

# News and newsworthiness: A commentary

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## *Abstract*

*This commentary argues that the concept of news is a primitive term, one whose existence is not questioned, and that assumptions about the news need to be identified and questioned. One common assumption is that news is composed of things that are newsworthy, i. e., that news and newsworthiness are essentially the same, and that the prominence with which an event is covered in the news is an indicator of newsworthiness. Shoemaker's recent research with Akiba Cohen shows that news and newsworthiness are in fact not the same. News is a social construct, a thing, a commodity, whereas newsworthiness is a cognitive construct, a mental judgment. Newsworthiness is not a good predictor of which events get into the newspaper and how they are covered. Newsworthiness is only one of a vast array of factors that influence what becomes the news and how prominently events are covered.*

*Keywords: news, newsworthiness, gatekeepers, negativity*

The term news is a primitive construct – one that requires no definition in ordinary conversation, because everyone knows what it is. A primitive construct is so integrated into our lives that we do not question its existence. When asked to define a primitive term, it is difficult to do so without using the term in the definition.

News is what comes in the newspaper every day. It's what those television and radio news programs talk about. Internet news portals have broken the geographic boundaries of 'local' news; the world is an internet of villages, each with its own news web site. In the hegemonic world of theoretical concepts, news is one of the most powerful, seen but not seen. People may rail against news, they may criticize it, oppose or support it, but they never say "let's do away with news and the entire news industry." It is not an unthinkable thought – I did just type it. But

common sense tells us that the world will always include news. Even if there are no news media, news will be transmitted from person to person. News will always exist in some form.

News is a commodity. It can be bought, sold, and traded. Journalists manufacture the news. Public relations firms manipulate the news. The audience consumes the news. Advertisers pay to place their products next to the news. News travels by word of mouth, across the Internet and other mass media. Professional associations focus on the production of news and on social science research about news. Televised news shouts at us in airport waiting rooms. News is ubiquitous.

No one thinks news should be outlawed. Optimistic theorists consider news to be important to the maintenance of democratic political systems and believe that the more news there is, the better the political system will be. Pessimistic theorists see news as a conduit that supports the political system as it is, and contend that our unquestioning acceptance of the news industry is evidence that it plays a functional role in society. News is part of the homeostatic system that keeps society in balance; it interacts with other social institutions to keep things as they are now, with the exception of encouraging ‘progress’, which is a dressed-up way of saying that news constrains social change. If the speed of social change can be controlled by organizations and people who hold power, then they can use change to their advantage.

News organizations employ people to do news work, and they support a myriad of related industries that would not exist if there were no news. Thus the power of news organizations extends beyond their own boundaries. News content distracts people with bits of information taken out of context, which makes concentrating on issues, problems, and solutions more difficult. We in the academy legitimize the existence of news by making it part of the university curriculum and by endlessly studying it. Even those who write critically of news take advantage of its social capital to gain promotion and tenure at their universities and to enhance their reputations.

If news accurately portrayed every nuance of reality, would we study it so much? Our journals are filled with the anti- and pro-social effects of news, bias in the news, and politicians manipulating the news this year. Election news is supposed to end up with *somebody* receiving good news, but the results are most newsworthy if cast with a pall of suspicion and uncertainty.

Whoever said “no news is good news” got it right – so much news is bad news that the absence of news is itself perceived as good news. *No news about hurricanes tonight? Things must be getting better there.* Good news is occasionally present, but often it is about something surprising – bad news with a good news spin. I recently read a front-page story in

my local newspaper about a 16-year-old girl whose car strayed from a country road and hit a tree. Two men who were late to work saw the accident and ran to the smoking car, but the door was jammed and so was her seat belt. She began screaming when the passenger seat broke out in flames. The men reached in to help her get out, and heat was so intense they could feel the backs of their hands burning. One man grabbed the fire extinguisher in his truck, but it didn't work. The other unsuccessfully tried to cut her seat belt with his pocket knife. They then found a big hunting knife in the truck. Once they had freed her, they moved the driver's seat back all of the way and literally pulled her out through the back passenger door. The car exploded no more than ten seconds later.

Good news, right? A story of true heroism. But heroes can exist only if there are villains; good news must be understood in the context of bad news. What if I had written that a girl's car hit a tree, and she was helped out of it before the gas tank exploded? This version doesn't have enough drama, essentially not enough bad news to justify the one bit of good news. The newspaper story was composed of a series of bad-news events: Not only does the car crash, but it crashes in the country where few cars pass, the two witnesses see the accident only because they are late for work, the girl is trapped, flames appear, the fire extinguisher doesn't work, the pocket knife can't cut through the seat belt, she screams because the heat is so intense and the flames so close, she is pulled from the car through the back seat door, the car explodes. Oh, and by the way, the girl was saved.

It is no coincidence that this sounds like something from an action motion picture, a series of frightening problems or dilemmas that the heroes have to and do overcome. People naturally pay attention to things that are dangerous or threatening, and so danger and threats sell newspapers and DVDs. 'Human interest' stories also tell us about people who triumph over adversity, but generally are several adrenalin levels lower than saving girls from burning cars. We like to see and hear about people who face threatening situations and yet come out on top. Good triumphs over evil, good news defeats bad news. But we don't want too many human interest stories, because 'good triumphs over evil' is essentially the same story told over and over again.

'Hard' news and 'breaking' news are generally bad news – crime, political conflict, threats to the health of the public, sex scandals, dire economic forecasts, war, and death – but a hard or breaking news story is analogous to hearing about the car crash. The bad news comes first, and then later news stories tell us about 'developing' aspects of the event. If developments are negative, they are more likely to become news. Sto-

ries develop until the problems are resolved. Problem resolution is good news, which most of the time means no news.

‘Soft’ news is often differentiated from hard news because it does not have to be published as quickly. But what is there about soft news that makes timeliness a less important news criterion? It’s that such stories contain less bad news. Bad news must be known right away, while good news can sit around for a while.

I have argued elsewhere (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006; Shoemaker, 1996) that no one has given a plausible explanation for the overwhelmingly negative nature of news. Those who believe that the news mirrors reality might say that the world is not a happy place; bad things happen to good people. Yet millions of people have positive experiences every day, and even more have ordinary days. Why did journalists select my friend’s murder for last night’s television news program rather than my neighbor’s new job? If the news media give us a representative sample of the day’s events, why aren’t ordinary people’s daily triumphs covered? Who decides which events become news?

In a democratic society, the role of the news media is not to mirror the world as it is, but rather to spotlight and draw public attention to problems and situations that need solutions and repair. *There have been many rapes in the past year. We need a law that requires previously convicted sex offenders to register their addresses with the police.* Problems dominate the content of the news media, and by their very nature are shaped as bad news. Positive or routine occurrences are rarely news because, if things are okay, there is no need to highlight them. Although the term democratic implies that the relative importance of problems in the news is decided through an open process that involves many individual citizens, in fact news is more likely to be shaped by a relatively small number of people in government and interest groups through lobbying, public relations, and advertising (and by other factors, see Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

In an authoritarian society, the role of the news media is not to reflect reality, but instead to portray a world that the people in power want to be real. The news media act as an arm of the state and help it maintain power by manipulating the nature of news to teach the public which events, people, and ideas will be rewarded or punished. *Internet sites question the legitimacy of our government. We will close them down and jail those responsible, and then we will let it be known what happens to people who operate such online sites.* The process is analogous to the individual-level effects of positive and negative reinforcement, but the reinforcements are news stories and their effects are indirect. Instead of reinforcing an individual’s behavior, those in power use the media to teach the public what will be rewarded and what punished.

Although the term authoritarian implies that the government is somehow a sentient being who decides what will be in the news, gatekeeping decisions are, in fact, still made by people. The more power a person has, the more easily the person can select, shape, and otherwise determine what becomes news. Because the news is used as a tool of the state, government personnel may achieve their goals by deciding which problems should become news. Since by definition a problem is bad news, powerful gatekeepers highlight problems only when they do not imply any negative affect about the political system or those at the higher levels of government. Therefore, the types of problems that become news tend to be local, i. e., many levels removed from the centers of power. Problems closer to the center of power become news if they can be attributed to an individual's eccentricities, or if they involve foreigners.

Although the basis for selecting and shaping events to become news in these two archetypal political systems appears to be different, it is actually quite similar. In both systems, people survey the environment and make mental judgments about which events that belong in the subset 'might be of interest to the public'. These gatekeepers then decide what will actually become news and how it will be spun. That is where the similarity ends, however, since an event of interest to the public might be emphasized in the democratic system and either omitted from the authoritarian system or covered in such a way as to deemphasize its importance. In some instances, bad news might actually be given a good-news spin.

Although decisions about what actually becomes news differ in the two systems, I propose that the gatekeepers' assessments of what would be of interest to the public are essentially the same. The gatekeepers share a common understanding about which kinds of events people want to know about. Whether gatekeepers allow or encourage the event to become news depends on many factors, but no matter what their political system is like, people are able to predict what other people want to know. In other words, people are able to reliably assess the newsworthiness of ideas, people, and events in the environment. In the one system, very newsworthy events are supposed to become the news, and in the other system, very newsworthy events are screened for their potential to harm the government. But in both systems, human beings first decide whether an event is newsworthy and then decide what to do about it. Thus news is not necessarily – and may never truly represent – what is most newsworthy.

This is contrary to an assumption that I and others have made, namely that measuring the prominence<sup>1</sup> of a story in the news media is a good way of measuring the newsworthiness of the event – a surrogate measure, but a reliable and valid one. This assumption is incorrect. Having

just spent the past few years studying both what is news in ten countries<sup>2</sup> and what people in those countries think is newsworthy, I now see that news is a social artifact – the stuff around the advertisements in television and radio news programs, in newspapers and in online media. In contrast, newsworthiness is a mental judgment, a cognition that can only marginally predict what actually becomes news.

In our study of news in ten countries, Akiba Cohen and I (2006) discovered a disconnect between what people think is newsworthy and how prominently newspapers<sup>3</sup> display the stories. People in four types of focus groups – journalists, public relations practitioners, low socio-economic audience, and high socio-economic audience – were asked to rank ten headlines according to their newsworthiness, each set being taken from their local newspapers several months earlier<sup>4</sup>. The stories ranged (in percentiles) from the most prominent as displayed in the newspaper to the least prominent.

As expected, people within each focus group ranked the stories in much the same way, but we also found that journalists agreed with public relations practitioners, high SES audience members agreed with low SES audience members, journalists with audience members, and so on – no matter what their station in life, people agreed on how newsworthy the events were. This was true in each of the ten countries we studied.

But when we compared the peoples' newsworthiness rankings to how prominently their local newspapers had displayed the stories, agreement was much lower. In some countries there was actually a negative relationship between how newsworthy people thought an event was and how prominently it was covered by the newspaper. In most countries, the relationship was positive, but much weaker than the relationships between the various groups of people.

The newsworthiness of an event is only one of many factors that determines how prominently the story will be covered. We cannot assume that the most prominently covered stories are the ones that people (whether editors, reporters, PR practitioners, doctors, mechanics, or teachers) think are most newsworthy, and we cannot reasonably expect people's mental judgments about what is newsworthy to correlate highly with what actually becomes the social artifact news.

Newsworthiness can never entirely predict what will become news, and why should it? Newsworthiness is a mental construct, a thought or judgment, whereas news is a social artifact, a thing. News may be produced by individuals, but even aggregating a million individual mental constructs has never produced a single news article. Something happens between the cognitive input and the societal output, between the manufacturing and production of the news.

So news may be a primitive concept in the sense that everyone seems to understand what it is, but simple it is not. Underlying the general understanding of what, within a culture, will become news is a long list of factors and influences, and newsworthiness is only one of these. These two concepts are not independent of one another – generally – but no assumptions can be made about the strength or even the direction of the relationship. We should no longer use the prominence with which events are covered as a measure of the event's newsworthiness, and our theories should not use newsworthiness as the sole (or even an important) predictor of what becomes news.

### Notes

1. The prominence of a story is operationalized as its quantity (in increments of either space or time) weighted by its placement within the medium.
2. Australia, Chile, China, Germany, Jordan, India, Israel, Russia, South Africa, and the United States.
3. Although we studied television and radio as well, the gatekeeping exercise described here involved only newspaper content.
4. The three sets of stories were sampled from three days in our data set, and each set was evaluated separately by participants.

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