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No News Is Good News: What You See And What You Don't Get To See

By
Dr. S. A. Shahab

ABSTRACT

Spreading the truth is certainly not the first commitment of the news system. The news is supposed to tell us accurately about the world beyond our view, but what it does is to give a distorted account of the world beyond our view. Why is this the case? Why is truth least uppermost in the selection of news stories? What kind of warp is there to the news? What does the circulation of this sort of material do for the society it is supposed to serve and inform? What is the real function of the news? This paper will explore and discuss such questions.

Keywords: *News; Media; Information; Truth.*

It is noteworthy that one of the first things people normally greet each other with is “What’s up?”, “What’s new?” or in Malay “Apa khabar?”

What is news? What is the point of this communications activity? What does it accomplish? At first such questions seem easy to answer: what the news does is to tell us about the world beyond our view. It is a very rare person, in modern society, who does not read the papers, listen to the radio, watch television, or surf the internet, for their daily dose of the news. So we learn that murders and rapes have taken place, prices of goods are going up, taxes are climbing, players have been traded, legislators have been less than honest. We learn that airplanes can succumb to gravity, that husbands and wives will kill each other, that associates of the President of the United States are not above error. We learn of the greed of cartels and the rage of “green” warriors and anti-globalists. All in all, it is a sorry picture that the news presents.

But is it also an accurate account? This is another matter. Philosophers have great difficulty in conceiving of a perfect fit between the news—or any image-conveying activity—and reality. Some would argue that

the truth is so profoundly relative that it is unknowable. Other thinkers would emphasize that images and symbols could not capture it anyway; the word is not the thing. But we do not have to look any further than the everyday pursuits of newsmen to realize that the news cannot pretend to transmit an account of reality. Reporters cannot cover everything that happens every day. Only the smallest number of items can be taken up by the channels of the news system. This selection can hardly be representative, since newsgatherers resort by habit to just a few sources. When something does manage to be noticed by reporters and placed in the news stream, its most likely fate is that it will disappear. It will be eliminated not on the basis of its apparent objective truthfulness, but due to the caprices of the “gate keepers,” the few crucial men controlling the valve that passes one story for every four that are rejected. Spreading the truth is not the first commitment of the news system. What the news does, then, is to give a distorted account of the world beyond our view. Why is this the case? Why is truth of less than central concern in the selection of news stories? What kind of warp is there to the news? What does the circulation of this sort of material do for the society a news system is housed in? What is the real function of the news?

News can be defined as “*Newsworthy information about recent events or happenings, especially as reported by news media*”. But what makes news newsworthy?

There is a list of five factors, detailed below, which are considered when deciding if a story is newsworthy. When an editor needs to decide whether to run with a particular story, s/he will ask how well the story meets each of these criteria. Normally, a story should perform well in at least two areas. Naturally, competition plays a part. If there are a lot of newsworthy stories on a particular day then some stories will be dropped. Although some stories can be delayed until a new slot becomes available, time-sensitive news will often be dropped permanently.

Timing

The word news means exactly that - things which are new. Topics which are current are good news. Consumers are used to receiving the latest updates, and there is so much news around that old news is quickly discarded. A story with only average interest needs to be told quickly if

it is to be told at all. If it happened today, it's news. If the same thing happened last week, it's no longer interesting.

Significance

The number of people affected by the story is important. A plane crash in which hundreds of people died is more significant than a crash killing a dozen.

Proximity

Stories which happen near to us have more significance. The closer the story to home, the more newsworthy it is. For someone living in France, a major plane crash in Malaysia has a similar news value to a small plane crash near Paris. Note that proximity doesn't have to mean geographical distance. Stories from countries with which we have a particular bond or similarity have the same effect. For example, Australians would be expected to relate more to a story from a distant Western nation than a story from a much closer Asian country.

Prominence

Famous people get more coverage just because they are famous. If you break your arm it won't make the news, but if the Queen of England breaks her arm it's big news.

Human Interest

Human interest stories are a bit of a special case. They often disregard the main rules of newsworthiness; for example, they don't date as quickly, they need not affect a large number of people, and it may not matter where in the world the story takes place. Human interest stories appeal to emotion. They aim to evoke responses such as amusement or sadness. Television news programmes often place a humorous or quirky story at the end of the show to finish on a feel-good note. Newspapers often have a dedicated area for offbeat or interesting items.

The function of the news, then, is to cull and circulate the kind of information which is necessary for the nation's well-being under conditions of constant change and uncertainty. This is an enormous responsibility and a strenuous task. The way it gets carried out in actuality is through the heightened intuitions of reporters and editors about what is necessary information and what is not. Sometimes they can do their job in a straightforward fashion; at other times they must be involuntarily cunning in order to transmit information they sense is newsworthy. Thus some stories get run which fail to meet nobler standards, and other stories get inflated so that their essential message can be conveyed. But allowing a small margin for error and connivance, newsmen do surprisingly well at answering their audience's silent query about the uncertain future. The question of continuance is the one that the news system unreflectingly responds to.

Presenting news about the natural environment is sometimes complicated by the lack of accurate baselines. No one knows how many whales there were a century ago, or whether the world is cooling or heating up, or how much oil there is down there. Standards are an obvious convenience for newsmen when collecting information, and for the audience when appraising it— so great a convenience, in fact, that the news system is biased towards reporting trite but calibrated information. This bias has been giving way to the increasingly insistent need to know about the state of our physical surroundings, and now most issues of newspapers refer to petroleum or mineral supply, to water levels or recreation sites, to pollution and its causes. The monitoring of the physical environment is most thoroughly conducted in the case of the weather. Here measurement and interest combine to create news that is very carefully attended to. Television news shows compete heatedly for the large, intense audience for tomorrow's forecast. Why do we care so? Since we are much more oriented to the future than any people in history, we need to know if we will be able to push forward with our plans.

Anything that pertains to the continuity of the various components of society is a likely subject for the news. This includes changes at any of several levels of social organization—national, regional, local, organizational, family, or individual. Every reader of the news is bound into several social contexts of greater and lesser intimacy and wants to know the minute anything goes wrong. If the institutions and personalities which represent the layers of social structure to which we belong show signs of faltering, that becomes news. Stories in this

category may range from ethical misconduct of our political leaders to school bullies or child abuse. A breach in our expectations about the smooth operation of the government, or the local educational system, or family life is bad news, and demands our attention.

But when Marshall McLuhan insists that “Real news is bad news—bad news about somebody, or bad news for somebody,” he is only half right. Real news can be good news. In addition to threats to continuity, news also relates the removal of threats, and unexpected boosts. It can tell about continuity being enhanced—the routine election of a new official, the capture of a murderer, advances in medicine, and so forth—and these tales sustain our expectations for the future. So, too, does the human interest story — a type of news frequently misunderstood by analysts of the press. Its real subject is the enhancement of continuity, so it belongs in the news as much as any other report. The couple married on Gunung Ledang, the child who sets a durian-eating record, the taxi driver who returns the missing wallet are all news-makers because they illustrate that the social norms of love, ambition, and honesty are still at work.

The international news, like the environmental or the social, contains little about lasting, lackluster relations, and a great deal about the rupturing or bracing of those arrangements. Any change in the configuration of the pack would be news. If America were being overtaken, that would certainly be news, all the more so if several countries were banding together to do it. But even shifting alliances are news, or the stumbling of some, or squabbles among others. Economic disturbances are likewise newsworthy, as is any unpredictable behavior on the part of a country. We have a close eye on renegades like North Korea and Iran.

The news, then, takes responsibility for monitoring a three-ring circus of environmental, societal, and international matters. Needless to say, it does not delve deeply into any of them. They are noted, nothing more. There are great economies at work in the business of newsgathering. It is seemingly a better use of time and energy to survey broadly and rapidly rather than to dig in where the return might prove to be negligible. The surveillance is further made manageable by trusting to certain institutional sources. And when a story on some issue is written up, there is little effort to research the matter, or place it in fuller context. If the news were not shallow, it might not find such a large audience.

The audience is a very important part of the news system, as it is of any communications system. Reporters are highly conscious of their audience and tailor their stories to suit their readers. If they did not, they would not have an audience. So the news system not only takes responsibility for the gathering of news, it also takes responsibility for the audience's reactions to it. Depending on the situation, the news can either stimulate or dampen public interest. This is a subtle function of news, never admitted but always at work. When Patty Hearst or Son of Sam were on the loose, the news fabricated stories out of the meagerest information and kept interest high until the resources of the society were sufficiently mobilized to set things to rights; after the offender was caught and information was ample, the news downplayed the story to discourage vengefulness. The levels of audience excitement must be high enough to keep people reading but low

enough to prevent over- reaction. This difficult balance is struck through the practiced skills of professional newsmen. Once the audience is in possession of the modulated news, it goes on to form opinions and to get responses under way. The society can accept the changes reported and accommodate itself to them, as in the case of civil rights, or it can reject them, as with Richard Nixon. When it adjusts itself and proceeds onward, the function of the news has been fulfilled.

It is true that the most significant differences among the world's various news systems are accounted for by how free-wheeling they are. What most astounded Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn upon his release from the Soviet Union was the intrusiveness of the Western press. Armed with pads and microphones, newsmen trampled the flower beds of his rented houses, to his amazement. He was used to a news system which did not reach out for its stories. But because the Soviet press lacked latitude, this does not mean that it lacked integrity. It does its job completely and devotedly. It just had a different job to do.

The nature of news for a society that lies back in the pack is very different from the nature of news in a bellwether society. When commentators imply that the news should serve identical functions in all countries, they are being parochial. Our news system must be unfettered or it cannot successfully perform its job of looking out for the unanticipated. Since no one knows what lies ahead for the vanguard, the news systems have to be granted the widest possible purview. Limitations on its scanning can only imperil the survival of the society.

But the problem for the nations trailing behind is different. They

are not breaching the unknown; they are straining to keep their place in the pack, at most hoping to improve on it. They must do this with less wherewithal than the advanced societies, which threaten to outdistance them completely. In order not to get left in the lurch, they must make the most out of whatever resources they have. So the mission of the news is not to report on what may lie ahead; what lies ahead is fully recognized — it is the tails of the nations doing slightly better. The mission of the news in a less developed society is to circulate information which will help the country stay in the running. This is clearly a different kind of information than that which gets pumped through the news system of an advanced nation.. It is the sort of information which will help the society make a concerted effort. Stories about mistakes, or dissension, or breakdowns, or disasters, or anything that smacks of faltering, are less liable to run. They will be replaced with other stories about the strength and resolve of the government, the will of the populace, and the achievements that result. The point is this: the nature of the news is not everywhere the same, nor should it be. A news system is responsive only to the particular society it is embedded in. Our news system differs from other news systems not because it is somehow more sanctified, but because it has a novel job to do. News systems for those societies which enter the future first must be freer than news systems for those which come later.

We should expect accuracy from our news system in the sense of its repeating with precision the more obtrusive details of an event being covered. But we should not expect accuracy in the sense of its giving us a true rendition of the world beyond our view. If the news provided that, it would be doing a bad job. The news system has more important things to do than to tell the whole truth.

Let's pretend that the head of a towering social organization—perhaps Microsoft, or Xerox, or Germany—called a press conference to announce that the sky was about to fall in. A communication vehicle for the truth would be disinclined to carry such a prediction because the chances of its happening are minuscule at best. Another brand of communication, the news, would distribute the story far and wide. Why? It's a juicy item, for it pertains to the continuance of several levels of social organization. Any story to do with the apocalypse, no matter how remote the chances of its coming to pass, will get some play in the papers and on the airwaves and the digital strata. Because institutions structure and sustain society, their spokesmen are more than likely to get a hearing from the media; it is one of very few ways that the public

learns about these gigantic entities. And finally, there is an element of pure personal derangement to the story. The readership's interest in deviance at the very highest levels would guarantee that this particular ranting would be transmitted. Reporting this story would be an instance of the news doing its real job, and doing it well. It would be relaying to its audience information on possible discontinuities in behavior, institutions, and the fate of the species. Here, it would be saying, are where the uncertainties lurk. Public reaction might be to study the sky and see if it were indeed falling, or to shift allegiance away from the institution that lent credence to such a pronouncement, or to preside over the replacement of the person responsible for it. Thus resolution would occur, and the society could move on to deal with what the next day's news might bring.

Whatever the truth is, we can be sure that it would be comparatively stable and dull, and unlikely to make the news. The job of the news is not to give us a true picture of the world as it is. Its function is to scan quickly and alert us to what the world may become. For this purpose, there is nothing wrong with a little distortion. As for the truth, if people want that, they will have to look elsewhere.

Media are the gatekeepers and agenda-setters. They are largely in control of what is and is not disseminated to the masses. This may be a burden of responsibility too great for any media to handle. This holds true for individuals, smaller and mid-sized media outlets and especially conglomerates.

It's cliché, but there's value in Lord Acton's warning that "power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Who's out there competing with media? Who's keeping the media in check? Should we believe what we read in the newspaper, see on television and listen to on pod casts? Who's there to make sure the media isn't overstepping its bounds? Who can you trust?

I encourage consumers of the media to scrutinize the information disseminated to you. Examine the information you receive critically; find alternative sources. Let's be frank: there is no such thing as objective reporting. We're human; we naturally have biases, which can show in our reporting. Thinking for yourself and analyzing how information is presented to you is responsible media consumption.

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