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# **FRAMING 'REALITY'**

**An exploration of how events  
become news items on television.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies at Massey University. Palmerston North. New Zealand.

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## Abstract

Television news does not reflect all that happened on any particular day. It is a selection and reconstruction of some of the available and more newsworthy occurrences.

Drawing on the influential work of Herbert Gans this thesis explores and attempts to identify the relevant factors in news selection and the typical influences affecting the final content and form that a television news item takes in representing a news event.

Using the method of participant observation ten news events were followed from their initial selection, through the news production process to the final broadcast. This was undertaken over a two week period. The analysis and examination of the institutional and professional forces affecting a news item were supported by interviews, notes and video records.

The findings confirm many of the claims made by Gans and others that a television news item is a highly constructed event. Amongst the factors shown to be most significant in this process were conventional criteria of news worthiness, professional production codes and practices, gatekeeping decisions, institutional organisational routines, time constraints and cost benefit considerations.

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## Contents

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Page</b>
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of contents	iv
Chapter One: Introduction.	1
Chapter Two: Literature review.	10
Chapter Three: Methodology.	20
Chapter Four: Results	49
Chapter Five: Conclusions	79
Chapter Six: Appendices.	119
Bibliography	190

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

On any day of the week a great many potential news events and incidents occur. Many of these could, under the right circumstances become television news stories. However, what finally 'gets to air' on television news is influenced by a wide range of social, historical, political, economic, technical and cultural factors.

Television news is produced by professional news teams and as such is a social process subject to a variety of social, institutional and personal influences. News professionals employ a wide range of audio visual skills and technological techniques to construct and represent news to the television audience. These events are turned into "narratives" to take the form of stories that are 're-presented' to the television audience. Such stories have a beginning, middle and an end in keeping with the demands of the narrative form and they also assume other characteristics in accordance with the expectations of narrative structure. The professional practices and codes associated with television production also exert a significant influence over the form of the news item. There are many variables which can influence both the meaning and final representation of a television news event in addition to its news worthiness. Indeed the degree to which an event will be considered newsworthy is also subject to a range of influences.

The objective of this thesis was to study at first hand, the processes whereby an event became a television news story. An attempt was made to explore and identify factors relevant to the selection of news and the influences impacting on the final content. No news event is simply represented, in a pure, uncorrupted, transparent manner. Rather, in becoming a news item, all events are changed, modified, and their meaning influenced by a range of forces impinging on the process of news construction. For example, Hall et al (1978) maintained:

"the media do not simply and transparently report events which they see as newsworthy.... News is the end product of a complex process which begins

with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories". (1978:424)

They considered it is by virtue of this social process of construction and representation that an "event is made intelligible" to the audience. This process, also includes a number of specific journalistic practices, which embody crucial assumptions about society, its underlying beliefs, ideologies, and general ideas about how society works (1978:425).

#### BACKGROUND:

Originally this research began on a far more simple and unsophisticated basis .

The beginnings of this research can be traced back to a day spent shadowing a TVNZ television news crew as they researched and produced a story for the evening news programme. Initially I was interested in obtaining observational information for a student teaching resource, relevant to a unit on television news included in a course I teach on Television Production at Massey University. It was possible for me to video tape everything that took place throughout the period of a whole day, in relation to a television news team. During this time following a television news reporter and crew I obtained a wealth of information concerning the nature of the news production process. TVNZ also provided me with the raw footage of the story, together with the edited news item which finally ran to air.

In reconsidering the experience during the weeks which followed it became increasingly clear to me that this project had resulted in not only a valuable teaching resource, but had also provided an opportunity to observe at first hand the complex and intriguing process of news selection and construction. The experience thus raised the question of whether all news stories were subject to the same general forces that appeared to be operating in this initial experience. Factors such as the location and timing of the event, the constraints imposed by the time and resources available to the reporter, the particular personal characteristics of the crew, the editing team, the news editor, and the nature of the competing stories which occurred that day. Even the day of the week on which an

event occurred seemed to have all have an impact on the eventual form and meaning of the news story.

Herbert Gans (1979) discussed a number of theories about how he considered story selection occurred. He argued that selection of news could be journalist centred, where it was shaped by the professional judgement of the journalist. He considered that many of these judgements stem from the nature of the journalist's training and the set of expectations which a journalist brings to the process which derive from his judgement about proper journalistic practice. He also raised the issue of the degree to which the routines and formal organisational structures of television news impact on story selection and subsequent production. In his other approach he pondered how much the actual events themselves determine news item selection.

Other theories have explained story selection in terms of such concepts as negativity, meaningfulness, personalization and threshold (Galtung and Ruge , 1973. McQueen, 1998) Others (Cohen,A.1987, Ericson, Baranek & Chan 1989, Harrison 1985, Palmer 2000) saw the news as being determined by forces,(sources) outside the news organisation, or by global forces embodied in technology resulting in "electronic colonialism" (McPhail, 2002). Still further theorists regard the news as largely determined by technological, ideological, and political forces outside of the news organisation itself. (Jones 1986, , Maltese 1998, Tuchman 1978)

Issues such as balance and fairness also play an important role in finally determining the actual content of a news item, especially where the event is contentious or controversial (Goodwin , 1990).

Cultural theorists such as Hall (1999) saw journalists as also selecting stories in accord with the value of the national culture.

Thus it is apparent that news selection is subject to a wide range of agenda-setting strategies and news values which operate both within and outside the news organisation itself. These are embodied in a wide range of forces and influences that may impinge on

the news selection process at any one time and ultimately exert a powerful influence over the final meaning and representation of the event. It is beyond the scope of this present study to provide a comprehensive account of all these theories and the factors influencing television news which is undeniably the result of a large range of complex forces that are both implicit and explicit in the news production process.

However, the objective of this thesis is largely confined to identifying the day to day influences operating on a news event within the confines of a TVNZ news production team and the associated news production process. This will begin with the initial selection of the actual event and continue through to its final broadcast form, or not, as the case may be.