

MM4 – Selection and Presentation of the news

One key aspect discussed is the means through which individuals access news. According to the Ofcom news consumption report for 2022, adults, particularly those aged 16 and above, primarily relied on television for their news consumption. However, this trend is gradually declining due to the increasing influence of the internet. Radio and newspapers, on the other hand, are experiencing significant declines in popularity as they are less easily accessible. Interestingly, the age of the audience plays a crucial role in news consumption patterns. Younger individuals, aged 16 to 24, predominantly acquire their news from the internet and social media platforms. Consequently, the usage of newspapers and radio among this age group has substantially decreased compared to other age demographics. As individuals get older, they tend to revert to television and physical newspaper copies as their primary sources of news.

However, it's essential to exercise caution when interpreting these trends, as younger people are still engaging with newspapers, albeit in digital formats, rather than traditional print copies. This variation in news consumption highlights the evolving landscape of how people access and engage with news in the modern era, with a multitude of sources available to cater to individual preferences and habits.

Sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who discussed cultural capital, and Stuart Hall, known for his work on encoding and decoding, provide valuable insights into how social and cultural factors influence news consumption patterns. For example, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps explain why certain age groups may prefer specific news sources over others based on their social backgrounds and educational levels. Meanwhile, Hall's encoding and decoding theory elucidates how individuals interpret and decode news messages differently, contributing to variations in news reception and understanding.

Role of the News

The role of news in modern society is multifaceted and plays a crucial part in shaping our understanding of the world. As one quote suggests, news acts as a "window onto the world," helping us perceive and engage with our surroundings. Various sociologists and examples can illuminate these roles:

Informing and Educating: News informs us about current events and developments, serving as a vital source of information. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital highlights how access to and understanding of news can be influenced by one's social background and education.

Promoting Transparency: News promotes transparency in government agencies and business practices. For instance, the work of sociologist Max Weber emphasizes the importance of accountability and transparency in bureaucratic organizations.

Facilitating Public Discourse: News encourages public discourse by providing topics for discussion. Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory can help explain how individuals interpret news differently, leading to diverse perspectives and discussions.

Raising Awareness: News raises awareness about humanitarian, charitable events, and important issues. For example, the media's coverage of disasters or social movements can mobilize public support, as seen in the response to natural disasters or the Black Lives Matter movement.

Building Community: News fosters a sense of community by connecting individuals to their local or global context. Sociologist Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" highlights how the media contributes to the creation of shared identities among geographically dispersed people.

Serving as a Watchdog: News acts as a watchdog by holding governments, businesses, and powerful individuals accountable for their actions. This role aligns with sociologist Seymour M. Lipset's emphasis on the importance of a free press in maintaining democracy.

Cultural Reflection: News reflects the culture of the society in which it operates. Sociologist Herbert Gans studied news organizations and their role in shaping public perception, highlighting how news can reflect cultural norms, values, and biases.

However, it's essential to note that news is not a monolithic entity; it varies in content and framing, influenced by factors like ownership, agenda-setting, and sensationalism. Sociologists such as Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's "propaganda model" can be referenced to explain how media ownership and corporate interests can impact news content and priorities.

Selection of the News

In 1992, sociologist Dennis MacQuail highlighted an important aspect of news production: not everything that happens becomes news. Each day, thousands of events occur, but it's impossible to cover them all. Therefore, the news we see is not just a random collection of events; it is carefully selected and shaped by gatekeepers like editors and journalists. These gatekeepers decide what is "newsworthy," meaning it has enough interest or appeal to attract a significant audience. MacQuail identified three key factors that influence what becomes news, and we'll explore them further:

News Values: News values are the criteria used by editors and journalists to determine whether an event should be covered as news. For example, the value of "proximity" suggests that events happening closer to home are more likely to be considered newsworthy. Sociologist Galtung and Ruge developed a list of news values that include factors like "impact," "timeliness," and "prominence." These values guide the selection of news stories.

Organizational and Bureaucratic Routines: The media industry has its own set of routines and processes that influence news selection. These routines ensure that news is produced efficiently and follows established norms. For instance, newsrooms have deadlines and production schedules that affect which stories get attention. Sociologist Max Weber's ideas on bureaucracy help us understand how organizational structures can shape news production.

Ownership of Media Organizations: Media outlets are often owned by larger corporations or individuals with specific interests. This ownership can influence the types of stories that are prioritized or neglected. For instance, if a media company is owned by a conglomerate with interests in the oil industry, it may be less critical of environmental issues related to oil production. This aligns with sociologist Herbert Schiller's concept of "cultural imperialism," where media content can reflect the interests of powerful owners.

By exploring these three influences, we can better understand how the news we consume is not a random assortment of events but a carefully curated selection shaped by various factors. This process determines what we consider as news and what we are presented with in the media.

News Values

News values are essential guidelines that determine which events make it into the news. Journalists, editors, and broadcasters are the key decision-makers in this process, shaping our understanding of what is considered

newsworthy. Let's delve into the concept of news values, as identified by sociologists like Mari Hombé-Ruge and Johan Galtung, using the acronym "10 Cent Cup Fee 10" to remember the ten key factors:

Continuity: Stories that have a lasting impact and provide opportunities for follow-up coverage are more likely to be featured. This keeps audiences engaged and invested in ongoing narratives, similar to a captivating book series or TV show. A good example of continuity in news is coverage of a major event like a natural disaster. For instance, if a hurricane makes landfall and causes significant damage, the news coverage doesn't stop after the initial reports. It continues with updates on recovery efforts, government response, and stories of people affected, maintaining audience interest over time.

Extraordinary: Unpredictable and surprising events catch our attention. News tends to focus on what is out of the ordinary. As sociologist Charles Aidan pointed out, "if a man bites a dog, that's news" because it's unexpected. An extraordinary event could be the landing of a rover on Mars. This event is rare, highly unpredictable, and captivating because it takes place in an extraordinary setting far from Earth.

Negativity: Unfortunately, negative news tends to be more captivating than positive stories. Topics like death, tragedy, violence, and disasters draw more attention. This preference for negativity is connected to the concept of "schadenfreude," where people feel relief that misfortune is not happening to them. Tragic events like mass shootings often dominate the news due to their negative nature. The focus on casualties, the impact on the community, and investigations into the incident grab the audience's attention.

Threshold: The size and impact of an event determine its national relevance. Events below the national interest threshold may not receive widespread coverage, as news outlets aim to reach a broader audience. An event below the national interest threshold might be a local city council meeting discussing mundane matters. Such meetings may receive coverage in local newspapers but are less likely to make national news because they do not have broad appeal.

Composition: To maintain audience engagement, news outlets balance negative stories with positive ones. This balance prevents excessive doom and gloom and keeps audiences coming back. To balance negative news, a news outlet might feature a heartwarming story about a community coming together to help neighbors affected by a disaster. This positive story complements the negative coverage and provides a sense of hope.

Unambiguity: News stories are typically straightforward and lack ambiguity. They provide a clear viewpoint or interpretation, making it easier for the audience to understand and form opinions. A clear example of unambiguity is in political reporting. News stories often present the viewpoints of different political figures or parties, making it clear where each stands on a particular issue.

Personalization: Stories involving prominent individuals or celebrities are more likely to be covered. Personalizing a story by putting a face to it creates a connection with the audience. The coverage of a celebrity's personal life, such as a high-profile divorce or a scandal involving a famous actor, demonstrates personalization. The inclusion of a prominent figure's name draws readers' interest.

Frequency: This refers to what Dutton called the "Time span of the event" Events that unfold rapidly are more likely to be reported because their meaning can be established quickly. Structural changes that happen slowly may go unnoticed by the news. An example is reporting on a stock market crash. This event happens quickly, and its impact can be assessed within hours or even minutes. News outlets provide real-time updates and analysis as the situation unfolds.

Elite Nations: News outlets often prioritize events from culturally similar nations or those with a shared language. This cultural proximity influences news selection. When the United States reports on a significant event in the United Kingdom, such as a royal wedding, it reflects news selection based on cultural proximity. These nations share a common language and have a strong historical connection, making such events newsworthy.

Elite Persons: Famous and powerful individuals, often at the top of the social hierarchy, are seen as more newsworthy. The rise of celebrity culture has expanded the definition of public interest to include celebrity gossip and personal lives. Coverage of a high-profile politician's speeches, actions, or controversies falls under elite persons. For example, when a U.S. President makes a major policy announcement, it receives extensive news coverage because of the person's high status and impact on society.

In 2001, sociologists Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill expanded upon the concept of news values through their own content analysis of British newspapers. Building upon the ideas of earlier sociologists like Galtung, Ruge, and Golding, they offered a fresh perspective on what determines newsworthiness. Let's delve into their findings using appropriate sociological terms and examples:

1. Power Elites: Harcup and O'Neill emphasized that individuals or groups with significant power and influence often receive extensive news coverage. For instance, political leaders, business tycoons, and celebrities frequently make headlines due to their elite status in society.

2. Entertainment Worthiness: News stories that have an entertaining aspect are more likely to be featured in the media. This could include celebrity gossip, reality TV scandals, or intriguing human-interest stories. These stories not only inform but also entertain the audience.

3. Surprise: Unpredictable and surprising events, such as natural disasters or unexpected political developments, capture the public's attention. These events are considered newsworthy due to their shocking or unexpected nature.

4. Composition: A balanced mix of negative and positive news is essential to maintain audience interest. While negative news often garners more attention, positive stories are necessary to provide a well-rounded view of the world.

5. Magnitude: The significance and scale of an event influence its news coverage. Major events like terrorist attacks, presidential elections, or global economic crises receive extensive coverage due to their profound impact on society.

6. Relevance: In the era of the 24-hour news cycle, timeliness is crucial. News must be relevant and current to attract the audience's attention. People want to know what is happening in the world right now, not days or weeks ago.

7. Follow-ups: Stories with continuity and follow-up reports maintain audience engagement. Media outlets provide updates and ongoing coverage of events to keep the public informed about developments.

8. Media Agenda: The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and influencing cultural views. Stories that align with a particular media outlet's agenda or priorities are more likely to be highlighted, while those that don't may receive less attention or be placed lower in the news hierarchy.

Understanding these factors helps us appreciate how news values are socially constructed and how they influence the content we consume in the media. Harcup and O'Neill's insights add depth to our understanding of why certain stories make it to the headlines while others may go unnoticed.

Evaluation

While news values have been a useful framework for understanding how news is selected, sociologists like Paul Brighton and Dennis Foy have raised important criticisms. Let's explore these critiques:

1. Assumption of a Value Consensus: One of the main criticisms is that news values assume a shared set of values across all news outlets. However, in today's diverse media landscape, we have various types of news sources, including the internet, radio, TV, hardcopy, and social media. These outlets do not always follow the same values, making it challenging to condense news selection into just 10 factors. Different news websites may prioritize stories differently. What's considered headline news on one platform might not be on another, depending on their target audience and values.

2. Cultural Differences and Expectations: Another criticism highlights cultural variations in what is considered newsworthy. What's important in one country may not be so in another. For instance, news about the US-Mexico border might be of greater interest in Mexico than in Germany. Cinco de Mayo, a significant holiday in Mexico, may receive extensive coverage in Mexican news but might not be prominently featured in Western newspapers.

3. Changes in Journalism: Journalism has evolved, with the rise of spin doctors and changes in news gathering practices. Spin doctors are influential individuals who shape news stories to align with their agendas. Additionally, the reliance on press releases, wire services, and prepackaged content has reduced the investigative aspect of journalism. The TV show "In the Thick of It" humorously portrays how press officers manipulate news to favour the government. This highlights the influence of spin doctors on news content.

4. Shift from Investigative Journalism: Some sociologists argue that journalism has shifted away from investigative reporting, with reporters relying more on press releases, wire services, and pre-existing content. This reduces the originality of news stories. Many tabloid newspapers source up to 80% of their stories from press releases and other sources, rather than journalists conducting their own investigations.

5. Citizen Journalism: With the advent of smartphones and social media, citizen journalism has gained prominence. Ordinary people, not professional journalists, now disseminate news through blogs and social platforms. This introduces a wider variety of perspectives and sources, challenging the idea that news values are universally applied. Citizen journalists often capture

events in real-time, like protests or accidents, and their footage is sometimes used by mainstream news outlets.

Organisational and Bureaucratic Routines

News outlets are more than just sources of information; they are also businesses with their own priorities and limitations. Let's explore how these organizational and bureaucratic aspects influence what makes it into the news:

Financial Constraints: News organizations operate as businesses, and their financial limitations can significantly affect the selection of news stories. These constraints often lead them to prioritize stories that are cost-effective to cover. For instance, local newspapers with limited budgets may focus on community events and stories because it is more affordable to report on them compared to sending reporters abroad for international news.

Impact on Investigative Journalism: Cost-cutting measures within newsrooms can have a profound impact on the depth and quality of investigative journalism. As news outlets strive to maximize profits, they may allocate fewer resources to in-depth reporting. Consequently, investigative journalists may resort to quicker, less resource-intensive stories that expose personal scandals rather than tackling complex social or political issues.

Shift Towards Infotainment: In the quest for higher ratings and readership, news organizations often face fierce competition for audience attention. This can lead to a prioritization of entertaining elements over informative content. Tabloid newspapers, for instance, may emphasize celebrity gossip and scandalous stories, even when they lack significant social or political relevance.

Time and Space Limitations: The limited time available in news broadcasts and the finite column inches in print media necessitate editorial choices regarding which stories to feature. Consequently, news outlets must select and frame stories to fit within these constraints. TV news programs, for example, may allocate only a few minutes to cover multiple stories, resulting in simplified or abbreviated reporting.

Deadline Pressures: Newspapers, in particular, must meet strict deadlines for their print editions. This deadline pressure can affect their ability to cover late-breaking news stories. Events occurring after a newspaper's deadline may only be covered in subsequent editions or through online updates.

Emphasis on Immediacy: In today's digital age, live footage and real-time reporting are highly valued as they can attract larger audiences. News organizations prioritize immediacy to keep viewers and readers engaged. News websites, for instance, frequently use live streaming and breaking news alerts to provide immediate updates on significant events, catering to audiences seeking the latest information.

Audience-Centric Approach: News outlets often tailor their content to cater to specific audiences, influencing their story selection and framing. This approach ensures that news organizations can maintain and grow their readership or viewership. For example, a financial news publication focuses on stories relevant to investors and business professionals to attract a specific readership.

Journalistic Ethics: Ethical considerations play a role in news selection, although their enforcement can vary widely. Unethical practices may occur when news organizations prioritize sensationalism over responsible reporting. A notable example of this is the phone-hacking scandal involving the News of the World, which revealed unethical practices such as hacking voicemails to obtain sensational stories.

Ownership and Ideological Bias

One critical aspect of the social construction of news is the influence of ownership and ideological bias. Pluralists contend that gatekeeping processes are politically impartial, presenting journalists as neutral and objective observers. However, Marxists like McChesney (2002) challenge this notion, asserting that media ownership is concentrated in the hands of extremely powerful individuals who can shape editorial approaches. For instance, Rupert Murdoch's control over media outlets played a role in his newspapers' reluctance to cover stories that didn't align with his ideology, such as his contacts with Prime Minister Tony Blair during the Iraq War buildup.

Market Forces and Capitalism: Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that news gathering is significantly shaped by market forces and capitalism. They highlight the power of advertisers within the capitalist system, which influences news output. News organizations often prioritize stories that attract the most viewers, readers, and clicks to attract advertisers. This emphasis on profit leads to a focus on marketable stories, potentially sidelining issues of economic inequality. Capitalist values often permeate news reporting, with business news sections presenting corporate leaders positively while giving

limited attention to the economic pressures faced by ordinary people, exemplified by the growing wealth gap.

Hierarchy of Credibility: Stuart Hall (1973) identifies primary definers—politicians, police officers, civil servants, and business leaders—as those who hold the power to define what is or isn't newsworthy. These individuals, often with political and economic influence, shape news narratives. Their voices are prioritized, while less powerful groups are less likely to be heard in the news. Manning (2001) notes that marginalized groups may moderate their views to gain visibility, as extreme views are less likely to be covered. Thus, the social hierarchy plays a crucial role in determining whose stories are told.

Social Background of Media Professionals: The Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) takes a hegemonic Marxist perspective and emphasizes the social background of media professionals. GUMG contends that journalists and editors, often from middle-class backgrounds, unconsciously promote middle-class views in news reporting. They conducted studies on news broadcasts, revealing that journalists' language and images tended to favor the interests of the powerful and the middle class while devaluing the perspectives of less powerful groups. For example, Fisk (1987) found that trade unions were often portrayed as demanding and unreasonable, while management's offers were presented as generous.

Moral Panics

One key area in understanding the social construction of news is the phenomenon of moral panics, famously analyzed by sociologist Stanley Cohen. Cohen's seminal work on the "mods and rockers" subcultural conflict in 1964 sheds light on the mechanisms underlying moral panics. His research was later complemented by Stuart Hall's examination of the moral panic surrounding "black muggers" in the 1970s. While Cohen focused on subcultural groups, this concept applies to various other moral panics, including those related to knife crime, Islamophobia, and even the COVID-19 pandemic.

Defining Moral Panic: A moral panic can be defined as a situation where a news story, issue, or social group is sensationalized and magnified by the media, creating a public perception of exaggerated fear and concern. The process of creating a moral panic typically unfolds in several stages.

1. **Identification of Problem Group or Issue:** Moral panics often begin with the identification of a problem group or issue. Cohen's study highlighted the mods and rockers as two subcultural groups perceived

as problematic in the 1960s. Similarly, Stuart Hall examined the moral panic surrounding young black men as perceived threats. More recently, moral panics have targeted groups like teenagers wearing hoodies.

2. **Demonization Through Media:** Media outlets play a crucial role in moral panics by publishing stories that demonize these identified groups. They employ language and imagery that exaggerate the perceived problem, portraying it as much more significant than it actually is. For example, headlines may describe "hordes of teens," implying negativity and threat.
3. **Oversimplification of the Issue:** To sustain the moral panic, the media often oversimplify the issue at hand. They reduce complex factors to black-and-white portrayals, removing any ambiguity or nuanced understanding. In doing so, they create a straightforward narrative that portrays the identified group as solely responsible for the problem, neglecting underlying causes.
4. **Moral Entrepreneurs' Involvement:** Moral entrepreneurs, individuals with social or political influence, play a pivotal role in the creation of moral panics. They make public statements condemning the targeted group, contributing to their degradation and demonization. These influential figures can include politicians, law enforcement officials, and even prominent celebrities.
5. **Police Targeting and Justification:** The media's portrayal of the group as a threat often leads to increased police targeting. Law enforcement may conduct more arrests, initiate frequent stop-and-search operations, or engage with the group in a more aggressive manner. This heightened police activity seemingly justifies the moral panic, as increased arrests and interactions are presented as evidence of the group's deviance.
6. **Creation of Folk Devils:** As the moral panic intensifies, the initially identified group becomes "folk devils." They are branded as society's villains and symbols of the perceived problem. The media's narrative reinforces this image, further fueling public fear and concern. Consequently, the demonization of the group becomes deeply ingrained in societal perceptions.

Understanding moral panics, their origins, and their consequences is essential for sociological analysis. It highlights how media, influential figures, and societal dynamics can collectively shape public perception and contribute to exaggerated fears and concerns. By critically examining moral panics, we gain insights into the power of media and societal reactions to perceived threats.

Evaluation

While moral panic theory provides valuable insights into how media shapes societal perceptions, it's not without its criticisms and complexities. Several scholars have offered critical perspectives on this theory, highlighting its limitations and nuances.

Jukes' Critique (2015): One notable critique comes from Jukes in 2015, who argues that moral panic theory can be somewhat vague and imprecise. Jukes suggests that defining who qualifies as deviants isn't always clear-cut. Moreover, Jukes points out that some of the individuals or groups labeled as "folk devils" during moral panics may not necessarily be genuinely harmful or malicious. To illustrate this, Jukes cites the example of the moral panic surrounding pedophiles in the early 2000s, emphasizing that not all individuals within this group were inherently evil. Furthermore, Jukes questions the assumption inherent in moral panic theory that portrays the public as passive and gullible consumers of news, suggesting that it underestimates public discernment and critical thinking.

Critchner Perspective (2009): Critchner, in 2009, introduces the notion that moral panic theory might be too abstract and challenging to test empirically. He argues that creating a moral panic deliberately for research purposes would be unethical. Consequently, the theory's validity becomes difficult to verify. Critchner also highlights that retrospective application of the theory to past events allows for interpretation to align with specific interests, raising questions about objectivity.

Value-Laden Characteristics: One overarching critique is the value-laden nature of characteristics associated with moral panic theory. Critics argue that these characteristics, which include excitement, surprise, and focus on elite groups, are determined not by neutrality or objectivity but by the subjective judgments of news outlets, editors, journalists, and owners. This subjectivity can influence the creation and portrayal of moral panics.

Postmodernist Perspective: Postmodernists challenge moral panic theory, emphasizing the complexity of moral panics due to diverse media interpretations. They argue that not all social groups will be demonized uniformly across different media outlets. New media platforms have given a voice to groups labeled as "folk devils," enabling them to present their perspectives. Examples include subcultural groups like Goths and Emos, who contest media portrayals and assert that they do not conform to the negative stereotypes assigned to them.

McRobbie and Thornton's Argument (1995): McRobbie and Thornton (1995) contend that moral panic theory may have become outdated for several reasons. First, the frequency of moral panics has increased over time, making it challenging to sustain prolonged demonization of specific groups. Additionally, heightened awareness of contextual factors has led people to critically assess moral panic narratives. Reflexivity among individuals means that public perceptions can shift as more information becomes available. Furthermore, achieving consensus on who is good or bad is difficult, as values and beliefs vary widely among individuals and social groups. Lastly, there is the risk of backlash when starting a moral panic, as exemplified by the case of John Major, who initiated a moral panic about family values but faced backlash when his extramarital affair became public knowledge.

In conclusion, while moral panic theory provides a framework for understanding the role of media in shaping public perceptions, it is subject to critique and may not offer a complete or universally applicable explanation for the complexities of social reactions to perceived threats and deviance. Scholars continue to engage in critical discussions to refine and expand our understanding of moral panics in contemporary society.