NEWS VALUES AND PUBLIC INTERESTS: TWO DEBATABLE CONCERNS

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Abstract
This paper delves into the contentious terrain of news values and public interests. The paper appraises the argument that editorial judgment, market force, and public interest are the key deciders of news. The paper however agrees that a symbiotic relationship exist among these critical factors in the news making process. But the paper holds that the whole essence of journalism or the making of news is to render credible service to the public because they have a right to know.

Keywords: News, Public Interest, debatable, values, editorial judgment

Introduction
Journalists are traditionally regarded as custodians of the public trust. In other words, journalism exists to render service to the public. This line of thinking suggests that media offerings ought to generally reflect or be driven by what the public wants or needs. But, is this always the case? Are editors, who are the final deciders of news, not influenced by other factors? In any case, there already is a raging debate on the news judgement notion. Who, what decides the final output, news values or public interests?

Agenda Setting Theory
As a theoretical basis for this paper, the agenda-setting theory explains the power of the mass media to set agenda for public debate and discourse. This implies that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda-setting theory does not ascribe to the mass media the power to determine what the public actually think. However, it ascribes to them the power to determine what the public is thinking about. The elements involved in agenda setting according to Folarin (2002; P.75) include:
1. The quality or frequency of reporting;
2. Prominence given to the reports through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, film, graphics, or timing on radio and television.
3. The degree of conflict generated in the reports; and
4. Cumulative media-specific effects over time.

As clearly stated by Becker, Mc Combs and Mc leod (1975; P.38), the focus of agenda setting has moved away from “the question of opinion formation, to specification of the media’s role in development of specific cognitions about issues in the public domain”. Indeed, the notion of agenda-setting function of the mass media specifies a strong, positive relationship between the emphasis of mass media news coverage and the salience of these news topics or issues in the minds of members of the public. This casual relationship or connection build by increased emphasis of a topic or issue influences or causes increased salience of that topic or issue for the public interests.

In other word, the mass media have the ability to structure our world. No wonder, research on the agenda-setting function of mass communication has its base in the writings of Lipmann (1922) on the role the mass media necessarily play in shaping our perceptions of public affairs, public interests. Other scholars such as Lasswell (1948) focused on media’s “surveillance” function, Schramm (1957) on media’s role in helping readers’ anticipation of events in the world around them.

The relevance of the agenda-setting theory is further buttressed by O’sullivan (1983) postulation when he described agenda-setting concept as the way in which the media wittingly or unwittingly structure public
debates and awareness. Hence, agenda-setting theory refers to the way that the media, particularly in news, current affairs, and documentary output, have the power to focus public attention on a defined and committed set of selected news issues, while ignoring others. The result is that some topics are widely debated, beyond the media in the public sphere, while others are ignored. The implication of the media power to fix issues or topics for public discourse lies in the ways that the new agenda is internalized by the audience or public. This relates to the general issue of the role of the media in defining social reality, and their roles as agencies of ideological or value transmission in society (Cohen and Young, 1981; Mc Quail and Windahl, 1981). Agenda-setting theory thus, vividly captures this process of media decision making that impact hugely on public interest.

News Values
The term news was first used by Walter Lipmann in 1922 in his Public Opinion Quarterly to capture the core values of news such as environment and pseudo environment. Today, there is a lively continuing debate among those who try to sort out the definition of news. Researchers often consider news values on the basis of certain standard criteria: conflict, progress, disaster, consequence, eminence, novelty, human interest, timeliness, proximity, etc.

A long-time journalist, Denis MacShane (1979) in his book Using The Media gives a backing to this view when he sums up what journalists are on the lookout for with five tenets: conflict; hardship and danger to the community, the unusual (oddity, novelty); scandal; and individualism.

Adapting this scheme to TV news value, Tunstall (1971) itemizes four points of difference:

1. In TV the visual is given pre-eminence.
2. News items, which include film of our own reporters interviewing or commenting on a story, are preferred.
3. TV makes use of a small fraction of the number of stories the newspaper carry, and even major TV items are short compared with newspaper coverage.
4. There is preference for “hard” stories or actuality on TV news.

MacDougal (1982; p. 114) sees news values as those factors that are considered by the purveyors of news in his choice of news among the uncountable number of events that occur on a daily, perhaps, hourly or even by the minute or by the second bases. Bittner (1989; p.255) admits that news value is a “relative term” that refers to the value or importance of an event or the potential impact of an event in relation to other events or potential news stories. These events or news or news items are, according to Tuchman (1979), subjected to a gate-keeping process which is apolitical, unbiased and should be an artful accomplishment attuned to specific understanding of social reality. In other words, the selection of news events is not a reflex action but a socially determined construction of reality.

News Values
Wilson (2005 PP.136-137) says news is about events that you did not know about at their breaking moments. He affirms that news is about events of yesterday (early morning news on radio and in newspapers). News, Wilson continues, is about what happened a moment ago, is ongoing and may happen tomorrow. Put simply, Wilson avers that news is about yesterday, today and tomorrow that frequently sought after menu in our global cafeteria of news events, where newshounds, in collaboration with several departmental specialists, spin out a seemingly endless roll of new delectable tales. To Wilson:

*News is essentially a tale of woes that befall man in his giddy adventure through life … News is the tsunami’s rage against 200,000 souls lost in its anger … News is bin laden’s men raging against the twin towers of the World Trade Centre and the horrendous vengeance visited on the Afghans in search of the leaders of the pack. News is people in events geared to address the reader’s interest.*

Public interests
Public is the grouping of individual brought into being as a social unit through mutual recognition of common problems for which common solutions should be sought, such a grouping needs various means of communication for its development and continuity. But, according to Mills (1956), the mass media had
developed in such a way as to hinder the formation of public. All the same, one sees evidence of the continuing existence of various audience formations with the characteristic of a public. Although rarely identified as such, most societies have an “informed public” – that section of the audience which is most active in political and social life and draws on many sources of news, especially the elite, opinion-forming and specialist press (McQuail; 1987). Secondly, many countries retain some elements of the party press or a press which does have political connections with readership groups (Seymour-Ure; 1974). Here the membership or supporters of a particular party form a public, which is also an audience. Thirdly, there are local or community audiences for a local publication, of the kind described by Janowitz (1952). In such cases the audience tends to coincide with the membership, hence social group (Stamm; 1985).

Finally, there are numerous particular audiences formed on the basis of an issue, an interest, or an occupation, which may have their own forms of social interaction and are not simply the creation of media supply. Instances of such publics are mainly to be found in relation to commonly instituted forms to avoid links either with more elite “informed publics”, or with party political groups, or with localities. This is less true of radio, but still partly so. There are also exceptions in relation to television, for instance where channels are deliberately profiled by socio-economic or taste differences (McQuail; 1987).

But what are public interests? Members of the public are interested in many things, news, documentary and information. They also show story preference for fictions, the exciting and unusual. There is also a demonstrable demand for the more comforting myths, for nostalgia and for social amnesia (Davis; 1981). In their day-to-day news presentations, are the media offering this service to meet the public interests? Are news values determined on the basis of what editors and reports want, or what their audience desires, as a matter of public service? Importantly, who decides news values, editors or market forces?

News values and public interests: matters arising
Two scholars: Defleur and Dennis (1981; 422) in their comprehensive definition of news, point out the need for news to be “shaped by a consensus about what will interest the audience”. This emphasis on public interests in news presentation resurfaced in the issues raised by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in its 1947 report, where it was pointed out that the media were failing to give the public a representative picture of the constituent group of society.

Currently, there is a raging debate within media circle on whether editors or market forces (i.e., what interest the media audience or public) should decide what constitute news or news values. Those who agree with the marketing approach (like Everett E. Dennis) argue that journalists underestimate reader, viewer or listener intelligence. They frown, that journalists betray poor understanding of what people will actually read, watch, and listen to. They complain that news people do not comprehend the role of television in delivering news to people who also read newspapers and listen to radio. They charge that, editors and reporters will continue to be elite. They will continue to get relatively isolated and out of touch with their communities, will continue to be removed from society. They will continue to be unlike their readers, viewers and listeners. Proponents of the marketing school believe that their strategy will save the day.

That is not all; opponents to the marketing proposition (like Melvin L. Defleur) contend that this line of thinking is flawed on the following points. One, the marketing approach to news regulates the press to a powerless dispenser of desired services. Two, editors take on a strange role; they do not make decision, but only grant requests to the public. Three, they do not determine what their public(s) need or should have; rather they provide the news that the public – the real editors in the marketing approach – say they want. Therefore, if the marketing concept of news determination were taken very far, they fear that journalism would become a passive and uninspiring profession.

Another position on this issue of whether marketing force or editorial judgement should decide what news is the believe that there is a natural symbiosis between editorial decision-making and public interests. News is an editorial matter naturally influenced by knowledge of the public interests. Editors are independent (at least it ought to be so) decision makers in journalism and not merely reactors and servants to members of the public. Service is crucial all the same, but, in doing so, certain standard values help determine news. As it seems, journalists have come to the conclusion that such values (like novelty, oddity, eminence, impact, conflict, human interest, currency, proximity etc) are agreeable to the public. Hence, the journalists rely on
them as they perform their so-called traditional functions of informing, educating and entertaining the public, etc.

**News Determinants**
This has to do with the criteria for news selection. News is determined or decided based on the importance members of the public or audience are perceived to attach to an event, issue or topic. Sometimes it is the potential impact an event, issue or topic is expected to have on its intended news hungry audience or public that increases its value for selection as news. In a gate-keeping system, editors as gate-keepers, they reserve the power to finally and professionally decide what makes news or not. The social environment provides vast opportunities and potentials for news. Newshounds, in their forage across the world’s vast news fields have for a long time now, identified and relied on certain values as guide-post in determining news for their news organizations. A few of these values are:

**Impact:** this refers to the importance, significance of the event, issue, topic, etc. One way to know the important of an event is to decipher the results or what the consequences of a news story might be.

**The Unusual:** this refers to the interruption of life’s routine, something odd, out of the ordinary such as a man biting a dog, a woman giving birth to quadruplet or even twelve 12 babies at a time.

**Prominence:** this refers to people, who are popular, or those in positions of authority, or those who are notorious such as the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria gaining notoriety for killing innocent people in Nigeria.

**Conflict:** this refers to strikes, strifes, political campaigns and confrontations, ethnic rivalries, wars, etc. such as battle for “APC” as an acronym for registering political parties in Nigeria.

**Proximity:** this refers to something physically or geographically close, or an attachment to those like you and those to whom you share affinity, common interest, etc. For instance, university students in Nigeria were worried and they kicked against students that were killed in Nasarawa State University in March 2013.

**Timeliness:** this refers to the latest, recent events, such as the election of new Pope Francis I, first ever Latin American leader of the Catholic Church in 2013.

**Currency:** this refers to a situation that has been around for a while whose time has finally come. It also refers to the newness, freshness of an event just brought to light, such as the probe of three Chief Judges in Nigeria.

Wilson, (2005, P. 142) has added to the list values such as: hardness (the factual quality), actualities (real persons or things), correctness (verifiability), balance (fairness), authorization (news source), utilization (value for society), and relative speed of delivery (fastness), etc.

Arguably, news values are not meant to serve public interests. Why? Because Udoakah, (1992:p.103) says “it is unimaginable that anybody would venture into newspaper and magazine publishing or broadcasting just to inform, educate and entertain the public without thinking of deriving some benefit in return”. Udoakah further observes that while it is true that members of the public could be instantly informed, educated or entertained by the mass media, one must not forget to ask what type of messages do mass media entertainments carry? To what use is the public expected to put the information and education it receives from the mass media?

Such questions as the scholar reasons will take the lid off the can of mass media objectives and give an insight into their long-term and undeclared objectives, some of which may be immediate or delayed. Udoakah’s position is very clear on the fact that the mass media do not exist for a public good. They are seen as promotional platform for their owners and dossiers of short comings for their owners’ political and economic or social rivals. What then determines news in this case; certainly not editorial judgement, not market forces or the controversial, public interests, or the goals of media organizations? Hence their distinct goals, naturally dictate their choice and presentation of events of the world. Take it or leave it Udoakah insist, the so-called news values are mere propaganda stunts to explain off the bias and selfish interest, which surround the operation of the mass media. In a world of interdependence, it is only natural that efforts are made to keep good relationships with those who are important to ones success. This is the purpose served by the vocabularies of news selection. They are for the “self-defense” of media operators and their owners (Udoakah, 1992; 104).
Stressing a point on curiosity plus a sense for what is new, interesting and different (news sense) Mencher (1996) observes that often, journalists find that curiosity pays off with good stories. The author states that what interests reporters usually interests readers and listeners. He notes that editors share various interests and concerns with their readers. Editors and the Public both want the same questions answered Mencher reasoned. Call it the feel for the public pulse or simply a commonality of interest, Mencher believes that whatever the description, the result is work that appeals to people. Adding a competitive angle to the argument, Mencher (1996, P. 125) note in the fifth edition to his book: *Basic media writing* that:

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\text{In addition to understanding what makes news, they (editor-gatekeepers) are aware of two other factors. Their need to match important news used by their competition and the changing nature of the public’s appetite for news.}
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Whatever interests news may serve: public, commercial, religious, political competition, etc., The American society of Newspaper Editors (1996) affirm that primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinions is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgment on the issues of the time. Ideally, the relentless acquisition and independent presentation of news is the way the press serves the public trust. Hence, Woo (2003; 28) notes: “Journalism is not an end in itself but only the professional means by which reporters and editors serve the public trust”.

**Conclusion**

The debate may continue and the concerns may be various. News would continue to be left, right and centre, North, East, West, and South. Whatever views one holds on the values that guide gatekeepers or the agenda setters of our time to decide what goes in and out of their media, editors will ever be strategic shapers of public world view. Therefore, let this function be handled with the utmost social responsibility it deserves.

One last word, as news is designed (or redesigned) to serve the valued public interests, let the journalist remember that their mission is disclosure, their canon, objectivity, their discipline, verification, their credo, the people’s right to know.
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