

Social Responsibility, Marketing, or Something Else? A Case Study of News Over 50 years in a Middle American community

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Abstract

A definition of news eludes scholars and those who practice journalism, but the meaning of the word has taken on more than academic importance because today anyone can create a document regardless of content, distribute it widely on the internet, and call it “news.” This article utilizes longitudinal data from multiple content analyses of news media in an American city, a comparison with earlier content, and interviews with community media representatives in order to examine choices made by print and broadcast journalists that reveal both an applied definition of news and, indirectly, the theory by which the community’s journalists made choices that determined what was called news in that community over 50 years. Results and observations reveal that while the community newspaper continues to adhere to tenets of social responsibility theory, the community’s television news has largely abandoned that theory in favor of a market-driven approach.

Keywords: Journalism, news, social responsibility, newspapers, television news, content analysis, case study, gatekeeper

1. Introduction

What is news? The question vexes journalism students and their instructors every semester, but increasingly it has taken on more than academic importance. Today anyone with a writing device and an internet connection can create a document, call it “news,” and disseminate it to uncountable millions of recipients, with the resulting ocean of mixed content inviting confusion about the meaning of the word “news,” the purpose of news, and its importance. Notes communication and political science scholar Robert Entman (2005), “journalists, scholars and the educated public have long thought of news as a more or less self-evident category of media product--the stuff that appears in newspapers, newsmagazines or on TV shows that have the word ‘news’ in their titles. Yet audiences increasingly appear inclined to use other products as news.”(p. 51)

To explore basic definitions of “news,” this article utilizes a unique opportunity that presented itself through a series of content analysis projects conducted over two decades in an American city. Presented here is a case study that incorporates that longitudinal data, a comparison with earlier content, and interviews with community media representatives. In total, the results and observations illustrate choices made by print and broadcast journalists that reveal both an applied definition of news and, indirectly, the theory by which the community’s journalists made choices that decided what was called news in that community over 50 years.

2. Review of Literature

Certainly the concept of “news” has ill-defined edges. Mencher, in his classic textbook, defines news as “information about a break from the normal flow of events, and interruption in the expected, a deviation from the norm,” and “information people can use to help them make sound decisions about their lives.”(2011, p. 62) Other texts (e.g. Yopp, et al., 2010) avoid the question, instead defining news by presenting its constituent parts: traditional criteria or “news values” including timeliness, proximity, prominence, rarity, consequence, and human interest. Downie Jr. and Kaiser (2003) approach the definition from the negative: “The celebrity divorce, the police raid on a massage parlor, the opening of a county fair--all too often, it doesn’t have to be new, or factual, or interesting, or important to be labeled ‘news’” (p. 7), they say, and they lament that modern journalists have blurred the lines between news and opinion or between events of consequent versus entertainment.

However, entertainment has been part of disseminating information since the time of Julius Caesar and the Han dynasty of China, according to Eaman (2009). Balladeers and chroniclers of medieval Europe who shared information about events of their world orally embellished their messages as necessary to retain audience interest. Harrison (2006) notes that technology introduced a temporal factor as the development of printing allowed for timely dissemination of information.

The stem for the term “news” is the word “new,” (Zelitzer, 2005, p.66) and Mott, in reviewing the history of “newes” from the early 1500s, says the word meant “recent reports of events or situations, and that is still the primary or generic meaning of the word today.” (1962, p. 22) He adds that by the seventeenth century journalism had developed with the creation of “professional newsmen” and editors who “eventually took over the news and defined it for themselves and their readers.” (p. 23)

Increases in sophistication of technology and the sense of professionalism in the early years of the twentieth century made journalism pervasive, prompting journalist and social critic Walter Lippmann to address fundamental values of news in several classic essays (Lippmann, 1920, 1922; Lippmann and Mertz, 1920). The news, he said, is not the event itself but the interpretation of that event. Communication scholar Wilbur Schramm (1949) advanced that definition in a study in which he described news as an act of communication that requires the audience member to place reconstructed accounts in recognizable frames of reference.

A considerable amount of subsequent scholarly examination has focused on selection of what is called news. Mott (1962) observed that “the popular concept of what news was came more and more to be formed upon what news was printed. With this development, the editor...decided what was news and what was not.”(p. 23) Hausman, in his “handbook for the working journalist,” quotes a wire service editor that news is “what the editor thinks is news.” (1990, p. 9)

The classic work evaluating that point of view is White’s “Mr. Gates” study (1950), which described a subjective process by a news wire editor who defined what constituted “news” for one small community. Subsequent “gatekeeper” studies (e.g., Snider (1967); Whitney and Becker (1982), Dimmick (1974) and Donohue, Olien and Tichenor (1989)) studied the organizational aspects that affect decisions about what constitutes news, reviewed gatekeeper effects in local communities, and determined that national and international wire service content had great influence on the editors who chose what became the news.

Recent scholarship builds on those observations. Menelaou and Maniou (2013), in their examination of television on the island of Cyprus, recognize that “it is the elaboration of the news which constitutes the news today and not the actual fact.” (p. 136) Soroka (2012) charted news content of the New York Times and the Washington Post and concluded that compared to reality there was an over-representation of news with a slightly negative tone.

Gatekeeping theory has been applied to the new world of digital communication as well. Enli (2007) examined criteria used to filter text messages from a Norwegian public affairs television audience, and concluded that new technologies are creating a hybrid role of online gatekeeper/moderator. Bui (2010) studied more than 34,000 news items during 2006 and 2008 from the computer-generated news portal Google News and the machine-assisted editors of Yahoo News. These sites serve as filters at the network level, Bui says, and analysis of the content substantiated the importance of traditional gatekeeping practices in the news items presented to the public, including content chosen by algorithms.

Given that even computer robots now confirm that journalists’ choices determine what is news, what provides the fundamental guidance for the journalists? Dimmick says “the criteria by which a gate-keeper judges an event to be news will be determined to some extent by the way he views his role as a journalist.” (1974, p. 19) That role was defined for journalism students in the years after World War II by Schramm, Peterson, and Siebert’s *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), and “social responsibility,” codified in the U.S. Communications Act of 1934 and described by the Commission on Freedom of the Press (popularly known as the Hutchins Commission of 1947), was presented as the fundamental operational theory of American journalism (The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Although it has been defined by journalists themselves, and thus it is varied and inexact in practice, social responsibility theory focuses on accountability to the public. Rivers, Schramm and Christians (1980) say “Social responsibility theory is motivated by its duties to the people, and it obliges the press to serve society.” (p. 50)

Although documents of the Society of Professional Journalists, (1996) the American Society of News Editors (2013) and the National Association of Broadcasters (2013) still begin with preambles that include phrases espousing social responsibility in the guise of public service, there has been criticism of the theory (Aultschul, 1984; Nerone, 1995). The contributing authors of *Last Rights* (1995) question whether the social responsibility theory has affected press performance, asking “Are media really more socially responsible now than during the 1940s and 1950s?”(p. 101)

Deterioration already is apparent, according to an array of media critics and scholars. Shim (2002) examined American elite newspapers from 1950 to 2000, and in observing a shift toward interpretation he concluded that the papers “failed to provide a wide variety of social issues to the public” (p. 162). Tsuruki (2001) reported that although a Japanese Human Rights Advisory Committee in November, 2000, urged that country’s media to use “self-regulation” in order to follow the American-style system of “social responsibilities,” his examination of Japanese television programming and ratings indicated scandalous newspaper advertising of television programs, and television content itself, combine to weaken the effort. He concluded, “The hundred-year-old solution of demanding every medium to observe its social responsibilities and self-regulation ([the] traditional American social responsibility theory) is out-of-date and no longer appropriate.” (p. 50) Ostini and Fung (2002) echo that theme and propose a new model based on more modern ideology and political attitudes.

Adams-Bloom and Cleary (2009) use results of a content analysis of U.S. network morning news programs to illustrate the impact of modern media ownership on news decisions. They suggest that modern economic realities require a new “dual responsibility” model under which gatekeepers attend to fiscal as well as social concerns. “In the highly targeted niche media environment existing today, the question is not so much ‘is it important,’ but rather, ‘Is it something demographic X will watch/listen to /view/consume?’” they ask, adding that “for the news media, this effectively turns gatekeeping into more of a positioning challenge where editors try to play to the largest audience possible.” (p. 6)

Such an observation hints at an emerging alternative to the social responsibility theory for journalists who make decisions about what will be called “news.” Menelaou and Maniou (2013), in their examination of television on the island of Cyprus, document the impact of entertainment values in news content, suggesting “this manipulation of information before it is disseminated is the result of a shift of the central and vital focus of the media and especially the traditional ones, from the originality of the event to its dynamic to produce income, from the objective dissemination of information to the commercial model of information.” (p. 136)

This observation dovetails with the model proposed by McManus, (1994) who observes that news media trade simultaneously in markets for audience, advertising, financial, and information sources. However, because in western governmental systems news media are businesses, ultimately the financial aspects dominate. Following interviews with broadcast news representatives, McManus suggested that “Economic norms usually dominate journalistic norms when the two conflict, ” (p. 168) and he concludes, “Market journalism seeks to please more than inform its audience.” (p. 193)

3. Research Questions

Is the definition of news in the modern era determined by social responsibility, or by the potential to please an audience that draws advertisers and income? The study reported here examined both longitudinal data from a series of content analyses of news media in a middle-sized midwestern United States community, and interviews with news decision-makers in that community, in order to answer the following research questions:

- What kind of content was determined to be “news” by the local news media of the observed community?
- Do the data indicate that the journalists in those media chose the kinds of stories that reflect primarily a concern for social responsibility?
- Do the data indicate any change in decisions about what constitutes news in the community over the years from the original publication of *Four Theories of the Press* in 1957, with its explication of social responsibility theory?
- What are the attitudes of media editors and producers toward the results of the analyses?

4. Method and Results

To attempt to answer those questions, the study reported here utilized data from five content analysis projects conducted in a midwestern United States metropolitan area with a population of about one million surrounding a city of about 150,000 population.

These projects, originally commissioned by community action groups and then more recently organized by a local university, examined news distributed by the community's seven-day daily newspaper and the community's affiliates of the three major American television broadcast networks.

The research projects provide a unique opportunity because they used identical methods and nearly identical coding instruments over 20 years of journalism beginning in the year 1992. The goals of these projects were to examine the area's news coverage in considerable depth; for the research reported here only portions of the resulting data were extracted.

For purposes of the research reported here, a separate content analysis was added. This work examined microfilm archival copies of the community's daily newspaper in order to determine news selected for publication in editions contemporary with the publication of *The Four Theories of the Press*. A sample equivalent to two weeks' worth of weekday editions of the newspaper's first page and first local news page were selected from the months of July, 1955, through January, 1957, and coded using a coding instrument identical to the one used in reviews of 2005-06 and 2011-12. (Local television news content of the 1955-'57 period could not be examined because the community's television stations did not keep organized archival records of their news presentations.)

For all the projects, the story was established as the unit of analysis. Coders counted numbers of stories in content categories that had been developed in preliminary testing and similar news analysis studies. The coders--in each project, trained teams of about a dozen people from community groups, and college students in the most recent versions--reviewed news stories in designated media, using samples created by constructing several five-day "weeks" drawn from across the calendar, taking the first Monday of January, the second Tuesday of February, etc., and avoiding television "sweeps" months during which the television stations produced unusual content to enhance ratings.

Coders recorded their observations on uniform coding sheets. In the initial analysis projects the resulting data was calculated by hand; in subsequent projects observations were recorded on computer coding sheets and tabulated by computer. Coder reliability was measured in each of the content analysis projects using standard procedures; using the Holsti method (Wimmer and Dominick, 1969) coder reliability averaged .81 across all the studies.

The resulting numbers allowed analysis based on concepts that were examined in the seminal work by Schramm (1949) about the essential aspects of news. Schramm anticipated McManus (2009) and Menelaou and Maniou (2013) by suggesting that news content brings with it the expectation of some kind of reward. According to Schramm, stories about crime, accidents and disasters, sports and recreation, social events and human interest have the result of releasing the audience member from daily concerns and thus they bring immediate rewards, whereas news of public affairs, economic matters, social problems, science, education and health bring to the audience member delayed rewards. Schramm suggested readers (and now viewers) of the first kind of news "can enjoy a vicarious experience without any of the dangers or stresses involved," whereas "when a reader selects delayed reward news, he jerks himself into the world of surrounding reality to which he can adapt himself only by hard work." (pp. 260-261)

In order to attempt to reveal editors' operating philosophy, totals from the story categories were collapsed following Schramm's observations. This procedure combined stories of crime and criminal justice, accidents and disasters, sports and recreation, family and human interest into what he termed news of immediate rewards, i.e. pleasurable content that would attract audience members and subsequently advertisers. Stories of public affairs and social issues (government), economic matters (business, employment and labor), and science (including education and health) were combined into a category Schramm described as news with a delayed reward, i.e. those stories relating to social responsibility.

Data from the first two community projects varied somewhat from subsequent studies, clouding results of the newspaper content analysis for the 1992 and 1999 surveys. Specifically, the 1992 project examined only the daily newspaper, and purposes of the studies conducted that year and in 1998-99 were served by incorporated eight story categories: "government/politics," "crime/criminal justice," "education," "home/family," "business," "sports," "entertainment," and "other." The two more recent studies added the categories "Fires/accidents," "natural events," "health," and "employment/labor"; in the first two projects, coders were instructed to place stories about those topics in the "other" category. Results of the four newspaper content analyses from 1992-2012 show that of 936 total stories, nearly 27 percent were in the "other" category.

Almost 35 percent of the totals were stories that provided “immediate reward,” and nearly 39 percent were of the type determined to be “delayed reward,” i.e., tending toward public service.

More accurate analysis is available from comparison of results from post-millennium projects of 2005-'06 and 2011-'12 with the 1955-'56 period, because these studies used identical coding instruments with 12 story categories. Results are presented in Figs. 1 and 2, and these show interesting variation in the three time periods. First, the total number of stories published in the newspaper dropped drastically. Next, while the number of stories aiming for immediate gratification stayed roughly the same proportion (about 30 percent of each period's total) the number of stories in the “other” category dropped substantially, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the sample, while the number of “delayed reward” public service stories grew larger as a percentage of the total in the more recent years compared to the 1950s.

Television news was included in the content analysis projects conducted in 1998-'99, 2005-'06, and 2011-'12, and results of the analyses of local television news show an entirely different picture. When television news was added to the research beginning in 1998-'99, coders were asked to place stories about “fires and accidents,” “natural events,” “health,” and “employment or labor” in the “other” category, just as newspaper coders did; nevertheless, some useful information can be leached from the raw television data, because for comparison purposes those categories were placed in the “other” category for the 2005-'06 and 2011-'12 data just as it was in 1998-'99. The resulting data, charted and illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4, shows that the number of stories deemed to be aimed at immediate reward fell from 60 percent of the total in 1998-'99 to 37 percent in 2011-'12, while the category including stories identified as “other” rose to 40 percent of the total. Stories coded as pertaining to delayed reward, i.e. social responsibility, remained fairly constant at about a quarter of all stories.

Not surprisingly, when the recent observations drawn using 12 categories were extracted, the “other” category shrank to less than 10 percent of the total. Comparison of the analyses from the years 2005-'06 with 2011-'12 indicates that for both periods the stories determined to be for immediate reward rose to about two-thirds of the total, while stories for delayed reward took less than a third of the total in each period.

5. Discussion

The newspaper in the community examined here has endured wrenching changes and an enormous transformation in the half century since publication of *The Four Theories of the Press* in 1956. This is apparent in a huge drop in the number of stories published on page one and the first local-news page. In 1955-'56, an average of about 33 stories were published on those pages each day; in the years including 1992-2012, an average of just over a dozen stories were published per day.

Much of this variation is due to increased attention to page design, particularly a drastic redesign in the years of the new millennium. This new look included many factors that reduced story count per page: the elimination of “jumps” (the breaking of front-page stories after several column inches of text, with continuation on inside pages), which made for longer individual stories; an increase in the number and size of photos; use of larger headlines and headline type sizes; and the addition of promotional “blurbs” both above the newspaper name plate and in a vertical column on the left-hand side of the page. By the latest analysis project in 2011-'12 jumps had returned, but also advertising was being placed at the top and bottom of some front pages.

Results indicate that as story count was being reduced, story content was changing as well. By percentage of total stories published in the half century examined, the number of stories offering “immediate reward”—crime, fires and natural events, sports and entertainment, and human interest stories such as home and family life—remained constant at about a third of the total. On the other hand, stories with “delayed reward”—government, education, business and employment, and health—increased as a percentage of the total, while the “other” category shrank dramatically over those years.

This rising share of stories related to social responsibility, combined with a reduced number of stories that coders could not categorize, probably reflects both the design change and an evolution in philosophy. The busy 1955-era pages utilized a great number of very brief “filler” items, sometimes even random facts or quotes by famous people. Headlines were displayed in relatively small type, across a few columns, and section fronts (page one and the local news front page) had no advertising. This would account for the greater number of stories, and apparently the editors, while retaining a uniform interest in stories of crime, accidents and natural events, filled the remaining space with public service stories of more depth.

One editor of the newspaper confirmed this, and noted that the physical size of the pages had narrowed considerably since 1957. Another editor said that the gatekeepers consciously included public service stories because they gave the newspaper a marketing advantage. “Investigatory, explanatory reporting that can be found nowhere else is a key to survival for newspapers,” the editor said. Both managers also emphasized the importance of research to identify audience tastes, so the newspaper could tailor its content. “We know what the topics are that are important to our readers,” explained one editor, who said that in recent years the newspaper has begun to use audience research the way radio and television have used it.

While the community’s newspaper increased its public service content, the community’s television news apparently went in the other direction. Results are less extensive and somewhat less clear, because no coding is available until 1999 and coders that year used a truncated categories list. Nevertheless, by consistently following the instructions given to coders that year to list accidents, fires and natural events as “other,” some patterns become apparent over the next dozen years.

As a percentage of the total content over the period examined, the community’s three television stations devoted a notably small proportion of their time to stories related to social responsibility. The remainder was given to stories of immediate reward--crime, sports and entertainment and home/family--and to the “other” category, inflated with news of accidents, fires and natural events. These are, of course, highly visual stories that lend themselves to new reporting technologies. The category “natural events,” including weather, deserves special attention, because during the time examined the community’s television stations installed special radar and weather tracking equipment, making weather news a valuable commodity. This is reflected in the expanding “other” category.

A news director with one of the television stations of the community agreed with the importance of weather-related news. “We considered that a public service,” the news director said, noting that consultants had recommended an emphasis on weather news prior to the 2005-’06 analysis. The station also added more human-interest content to counteract the crime stories the station had been showing, the news director said, but he noted the importance of framing any story so that it would have wide impact. “Spin it so it’s impactful in the entire viewing area,” the manager said.

The news director emphasized the importance of attracting a wide audience. “Every morning you went to work your goal was to get every viewer you could,” the news director said. “That’s what it’s all about. It’s business.”

6. Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

It must be recognized that these analyses represent snapshots of the past. The news media environment currently is in the midst of a tremendous upheaval, and aged data, even from only months ago, may be a limited referent today or tomorrow. However, the results shown here indicate some conditions might cast long shadows. In answer to the research question asking what kind of content was determined to be “news” by the local news media of the observed community, “news” seemed to depend on the medium the audience member chooses. For the television audience, news appears to be overwhelmingly crime, fires, accidents, and weather--exciting, visual content that Schramm defined as satisfying a desire for immediate gratification. The community’s newspaper, on the other hand, has moved increasingly toward content that emphasizes social concerns and problem-solving, as a reaction to the television news content. At the same time, the newspaper wrestles with a reduced number of stories, a two-edged sword that may be indicative of more modern design as well as staffing issues typical of a business trying to compete.

That information further answers the question of whether the news media chose stories that reflect a concern for social responsibility. Data indicates the newspaper has published roughly the same proportion of stories dealing with crime, fires, and accidents since 1955, while in the same period it has increased the number of stories about government, business and employment. On the other hand, from the observations presented here it is apparent that the driving force of the community’s television journalism is not the social responsibility theory, despite claims to the contrary. Because recent data indicates that 60 percent of the American audience gets its news from local television, (Marino, 2012) television news content continues to be influential, especially at the local community level, even though critics maintain that television news clearly lacks substance, (Grossman, 1997)

Results presented here confirm that researchers should look more closely at the conclusions of Menelaou and Maniou (2012), and McManus (1994), who suggest market-driven factors determine what is called news today.

Television news strives to maximize audience levels by deciding that “news” is content that brings vicarious relief, not intellectual struggle. For the community’s newspaper examined here, the impact of marketing is shown even in the answer to the research question asking whether there has been a change in views toward news since publication of the *Four Theories of the Press* in 1956. Data shows that the newspaper has incorporated a substantial and growing amount of content that reflects a concern for social responsibility, but it also redesigned and reorganized itself extensively since 1956 to make the news-consuming process more appealing, and its editors emphasized the importance of providing content that appeals to its audience. “What do our customers want?” one editor asked rhetorically.

The data reported here did not include information about the geographic origin of the stories, and further research might closely examine that factor as well. It is worth asking whether a community is well served by, for example, presentation of an easily and cheaply acquired wire-service story about a horrific accident or factory fire thousands of miles away, although unquestionably such events would be considered “news.”

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Figures

Fig. 1

Number of stories in the community newspaper, by year published and kind of story according to Schramm classification. (12 story categories)

	Immediate Reward stories	Other type stories	Delayed Reward stories
1955-'56	171	91	211
2005-'06	38	17	60
2011-'12	66	7	133

$X^2 = 36.94$

d.f. = 4

$p < .001$

Fig. 2

Charts showing proportion of kinds of newspaper stories, by year and kind of story according to Schramm classifications. (12 story categories)

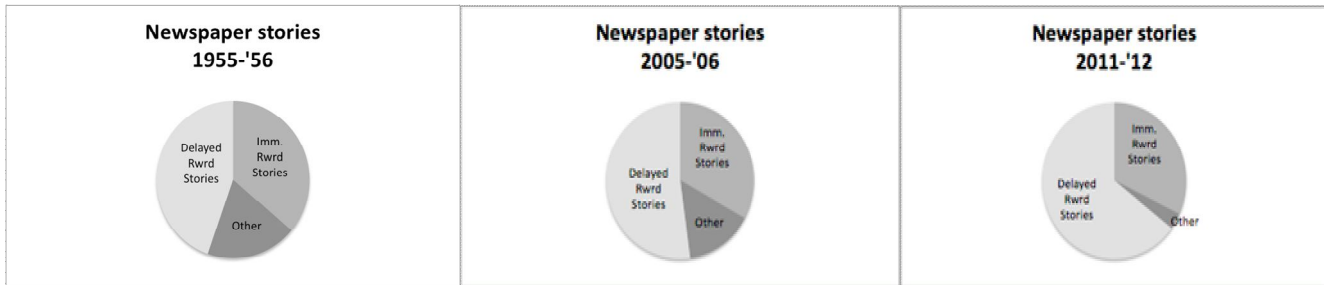


Fig. 3

Number of television stories, by year broadcast and kind of story according to Schramm classifications. (8 story categories)

	Immediate reward stories	Other	Delayed reward stories
1998-'99	365	75	171
2005-'06	203	129	85
2011-'12	267	290	172

$X^2 = 134.7$
 d.f. = 4
 p = <.001

Fig. 4

Charts showing proportion of kinds of television news stories, by year and kind of story according to Schramm classifications. (8 story categories)

