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Comment

Choices that Make Radio Science Stories

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General criteria

What makes a science story? Behind the scene there are many choices: what, how and when to broadcast. Decisions are made according to the general criteria of news values to which we add two groups: personal and emerging criteria.

General criteria of choices are news values for the science stories. According to Tonner, stories containing human interest are important in everyday life, report less complicate discoveries and science as a part of the broader subject comes to the media easily.[1]

The more detail list of general criteria we quote from Gregory and Miller. First, an event has to get over the threshold of news interest (1) and further criteria are (2) meaningfulness, relevance and consonance; (3) co-option and composition; (4) frequency, unexpectedness and continuity; (5) competition; (6) unambiquity and negativity; (7) facts, sources and their reliability; (8) elitism and personalization.[2]

News values are not stabile and, as cultural categories they are a subject of changes, depending on social and cultural context. One of the most common news values is proximity: what is news here could not be news somewhere else in the world. But basic news values are more or less similar in various milieus. After his investigation on British newspapers and television, "Hetherington has found out that journalists have based their choice on two criteria: (1) what is political, social and human importance of event, and (2) will it excite, interest and entertain the public. He has concluded that journalist's choices and perception of newsworthiness has tended towards sociocentrism – the reinforcement of established society, upholding law and order, gradualist reform (1985:12). Nevertheless, cross-national study suggests that much the same factors play a similar role in different media systems".[3]

Personal criteria

Depending on previous experience, knowledge and skills, some choices are made according to the journalist's/editor's and scientist's personal criteria. E.g. AIDS was not reported in the American media because it was considered unattractive and affected unimportant constituencies and has become news only after Rock Hudson revelations and when families of some journalists were involved.[4] What effects the editor personally, and in general is not so important, will become the news of the day!

Perceptional bias (unconscious selections according to the mental schemes or pictures reporter has developed in his life)[5] is a very important personal criterion. Journalist's choice of interviewed scientist can be based upon his perception whether the scientist has clear, connected, non-controversial reasoning, keen to communicate or not? Auto perception of journalist's own role in the society is also among personal criteria. Some journalists see their purpose in informing. Others have pro-science agenda. Most of them do not see education as their function, and some see science as a way to sell their stories.[6]

Personal criteria of the scientist are his wiliness to go to the media, his communication skills and his "media sex appeal". Media simply love some scientists; they are news per se. If there is not even an event, if we have such a scientist we have a story. How scientists perceive media, their knowledge and attitudes towards media importance, logic and audiences, and their own role in it is an important part of science story producing. The auto perception of scientists varies from reluctance to omnipresent "experts" in all fields circulating in the media.[7]

Emerging criteria

Emerging criteria are economical, organizational and technical. The development of the media landscape can influence the choice and we can assume that science has less chance to get to the media in the less developed media market, with less radio stations. When competing with the other news of the day science stories are often put aside. The more developed media market with more profiled programmes is potentially more convenient for scientific issues. The nature of the media (public v. campaigning) and their role in certain circumstances define criteria of choices; who will report, what and how. Circulation war between *Daily Mirror* and the *Express* resulted with campaigning approach in the case of the great UK GM debate: "they entered the debate first, raised new issues first, made use of more dramatic headlines, and devoted a larger proportion of their coverage", while the authors of the greatest part of news items were "non-scientific" correspondents (consumer, political, general…).[8] Economical circumstances are influencing media performance. If we have bigger budget we will travel more, have more experts and other collaborators, spend more on scientific books and journals. Some studies has showed that sometimes "the news follow more the lines of a script written in advance, than the reality itself. They 'define' and 'pre-structure' the situation (Lang, 1953; Halloran et al., 1970). That confirms that sometimes media are more influenced by their own organizational, economical and technical structure than by the reality".[9]

Conclusion

Here we have tried to indicate complexity of criteria which influence choices behind radio science stories. We often hear scientists complaining that journalists change and even distort their stories. Serial of different choices journalists make every day, as W. Lippmann said, are not and can not be objective; they are more part of conventions. How serious these conventions will be depends on the quality they want to achieve.

Notes and references

[1] M. Toner, "Introduction", in D. Blum, M. Knudson, (Eds), *A Field Guide for Science Writers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p. 130.
[2] J. Gregory, S. Miller, *Science in Public* (First paperback printing), Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, 2000, p.110-114.
[3] Golding and Elliot, 1979, Gaunt, 1990, quoted in D. McQuail, *Media Performance*, SAGE Publications, London, 1992, p. 217.
[4] E.g. A. Fischer at 4. World Science Journalist's Conference, Montreal, October 2004.
[5] D. Gordon, J.M. Kittros, *Controversies in media ethics*, Longman, New York, 1999, p. 82-82.
[6] There are many discussions on that, e.g. at EuroScience Open Forum, Stocholm, August 2004.
[7] See more in R. Rieffel, "Du vedetteriat politique", *u Hermes*, CNRS editions, Paris, br.4, 1989, p. 117-220.
[8] J. Durant, Linsdey, *The Great GM Food Debate* (POST 2000a), Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, London, 2000.
[9] D. McQuail, *Media Performance*, cit., p. 231.

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