

## THE CONCEPT OF 'NEWS': A RECONSIDERATION

Sudhangshu Sekhar Roy\*

***Abstract:** In the media world, 'news' is a most exciting term as every media house virtually lies and survives on news. John T Delane said 'Press lives by disclosures'<sup>1</sup>. What's the disclosure? The answer is News and news materials. What do we mean by news? In brief, the news (NEWS) is something new, but, one event (a general term of incidents, issues, themes, happenings, even gossips or rumor, etc.) is to be considered news on the basis of its newness and newsworthiness. However, a report or account of one event is not considered news until it is communicated through any form or any channel of media. Another point, however, very important is that an item is to be news on how that particular item is presented. How we present any news is also very important. Every news item is unique from the other. Its appearance, placement and coverage give the readers a clear idea that defining news under a bracket is really a difficult task. Subeditors (copyeditors) of a news desk need an eye and insight to understand events to convert them into news. Those days have already gone on what once we traditionally understood as news. Somebody now can say that an old event in a new bottle can also be news. How that new bottle of news is presented and who is presenting give the idea of something called news. The context and perspective or newer technique and technology, time, space and thinking, demand and outlook of the consumers also determine the character of news. Therefore, the focus of this article is to understand and explore the insight and changing pattern of news using a variety of definitions first followed by a formula, and then to pinpoint its character in the process of its usage and practicality.*

***Keywords:** News, Definition, Pattern, Change, Subjective.*

### Introduction

The term *news* is the core point of all kinds of journalistic activities. News media depend and survive mostly on news and news related materials. News is a most exciting and a very familiar term to the world of media industry. All forms of media have always been struggling and fighting for locating

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\* Sudhangshu Sekhar Roy, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka

1. Once the great editor of prestigious newspaper of London 'The Times' John Thadeus Delane while setting some principles of press uttered the line 'The press lives by disclosures'. The implied meaning of the statement is- the press survives through disclosures of knowledge and history of our time (Bond, 1954:3).

newsworthy events which are happening around the world, on which selling of the copies and telecasting and survival of every media house depends. This exciting product 'news' is not very easy to find as only a few events are to be considered news out of thousands of them. The trailers and the experts of this industry for the last more than one century tried their best to understand news in different ways, manners and dimensions. Initially they identify the news as a very new information, and obviously very interesting, which attracts a significant number of consumers of a community. Some of them tried to bracket the news within a very few sensational words like *sex*, *glamour* and *crime*, etc. However, the content and character of news events are getting wider dimension now, and readers sometimes get perplexed to consume items presented in the newspaper as 'news'.

With the rolling of time and rapid changing of technology, the character of media industry has also been changing, and the nature and character of newsworthy events and their scope and dimension have also been changing. News is said to be time-bound as it is a perishable item like fish. But in today's newer perspective, the news items perish so fast that it is difficult to identify the news under the traditional factor of timeliness. Therefore, the style and presentation of news have also been changing. Which item has to be presented with how many columns in a newspaper is becoming a very subjective issue now rather than objective. Experts of earlier time tried to see the news almost in a very dispassionate manner, but today's approach of the gatekeepers<sup>1</sup> and policy makers are totally different. News now-a-days has been looked upon in a very subjective and passionate mould and manner. One event seems to be news on its own merit but that item may not be covered as news in another context. Rather an item what an editor considers affirmatively and publisher in the newspaper or a telecast management considers worthy of telecast is news. In this regard the focus of this article is to understand news first through some definitions followed by a formula and then to locate the changing pattern and actual character of news in the process of its application.

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<sup>1</sup> 'A news bulletin is the result of a number of choices by a variety of "gatekeepers". They include the editor who decides on the day's coverage, or the organizer who briefs camera crews and reporters and allocates assignments ...the copy tester who chooses the stories..., the subeditor who writes the story and the duty editor who supervises the compilation of the bulletin (Watson and Hill, 1989:74).

### Understanding the background of news

The term 'news' originally was not meant for anything, which we do understand right now. It was rather the plural form of *new(s)*. In the nineteenth century the news was familiar as *tiding*. Webster dictionary defines *tiding* as an 'account of what has taken place, and was not before known' (Wikipedia on 30.06.2013). Tiding might have come from tide. A proverb said, 'Time and tide wait for none'. As journalism is time-bound, so, the term *tiding* could have been taken as the original form of news. Tiding was just some kind of tidbits, the fragmented pieces of information. That time has gone as news is not confined today within only a few tidbits. In Indian traditional system, at least in Hindi, news (message) is branded as *Sandesh*. That indicates that the news would always be *sweet* information. In our Bengali culture, when any two people meet each other then both of them would ask 'Kee Khabar' (How are you)? The reply as usual comes from the other side: 'Bhalo Achhi' (I am fine). The implied meaning of it is, the news is actually good news (information). In ancient times, especially during the time of Great Mughal Emperor Akbar, three categories of writers emerged. They were: *Waqiah Nawis* (News writer), *Khufia Nawis* (Secret agent) and *Savani Niger* (Biography writer). These writers were found working during the time of Emperor Aurangzeb too. Here the *Waqiah Nawis* were in duty to collect 'good' news for the Emperor. Bad events were desperately left out in order to give the emperor an idea that entire empire was being running smoothly. In much earlier time, during the reign of *Maurya* dynasty (around 300 BC), a class of writers had also emerged and they were called as *Prativedaka*,<sup>1</sup> who were supposed to collect report (Protibedan) and to reach it to the emperor.

Since the beginning of the last century, it is proved by the newsmakers that all the good events may not always be very good news but all the bad incidents might always be good news as bad events as usual have the instinct of creating much attention and sensation of the readers. Therefore, for most of the newsmakers, an uncritical journalism carries no news (any information without severe selling urge); rather they expect for quick fire reporting, which has thrill, excitement and glamour. Nowadays this notion has also been changing in favor of bad events. News makers are making news on what they feel sensational, glamorous or marketable.

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<sup>1</sup>*Prativedaka* is supposed to reshaped as Protibedak in Bangla later which is said as correspondent or reporter. That means *Prativedaka* during *Maurya* Dynasty was nothing but the correspondent of Emperor.

### **Ideas of news from definitions**

In order to understand the character of news we need to examine some definitions first. However, not a single definition is perfect enough to clarify what news is. It is a general assumption that perceiving the news is easier than defining it. Nevertheless, we would be able to understand *news* after getting ideas from different definitions with different angles. A great degree of perception is essential for a learner to understand news.

The very common and basic definition is: *News is something or anything new*. If we dissect the term *News* morphologically, i.e. New/s, then we find the meaning of the above definition. Something new or unusual is considered to be news. News is actually a new fact which just happened or has been happening and should have interest for a large number of people of the target group for whom one presents the news. It is interesting to a large number of the target audience, and it has relevance or importance to a large readership (Macmillan, 1997: 64). Another basic definition of news said, 'News is about what is happening or the first inkling of something that happened earlier' (Boyd et al, 2008:16). In other words, 'news is a special knowledge and it is an addition with the general knowledge of general people' (Roy, 2011: 34). News is something that attracts the attention or interests of a significant number of people (or reader) of a community. News sometime affects the whole community and sometimes affects at least a small group of people of a community. In both occasions it is news as it affects at least a significant number of people of a community.

*News = North east west south and information from these points and all points between*. A lot of incidents are happening every day at every corner of the world, and all the incidents should not be considered news as it depends on the merit and newness of the incident and readers' interest. The context or the perspective of the incident sometimes matter too.

*News = New event with specialty*. News is usually being created on the basis of occurrence of a new event (Sometimes old event may have some ingredients of news and have new dimension of news). But whenever an event happens and obviously some kind of specialty lies there, then it is news. So, 'News is a departure from the normal' (Cardownie, 1987:78). Cardownie (1987) further said, 'News is the difference between the world yesterday and the world today' (p. 77). News is the information which consumers never knew earlier. The above definitions are heralding the life

span of news. That is, news is explicitly time-bound. With the rolling of time it perishes. However, to the broadcast media ‘what happened yesterday is dead and buried. There has to be something new to say, some fresh angle’ (Boyd et al, 2008:16). For a typical print newspaper, one would have twenty four hours time to prove the newsworthiness of any event in terms of timeliness (immediacy), but for the online version of the same newspaper the freshness and the life span of the same item is only for a few minutes.

#### **Classical definition: Male dominating or chauvinism?**

We now look at a few definitions of different phenomena. The definitions are: News springs from *sur*, *sura* and *suraya* (music, liquor and woman) (Cardownie, 1987:77). A city editor Stanley Walker defined news with the succinct summary: ‘*woman, wampum and wrongdoing – sex, money, crime*’ (Bond, 1954:64). Another definition said, *News is sex, money, crime, sensation, glamour*. The above three definitions are very simple and short, but are much gender biased. Whenever any incident occurs involving any woman that is obvious that a man is also involved there, but one cannot impose a *slant* only on woman for which the event would be news. In order to create undue sensation, we usually involve woman to define any event as news. But today, in different contexts and perspectives, the trend of defining news has already started to change. So redefining it, one can say: *News equals man, woman, wampum and wrongdoing*. Feminists might well argue for an adjustment of gender; but the point remains the same (Cardownie, 1987: 78). Even then, it is quite clear that the above mentioned definitions are classic ones and some of them are quite gender biased as news is not only any event which involves money, sex, crime, etc. May be almost a hundred years back those definitions were developed when a male-chauvinistic journalism industry prevailed throughout the world. It is not quite justified in today’s modern perspective that news should be considered only whenever women are involved in an incident. But, it is quite natural that womenfolk is always at the centre of attraction for the news-makers as glamour and beauty are two strong elements of news which provoke them to look for.

#### **Some usual definitions**

Lord Northcliffe (1869-1922), one of the original press barons, said, ‘News is what somebody wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising’ (Watson & Hill, 1991: 119). It is the nature of system and society that someone wants to suppress and on the other hand press or media wants to disclose it. This is actually putting a contrasting scenario of the society. In one end, some unscrupulous people are just committing some wrongdoings like crime,

corruption, scandals both financial and sexual, lapses either intentional or unintentional mostly at government levels, and deliberately trying to hide those wrongdoings. On the other hand, the media people always try to expose those wrongdoings and misdeeds keeping in line with its watch-dog role. Deliberate suppression virtually does create more attraction on any event for the readers.

A former teacher in the department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, in his lecture said, *News is accurate, objective, and timely accounted report that disrupts the status quo or potential to be disruptive* (Roy, 2011). A traditional maxim says, '...if it bleeds, it leads' (Boyd et al, 2008:19). The implied meaning of the two extracts is that whenever any disruption is made and the people start to feel that the disruption is in their congenial vicinity then it is news.

News is understood with the way of presentation by Bangladesh Television (BTV) as "*Everything concerning the Prime Minister and the rest of the government*". (Source: The Daily Star's Rising Star, P-1; May 27, 2004). Although the definition was written with a note of satire but it is the character of state-controlled Bangladesh Television's news bulletin since its inception in 1964, which never paid any attention to meet the demand and interest of the viewers in terms of gradation of news and appropriate treatment of news. Appropriately a Chinese official said, 'News is what my Government says' (Boyd et al, 2008: 13). This is the reflection of a media system of a well-cemented regimented society.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Walter Lippmann noted that 'something definite must occur that has unmistakable form for it to be news' (Black et al, 1998: 127). Rudin and Ibbotson (2002) said, 'the usual definition of news is something that is new, interesting and true, but the definition is not sufficient...' (p.5). But in both cases, the informational accuracy is given priority for any event to be news. The basic character of news can be found from the following statement also:

"News is first and foremost happening event. Old happenings are history; something happening now is news. News can be either a surprise (unexpected) or expected. Unexpected news satisfies the audience love of the shock or surprise. Expected news satisfies the curiosity about a happening of which they already either know or have some suspicion (Macmillan, 1997: 64).

Considering above definitions, we can develop an elaborate and possibly a complete definition of news. The possible definition could be: “News is an account or statement of an event, issue, situation, subject or phenomenon involving a prominent individual or organization or any ordinary individual with any extraordinary attachment, which interests a significant number of people of a community of any system concerned and be communicated (transmitted, telecast or published) through any kind of medium like newspaper, radio or television or even an online media.” When anything happens to any famous or notorious person or if any interesting story occurs with any person that can attract people’s attention, then it can be news. When something is invented, or anything makes some person very famous, then it can also be news. Why not infamous people also? The people like Ershad Shikder (a hanged criminal of Khulna region) had always hit the headlines. De-famous or re-famous people are also the subject of news item. Ousted former president and presently a lawmaker Hussein Muhammad Ershad can easily enter those two categories in terms of time and space.

Whenever an incident, which arouses interest, thrill and excitement, is depicted in pen and paper, is known as news. News, while its definition varies from office to office (depending on function, readership, etc.), has elements common to all conceptions of news. To be news, an event must first be interesting to the public. Second, and equally important, it must be new (to the public). So we can say,  $\text{Newness} - \text{No interest} = 0$  (Newness minus no interest is equal to zero). News is a picture of running time. If we say much more, ‘news comes from daily incident, or it can be different eye cache information of running time, mainly’.

From the above different definitions, however, we are able to understand the different natures and characters of news. Different definitions actually show the different faces of news. So, news is not absolute, it is rather relative. ‘News values are subjective’ (Boyd et al, 2008: 16). News can be perceived in a different manner from the following statement also: ‘The two most engaging powers of writer are to make new things familiar and familiar things new’ (Boyd et al., 2008:19). This exposes the capacity and power of a news writer who makes news without any seemingly newsworthy event occurred.

#### **Departure from merely definitions to a formula**

The society of the West always measures everything in terms of mathematics. So the human emotion has been losing its character at the onslaught of

mathematics. That doesn't mean that mathematical definition is bad. An expert of journalism Cardownie (1987) tries to see the insight of news not in terms of definition, rather in terms of mathematical formula. The formula is: **News = Event + People + Readers interest** (p. 78). He simply develops a formula but not explained in his book what he wants to say with that. But, we can produce a chart which can be an extension and explanation of that formula. The formula to a large extent is suitable to judge any event whether it is worthy as news or not. Instead of a plain definition, using the formula would be much safer for us to understand news.

Event	People	Reader's Interest
Event	People	Feeling
Idea	Plant	Thinking
Innovation	Animal	Concern
Incident	Non-living thing	Relief
Accident	Environment/Nature	Asking
Killing		Decision
Issue		Reaction
Death		Aggrieved
Subject		Appeal
Fact		Demand
Phenomenon		Satisfaction
Object		Action
Rumor/Gossip		Motivation
Change		Agitation
Concept		Demonstration
Achievement		Enjoy / Amusement
Action		

From the above chart, we can understand what we mean by event, people or the reader's interest. *Event* is a broad term of different incidents, issues, situation, phenomenon, etc. May be a very good idea is developed by a teacher of any university which can create a state of thinking or concern among the people of the community in society. If so, then it is news. 'Events have to be unexpected or rare, or preferably both, to become news' (Watson and Hill, 1991: 119). And in every event, people (human beings) are directly or indirectly involved. Some incidents may happen involving any animal, plant, nature, environment or even any non-living thing; in those events, people are also involved in some way. 'Top-dying' disease in *Sundari* or



*Poshur* trees in the mangrove forest of Sundarban of Bangladesh is an alarming event as the people's interest and lives are very much involved there. In ultimate sense, the interest of human being is involved in terms of their welfare and survival. This happens due to the *symbiotic nature* of all elements, ingredients or entities of the planet, and for that people are connected to everything. Former editor of *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* Harold E Vance in his book *The Practice of Journalism* (1963) said, 'News is people' (Watson and Hill, 1991: 119).

'The most interesting element in news is often people, not just famous people but people in general and what they do. People, just like gossip, give the news some feeling: curiosity, envy, admiration, malice or affection. People through whom we live our lives vicariously, or whose actions and decisions influence and shape our existence' (Boyd et al, 2008: 17).

And as readers we find interest in any newsworthy event in different ways. To see or to hear any news, somebody acts or another one reacts. Somebody finds relief; another one is aggrieved or somebody relaxes, and another one demonstrates. These are the different natures of readers' digestive approach to different newsworthy incidents. But before readers interest, one has to put one's attention to the event's *merit* and *owner's policy* too. And here the issue of *treatment* of news is also very important. Soon after the charge of caretaker government taken by Mr. Fakhruddin Ahmed in 2007, one or two incidents happened that did not have involvement of people directly. In one incident, two big pythons were found near the rail track of Chittagong rail station. And costly SUV Hummer cars were found abandoned in two areas of Dhaka city. In the first incident, it is not human being but reptiles were involved and in the second case, non-living things were involved but both the incidents involved the human beings and created some sensation, feeling and interests.

#### **News: Objectivity Lost**

News is new and honestly and accurately reported information which is about current events of any kind anywhere in the world set against a background of other honestly and accurately reported information previously gathered as news; selected fairly but without artificial balancing and without political motive or editorial colouring by trained journalists; included in a bulletin because it is interesting significant or relevant to the bulletin's audience in the

eyes of the journalists; and presented fearlessly and objectively but with respect for the law and the BBC's own rules concerning taste and editorial standards. (The task of Broadcasting News, 1975, p. 9 as cited in Macmillan, 1997:62).

Objectivity emphasizes on what is good and fair, and its goal is that the news reporting would be fair and impartial. Such an idea is crucial in a society that views journalistic independence as a corner stone of democracy. This is much reflected in the following two statements.

This perhaps helps explain the difference in attitudes to independence in reporting and notions to objectivity between the Western and Eastern democracies. For example, the ideas of independent impartial reporting practiced in North America, Europe, Britain, and Australia are very different from ideas prevalent and underpinning journalism in other developed countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and, of course, China (Macmillan, 1997: 65).

Right from the initial stage in a news decision-making process the event is subject to individual interpretation, and that in itself means it is subject to a personnel value judgment. News judgment is largely subjective, and the results are too often in the mind of the beholder. Facts to one person are often lies to another. This is why it is so difficult to discuss and synthesize such concepts as news balance and impartiality; what is important is the preservation of accuracy (Macmillan, 1997:67).

Mere objectivity sometimes can obscure truth. 'Total objectivity in reporting is unattainable because it would require complete neutrality' (Seital, 1984:318).

However, news values cannot be as subjective as all that, since there is often a great similarity between rival news bulletins. Professional judgment exercised by professionals seeks the same end: truth, fairness and honesty in reporting. The traditional editors of the past did not want thought; they wanted their readers and

viewers to be thrilled by the latest dramatic news. Sensationalism is still the word used to condemn any undue emphasis on the events at the expense of understanding. Journalists are also sometimes accused of being interested only in conflict on the principle that this is more dramatic than a hundred of disputes peacefully settled; that grief provides better pictures; that political life and political story is boring unless everyone is attacking everyone else. They are also condemned for looking for the picture and the soundbite rather than the issues (Macmillan, 1997:68).

In the process of steady intrusion of subjectivity in news, news gradually becomes a good tool now instead of mere information of molding opinion in their own way by the newspaper authorities either for their ideological interest and purpose or for pulling huge sale. In order to downsize the concept of objectivity some journalists of America simply argue the 'objectivity as bullshit' (Charnley and Charnley, 19879: 40).

### **Conclusion**

From our discussion it is clear that 'news is', no doubt, 'a departure from the normal' (Cardownie, 1987:78). However, 'News should not be defined strictly in terms of events, but rather in terms of trends or changes in subtle ways of thinking about and dealing with environments' (Black et al, 1998: 128). The first editor of Randolph William Hearst's San Francisco Examiner said, 'News is anything that makes a reader say "gee whiz"' (Macmillan, 1997:69). It (gee whiz) expresses shock, surprise or even admiration.

Different arguments are also found. Cynics suggest that news can be defined as whatever the gatekeepers (editors and reporters) allow to pass through institutional channels (Black et al, 1997: 127). It, therefore, is the result of the whim of the gatekeepers or gate openers. A trainee reporter in Glasgow said, 'News is what my Editor says' (Boyd et al, 2008: 13). Macmillan (1997) argued, 'News is reported by people (who think subjectively) and is listened to by people (who listened subjectively). 'News is', therefore, 'subjectively selected and subjectively listened to' (p. 65). Macmillan (1997) further argued: 'News does not have an independent existence; news is a product of people who are members of a news gathering (or news-originating) bureaucracy' (p. 69). Bond (1954) appropriately said, 'News is what the

newspaper prints' (p. 64). That means the newspapers do not print some items despite their news value, rather what they publish is news.

Sociologist Gaye Tuchman in her book, *Making News* (1978), contends that news is the social construction of reality (Severin & Tankard, Jr., 1988: 231). Tuchman further said, 'The art of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality' (Severin & Tankard, Jr., 1988: 231). 'On any given day of publication, there are only about six stories that have to be printed. The rest are *chosen by editorial whim*. Life could go on if most stories were not printed' (Fox<sup>1</sup>, 1982 as cited in Severin & Tankard, Jr., 1988: 231). The actual reality is not the reality; rather the reality we live in created by the media is the actual reality.

The analyses, therefore, clearly indicate that the trend and pattern of definitions of news have been changing, through which we are being able to understand the multifarious dimension of news. It is also clear that all the definitions are not quite perfect to understand the complete image or picture of news, but we are getting the ideas of news in very meticulous details to a larger periphery. It is also proved that news is quite impossible to define precisely. If so, then a formula is not bad to go for anatomical dissection of news. And that is not sufficient too. Therefore, in the process, one thing is largely understood that news is not always covered on the basis of newsworthy event; rather in most cases it is created or manufactured on the basis of created or manufactured events at least in today's newer perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Fox was a former City Editor of renowned American newspaper St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*

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