, it made its displeasure known to Rupert Murdoch, the owner of a massive global media conglomerate

Cause and Effect

The news article quoted producers as saying that the new Brad Pitt movie was "loathsome," "absolutely indefensible," "deplorable on every level." The movie review in the same newspaper, *The Hollywood Reporter,* said the movie "is exactly the kind of product that lawmakers should target for being socially irresponsible. . . . The production company, 20th Century Fox, stopped all its movie advertising in an obvious attempt, *The New York Times* reported, "to damage the trade paper financially."

Murdoch's Empire

"Murdoch uses his diverse holdings, which include newspapers, magazines, sports teams, a movie studio and a book publisher, to promote his own financial interests at the expense of real newsgathering, legal and regulatory rules and journalistic ethics. He wields his media as instruments of influence with politicians who can aid him, and savages his competitors in his news columns. If ever someone demonstrated the dangers of mass power being concentrated in few hands, it would be Murdoch."

—Russ Baker, "Murdoch's Mean Machine," ***Columbia Journalism Review***

Dying Competition

The number of cities with competing newspapers has steadily declined, and the number of chain-owned newspapers has spiraled over the past three decades, the result of declining advertising income and a decrease in the circulation of afternoon newspapers. Twenty-eight states have no competing newspapers.

that includes large holdings in China. Murdoch's Hong Kong broadcast operation had been airing the BBC newscasts that irritated Chinese Communist Party leaders.

Murdoch acted quickly. He eliminated BBC news. He said that using the BBC, considered the provider of the finest broadcast journalism in the world, would jeopardize his business in China.

Murdoch again made the news with a move motivated by his business interests in China. HarperCollins, a book publisher owned by Murdoch, planned to publish a book by Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong. Patten was an outspoken critic of China's authoritarianism and miserable human rights

record. When Murdoch learned of the publication plans he ordered HarperCollins to drop the book.

Owners' Politics Murdoch is politically conservative, and his politics impose a deep imprint on his media properties. When Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont changed his party membership from Republican to Independent, thus giving control of the U.S. Senate to the Democrats, the front page of Murdoch's *New York Post* put a photo of Jeffords on page 1 that was doctored to portray him as a traitorous Benedict Arnold.

Courage In contrast, to the bottom-line journalism of many publishers, some put the public welfare before the dollar sign. In the darkest days of *The Washington Post*'s coverage of Watergate, when President Nixon threatened economic reprisals to *Post* properties, publisher Katherine Graham stood steadfast. In a tribute to Graham on her death, Hendrik Hertzberg wrote in *The New Yorker:*

> The courage she summoned in the face of serious, and at that time frightening, abuses of power put democracy in her debt in a way that few other American publishers, perhaps none, have ever equaled.

Chains

The media are spiraling toward a concentration of ownership in fewer and fewer large corporations. Fifty years ago, families owned almost all the daily newspapers. Today, four of five newspapers are owned by groups, known as chains. The Chicago Tribune, Gannett and Knight-Ridder alone own a fourth of all daily newspapers. "The family-owned newspaper is an endangered species," says H. Brandt Ayers, whose family has owned *The Anniston Star* in Alabama for parts of three centuries.

The *Star*'s ownership is happy if it can make 10 percent profit, Ayers says. Chain owners want twice as much and more to placate dividend-hungry stockholders.

Most media commentators find the concentration worrisome. "The pressure on them is to produce dollars," says Ben Bagdikian. Profits come before good journalism, he says.

Group ownership has its defenders. Their large resources enable local editors to take on the community power structure without fear of economic retaliation, the defenders say.

The reality is mixed. Some group-owned media provide minimal coverage. A radio chain with hundreds of stations has no news staff in most of its stations. Some newspapers and stations continue to dig and provide their readers and viewers with illuminating journalism. The difference often lies with the tradition of the newspaper or station and its ownership.

The Charleston (W.Va.) *Gazette* has long spoken for protection of its environment. This Scripps Howard paper has encouraged reporter Ken Ward, Jr., to take a

Maxim

"Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

—Joe Liebling

Threat

"It is daily becoming more obvious that the biggest threat to a free press and the circulation of ideas is the steady absorption of newspapers, television and radio stations, networks and other vehicles of information into corporations that know how to turn knowledge into profit—but are not equally committed to inquiry or debate or to the First Amendment."

—Reuven Frank, former head of NBC News

strong point of view to his work. "The area is economically depressed and controlled by a few large companies that rape and pillage and don't leave much for the people," he says. "If there is any place in the United States that needs good investigative reporting that comes at things with a good set of values, it's here."

Tradition

Some publications and broadcast stations have a history of public service journalism that guides them in their selection of what is worthy of their reporters' time and the owners' funds.

The Charlotte Observer has challenged the tobacco industry. More recently it took on the home builders. Reporters Ames Alexander and Rick Rothacker accompanied building inspectors on their rounds, watched houses being built, pored through public records and interviewed more than 400 homeowners, builders, inspectors and others. The paper's database editor, Ted Mellnick, helped them examine "4 million computer records on all building inspections conducted in Mecklenburg County since the 1970s," says Alexander.

The project took eight months. The reporters concluded that "North Carolina's laws favor builders over buyers."

See **Home Buyer Beware** in *NRW Plus*.

The Audience

When the TV actress Ellen DeGeneres announced that she is a lesbian, the *San Francisco Chronicle* put the story on page 1 alongside a four-column photo of a crowd in town watching the show on a big screen. *The New York Times* national edition put the story on page 17A. The reason for the difference in play: San Francisco has a large percentage of gay men and women in its population.

Everything media writers do is aimed at an audience, and the nature of that audience may well be the most important influence in media performance.

Network TV Once king of the media hill, network television is now struggling for footing on a downward slope. Viewership has eroded, and the networks have been engaged in a search to match the news to its different audience. Their advisers have suggested that the morning audience wants less news of government and domestic and foreign affairs and more of crime, celebrities and lifestyle. Nothing too heavy. That's for the evening newscasts and for the "PBS NewsHour." Why the difference? Demographics. The morning viewers are younger.

Demographics Age, race, gender, geography, income, ethnicity—these are factored in when news managers make their decisions on what is printed and put on the screen.

If we look at the audience for National Public Radio, the content of its news becomes understandable. The audience, reports the Project for Excellence in Journalism, "falls between 25 and 54 years of age, has college degrees, and votes, and half have household incomes of over $75,000. This has created a situation in which NPR is a media resource used by a young, culturally elite group."

Corporate Journalism

". . . one can argue that considering there are nearly 1,500 daily papers in the United States, and considering that most of these are handsomely profitable, the percentage of excellence is abysmally low. Today's typical daily is mediocre, with a strong overlay of provincialism. And industry trends are only making matters worse."

—Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Journalism
by Thomas Kunkel and Gene Roberts

Mark Sluder, *The Charlotte Observer*

Five Packs a Day

Although *The Charlotte Observer* circulates among farmers who grow two-thirds of the tobacco used to make cigarettes, the newspaper published a 20-page special report "Our Tobacco Dilemma" that called attention to the health hazards of smoking. On the front page of the section was this photograph of James McManus, 62, who has, the newspaper reported, "smoking-caused emphysema" and requires an "oxygen tank to survive." The tobacco industry spends more than $1 billion a year on advertising.

Ethnic publications, along with the alternative press, are two of the few media that have growing audiences. While English language newspapers have lost 11 percent of their circulation in the past 15 years, the circulation of Spanish language dailies has tripled to 1.7 million. The Spanish-speaking population in the United States has more than doubled, whereas the black population has increased only by a third.

The standard media are reaching out to non-whites and various ethnic groups. News is no longer confined to the activities and assertions of the white middle class. The days when news of blacks, Asians and Hispanics was not news are gone.

The Affluent

USA Today devotes plenty of space to its "Money" section. A third of the newspaper's readers have incomes of more than $100,000, the readers that advertisers are anxious to reach.

The Reporter

Despite the many media changes, it remains true today what has been operative through the years: For the most part the reporter, the man or woman on the beat, makes the news. The court reporter who looks through a dozen court filings chooses the one or two that she will write about. The police reporter, whose daily rounds begin with the examination of the dozen arrests made overnight, decides which two or three he will report. The feature writers with a dozen ideas swirling through their heads have time for a couple.

Yes, the guidelines do help, the news values that we have discussed—timeliness, prominence, impact and the others. But there is wide latitude within these

categories. For example: Just who is prominent? To Karen Garloch, a medical writer for *The Charlotte Observer,* a local building contractor named Vernon Nantz may not have been prominent, but his situation qualified him for her attention. Nantz was dying of cancer and had decided to forgo chemotherapy. He wanted to die at home, close to his family.

"The idea for this story was born out of my interest, as a medical writer, in the end of life care," Garloch says. "I had written many stories about living wills and advance directives, the forms people sign to declare their expectations about extraordinary medical care. I had also written about the growth of the hospice movement and discussions among ethicists and doctors when to stop treatment that appears to be futile.

"With millions of Americans facing these choices, I wanted to tell the story of the end of life through a real person who made the choice to reject extraordinary medical care and die with dignity at home."

Garloch's series about Vernon Nantz began this way:

> When Vernon Nantz was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer, his doctor told him: "We can treat it, but we're not gonna beat it." Vernon had just months. He decided to use Hospice at Charlotte, stay at home with his wife and be around his family and friends.
>
> More and more we want a choice about how and where we die.
>
> This is the story of one man's choice.

Garloch was with Nantz when he decided not to get out of bed to dress for the visit of the hospice nurse. She was there when the family gathered around his bed, sure he was dying, and she was there when he rallied and ate an entire fried fish dinner with french fries and hush puppies. And she arrived at the Nantz home shortly after he died at 2 A.M.

Reader response was overwhelming, said Garloch's editor, Frank Barrows.

Like many of the reporters we have seen at work, Garloch could be said to have made the news with this story of Vernon Nantz. She and the others could be described as activist journalists.

For Garloch's story, see **Vernon's Goodbye** in *NRW Plus.*

Activist Journalists To some journalists, news consists of overt events—an automobile accident, a city council meeting, a court document, the State of the Union Address. Their journalism is denotative, pointing to what has happened. Necessary as this reporting is, some journalists consider it a passive type of journalism because the journalist essentially is responding to events. They would complement denotative journalism with a more active, seeking-out journalism.

Activist journalists seek to place on the public agenda matters that they believe require consideration, civic discussion that could lead to some kind of action. The action could be an awareness of another way to end one's days, as the Garloch fea-

ture demonstrated. Or it could lead to remedial action, as Willman's stories about deadly prescription drugs accomplished. The sociologist Herbert Blumer says that issues come to public attention, not because of the "intrinsic gravity of the social problem," but because they have been given status by some respected group that has called attention to the problem. These groups can legitimatize an issue as a matter of concern requiring action, Blumer says.

Among those that can legitimatize situations Blumer lists educational organizations, religious leaders, legislators, civic groups and the press. Once legitimatized, the issue can be acted upon quickly, Blumer says.

Summing Up

Impersonal and objective as journalists would like to make the determinants of news, journalism is based on selection, and choice is a highly personal affair. It derives from the journalist's professional background, his or her education and the intangible influences of family, friends and colleagues.

The professional decisions are framed by other considerations as well: the need to entertain to keep readers and viewers who are constantly being seduced by entertainment media; the pressures of the business of journalism such as budgeting restrictions, meeting the competition, considering the needs of advertisers.

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