

## Lecture VIII – New Standards for Evaluating Media Performance?

→ Key question: by what clear normative standard should the quality of the news be judged?

What criteria can we set for the definition of a standard for news? Zaller's proposal:

1. **Informational needs of self-governance.** Citizens need news that help them perform their democratic tasks. If democracy is defined procedurally as free periodic elections of governors, then the governors have to be accountable to the people, and therefore the people need information to keep their elected representatives accountable.
2. **Feasibility.** The standard must not impose too heavy a burden on the consumers. However, different societies justify different criteria for feasibility. Education and average income should be taken into account, but working conditions matter as well (remember Bennett).
3. **Critical potential.** Setting a standard is an opportunity for criticism of what is generally accepted. We cannot simply accept whatever exists as good and sufficient.

What is the current standard for news quality? The **Full News Standard**, which was developed in the **Progressive Era** in the 1920s, at a time of retreat from and reform of the partisan era of US politics. Such standard is still alive in most evaluation and criticism of the role of mass media in democracy.

“The good citizen was no longer the exuberant partisan but the cool independent. He was also an Informed Citizen. Rather than march in torchlight parades, he studied the issues; rather than cast a straight party ballot, he evaluated candidates on their individual merits. “The new model of politics increased the demands on the citizen. Those who would vote needed more information to cast a ballot than the loyal partisan of the nineteenth century” (Schudson). Good journalism thus became journalism that enabled citizens to form their own opinion about politics, as required by the new model of politics.”

Does this reform and this ideology square with reality? It is true that partisanship has declined compared to one century ago, but most independents do not vote. Therefore, the outcome of elections is still mostly shaped by partisans who go to the polls.

### Evaluation of the Full News Standard

1. **Informational needs of self-governance.** Since most voters (not citizens) are still leaning toward one or the other party, the impact of the news must be judged in its interplay with partisanship. If I support a party, the more I get informed the more I tend to absorb information that supports and reinforces my views (and my biases). This is due to *selective attention, selective perception, and selective memory*. Therefore, the more a Democrat is informed, the more he will support Democratic policies. On the other hand, those who are more likely to be “swing voters” are weak partisans who get little information and therefore experience less reinforcement of their opinions.
2. **Feasibility.** Because independent voters are in most cases very little interested in politics, raising the standards on news quality would probably make it even harder for them to acquire information about politics.
3. **Critical potential.** The Full News Standard has a strong critical potential and should be a starting point for educating readers and citizens, but it is not a workable theory of how the media should perform their duty.

Zaller proposes an alternative standard for news quality, which he terms the **Burglar Alarms Standard**, consistent with Michael Schudson's idea of a Monitorial Citizen that substitutes for the ideal of the Informed Citizen.

How can the police or the firemen corps know when and where something bad is happening?

- Patrols: scanning the territory in order to see directly when such events are happening. Requires a lot of effort, resources, and people.
- Alarms: automatically inform the police when intervention is needed. In order to function, they must be:
  - Meaningful and relevant: alarms must be located in all places where danger might present itself
  - Reliable, alerting for all situations of danger, not alerting for false or irrelevant dangers
  - Timely, allowing rescuers to intervene in time and not too late.

Zaller's theory: if the news can function as burglar alarms, then the citizens are not asked to patrol their politics continuously and extensively, but rather they can turn their attention to just those issues that pose problems, and just when and where they do so.

“The standard of news coverage I advocate can now be expressed as follows: Journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining and that affords the parties and responsible interest groups, especially political parties, ample opportunity for expression of opposing views. Reporters may use simulated drama to engage public attention when the real thing is absent.”

Zaller cites Murphy Brown controversy as an example of a political controversy that was well represented by the media under the Burglar Alarm Standard. Vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle (1992) criticized TV character Murphy Brown for her decision to have a child out of wedlock. The issue was largely reported and dramatized in the media, and all presidential candidates had to take a stand in the controversy, that crucially involved a *lifestyle issue*. The media ran on a “frenzy” that boosted coverage and made the issue central in political discourse, thus making it accessible to more people than a high-brow debate about family values and policies.

#### Evaluation of the Burglar Alarms Standard

- 1. Informational needs of self-governance.** Under the BA standard, the news on Congressional elections should focus only on those elections that are close, thus helping challengers who otherwise have to face a very high burden against incumbents. Moreover, the news should check the elected Congressmen's activities during the legislature by providing information on important roll call votes and by ringing the alarm when a representative is suspected of voting against their constituents' will and interest.
- 2. Feasibility.** The BA standard squares off with most contemporary journalistic practices and with the prevailing taste in popular culture. However, Zaller mentions the risk that if the news continue to go downmarket and look more and more like entertainment, then “the audience will soon abandon news altogether in order to get the real thing from Hollywood”.
- 3. Critical potential.** The BA standard has obviously less critical bite than the FN standard, but there are yet various news media that do not perform the tasks that it requires. Therefore, it would call for some reform on the part of the media, but it would be a more feasible kind of reform. Moreover, Zaller maintains that such changes “hold the promise of increasing the number of people involved in the nation's business”.

#### Most significant objections to the Burglar Alarms Standard

- **False alarms:** most of contemporary news employ spectacular features in order to make their content more interesting and attention-grabbing. This means increasing, and at times

unnecessary, dramatization of events and issues, resulting in alarms continuously ringing when there is no actual danger.

- Example: crime concerns increased as a result of the diffusion of soft news that emphasized and dramatized crime issues: “At no time in the previous decade had more than 10% of Americans in the Gallup poll named crime as the nation’s leading problem. By 1994, however, crime was at the top of the charts, with 39% saying it was America’s biggest problem. Remarkably, Justice Department statistics indicated that crime rate was actually falling during this period.” (Patterson)
- **No alarms when and where needed:** the news fail to ring alarms in situations in which they would be highly required. The news tend to limit themselves to reporting controversies among politicians and public officials, rather than scrutinizing their activities directly.
- **News cover events, not issues:** the greatest problem with the news has not to do with the choice of issues covered, but with the context in which events are placed. Journalists need events in order to construct a different news product every day, but these events have to be put in context in order for the citizens to understand their political impact and form political judgments. This duty has been largely abandoned by the news, mostly because it is too expensive and not because it would drive viewers and readers away.
- **Soft news indeed turn off citizens:** research shows that those who have abandoned the news market in the last year did so because they were turned off by negativity, drama and triviality, not because the news was too complex or too demanding.