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AUDIENCES CHANGE NEWS VALUES

MIROSLAV LANGER

Temmerman, M., & Mast, J. (Eds.). (2021). *News Values from an Audience Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan. 973-3-030-45045-8, 189 pp.

Since the first newspapers appeared, the selection of events in the news has been one of the fundamental tasks of journalism. It is still true today, although the editors have a slightly easier role in fulfilling this duty considering the seemingly shoreless ocean of the Internet. The selection process continues, but its core has moved from the newsrooms into the sphere of audience activities.

Journalists and journalism textbooks discussed the news selection criteria before they were regularly named news values. The seminal study of Galtung and Ruge (1965) definitively established the term and transferred the subject to media studies. There it became as important as the selection process itself, examined through the prism of gatekeeping studies. More than a half-century later – and despite occasional voices saying the concept of news values has already been exhausted – the theory has been getting new interest. After Harcup and O’Neil (2001, 2017) made significant contributions to the modernization of the theory for the era of digital media, a discursive approach by Caple and Bednarek (2017) followed with a massive response.

And here comes another promising development: the orientation to how the

audience applies news values in its selection process. A summary book, *News Values from an Audience Perspective* edited by Martina Temmerman and Jelle Mast, proves this direction has the potential to be fruitful. The volume offers an accurate summary of the theory and a wide and varied scale of individual studies focused on the relationship between the audience and news values. The book postulates that this relation constructs only one side of a triangle, whose third vertex is the journalists with their subjective opinions and experiences, professional routines, and the media's institutional influence.

The new volume consists of nine chapters divided into three sections. In the first section, general topics are discussed in chapters by Harcup (pp. 17–36), Paulussen and Van Aelst (pp. 37–56), and Wilkinson, Grant, Zhu, and Guerazzi (pp. 57–78). The second section is devoted to audience metrics and shareability with studies by Tandoc, Cheng, and Maitra (pp. 81–94), Lagerwerf and Govaert (pp. 95–120), and Opgenhaffen (pp. 121–138). The final section is based on the ideas of the previous two parts and applies them specifically to local and social media in the analyses by Boesman, Meijer, and Kuijpers (pp. 141–164) and Turner (pp. 165–186). Relying on the context of earlier research and theory, I will comment on the book in reverse order from applied analyses to more general introductory passages. Then I will return to the most inspiring findings related to the changes that audiences force in the news values image and newsrooms' and journalists' routines and attitudes.

The question of what audiences or

media audiences are has no easy answer. Sullivan (2019) shows how audiences can be defined, described, and understood differently. He concludes that an audience is a theoretical abstraction and that “the audience” in any specific context is always a construct provided by theory or history. Moreover, the audience is not a stable phenomenon; it changes in time – Napoli (2010) writes about the ongoing audience evolution. The idea of audiences develops through time from passive audiences to active audiences (see Ross & Nightingale, 2003) and participatory or interactive audiences (Sullivan, 2019, pp. 265–302).

The topic of news values from the audience's perspective is not new. In the reviewed book, Tandoc, Chang, and Maitra quote Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 53) who said that news values are “based, in part, on assumptions about the audience”. This describes how the audiences have always been present in the thinking of news values, but only as their imagined representation in the journalists' minds and mostly in the practice-related sense. At the turn of the century, Eilders (Eilders & Wirth, 1999; Eilders, 2000) introduced the actual perspective of the audience into the theory. Nevertheless, only the arrival of online and social media brought available and robust data suitable for researching audience preferences in news selection. After all, the shareability was only added to the news values almost two decades later, just five years ago, by Harcup and O'Neil (2017). At the same time, the term shareworthiness was introduced (see Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017).

In his ethnographic study, Turner

(pp. 165–186) analyses this topic and finds both analogies and fundamental differences between shareworthiness and newsworthiness. The newsworthiness – how much the story is vital for audience members as a piece of news – is much less important in further sharing of online news stories than whether the story provides information or provokes an emotion that is, according to the recipient, suitable to be shared with other members of the community. In some cases, the sharing is also motivated by an effort to find a solution to a real problem, like help with finding lost people, animals, or objects.

Although sharing news stories is a welcome form of natural advertising for the media, the readership or viewership remains the primary goal. Social media analytics and web analytics data have a growing practical significance, as proved by Tandoc, Cheng, and Maitra (pp. 81–93). In many cases, the web analytics results replace the discussion about editorial criteria in the newsrooms. The process is strengthened by the relationship between discursively constructed news values and rates – in the online media, the intentional discursive highlighting of specific news values can bring higher rates, Laagerwerf and Govaert write (pp. 95–119). Opgenhaffen (pp. 121–138) shows that social media are a unique peculiar environment in this respect and the editors should modify their content to reach higher share rates instead of simply using the original content of their traditional media outlets. It summarizes the findings of the research section of the book that excels in the novelty of knowledge and methodological

variability, from in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey to quantitative content analysis and ethnographic research.

The general topics-focused first opening section of the book deserves long-lasting attention. The impressive scale of compiled materials gathered by Wilkinson, Grant, Zhu, and Guerrazzi's (pp. 57–77) comparative study of audience news values and news consuming habits, which included fifteen countries, far surpassed previous studies in the literature to date. The results prove that the notions of the universality of news values are misleading in the field of reception. Various authors (comp. Harcup & O'Neill, 2009) have already challenged this idea of universality in the news selection processes on the side of news production.

Following the change in his interest (Harcup, 2020), in which his thoughts are “turning from what news is to what news *could be*” (p. 26 in the reviewed book), Tony Harcup joined with his essayistic text (pp. 17–35). He steps out of the sphere of academic theory of news values and makes a unique contribution to the normative sphere. One would expect that for a phenomenon named “value”, there would be a lively discussion about which specific news values should be applied in quality journalism if it is to produce news beneficial to society. Surprisingly, this discussion is lacking. In addition, it is worth repeating that Galtung and Ruge (1965, p. 84) already encouraged journalists to challenge these values in their jobs. It does not mean that further authors have not been discussing individual news values

as beneficial or harmful for the news production; the values of negativity and violence have been the most criticized. Still, few of these critics place their objections within a framework of a more comprehensive social theory, which Harcup eventually does.

The third chapter by Paulussen and Van Aelst (pp. 37–55) is an overview of a news values theory. It describes the differences among constructivist, discursive, and cognitive approaches. Its value also lies in the fact that it at least partially bridges the gap between the English-language (Anglo-American) and German-language tradition of the theory. The German tradition derived from authors like Schulz, Staab or Képplinger with a strong theoretical core based on the relationship between reality and media reality and the role of news values as the tools to construct a media reality. From a methodological perspective, quantitative research was promoted as the main tool to research the news values (the German tradition is best summarized in Maier, Retzbach, Glogger, & Stengel, 2018). On the contrary, in the Anglo-American world, the research direction was more practically driven and newsroom-oriented and the methodological apparatus more varied. The communication between both traditions was weak, so having a volume that cites sources from both traditions seems satisfactory.

Despite being useful for any reader in this synthesizing approach, this theoretic chapter has two essential issues. Very little of the theoretical discussion is related directly to the main topic of the book, the news values from an audience

perspective. As the only partial substitution, the authors introduce Singer's (2014) concept of secondary gatekeeping. They do not even mention the theoretical input available in the past works of Eilders that are grounded in discussing the psychological nature of news selection, explained through concepts of selective attention and selective retention. Unfortunately, this contribution of Eilders to the theory remained without reflection in the chapter as well as by the book's other authors, who included only period empirical data from her texts.

Another essential omission in the chapter – and the volume as a whole – is the lack of discussion about what the audience is. Nowhere in the book can we read any definition of audience or reference to audience studies. Calls for such precision are not just for the sake of the love of theorizing. As said before, the media audience is a construct (Sullivan, 2019), and as Turnbull shows, the audience construction is the important side effect of any audience research or audience-related research, which has substantial methodological consequences: “In many, if not most, instances of media audience research, the audience is a function of the design of the researcher's project.” (Turnbull, 2020, p. 46) This strong objection requires any author working within the field of audience research to consider this issue and define the boundaries of how the content of the term audience is understood. In the end, the reader is left to evaluate the implications of the fact that the authors did nothing similar in this volume. In the future, this is the area where the audience-oriented news values research

shall precisely explain its position and the constraints of its study.

Only the introductory section focuses on theory in the reviewed book. In contrast, the second and third sections follow the prevailing trend in news values research oriented to the practical use of new analytical data resources for media studies and editorial practice. Nevertheless, it does not stop describing how the news production and news selection in newsrooms affect the audience or how the audience actively selects the news. A further step in the considerations of the book's authors is truly inspiring: the findings that the audience's specific preferences of news values are changing the editorial processes. And it is not an uncontroversial influence; quite the contrary. The journalists must cope with the fact that their image of what the audience's characteristics are, what its own interests are, and what the news should bring to the audience partly do not coincide with the actual preferences of the audience. Therefore, an effort to satisfy the audience on one side and the professional standards and editorial autonomy on the other are contradictory. This has been confirmed by Tandoc, Cheng, and Maitra (pp. 81–93), based on a literature review, as well as Boesman, Costera Meijer, and Kuipers (pp. 141–163) from data obtained from in-depth interviews with journalists.

While it can be a traumatizing experience for the journalists, the authors of the volume see it as a potentially positive impulse for a change in the news and media production. Boesman et al. conclude their study with recommendations regarding higher audience engagement,

whether community building or audience participation in news production (p. 159). In the path of the discursive approach to news values, the authors in several places support the efforts to stress news values in framing the stories and their headlines or social media summaries, thus leaving the discursive theory of news values valid. However, the journalists shall question the selection of the specific news values and follow the audience's wishes. And then, Harcup's chapter comes to the fore with its description of what works best among the audiences with a conclusion that: "The very best news resonates by engaging imaginative empathy and encouraging us to express our own agency." (p. 33)

How new perspectives open ahead of journalists when including audience feedback and how they undermine journalists' deep-rooted ideas of their job should be the subject of a careful interest in media studies. Theory and research of news values, traditionally connecting the news selection with journalistic routines, definitely have not said their last word on this topic.

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