

MAKING NEWS DECISIONS:

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Let's look at the news process - the major steps by which the content of a newspaper, newsmagazine, or newscast is determined. In doing so, we will examine decisions involving (1) assignments, (2) reporting, (3) editing or evaluating content, and (4) matters of news policy.

(1) Assignments - The possible number of events and problems worthy of reportage usually exceeds the staff capacity to adequately report all of them. So decisions are required. What proportion, if any, of staff resources will be devoted to a particular event? Will one reporter be assigned, or perhaps a team of reporters? Media personnel who give assignments, therefore, are crucial decision makers.

A) News Value: Personal preferences and idiosyncrasies undoubtedly affect the decisions made by these "assigners". But some criteria typically pervade assignment making regardless of the type of medium or the individual's own foibles. Perhaps the most important criteria are notions of "news value" - a set of journalistic traditions which may trigger an almost automatic response from news decision makers. The notion of news value is that certain attributes, when connected to an event, are prima facie evidence of "newsworthiness".

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The major attributes traditionally include the following:

- a) Conflict - An event which demonstrates antagonism, opposition, or disturbance of the status quo is likely to be judged newsworthy. Such events include conflict between individuals (eg. crime), groups (eg. riots and elections), nations (eg. wars), and between humans and the forces of nature (eg. natural disasters).
- k) Magnitude - The larger the event, or the more people it affects, or the more money it involves, the more likely it will be judged newsworthy.
- c) Oddity - If something is unusual enough, it will be covered.
- d) Proximity - The closer the occurrence, the more likely the news coverage.
- e) Prominence - Well-known persons tend to have their activities covered; persons of low social status are more likely to be ignored.
- f) Timeliness - Most journalistic decision makers prefer to deal with "the latest news".

OTHER CRITERIA:

- g) Significance - An occurrence or a problem should be covered if it is likely to have an impact on people.

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- I h) Explanation and problem solving - Items which shed light on how some current problem developed, or which report on how others may have tried to solve the problem, are considered worth covering,
 - i) Empathy - A happening or a problem may be psychologically close to people even though far removed physically.
- (2) Reporting - The reporter has two main roles. He or she is an observer (or news gatherer) and a describer (or news teller).
- A) Influences on Reporters;
- a) Role perception - Does the reporter view him - or herself as a watchdog, transmission belt, promoter, representative, or activist?
 - b) News values « Like assignment editors, reporters are aware of journalistic traditions which so often place a premium on the antagonistic, the large, the unusual, the prominent, the recent. The news sources they seek out, and the questions they ask, often are influenced by those considerations.
 - c) View of source - Like all of us, reporters like and trust some persons more than others. Newsmakers favored by reporters come to be "reliable sources", and they are more frequently sought.

d) View of topic - Reporters sometimes frame questions in a way to elicit answers which coincide with the reporter's personal assessment of the topic being reported.

(3) Editing - This basically involves evaluation of the materials that flow into the newsroom. It is no small task, and most news operations employ specialists to get it done. Consider the vast amount of different kinds of news materials which must be evaluated at the editing level in a typical news operation. »

a) Staff-generated news

b) News purchased from outside news agencies

c) Material supplied by a parent or affiliated company

d) Items supplied by professional utilizers of the media (particularly public relations firms).

In evaluating all this material, editors face two kinds of decisions. They must "filter" - that is, decide which items will be used. And they must "package" - that is, decide how to organize and arrange items they select for use.

A) Filtering - In general terms, the mechanisms and criteria which editors typically employ in the filtering process.

- a) Mechanisms - By mechanisms, we mean the established procedures or routines which are established to allow for quick, efficient filtering of mammoth amounts of materials. Specialization through division of labor is a common strategy.
- k) Criteria - The criteria used to filter material will vary with the individual gatekeeper. Sometimes highly personal, subjective standards are used. More often, criteria related to "news values" are determinant.

Packaging - Those items that somehow make it through the filtering process need next to be packaged. In the print media, that usually means deciding about the size and style of type for the story and the headline; deciding where to place the story; and laying out or designing the individual pages. In broadcasting, the typical packaging decisions concern arranging the stories (from opening to closing items of the newscast); adding transitions (called "coupling pins") between stories where appropriate; deciding where and whether to use "actualities" (filmed or taped on-the-scene reports) and other special effects (like background music or video slides); and editing the items to meet time requirements.

- a) Criteria for packaging - These are similar to the

criteria mentioned earlier. Indeed, some gatekeepers who filtered the items earlier might also become involved in packaging.

c) Results - The results of the editing process are, of course, noticeable to media audiences. As readers, viewers, and listeners, we are aware only of the materials which do pass through the filtering process; and the way those materials are packaged ordinarily influences how we react to them. Editing procedures may vary somewhat from media unit to media unit, and inevitably involve complexities which we will not go into now. But the generalizations presented in this outline should provide a basic understanding of these important processes.

(4) Policy Making - Executives such as the publisher, editor-in-chief, station manager, or program director usually do not play an active role in routine news decisions - except in small media units. But these executives do make decisions which influence the quantity and quality of news available in the media they oversee. They are instrumental, for example, in:

Determining the resources available for the news staff by setting employment standards, hiring key "gatekeepers", deciding how large the news staff will be, purchasing newsroom equipment, and setting salaries.

Formulating general policies, including codes of ethics, to guide the conduct of the news staff.

Setting editorial policy, by participating in the writing of editorials and occasionally by initiating and supervising various campaigns and crusades.

Making final decisions in major controversial matters, such as resolving disputes between staff members or determining whether particularly sensitive material should be used.

Today, personal involvement by corporate executives in news decisions is quite rare. But in those instances where they do become actively involved in journalistic decision' making, their employees and their audiences have every right to expect them to act as professional journalists rather than business managers.