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## FOCAL POINTS ON CONSTRUCTING NEWS STORIES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The issues stated in the article line with the current interest to pragmatic value of news releases in modern media. The news is thought to be a verbalized focal reflection of some event that was chosen by media professionals for setting the current information agenda. Having generated the opinions on the newsworthiness the authors present a set of values that may be used for measurement of relevance and clarity of an event reflection in the news content with frequency, clarity, predictability, unexpectedness, amplitude, cultural proximity, elite nations, elite people, personification, negativity among them. The novelty of the research is that the newsworthiness is checked with the focus to lexical (thematic) representation of the news in a diachronic approach: the empirical base of the research was taken from the archives of UK national and local media sources (18–20<sup>th</sup> cent.) and implied comparison of lexical means that reflected an event itself and some values of human interest potential in the news stories written in defined periods. The article states the trend for dynamics in the way the event is reflected in the news stories – the information core of the story is merged with detailed reporting parts, and their content is conditioned by social and moral values.

**Key words:** discourse, media content, news story, news value, focal representation.

**Introduction.** Information exchange has significant implication for the nature of social relations, and it explains special interest to intellectual, artistic and creative media practices

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Needless to say, that media has the power to influence people and affect the future of society, and the detailed understanding of the information patterns in relation to broad social demands to mass media is far from simple task. There are various approaches that regard media as sources of information or opinion shapers that construct information lines' content these days [7, p. 4]. Some suggest that while depicting news about violence or misfortune journalists preprogram people's life with dominance of promiscuity or danger [3]. Paul Hodkinson contradicts such point. Admitting that «political or moral bias in the media may lead to a predominance of certain opinions among audiences» [7, p. 4], that the general quality of media content may affect the level population is informed, Paul Hodkinson states that media mirrors state of things in society, they reflect back events, behaviors, social relations or values that have been claimed to be important. From this perspective, when being accused of manipulating public opinion and values through bias, news media professionals defend themselves reminding “don't shoot the messenger”, thus implying that news content should reflect the world, and if people don't like the news, «they should seek to improve the world rather than blame media» [7, p. 5].

**Background.** In linguistics of media discourse it is stated that news content both mirrors and shapes social life as it does not reflect events perfectly or neutrally [6]. It is considered to be a set of representations of the world, not a mirror but selective reflection. Only certain issues and incidents are included into a news line, shaping opinions and social patterns on international or local levels. In the process of seeking for a worthy event that can potentially become a catchy story professional journalists hunt, verify, consider and reject dozens and hundreds of variants. One of their major demands is that the event must have great human interest potential (that is, the aspect of a story in the media that interests people because it describes the experiences or emotions of individuals to which others can relate (ABBYY Lingvo)). Keeping this in mind, web providers, editors of news agencies select the events that have richer story potential and start processing it.

The above stated issue on 'news conformity to facts' has been considered as current for some decades in media linguistics [1–4; 6; 7; 10 etc.],

but in spite of the number of researches devoted to various aspects of informative patterns, pragmatic functions and stylistic ranks of media sources, the issue of news construction still requires detailed investigation. This article focuses on common features of news representation patterns in UK media sources that have been proved to be stable from the point of diachronic media discourse research – for a couple of centuries the news story has been constructed of factual information merged with some details and commentaries.

A view of what the news should be like is based on universally accepted requirements that «the news is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality» [10]. The qualifier 'due' indicates to the intention to report on any event or happening accurately and clearly, but it is apparent, however, that news can never constitute a neutral, unbiased or impartial reflection on the world. Being based at real events the content of news stories is constructed in accordance with some viewpoints, social priorities and cultural values in mind.

**The constituents of the News model.** The news story is not a neutral account, but one or another particular version, or representation of an event or happening. Some of these versions may be more or less detailed, better substantiated than others, directed to various groups, but none are unbiased, and the focus in which the news represents events points to certain values and priorities of those who are responsible for news production. To illustrate the point about news content represented in media texts we will consider two sequential stages of news production – the selection of events to base news content and the construction of news stories.

**Selection of events.** The first step in selecting news for reporting is called «gatekeeping». It may be defined as filtering events and issues that take place on a given day, and streaming them up into a newspaper or website news lines, which is the second step called «setting agenda»; in other words, journalists and other news providers choose which event to cover and which to exclude. «Gatekeeping» is not seen by audience, but making decisions media staff affects what people know, care for and talk about. In other words, media professionals shape the focus of public concern, and such practice of managing

public awareness and priorities is known as «agenda setting» [8, p. 177]. According to Paul Hodkinson, «gatekeeping» and «agenda setting» are two terms that identify a correlation between the amount of coverage devoted to an issue in the media and the level of importance attributed to it by the public. Being joined they might provide «empirical evidence for the plausible assumption that news gatekeeping has a strong influence on what people know about and what they think is important, although it should be noted that the direction of causality is ambiguous as news providers may claim that the stories they include reflect existing public priorities rather than shaping them» [7, p. 129].

**News value.** The process of news selection is thought to be associated with detailed evaluation of newsworthiness [7, p. 129], that is, providing priorities of current events and issues in media content. In the works of British experts on media culture a set of criteria to evaluate newsworthiness has been offered; their choice is a result of selection and controversial exclusions. First attempts ‘to measure’ news values were made in the 70<sup>th</sup> of the last century [4; 8], since that moment a set of universal criteria has been enriched: frequency, amplitude, clarity, predictability, unexpectedness, cultural proximity, elite nations, elite people, personification, continuity, composition, negativity [7, p. 130–134].

**Frequency** is associated with some discrete events that play themselves out in the short timespan between one news release and the next. This notion is connected with the increasing prominence of immediacy and recency, they are referred to the emphasis placed by news lines on breaking top stories as quickly as possible (i.e. criminal or violent incidents), and the most recent news sometimes are prioritized even if they aren’t particularly strong with respect to the content value [1; 7].

**Amplitude** is referred to noticeability [7, p. 130]; the more dramatic or extreme an event is within its category, the more likely it is to receive prominent coverage. The selection of dramatic or challenging events gets more newsworthy, i.e. a fire must be of a sufficient size or a crime of a top level of seriousness.

**Clarity** is welcome, as a one-dimensional event without extra ambiguities involves the clear attribution of right or wrong, obvious victims and

villains; acts of criminal violence, for example, can be easily centered on individuals, who can be blamed, victims, with whom audiences will empathize [7, p. 131].

**Predictability** is related to clarity that fits with the public expectations based on social stereotypes [7, p. 131]. It is often related to specific anticipated events, i.e. media speculations about the great possibility of violence at football tournaments, protest marches, news stories about young people activate stereotypical expectations about youth delinquency.

The values presented above are mixed with that of **unexpectedness** of news, its being extraordinary and unusual. It might sound strange but the rarity of happening urges amplitude and implies cultural familiarity (it happens to a family near us or like us). The unexpectedness as a value is important, it explains why all the details of each of our everyday lives are unlikely to become news – it’s too unremarkable as compared to a sudden disappearance of a child or a fire in the neighboring area [7, p. 132].

**Cultural proximity** as the news value tends to favour stories with places and people familiar to the audience. It is advised that news should be ethnocentric [4], and it is noticed that in UK news lines disasters and other happenings in the UK itself or in countries regarded as close to it tend to get more coverage than similar events in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, it is noted [7, p. 131] that distant places may still be newsworthy, for example, some disasters in Africa may receive coverage in the UK if British citizens were among the casualties, while some misfortunes in the Middle East might be mentioned in the US news release as a result of ongoing diplomatic tensions between the USA and the states of this region.

Associations with **elite nations** and **elite people** also stand for values as the events that relate to the most powerful nations or famous people are more likely to be covered than those taking place in poorer areas or happened to less influential people. Celebrity stories are attractive because they encapsulate extraordinary levels of wealth and power thus getting extra interest and emotions of ordinary people. In political or commercial sectors **personification** might get importance as individual style of life, morals, behavior, and decisions are very likely to be selected.

The values stated above concern pragmatics of public psychology in selecting news, whereas the values of **continuity** and **composition** show the most universal feature of news contents, as their textual representations should fit together as a whole [7, p. 132–133]. News stories are composed in accordance with a universal news pattern «Five Ws / Five Ws and one H / or the Six Ws», though there may be some variations in presenting domestic and foreign news. Once a story has entered the news agenda it may gain public interest and be continued in the future. Public may get keen to find out what happened next, urging providers to allocate space to ongoing stories.

According to Chris Waugaman, it is important to identify why an idea for the story would be worthy. If it (the idea) supports at least two out of seven news values, a worthy story can potentially be constructed. The mostly required news values are as following: prominence (how often this has happened); proximity (how close this story is to our reader); immediacy (how recent this has happened); impact (how this can affect readers); novelty (how unique it is). The expert points out that it is better if a proper human interest story includes some conflict or public displeasure, which is directed to the emotional move of readers [11].

It is necessary to state that the negative slant of the news stories is a dominant feature in the process of news selecting. Paul Hodkinson thinks that this estimated feature of the newsworthiness may be called **negativity** [7, p. 134]. It tends to dominate in modern news agenda, it fits better with other news values than positive stories. Negative stories concern discrete short-term events, they are easier to be presented in an unambiguous manner and are based on rare or unexpected happenings. As it is stated in [7, p. 143], negative stories fit better with established expectations, offer more potential for personalization, form clearly and easily discernable opposition of villains and victims which causes empathy and generalize interest. J. Galtung and M. Ruge [5] once explained that bad news story has more impact and generates more public interest than any good story. Readers are psychologically eager to learn that there is somewhere worse than in their life situations, that their problems are so insignificant and

imperceptible that it is shameful to complain. As a result, readers comprehend their own life circumstances as rather tolerable and bad news is transformed into good news.

Our research on historical issues of UK news focus (RGNF, project No. 15-04-00134) included critical examination of topical universality and variability of the news content. Having analyzed the news archives of some national top and local British papers we noticed that negativity of the news content has always been on the agenda. The news on natural disasters and personal misfortunes were in the focus of journalistic attention in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the news «Lamentable Distress by Fire» from «Saunders's News-Letter» (Tuesday, 17 March, 1789) one may state the universal news pattern: event (*fire*) / place (*Joseph's lane near South Great George's street, Dublin*) / time (*Saturday Night 7th March*):

The **Humane** and **Charitable** are most humbly entreated to contribute even the smallest **Relief** to Charles Field and his Wife, whose little Dwelling in Joseph's lane, near South Great George's street was on Saturday Night 7th March inst. entirely **consumed by Fire**; their two Children **perished in the Flames**; and the laid **unfortunate Couple** are almost **frantic**, and in a **starving Condition**. **Benefactions** will be most thankfully received by Mrs. Peters, Grocer, No. 31. South Great George's street, who will **certify the melancholy Narration**, or by Mr. Stapleton, at No. 74, Dame-Erect (BNA).

As it follows from this story the factual core of the news (a disaster – *fire*; victims – the family of Charles Field) is flavored with some emotional appeal to the readers who are asked to be as merciful to the victims and sufferers (*the Humane and Charitable*) as someone from the local community (*Mrs. Peters, Grocer, No. 31. South Great George's street; Mr. Stapleton, at No. 74, Dame-Erect*). The text is modestly enriched in merciful tone as the euphemistic descriptions of the suffering and funeral ritual were chosen by the writer (*perished in the flames, unfortunate, frantic, starving couple, benefactions, to certify the melancholy narration*) together with the title «Lamentable Distress by Fire» (*lamentable* – regrettable, from ‘lament’ – show, feel, express great sorrow or regret (FD)).

Another text from The Daily News (Thursday, January 8, 1890) demonstrates such news values as locality, currency, unexpectedness in a pair with negativity, which dominates in the descriptive elements of the text:

Within a few minutes of the birth of the New Year **twenty-six boys died from suffocation at the Forestgate Industrial Schools**. They now lie tide by tide, wrapped in fleecy with blankets, upon the floor of the infirmary, with numbers marked in big figures, or the names chalked over the inanimate heaps as to which identification is complete (BNA).

The general tone of the story differs from that of the previous, as it is fully informative though the title includes some connotation: *Disastrous Fire at Forest-Gate Industrial Schools : 26 children suffocated* (*disastrous* – causing great distress or injury; ruinous, very unfortunate (FD); *suffocate* – be killed by deprivation of oxygen (FD)).

A tragic short-term event ‘fire’ constantly dominates in UK local news lines as it is seen through values of frequency, unexpectedness, predictability, clarity, more than that it contains such participants as *villains* and *victims* with the potential for personalization of bad news for somebody else (*a family near us or like us*). It should be noted that in the tide of time the value of amplitude (*prominence of size, extreme, drama of the event*) is preserved but the merciful tone is not characteristic of the news covers on fires any more. The semantic content of the bad news narration is detailed and informal (*jump, escape*), as in the news note «Four Die in Fire» (Hartlepool Mail, Monday, 12 October, 1953):

FOUR children **died in a fire** at their home in Baneath Road, Fallin, near Stirling, to-day. They were Rosina Summerville (2 S), her brother Alec (4), her sister Katherine (8), and her brother John (13). They were the children of Mr. and Mrs. David Summerville. The parents and their other six children **escaped**. Betty (4) and Isabel (12) **jumped** from an upstairs window into a blanket held by neighbors. Janette (20) Sadie (18) and Stuart (17) **escaped** down a drainpipe. The **dead children** were found in an upstairs bedroom.

Mr. and Mrs. Summerville and another son, Edward (21) **jumped** from a window. The alarm was given about 5 a.m. but when the fire brigade arrived all the occupants of the house **had escaped** except the four children who **died**.

David Summerville, another son, left the house last night after spending the weekend with his parents,

to return to a N.C.B. school in Ayrshire, where he is a mining trainee (BNA).

It should be noted that in the 21<sup>st</sup> cent. news coverage on fire points to the social demand for security and efficiency of administrative institutions has got its importance, and it is reflected lexically in the text. In the news lines one may find the news reports which are focused on the efficiency of firefighters and indirectly urges authorities from local communities to pay attention to cases of fire in the neighboring areas:

**Firefighters from across Coventry battled a stubborn brush fire** fueled by high heat, gusty winds and extremely dry conditions on Tuesday.

**All of Coventry’s fire districts** responded to **the fire** that burned along Teakwood Drive and was first reported at around 1:20 p.m. **Crews** from West Warwick, West Greenwich and Scituate also responded **to provide support and mutual aid coverage** at **Coventry fire stations** depleted by the brush fire.

One **firefighter** from the Hopkins Hill Fire District was treated at the scene for **a minor burn**, according to reports. Authorities said that about two acres burned in the fire. Nearly **50 firefighters** worked **to control the fire** and **douse hotspots** after the fire was mostly under control. **Crews** were at the scene for more than four hours (CN).

**Conclusion.** The analysis of UK news content brings us to the final judgment that news values are the focal points that lay a basis for news content selection and measurement, with the mostly frequent unexpectedness, clarity, cultural proximity, personification among others. The amplitude as ‘noticeability’ in the news line is supported with negativity, as heavy stories (bad news about other people or areas) gets more newsworthiness being close to the criteria of familiarity and rareness of the event presented for the public news agenda. The research will be continued in order to get more detailed identifications on the lexical constituency of the bad news stories and their validity for the UK news content in diachronical and synchronic issues.

#### NOTES

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- BNA* – The British NEWSPAPER Archive. Available at: [britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/](http://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/)  
*CN* – Coventry Newswire. Available at: <http://www.topix.com/wire/city/coventry-ri>.

## DICTIONARIES

- ABBYY Lingvo. Available at: <http://www.lingvo.com>.  
*FD* – The free dictionary. Available at: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>.

## К ВОПРОСУ О ГЕНЕРИРОВАНИИ НОВОСТНОГО СООБЩЕНИЯ

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**Аннотация.** Рассматриваемые в статье вопросы связаны с возрастающим интересом к прагматической составляющей ценности новостного сообщения, опубликованного в современных средствах массовой информации. Новость считается вербализованным фокусным представлением какого-либо события, которое было выбрано редакторами масс-медийных изданий для формирования актуального информационного

контента. Принимая решение относительно включения сообщения в ленту новостей, авторы рассматривают его информационную ценность и доступность для восприятия, применяя набор критериев, включающий: частоту, ясность, предсказуемость, неожиданность, масштаб, культурную близость, влиятельность людей и наций, персонификацию, негативность. Значимость новостного сообщения оценивается с помощью анализа его лексической репрезентации в рамках диахронического подхода. Эмпирическую базу исследования составили материалы архивов национальных и региональных СМИ Великобритании XVII–XX вв. Предпринятый анализ лексических средств, использующихся для вербализации новостного события, позволил сделать вывод о критериях привлекательности новости и ее потенциальной способности вызывать общечеловеческий интерес. Авторы статьи отмечают тенденцию к динамическому представлению события в новостном контенте: информационное ядро истории сливается с описанием деталей, содержание которых обусловлено социальными и морально-этическими ценностями.

**Ключевые слова:** дискурс, медиа-контент, новостное сообщение, ценность новости, фокусное представление.