



Voices and values in the news: News media talk, news values and attribution

Monika Bednarek*

Department of Linguistics, School of Letters, Arts and Media, The University of Sydney, Woolley A20, NSW 2006, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how discourse analysis can be used to investigate the construction of news-worthiness in news media talk via the establishment of nine news values: Timeliness, Consonance, Negativity, Impact, Proximity, Unexpectedness, Superlativeness, Personalisation and Eliteness. It compares linguistic approaches to news values and discusses cognitive, social, material and discursive aspects of news values. Focusing on broadcast news, the paper illustrates how discursive news values analysis can be combined with analysis of attribution strategies. Analyses show how voices are integrated and how news values are combined and packaged. The paper argues that bringing together news values analysis and attribution analysis can provide detailed insights into journalistic practice.

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1. Introduction: news values

This paper concerns discursive news values analysis (DNVA) or the question of how we can use linguistically-informed discourse analysis to explore the construction of newsworthiness in news texts. It builds on previous joint research (Bednarek and Caple, 2012a, 2012b, 2014), but addresses some issues that have not yet been explored in great detail, with a particular focus on attribution and broadcast news.

While the concept of news values originated outside linguistics (Galtung and Ruge, 1965, using the term *news factors*), some – although not all – linguistic scholars who research news media have also provided definitions.¹ These scholars consider news values as principles of selection, professional criteria, cognitive constraints, audience preferences, and qualities of items:

- “principles of inclusion and exclusion may be summed up under the heading of news values” (Montgomery, 2007: 5);
- news values are “the criteria employed by journalists to measure and therefore to judge the ‘newsworthiness’ of events” and to “select, order and prioritise the collection and production of news” (Richardson, 2007: 91);
- news values are “the values by which one ‘fact’ is judged more newsworthy than another” (Bell, 1991: 155);

- news values are constraints that “have a cognitive representation” (van Dijk, 1988: 121), providing “the cognitive basis for decisions about selection, attention, understanding, representation, recall, and the uses of news information in general” (van Dijk, 1988: 119);
- “news values are the (*imagined*) preferences of the expected audience” (Richardson, 2007: p. 94, italics in original);
- news values are “the qualities that make a news item ‘news-worthy’” (Cotter, 2010: 67).

From these definitions, it is apparent that news values are seen by linguists as playing an important role in the news process: journalists measure and judge the perceived newsworthiness of events based on what they imagine their audiences find newsworthy and use this judgment to select (include/exclude), order and produce news stories.²

² Note that there is some debate about the extent to which journalists write for the audience and how informed they are about that audience. For instance, Green (1999) notes that the conditions in Australian newspaper newsrooms are not conducive to implementing audience research successfully, and Ewart’s (1997) study of an Australian regional daily newspaper found that journalists have ideas about “typical” readers, but “say they did not generally consider readers when writing stories, but thought more about the editorial hierarchy and its members’ reactions” (Ewart, 1997: 93). On the other hand, Bell (1991), a former journalist turned linguist, provides empirical evidence for what he calls *audience design* (how linguistic style is adapted to a news outlet’s readership), which can also be seen in the linguistic differences between the ‘popular’ and the ‘quality’ press (Bednarek 2006a: 203). It is also clear that audience metrics (including information about most clicked, viewed, liked, shared, etc.) are influencing 21st century newsrooms (e.g. Bell, 2015).

* Tel.: +61 2 9036 7201.

E-mail address: Monika.Bednarek@sydney.edu.au

¹ For reasons of scope, I strictly focus on linguists here, therefore excluding scholars such as Bignell (2002), Conboy (2007) and Hartley (1982); see cross-disciplinary review in Caple and Bednarek (2013).

Table 1
Approaches to news values.

van Dijk (1988: 120)	Bell (199: 156–160)	Caple and Bednarek (2013)
“News values formulated in the economic terms of news production”: e.g. sales/subscriptions, budgets, amount of advertising, limitations of space, beliefs/opinions of news actors and the public, number of reporters, agency subscriptions, competition		
“Closely tied to the social routines of newsgathering and organisational production”: periodicity/deadlines, news organisation into sections, accessibility of sources (elites)	Values in the news process: continuity, competition, option, composition, predictability and prefabrication	News selection factors: <i>any</i> factor or criterion impacting on whether or not an event gets covered or a story becomes published, not necessarily values
	Values in news actors and events: negativity, recency, proximity, consonance, unambiguity, unexpectedness, superlativeness, relevance, personalisation, eliteness, attribution and facticity	News values: values relating to the newsworthiness of events and actors
	Values in the news text: brevity, clarity and colour	News writing objectives: general goals associated with news writing, such as clarity of expression, brevity, colour, accuracy, etc.

Table 2
Dimensions of news values.

Material: an event in its material reality holds potential news value	<i>What are an event's potential news values?</i>
Cognitive: news workers and audience members have beliefs about news values and newsworthiness	<i>What beliefs do news workers and/or audience members hold about news values?</i>
Social: news values are applied as selection criteria in journalistic routines and practices	<i>How do news workers apply news values as criteria in selecting what events to cover and publish?</i>
Discursive: news values can be established/constructed or negotiated through discourse	<i>How are news values communicated through discourse, pre-, during, and post-news production and in news products?</i>

However, linguists have included different aspects of the news process under the heading of *news values*. As Table 1 shows, van Dijk (1988) and Bell (1991) take a broad approach and include a variety of economic and newsgathering aspects. This contrasts with Bednarek and Caple (2012a: 41) and Caple and Bednarek (2013), who restrict the term *news values* to Bell's category of “values in news actors and events”. They agree with Cotter (2010: 80) that factors such as space, content mix, deadlines and others are best treated as “factors other than newsworthiness” which impact on news production. The remainder of this paper makes use of the term *news values* in this narrow sense.

Like other values, news values can be considered to have cognitive, social and discursive aspects: in van Dijk's (1998) words, values are culturally “shared mental objects of social cognition” (74); they are “applied by social members in a large variety of practices and contexts” (74), and discursive strategies may establish (p. 262), select, or emphasise specific values (p. 286). While van Dijk makes these points about values in general, we may also consider *news values* to have these three dimensions (cognitive, social, discursive). In addition, a fourth dimension can be recognised: a ‘material’ dimension.³ Each dimension corresponds to a different research perspective on news values, as suggested in Table 2.

However, in much news values research, these four dimensions are not clearly distinguished, and at times conflated. O'Neill and Harcup (2008) point out that “discussion of news values sometimes blurs distinctions between news *selection* and news *treatment*” (O'Neill and Harcup, 2008: 171, italics in original).⁴

³ The use of the term *material* is inspired by John Richardson (Bednarek and Caple, 2012b: 103).

⁴ Galtung and Ruge (1965) themselves distinguish three elements: *selection* (events that satisfy news factors will be selected); *distortion* (once selected, the news media accentuate what makes news items newsworthy), and *replication*, meaning that selection and distortion occurs “at all steps in the chain from event to reader” (p. 71).

Montgomery (2007: 10) notes that “the epistemological status of the ‘factors’ [news values] is somewhat ambiguous”.

Following Bednarek and Caple (2012a), this paper takes a *discursive* perspective on news values, albeit with a focus on language and excluding other semiotic resources. Newsworthiness is thus treated as a quality of news media talk and text, and news values are conceptualised as the ‘newsworthy’ aspects of actors and events as constructed through linguistic resources. Most previous comments on the relationship between language and news values (Bednarek, 2006a; Bell, 1991; Cotter, 2010) appear to suggest that news values exist independently of language or prior to the news text and/or assume a mono-directional process, one where news values ‘drive’ or become ‘embedded’ in language. In contrast, referring to news values as ‘constructed’ or ‘established’ emphasises the constitutive dimension of texts in what Fairclough sees as the dialectical relationship between texts and society/culture, where “[t]exts are socioculturally shaped but they also constitute society and culture, in ways which may be transformative as well as reproductive” (Fairclough, 1995: 34). It is also in line with the assumption that cognitive representations are “(re)produced as well as (re)constructed by social practices” (van Dijk, 1998: 228), including discourse. Using the words ‘construct’ or ‘establish’ aims to emphasise the ‘bottom-up’ aspect of social reproduction, where social practices sustain, continue and change the system (van Dijk, 1998: 229), without denying that there is also a ‘top-down’ aspect of social reproduction. In sum, this constructivist approach is not intended to be anti-cognitivist, anti-material or anti-ethnographic, but rather presented as complementary to existing approaches.

In theory, a discursive perspective can be applied to the various phases of the news process: from story conceptualization, story construction, and story position to evaluation of the reporting (see Cotter, 2010: 73 for these stages). In practice, I have started by systematising the linguistic resources used to construct news values in published/broadcast news stories, working with a list of nine news values, as explained in Section 2.

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