

NEW VALUES IN EAST AFRICA

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News values are criteria that determine whether a particular event should be given coverage and by how much prominence.

The front page of any newspaper is so important one, that it should carry most valuable news of the day. The first page must cater for such choosy items of news, which are special and distinguished as compared other news.

The most vibrant journalism in East Africa is to be found in Kenya, where I have worked for most of my career, spanning 27 years. In the past two years, I have been based here in Dar es Salaam, working for Mwananchi Communications Limited (MCL), a subsidiary of the Nation Media Group (NMG).

In terms of numbers, Tanzanian papers have the smallest circulations. Interestingly, the paper with the highest circulation is *Mwanaspoti*, an MCL publication. The leading Kiswahili dailies, *Mwananchi* and *Nipashe* (belonging to IPP Media), hardly sell 50,000 copies between them. Uganda, where the NMG also has a presence, having acquired Monitor Publications, has high potential.

The *Daily Nation*, which has the highest circulation in East and Central Africa, among the dailies, specializes in political coverage. But, of course, the biggest newspaper in the region, the *Sunday Nation*, has for too long distinguished itself for its coverage of politics.

According to journalism scholars, news journalism has a broadly agreed set of values, often referred to as 'newsworthiness.' News values are not universal and can vary widely between different cultures.

According to Pranab Hazra, an American journalist, there is a hierarchy in the selection of news. Political news stories receive more prominent coverage than any other.

Disaster and crime stories receive more special attention than any social or civic problems. The focus, it becomes clear, is on events rather than issues and processes: on eminent or elite people rather than poor and marginalised: on exotic and novel rather than ordinary, the everyday and the usual.

Evidently, he says, certain 'values' are at work in the way some happenings, some people, some nations, and some cities are considered newsworthy and others not so.

Numerous happenings are not reported; a strict selection process shifts out what is not newsworthy, and chooses to publish what is.

In a article titled, *Understanding the News Values*, Dr Ken Blake of Middle Tennessee State University states that a writer's lead should emphasize the most "newsworthy" information in the story he is trying to tell.

But how do you figure out what information is most newsworthy? The information you consider most newsworthy depends in part on your own values, experiences and knowledge. But some general guidelines exist. Below are several characteristics that can make information newsworthy. The more of these characteristics a piece of information has, the more newsworthy the information is.

Impact: Information has impact if it affects a lot of people.

- A proposed income tax increase, for instance, has impact, because an income tax increase would affect a lot of people.
- The accidental killing of a little girl during a shootout between rival drug gangs has impact, too. Even though only one person -- the little girl -- was directly affected, many people will feel a strong emotional response to the story.

Timeliness: information has timeliness if it happened recently.

- "Recently" is defined by the publication cycle of the news medium in which the information will appear.
For "Newsweek," events that happened during the previous week are timely.
For a daily newspaper, however, events that happened during the 24 hours since the last edition of the paper are timely.
For CNN Headline News, events that happened during the past half hour are timely.

Prominence: information has prominence if it involves a well-known person or organisation.

- If you or I trip and fall, no one will be all that interested, because you and I aren't well known.
- But if the president trips and falls, everyone will be interested because the head of state is well known.

Proximity: information has proximity if it involves something happened somewhere nearby.

- If a bus accident in India kills 25 people, Tanzanian paper will devote maybe three or four paragraphs to the story.
- But if a bus accident kills 25 people in Dar es Salaam, our newspaper devote a sizable chunk of its front page to the story.

Conflict: information has conflict if it involves some kind of disagreement between two or more people.

- Remember how, when you were a child, everyone would run to watch a fight if one erupted on the playground?
- Fights have drama -- who will win? -- and invite those watching to choose sides and root for one or more of the combatants.
- Good democracy involves more civil -- we hope -- conflicts over the nature of public policy. That's why the media carry so much political news. Journalists see themselves as playing an important role in the public debate that forms the basis for democracy.

Weirdness: information has weirdness if it involves something unusual or strange.

- Charles A. Dana, a famous editor, once said, "If a dog bites a man, that's not news. But if a man bites a dog, that's news!"
- Dana was saying that people are interested in out-of-the-ordinary things, like a man biting a dog.

Currency: information has currency if it is related to some general topic a lot of people are already talking about.

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

These are the essential elements of every good news story. Most readers are aware of these six questions, but there many other values that contribute to the definition of news. Gerald Lanson and Mitchell Stephens, authors of *Writing and Reporting The News*, emphasize 11 judgments that journalism students should make when evaluating newsworthiness.

Impact

- The facts and events that have the greatest effect on the audience are the most newsworthy
- Weight
- The significance of a particular fact or event lies in its value with respect to other facts or events
- Controversy
- Arguments, debates, charges, countercharges, and fights increase the value of news
- Emotion
- Take into account human interests that touch our emotions
- The Unusual
- When a dog bites a man it's not news; but when a man bites a dog, it is news. (Old journalistic cliché)
- Prominence
- More prominent individuals are given more attention
- Proximity
- Concentrate on news that is of local interest; the closer to home the better
- Timeliness
- Emphasize what is new
- Currency
- Take into account what is on people's minds
- Usefulness
- Help the audience answer questions and solve problems in their daily lives
- Educational Value
- Make readers more knowledgeable rather than merely informed

While these values help determine what is reported in both print and television news, the medium also shapes the message.

This is a process in which media editors get to choose the leading news of the day. They consider such things as timeliness, prominence, impact, proximity, how much drama was involved, how weird a subject matter is, or how regular something occurs in a particular community, for example, an increase in crime.

So, are news values in East Africa adhered to?

Journalism in East Africa does not deviate from these general principles, because we have largely copied how it's done in the West. After all, what we have is just an extension of the western journalism.

In the three countries, there is an obsession with the political elite. These are key decision makers. They are the most prominent actors. Obviously, our eyes are on the presidency, the Cabinet, Parliament and the individual politicians.

All extensively covers parliament. We also cover business, commerce and industry. But unlike in Kenya, sports coverage is a big thing in Tanzania. In fact, this is the only country in the region where a sports newspaper has such a huge circulation. Its success has seen a proliferation of sports newspapers modelled on *Mwanaspoti*.

As happens in Kenya and Uganda, political parties provide the fodder for newspapers. Areas that are not so well covered include the environment and the rural areas, where the majority of our people live.

But the media houses are themselves based in Dar es Salaam and other major towns, and in line with the value of proximity, the bulk of the coverage is around there.

With entertainers coming into prominence, we have seen increased coverage of musicians and film stars. Bongo Flava and Tanzania films have huge followings. But Tanzania with a relatively new tradition in private media, following the economic liberalisation since the 1990s, has tended to ignore these new celebrities, who have a lot of influence among youth, thus continuing the old tradition of the State-owned media covering party leaders and cadres almost exclusively.

Interestingly, the increasingly popular Tanzanian stars would rather be interviewed by Kenyan journalists. I am talking about people like Matonya, Marlaw, Ali Kiba and so on, who are more popular in Kenya than back home.

Ugandan musicians have fared a lot better, hogging coverage in the media back home, with the emphasis on their newfound riches and extravagant lifestyles.

According to a Tanzanian editor, Peter Nyanje, the biggest test of news values in Tanzania definitely emerged with liberalisation. It was then that information started to be regarded more as a commodity (business) rather than a service. Immediately after information became a commodity, sensationalism became common. Before then, the State-owned papers gave saturated coverage only to the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi leadership and the cadres.

Though journalism is experiencing constant changes, he says, there is still a tendency in the newsrooms in Tanzania to cling to the traditional news values, dominated by leaders telling the people what to do and exhorting them to be patriotic, while hardly addressing their intrinsic problems, including the rampant poverty around the country.

But, is there a need to re-define news values to make them reflect the needs of the time? A fellow Kenyan journalist working in Tanzania says: "I think a lot of times the news values are subjective. State media will most likely project a desirable image of anything the government does,

while the independent media will try to protect their own interests. That said, however, more independent media adhere to the real news values more than the State media especially those that are not owned by an individual.

But still a lot of media today are fragmented and try to segment their audience. That way a certain media can be known for a particular subject. For example, magazines, radio, entertainment TV and all. Even in newspapers they try to segment their audience by giving targeted pullouts that will cater for the news value of those that they are talking to. Essentially, this is borne from the fact that it is hard to please diverse groups in one setting.

But again there still remains the headline news, especially in newspapers and TV news. Do these adhere to news values?

I would say sometimes. But in the example of Kenyan media there is too much emphasis on the political front, such that anything that the politicians do becomes top news no matter how degenerative to the society. A lot of people have expressed their disinterest to political news, especially when it involves just wrangles, so the news media has been trying to steal a few headlines of other nature, for example health.

In Tanzania, I find that every editor speaks his or her own language and it is almost impossible to predict what will make the top news. Sometimes prominence, timeliness and aspect of conflict are not wired in.

All in all I think there are a lot of important stories that are left out because the editors don't think they deserve to be top news. These include health, social services, education and women.

There is a new push to have news gatherers pay more attention to developmental news that is aimed at shaping policy rather than be mere parrots of government heads and influential people. I think this will be what will shape the future.

But an interesting development is the emergence of what another colleague of mine refers to as personalised media as opposed to private and public media. In the personalised media, the owner determines the news values, often directing his editors on what to cover and what angles to take. There is a Dar es Salaam-based investigative paper, which would every day carry a story against former President Benjamin Mkapa. The stories appeared orchestrated to achieve a certain goal, relying on sources that seemed to have a clear objective.