

Personalization and the Determination of News

Kristine Ajrouch

This article addresses the relationship between the construction of news and personal experiences. Ethnography and narrative approaches are used to study a metropolitan newspaper where it is discovered that personalization contributes in large part to the decisions made by editors regarding whether or not an event is considered newsworthy. This discovery adds another dimension to the perspective that news is a social construction because it presents news as a decision-making process and highlights the human elements which contribute to the determination of news.

KEY WORDS: news; personalization; ethnography; narrative.

INTRODUCTION

News is produced through a complex decision-making process by journalists and editors whose job is to inform the public about important issues. They are responsible for collecting and disseminating information that people increasingly rely upon to learn what is happening around them. Fast-paced life styles, busy schedules and numerous commitments increase reliance upon mediums of information that are easily accessible. The news media represent one aspect of the technologically rich super highway of information upon which people in society depend (Carey 1989:1) "today the mass media are inescapable and people feel slightly less alive when unhooked from long lines of news and entertainment." Because of this situation it is important to probe more deeply into the mechanisms by which news is constructed.

The authority of news is grounded in the ideology of objectivity (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979). Adherence to the objective standard has elevated

Kristine Ajrouch is affiliated with the University of Michigan.
Direct correspondence to Kristine Ajrouch, 41829 Ponmeadow, Northville, Michigan 48167.

news to a status which seemingly divorces its production from the human element. When Herbert Gans (1979) published his ethnographic study of news organizations, he asserted that his study was more about news itself and those who create news rather than the organizations. This distinction Gans makes between the news organization and those who produce news draws attention to the fact that news is not formed of its own accord, but is a result of people actively constructing the latest newflash, report, dispatch, or headline. The data presented below offer preliminary insights into how the human elements of news production contribute to the ultimate decision that information will be disseminated as "objective" news. In particular I focus on how the personal experiences of journalists and editors influence the determination news.

METHOD

This ethnographic study began with an understanding that news is indeed a social construction. A narrative approach was undertaken in which I was a participating observer, conscious both of what I wrote down in my observations, as well as seeking to capture the narratives that frame the construction of news. Through this approach it became evident that some stories are privileged over others, and also that who is writing the stories has an impact upon what is privileged.

I learned about news mainly from the stories I heard while I observed and informally talked with those who work at a major newspaper in metropolitan Detroit. My site was the Nation/World desk, and my primary informant was the foreign editor. I gained access to the field site by first arranging an interview with him regarding a special series on immigration he co-authored in which I had been interested. In the subsequent ten weeks, I made fourteen visits for purposes of collecting data about the determination of news. Observations included actually sitting at the desk with my informant and viewing his activities, and benefiting from his personal evaluations and interpretations. I also attended the daily budget meetings which is where potential news items are chosen to appear on the front page the following day. The daily budget meetings are conferences where the executive editor meets with all news department heads in order to discuss front page news ideas. Following these observations I arranged for interviews with others, including journalists, senior editors, executive editors, and copy editors. The data gathered were analyzed according to the methods of grounded theory (Strauss 1987). Major themes were detected, and then coded accordingly.

A narrative approach to studying social phenomenon recognizes that human communication is the basis of that phenomenon (Maines 1993). Narrative ethnography allows for a method which embraces the human utterance as central to understanding social phenomenon. Therefore, I began my research with questions such as: What kinds of stories are we receiving through the mass media? Who are the authors of the stories we receive? How do those stories become privileged? The stories revealed to me through informal conversation, interviewing, and observations pointed to the importance of personal experiences in the decisions of what constitutes news.

NEWS AS A DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The data show that personal experiences are a prevalent criterion by which the journalists and editors at this newspaper decide whether or not a story is newsworthy. They are by no means the only criteria used, yet they become a real element of the decision-making process. The results of my observations point to the front page as the central focus of newspaper production. Members of the entire news organization arrange their day around the goal of finding news that is appropriate for the front page. As a result there exists a seeming obsession by the journalists at this newspaper to land their stories on page one. An inevitable question then arises regarding what defines news as page one material.

A primary source of stories for the newspaper comes from a data base that includes a variety of news wire services such as United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), Reuters, New York Times Wire Service, as well as business publications. De Reimer (1992) found that editors are the primary users of these data bases. My observations suggest that the Nation/World desk would be immobilized without access to these wire services. Most of the day was spent by my primary informant scanning different stories on the data base as possible news items for the newspaper. The data base was a primary source of stories for the Nation/World desk and the newspaper.

Through my observations and the narratives of the people who worked at the newspaper, a major category developed which I have termed "determining what is news." Two sub-categories arise which are detailed instances of how news is decided upon. They are labeled first, "personal experiences and story selections," and second, "competition for 1A."

Determining What Is News

This category points to the criteria and definitions newspaper people apply in the selection and production of news. The important factor in de-

deciding what is news appears through judging its value as news. Through the experiences relayed to me by my primary informant as well as my observations, it became evident that the news value of a potential story is found through human reaction to the event.

One revealing instance of defining news occurred when my primary informant had received an article from a free lance writer about how Jewish people live in Cuba. He explained that the major point of the story destroys its newsworthiness. The free lance writer had developed his story from a perspective which downplays the importance of being Jewish for one that emphasizes economic hardships. The one line which "killed" the entire story read something like, "but the hardships faced by the Jews are not because of their religion, they are because of the economic hardships which face all those in Cuba."

My informant reasoned "that if it is a story about a particular group, i.e. the Jews, and there is nothing happening to them because of that identity, then there is no news value in it." He went on to comment that, "free lance writers usually don't know how to write for the mainstream media" (field observation notes, pp. 49-50).

Here the foreign editor not only addresses the issue of "news value," but also states that writing for the mainstream media requires that the writer understand the elements that constitute "value" in news stories. This statement that news stories have a specific form suggests that not all information is news. The constitution of news and whether or not it has value becomes more evident through the situation presented below. Another example of the criteria used to decide what is news arises as my informant browses through the wire services. He points to an item about an incident on the U.S./Mexico border:

My primary informant learns through the wire services that there is a toxic gas leak. However, because the wire story states that the leak has been managed and no one is in danger, my informant advises me that there is "no story." (field observation notes, p. 65).

That wire story, therefore, was not chosen as a possible news item for the newspaper.

The two examples above demonstrate that "news value" is found in the news item's ability to convey something unusually urgent about the event. The first story about Jews in Cuba was rejected because it did not convey anything happening as a result of being Jewish. The second story about a toxic gas leak on the U.S./Mexico border was not chosen because everything was under control. Hence, these stories did not meet the standards which define news because they do not raise potential concern or alarm in the average reader.

The criteria used to define whether or not a story has news value begins to reveal the human element in story selection. If the story does not

conform to the accepted narrative, and that seems to be one which invokes an emotional reaction by the reader, then it does not constitute a story worthy of printing. There emerges an implicit measure of newsworthiness which is grounded in human reaction as the reasons why stories are not accepted are explained. News value thus is determined by its ability to elicit an emotional reaction from the reader.

Personal Experiences and Story Selection

This category pertains to the relations of journalists' and editors' feelings and experiences to the stories selected as news. Both Gans (1979) and Michael Schudson (1978) refer to the centrality of the news journalists' upbringing and resulting values to the production of news. My findings suggest, however, that the everyday experiences of news people greatly affect the stories which are chosen as newsworthy. There are quite a few examples in my field notes to support this finding. The first pertains to my observations at the Nation/World desk:

The senior editor wrote a message via computer terminal to all at the desk that she will not consider any more Native American stories. She then verbally announced, "I am so sick of Indian stories" (field observation notes, p. 33).

Her personal boredom with the topic resulted in a command to the others, and so news stories with that theme were no longer considered as a possible story to be printed in the newspaper.

Another incident involved a remark made to me by my primary informant. He said that the newspaper had been printing numerous stories that center around the civil strife in the former Yugoslavia (via the wire services). He specifically referred to the ethnic identity of another editor at the desk to explain why this was so:

As my informant brought up the newspaper's budget (list of possible stories), he whispered to me that he thinks the Serb stories get too much coverage because of another editor at the Nation/World Desk who is a Serb (field observation notes, p. 44).

The personalization of events on the part of journalists and editors are undeniably central to the selection process of deciding news. The two examples above demonstrate that personal interests were directly responsible for the relative value of a story. The importance of personal experiences can further be understood through the explanation my primary informant gave for how he developed the idea to organize a special series on immigration. He begins by explaining that:

He was in Moscow for four years (1985-1989), and saw racism and bias in Russia, which he stated was itself just amazing. He and his wife looked after a lot of scholarship students at Patrice . . . University in Moscow, who had come from

Kenya. He observed the Russians as very unsophisticated which resulted in a lot of antagonism and fears in the community where the university is. From that idea he started looking for similar situations in Europe. It was something in all his travels, in Europe especially, an underlying racism and prejudice—always there but very rarely spoken about and very rarely addressed . . . (field observation notes. pp. 17-18).

His personal experiences through his travels led him to suggest and ultimately organize the immigration series at the newspaper. Through his personal involvement with the Kenyan students and in the countries of Europe generally, he chose the topic of immigration as newsworthy.

The stories selected for print from wire services also may include an evaluation of personal experiences. This situation was revealed to me as my informant explained to me that “bylines are arbitrary.” He told me a story about why he will never pick up an AP Pentagon wire story. The story involves a woman reporter whom he had met while in Moscow. While Ronald Reagan was president, both she, he and another reporter from Reuters had an assignment to cover Nancy Reagan when the President and First Lady visited the Soviet Union. After they had reached an area to rest, the AP reporter asked if my informant could help her use the phone so that she could tell her home office that nothing was going on. My informant explained to me that he and the Reuters correspondent had been helping her out the entire day because she did not understand Russian. The AP reporter then ended up filing a story with that phone call. My informant and the Reuters correspondent had no time to file because they were being led to another place. He and the Reuters correspondent were so angry at her for deceiving them that they did not help her out the rest of the day.

My primary informant explained to me that because of this incident he refuses to pick up AP wire stories on the Pentagon because she is the journalist who writes them. Until this day, whenever AP asks how they can improve their wire stories he always complains about Pentagon coverage. Thus, it is evident that the personal interactions my informant has with other news people directly influence which stories he will choose to publish in the newspaper.

The connection between personal experiences and news construction is also evident with regard to the selection of stories to appear on the front page. A very interesting instance of personal experiences occurred during a budget meeting where discussion was generated to decide whether or not a story about anti-lock brakes should be on the front page. During this discussion participants told personal anecdotes about their experiences with anti-lock brakes:

One states that you are not suppose to pump them, another says that people don't understand how they work, and that she took hers into the shop thinking there was

something wrong with them because they made a weird noise when she used them on icy roads. It turned out that's the way they work. Another gave a personal anecdote about how she argues with her father about whether or not you are suppose to pump the brakes when they are anti-lock. She says no, and he won't believe her no matter how many articles she sends him on the subject (field observation notes, pp. 37-38).

In essence, there emerged a consensus as to the newsworthiness of the story based upon many of the meeting members' personal experiences with anti-lock brakes. The above situation demonstrates that the personalization of issues penetrate the standards against which news events are deemed worthy for acceptance. Personal feelings as well as the personal experiences of news people have an explicit impact upon decisions that are made to determine newsworthiness, as the above situation illustrates—even with regard to front page news items.

Competition for 1A

Although I found that personal experiences were important factors in the decisions made about what constitutes a newsworthy story, the decision-making process regarding what stories should appear on the front page became the most prominent activity I observed. This was the activity around which the news people organized their days. Each department suggests possible story ideas for the front page at budget meetings, and discussions ensue as to which stories are most important. The final decision is made by the executive editor.

The process by which stories are selected takes into account characteristics or qualities which will attract potential readers, and therefore will sell newspapers. The goal is to sell the news, and this supersedes the goal to inform readers. I have demonstrated that this goal frequently induces the application of personal experiences, as well as news organizational ideas of what is unusual. The competitive nature of this process surfaced, however, as I attended more budget meetings and became manifest in a clash between the senior editor at the Nation/World desk and an executive editor:

The senior editor from the Nation/World desk offers three story suggestions—one regarding a story about a cease fire through UN sources in Bosnia, the second about a Russian spy story, and the third story about an education bill regarding home schooling. She gets challenged by the executive editor on every story she proposes. Following the budget meeting she gets a message from the executive editor, and tells everyone at the Nation/World desk that he has kicked back the stories she proposed at the budget meeting for the front page. The senior editor says she is going to send a note to him stating the story on Bosnia that she proposed should be a front page story, "schools are not that relevant" (field observation notes, p. 75).

After the budget meeting was over, but before the senior editor received that message, I lingered in the budget meeting room and heard the managing editors discuss the proposals for front page news. They decided on stories and offered their justifications:

They choose the Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding dispute because its a "soap opera," an article written by Mitch Albom, a sports writer, because he "sells," and the Olympic medalist Bonnie (Blair) because she is "accomplished." In response to the spy story proposed by the Nation/World desk, they say, "two killed? Who knows! The CIA is unreliable." They then bring up the home schooling issue the senior editor proposed, and say it is a possibility, Home schooling is not just for Christian Fundamentalists, its not a freak show. (they say) This is an answer, and people like solutions" (field observation notes, p. 73).

The front page of the newspaper the following day printed the story about the home schooling issue, with headlines that read, "Grilled lawmakers insist bill won't threaten home schools." (2/24/94).

Here we see a bit of the process by which one of the proposed Nation/World stories competed for and ultimately won a spot on the front page. During interviews with people who worked at the newspaper I asked about the importance attached to a story landing on the front page. Specifically, I probed for the criteria needed for front page news, and the benefits of attaining that spot. The criteria which arose as central to front page news were perceived relevance and interest to a wide population. They could range from something that is happening immediately to human tragedy. They could simply be strange and short. Overall, the goal is to capture the reader's interest, and implicitly ignite an emotional reaction in the reader.

The benefits or significance to the journalist or department in landing a front page story is the general consensus that the biggest and most important stories are going to be on the front page. Front page stories are perceived as important stories other people should know about. Journalists and departments get noticed and achieve prominence. The importance of landing a story on the front page follows from the shared understanding of news people and the news organization that it says you and your department are doing well.

CONCLUSION

Landing a story on the front page of the newspaper is the goal around which most of the activity at the newspaper is organized. Past research supports the notion that the front page is central to newspaper operation. Topics or areas which historically have appeared on the front page tend to reappear. For example, Reisner (1992) talks about front page stories as having a history. In other words, the more a news story is connected to

past front page stories, the more likely it will land on the front page. The fact that a news story has a past validates it as newsworthy.

The prevalence of personal experiences in defining newsworthy stories is an especially interesting finding. Although it has the most influence among those in positions of authority, it is a very real phenomenon. In a profession which bases its credibility upon adherence to a rigorous and strict code of objectivity, my study uncovers various instances where personal experiences directly influence the definition of news and the subsequent reporting of news.

These findings suggest that in an age where information is processed and disseminated at fast rates and in high volumes, we must consistently and consciously examine the source and selection processes of the information we receive. There has been an accumulation of research which tells us that news is a social construction. Accompanying that research, objectivity as an ideology has been critiqued, and charged with contributing to the consumers of that news "not to know." It precludes responsibility by protecting the news reporter from the ramifications of the news reported (Tuchman 1978). This separation of the individual news reporter from the end product of news poses an awkward paradox. If personal experiences and feeling are as pertinent to news production as the data above suggest, then the reader cannot properly evaluate the information which becomes disseminated as objective news because the relationship of news to its creator is not readily made known. The image of news as an autonomous category ignores the role journalists and editors play in its creation.

News is often equated with fact, and therefore rarely questioned. Yet my data challenge that assumption and instead point to the human elements which go into deciding whether or not a potential news item has "news value." Journalists and editors are likely to rely on their own personal experiences and feelings as they construct criteria for deciding what is or is not news. News is not simply information. Rather, information becomes news in contexts of human relationships. The human element is a very real aspect of deciding news, but not readily recognized as such. The data presented above begin to unpack the role of personalization in the determination of news.

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