THE GLOBAL NEWS AND THE PICTURES IN THEIR HEADS

A Comparative Analysis of Audience Interest, Editor Perceptions and Newspaper Coverage

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Abstract / News as a special kind of social product requires something to have taken place in the first place, to be captured by news people and published by the media, and ultimately to be consumed by the audience. Every stage is crucial for the news manufacturing process. This study examines the triangular relationship among what editors regard as important news, what the audience prefers and what the US and foreign media actually cover. The convergence and divergence of opinions among the audiences and the editors found in this study and media performance in coverage of some specific types of stories in the global context have important implications for a better understanding of the processes and structure of international communication in society.

Keywords / audience analysis / comparative studies / global news / news values / US media

It has long been well understood that a free and responsive press is not only essential to the proper functioning of democracy, but also vital to an enlightened public. As various news media have increasingly occupied a more prominent place in the everyday life of people across diverse sections of society, especially in the context of the Internet and the emerging globalization, the interplay among the media, journalists and audiences has inspired vigorous intellectual debates and empirical inquiries in both professional and academic circles over the past decades. The point of epistemological departure is often the relationship between the real and the mediated as well as its implications for the processes and structure of mass communication in society.

In examining the many aspects of news, mass communication scholars have looked at a wide variety of formulations and manifestations of reporting, dissemination and consumption through different stages and with varying foci. Some of the approaches, for example, include research about the production and presentation of news by journalists, the impact of intra- and extra-media factors, such as social structure and institutions, on the eventual news product, and the effects of journalistic practices in general and news in particular on the public. These theoretical and empirical explorations into the various processes of news making have sometimes led to disagreements and even conflicting views concerning the nature of news manufacturing and its potential political, social, economic and cultural consequences.

One of the contested areas is the extent to which journalists and their news work (e.g. the published stories) represent the needs or wants of the audiences for information, idea and perspective in order to make sense of the reality in the immediate environment or in a remote context. It is often claimed that journalists simply give the audiences what they want in the news, particularly when foreign settings are concerned. Through a comparative analysis between what US and foreign media actually cover, the purpose of this study is to determine how the triangular relationship among journalists, audience and the media converges to shape the way news is presented and judged.

News Making and Audience Interest

News as presented in the mass media, like any other product, is for the ultimate consumption of its targeted users. For news to reach the final destination, its ingredients first have to cater to the collective interest of the audience. To paraphrase an old cliché, if no one cares to read, watch or listen to the content of news media, does it become news? In the study of news as a social phenomenon and its conceptualization as a pervasive political force, it is primarily the notion of audience interest that has attracted the attention of both mass communication scholars and professional media practitioners. The decline in international news coverage in the USA is often attributed to the lack of audience interest in foreign news. The question regarding 'who gives a damn' to foreign news is illustrative (Hoge, 1997). In the eyes of editors, as Hoge suggests, the absence of local implications means that foreign news would have little relevance for the audiences.

Since the inception of modern journalism, news writing and reporting textbooks have recognized the importance of audience interest as one major, if not the most significant, factor influencing what is newsworthy and therefore merits media coverage. A look at some popular news-writing textbooks in journalism education, for example, reveals that audience interest appears to be the underlying factor that accounts for most, if not all, of these news ingredients: timeliness, impact, proximity, conflict, human interest, unexpectedness or novelty (e.g. Brooks et al., 1999; Hough, 1988; Mencher, 1994). Each of these elements can be defined to varying degrees according to whether the news can be related to the audience taste. Given the limited space or time devoted to international news coverage, the local taste is even more imperative in the editor's decision-making.

Because of the concern over audience interest, as Hough (1988: 2) stated, many editors are likely to give the readers 'what they [i.e. the audience] ask for, whether it is local news or features or high school football'. An extreme and controversial case of media providing what the audience wants is the so-called 'market-driven journalism' (McManus, 1994) that has increasingly become influential concerning the form and content of news in the world of commercialism and bottom-line competition. This is particularly true in the age of globalization when corporate takeover of the mass media industry has turned the news into a profitable commodity. Furthermore, the news is being produced by a smaller number of corporations that primarily seek to maximize the returns on their investment (McChesney, 1999).

How do editors decide what to give to their readers? To pamper the news appetite of their readers and viewers, editors of course will need to develop some means to assess audience interest. In the case of newspapers, for example, editors can determine readers' preferences through readership surveys, letters to the editor and circulation figures. The last decade has witnessed a significant increase in reliance of polls among media organizations to make various decisions, including news and entertainment programming. Marketing and audience research can be expensive and time-consuming. More often than not, editors tend to rely on their instincts and previous experience in assessing what the audience wants to know (Chang and Kraus, 1990). One typical example is Larry King's response to a viewer's comment on *Larry King Live*, when it devoted a full hour to the ongoing Clinton impeachment trial in 1999. After hearing the caller's complaint about the media obsession with the scandal, King argued that '[we are only doing this because] this is what you want. Otherwise, why are you watching this program right now?'

While opinion-oriented talk shows on television cannot claim to be functionally parallel to the news in general, the logic of the market very much underlines the two domains of media content. In news reporting, a sense of audience interest undoubtedly involves editors' perceptions of what the news should be to capture the attention and imagination of their audiences on a regular basis. For editors, news perceptions thus become for the most part their journalistic paradigms in which how they see their relationship with the audiences is a key building block. As Rothman and Lichter (1984: 40) put it, 'the paradigms journalists (like all of us) unconsciously accept as guides affect the manner in which they see the world and describe it'. Since to the general public, 'much of foreign news seems confusing and without sufficient significance to justify working it out' (Hoge, 1997: 50), there is little wonder that editors would shift their news agenda by shrinking media attention to foreign news.

In the process of news collection, reproduction, dissemination and consumption, the relationship between editors and their audiences is similar to that of suppliers and consumers. If editors tend to give the audiences the news they want or ask for and if editors usually depend on their news instincts, editors' perceptions of audience interest undoubtedly are likely to play a critical part in their news decision-making. As filtered through the interpretations made by editors, however, the effect of audiences' interest on news content is more indirect than direct (McQuail, 1987). Apparently, audiences per se do not actually dictate the types of news that should appear in the mass media. The news as reported in the mass media is the end result of journalistic judgment by editors who try to find the best goodness of fit between the news and their audience's interest.

More importantly, how editors perceive their audience's interest in the various types of news may influence the ways editors process the number of stories they receive daily. Knowing the dynamics of the perception process could help editors better organize and classify information going through the newsroom, reduce the volume of information flow in the news channel, and avoid uncertainty in the news selection. In other words, a mere perception of what the audiences ask for serves some useful purposes for editors in their daily

management of the news flow. By offering the audiences the news of their interest, editors would be able to maximize the amount of information provided to the audiences in the limited media space or time on a day-to-day basis.

How editors process news is essentially a matter of classification of various news types. Classification or categorization involves value judgments as to which stories are worthy of inclusion and which are to be discarded. Research on editors' cataloging news has been well documented. Since the classic study of 'Mr Gates' (White, 1950), numerous studies have examined, either systematically or impressionistically, how editors define and classify news. A general conclusion suggests that editors do not rely on formal, external rules or guidelines to limit the daily flow of information they process. Instead, their selection of news appears to be based on a set of subjective and selective perceptions of how the news would be related to their audiences. Knowing audience's news interest, whether real or imagined, of course allows editors to organize news stories accordingly. As Stempel (1967) argued, it offers editors a way to gain from grouping news stories. The category of 'foreign news' makes it easier for editors to safely assume that most stories from abroad will be as alien to the audiences as the countries involved.

More recent studies offered similar conclusions. Burgoon et al. (1982) argued that interest and importance are the main criteria journalists use in their news decision-making. The interesting news is what the audiences 'want to know'; the important news is what editors think their audiences 'need to know'. These two criteria are not necessarily independent of each other because the 'what to know' news and the 'need to know' news are largely determined by editors' perceptions of the tastes and preferences of their audiences. The goodness of fit between editors' perceptions of their audience's interests will have a great deal to do with the presentation and interpretation of the news as well as the success of the news organization. This is echoed in Fuller's (1996: 6) definition of news as 'report of what a news organization has recently learned about matters of some significance or interest to the specific community that news organization serves'. The specific community is unequivocally local.

Although largely unknown to each other, elusive and capricious (Dahlgren, 1998; Webster and Phalen, 1997), the audiences certainly constitute the specific community that editors try to reach. How editors perceive their audiences' interest and whether they have been influenced by such perceptions in their news judgments have long been part of scholarly inquiry into the underlying mechanism of news making and reporting. In an early study of wire editors, for example, Gieber (1956) found that most editors had little perception of readers' interest and their perceptions were not affected by social contacts. According to Gieber, readers as the ultimate consumers of the news were 'not perceived clearly by most of the wire editors; some were not concerned whether or not the output of the wire desk was read by their audience' (Gieber, 1956: 431).

Atwood (1970) suggested that among news people, editors were least able to predict readers' interest and might judge news stories differently than did their readers. He indicated that newspaper staffers 'who were poorest in predicting audience preferences held desk jobs' (Atwood, 1970: 302). Studies by Burgoon et al. (1982) and Wulfemyer (1984) also offered observations

suggesting that many journalists had a false image of audience interest or did not know their audience as well as they might. In his study of what made news in the US newsroom, Gans (1979) concluded that journalists he studied had very little knowledge of what their audiences liked or disliked. Instead, journalists wrote and filmed stories for themselves and their superiors, assuming what interested them would also interest their audiences.

Other studies reported how perceptions of audience interest affected news decision-making by journalists. Flegel and Chaffee (1971) indicated that reporters tended to cover news according to their own opinions and the perceptions of readers' views were less influential in their reporting. They studied two daily newspapers in Madison, Wisconsin, and found that for both news and feature stories, the order of influence described by the reporters was the same: 'they feel that their own opinions guide their reporting more than do those of their editors; readers' opinions are even less important' (Flegel and Chaffee, 1971: 649). Martin et al. (1972), however, challenged such assertion. Their evidence showed that news editors had a fairly good grasp of readers' interest, which in turn influenced their news decision-making. They found 'a discernible association between Wisconsin editors' perception of their readers' beliefs and the direction of the stories that appeared in their newspapers' (Martin et al., 1972: 464).

Journalistic Location and Social Structure

If existing findings and current knowledge are any guide, it is apparent that journalists do not necessarily do their work according to how they may perceive their audiences. Audience interest is clearly not the only factor that may account for the decision-making in the newsroom. In a recent critical review, Shoemaker (1991) studied the process of gatekeeping at five different levels: the individual (e.g. attitudes and values), the professional routines (e.g. deadlines and styles), the organizational/institutional (e.g. ownership, markets), the external (e.g. audience, interest groups, advertisers and other media) and the ideological (e.g. news paradigms, cultural practices, political elites). Factors at these five levels are further elaborated in Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) effort to develop a comprehensive theory of influences on mass media content. Whether audience interest has an overriding power over all other elements in news making is open to debate and deserves to be closely monitored.

In examining the media crisis in the USA as a result of recent trends of concentration and conglomeration, McChesney (1997, 1999) argued that the claim that the media 'give people what they want' is no more than a mythology and is a hindrance to understanding the present media system. The corporate media, in their relentless pursuit of profit and market share, are rarely, if ever, passive servants of public demand, but are often actively utilizing their resources to create new audience demand. To that end, the media often opt for what has been commercially successful in the past or the line or path whose marketability has been already tested with competitors. Therefore, few entertainment programs or news products are created with original sparks. The high degree of homogeneity among media content is illuminating.

However, not all scholars agree that the mass media should be guided solely by what interests its consumers (e.g. Hachten, 1998) on the ground that the majority of the media audiences have a reputation for their taste for trivia and sensationalism. As a result, the intermixing of news and/or entertainment (i.e. the so-called 'infotainment' or 'tabloidization') in today's mass media has been vehemently criticized by some (e.g. Berstein, 1992; Franklin, 1997; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). In the news business, because of the demographics and other characteristics of the makeup of professional journalists, the press corps display consistent preferences in their political views and positions on key issues and these personality traits often influence their approach to news (Lichter et al., 1986; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996).

As a professional group, journalists cannot be detached from the confines of the larger social structure in which they locate themselves and practice their trade in accordance with the logic of their profession (Ball-Rokeach and Cantor, 1986; Roshco, 1975). As Hallin (1994: 7) put it, 'it is naïve to imagine that journalists are free of social location'. In addition to the assertion of objectivity as professionalism (e.g. Tuchman, 1972), journalists' social location is what sets them apart from the general public, most of whom are lay persons and have little direct knowledge as to how the news is actually processed from raw materials to the end product. Based on the preceding discussion and within the perspective of social construction of reality (e.g. Tuchman, 1978; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), a general hypothesis in this study is that, as far as the news is concerned, journalists and audiences do not perceive the world the same way. In other words, what is reported in the global news is not necessarily what the audiences want.

Method

To test the general hypothesis, this study examines the differences and similarities among journalists' views of what makes the top stories of the year, audience interest in these top news stories and media performance in covering these stories. If the claim that journalists give audiences what they want is valid, it should be expected that certain types of news favored by the audiences will be prominently covered by the media. Although journalists' views of what makes the top news events of the year (need to know news) may not totally agree with those of the audiences (want to know news), they may reach some kind of congruence with the audience in evaluating news events in deciding what is important.

The data were collected from published reports. At the end of every year, the Associated Press surveys newspaper editors and broadcast news directors in the US on what they think are the top news stories globally in the past year. In the survey, news executives are asked to rank the top 10 news stories from a pool of events which took place within the past year. The annual poll results are then published in the format of the top 10 stories of the year based on the total points each story gets. Because the polling methods are fairly consistent from year to year and a wide range of news executives in major US news organizations has been surveyed, the AP results can be regarded as a reasonable indication of how

American news editors and directors perceive world events. This study used the AP poll results from 1995 to 1999.

Data about public news interest came from survey results by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press for the five years (i.e. 1995–9) corresponding to the AP data. For over a decade, the Pew Research Center has conducted nationwide surveys of adult Americans on the news stories they have followed the most closely in the past year. The stories that got the highest percentage of people following closely were ranked the top 10 events in terms of public news interest. The number of respondents ranged from over 1000 to close to 2000 for each of the five years under study.

To determine how the mass media actually cover the global news, data were also collected from the 'General News' section of the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe online database. As of March 2000, newspapers included in the source list of this section comprises 35 US newspapers and 25 foreign ones. The selection criterion for US newspapers is that they must be listed in the top 50 circulation in the *Editor and Publisher Year Book,* whereas the criteria for foreign newspapers are that they must be published in the English language and that they must be listed as a national newspaper in Benn's *World Media Directory* or they must be one of the top 5 percent in circulation for the country. Keyword search was conducted for stories mentioned either in the AP annual top 10 list (editors) or the Pew Research Center top 10 events (audience). While some overlapping exists every year, there are stories that are mentioned in one but not the other data sources. As a result, a total of 76 stories has been searched in the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database. For comparative purpose, items were gathered separately for US and foreign newspapers for each of the ranked news stories. The time frame included the whole year during which the event took place (i.e. from 1 January through 31 December). All published materials in the database, such as news, commentaries, letters to the editor and feature stories, were considered in this study.

For each of the 76 items identified in the database, a sample of materials in a 'constructed month' was collected. After such data were collected, one of the researchers read through each of the sampled stories to determine whether it belonged to the appropriate category of newspaper coverage of that event. This step was essential considering the fact that a search with a simple keyword or combination of keywords could lead to results that contain stories not relevant to the purpose of this story. For example, a search of 'Kosovo' in the database of the pool of news stories for 1999 was likely to generate stories that were not related to the Kosovo conflicts of that year. Then, the proportion of relevant stories originated in the US or foreign newspapers from the sample data was multiplied by the overall number of stories from Lexis-Nexis to reach an estimated number of stories from the US newspapers or the foreign media for that specific news event. For instance, if 95 percent of the stories from the sample of the 'constructed month' with the search of 'Kosovo' proved to be related to the Kosovo conflict of 1999, and the total number of stories after the search with 'Kosovo' from the database came to 12,500, the projected number of news stories about the Kosovo conflict for that year was $12,500 \times 95$ percent $= 11,875$. This then becomes the number used for analysis in this study. The

same procedure has been followed with all the 76 searches in the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database. Although the result is not a precise count, it is reasonable to believe that it is a good indicator of US media performance in covering national and international news since the sources include the most influential and the largest newspapers in the United States. Also, because the AP poll surveys news executives nationwide, the database makes it possible to determine the extent to which their views stack up against the actual coverage in the US and foreign media.

Results

As far as the global news is concerned, news editors and directors do not always see eye to eye with the audiences in the stories that make up the top 10 list in the past five years. Of a possible total of 50, editors and readers agree on 24 of them, representing 48 percent of agreement as to what are the top news events of the year. While this is remarkable considering the fact that the choices are made out of a large pool of possible events within a year, it also indicates that half of the times journalists' worldview and audience interest do not necessarily converge in the journalistic arena. Table 1 shows the relationships among editors' perception, audiences' perception and news coverage in the US and foreign media.

The Spearman's rank order correlation between audiences' perception and editors' perception of news events is .425 ($p < .05$), indicating a moderate agreement between readers and journalists on the newsworthiness of some events, but not all. One significant finding in Table 1 is that, contrary to the claim of many media professionals, what is covered in the news, especially when the news media devote an excessive amount of space in reporting, may not be what interests the readers at all. As far as the top-ranked events are

TABLE 1

Relationship among Editors' Perception, Audiences' Perception and News Coverage[a]

	Editors' Perception	Audiences' Perception	Number of Stories by US Media	Number of Stories by Foreign Media
Editors' perception	1 ($N = 50$)			
Audiences' perception	0.425[b] ($N = 24$)	1 ($N = 50$)		
Number of stories by US media	0.451[c] ($N = 50$)	0.031 ($N = 50$)	1 ($N = 50$)	
Number of stories by foreign media	0.412[c] ($N = 50$)	−0.031 ($N = 50$)	0.746[b] ($N = 76$)	1 ($N = 50$)

[a] The correlation is Spearman's rho.

[b] $p < .05$

[c] $p < .01$

concerned, their coverage in either the US or foreign media does not necessarily cater to the audience taste. The correlation between what media actually cover and what the audiences say they are interested in is close to naught (rho = .031, NS). In other words, there is little relationship between what the news covers the most and how important the audiences think it is to them. Because news coverage of the top events preceded the audience survey in this study, the finding apparently does not support the agenda-setting thesis that the news salience influences public perception of issue importance.

As shown in Table 1, not surprisingly, what news editors rank as important is moderately correlated with what the domestic and foreign media actually cover (rho = .451, p < .01). It should be expected that editors tend to publish more stories about things they deem important in their gatekeeping process. The problem is that their choice does not register with the audiences' preferences. Rather, it resonates well with that of their foreign counterparts (rho = .746, p < .01). The similarity in this general pattern between the US and international media suggests a possible global diffusion of news values and an effect of the 'Galton's problem' in social science research – the problem whether something is caused by a culture or a result of diffusion across cultures (Ross and Homer, 1967; Scheuch, 1990). The heavy reliance of global English media on daily wire services dominated by the AP points to the possibility of diffusion of news among nations, primarily from the US to other countries.

The patterns of media coverage of different types of news stories and their relationship with editors' perception and audiences' preference become more evident in Table 2. For the stories that are mentioned as important by both editors and audiences, the news media generally pay the most attention, with an average of 4260 stories run by the US newspapers and 1550 stories by foreign newspapers for each of the top-ranked events. For those stories that are deemed important by news editors but not by the audiences, the US and foreign print media publish on average about 2554 and 1420 stories respectively. In contrast, there are only about 894 stories in the US media and 204 foreign originated stories about events that readers think are interesting. Again, the comparison suggests that readers' interest in the events does not often translate into news that editors decide to publish. The opposite seems to be true.

TABLE 2

Average Number of Stories Run by US/Foreign Media for Three Categories of News

Categories of News Events	Number of Cases	Average Number of News Items in Media		SD
Events ranked both by editors and audiences	24	US	4260	4988
		Foreign	1550	3198
Events ranked by editors but not audiences	26	US	2554	3019
		Foreign	1420	2881
Events ranked by audiences but not editors	26	US	894	578
		Foreign	204	223

To further investigate the relationship between audiences' interest and actual news coverage, the top 10 news events for the past five years under investigation were ranked according to the survey results and the number of stories devoted to each event in the US and foreign media. The rank of audience interest is based on the percentage of people who said they followed the events very closely, and the US and foreign media ranks are arrived at on the basis of the total number of stories available for each event. Generally, the AP annual survey of news editors/directors reports the overall top 10 event ranking as well as a total number of points tallied based on the order of each ranked event by every news editor/director surveyed every year. However, the tallied points were not available for 1997 in the AP database. Consequently, we were not able to compare the actual points scored for the top 10 events across the five years under study and therefore unable to generate a list of the 10 stories ranked as the most important over the five-year period we are studying. This is unfortunate because we cannot compare the news editors' ranking with that of the audience and media coverage. Our compiled lists, which include audience ranking and media coverage over a five-year period, are reported in Table 3.

As is clear, the pattern indicates that the audience interest in news events generally deviates from what is presented in US and foreign media coverage. During the study period, the audiences only agree on two to four items with what the media have covered most frequently as to what makes the top 10 major stories. The exact agreement only includes two stories: the Oklahoma blast in 1995 and the presidential election in 1997. For two other events, the audience interest has a much narrower focus (i.e. the Olympic bombing in 1996 and the US soldier captured near Kosovo in 1999) than the media (i.e. the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996 and the Kosovo conflict in 1999). In both cases, the media projected a much broader perspective and delivered more than the audience is directly interested in. This discrepancy possibly can be attributed to the news editors' effort to strike a delicate balance between what is classified by Burgoon et al. (1982) as what the audiences 'want to know' (i.e. interesting news) and what they 'need to know' (i.e. important news).

On the other hand, for actual news coverage, the US and foreign media share a consensus on eight out of the top 10 events over the five-year period under study. It appears that editors have more in common among themselves than with their audiences in journalistic judgment of newsworthiness. Whether this is due to professional socialization in the newsroom or diffusion across national borders (i.e. the so-called 'Galton's problem' as mentioned earlier) remains to be further explored. What is obvious is the discrepancy between audience attention and the news focus in both domestic and foreign media.

Table 3 also shows the types of news stories that attract audience attention the most. Eight of the top 10 stories involve human-made or natural disasters such as shootings, deaths, plane crashes, abnormal weather patterns and so on. Whether among the audiences or between the US and foreign media, almost all events that make up to the top 10 list have some distinctive American flavor. For the American audiences and news media, the pattern indicates the unmistakable propensity of ethnocentrism. Hoge (1997) indeed has a point when he claims that Americans don't give a damn to what is happening outside of

TABLE 3

The Top 10 Events as Ranked by the Audience, US Media and Foreign Media (1995–99)

Rank	Audiences	US Media	Foreign Media
1	TWA crash (1996)	Clinton/Lewinsky scandal (1998)	Kosovo (1999)
2	H.S. shooting in Littleton (1999)	Kosovo (1999)	The former Yugoslavia (1995)
3	Oklahoma blast (1995)	Presidential election (1997)	Global economic turmoil (1998)
4	Olympic bombing (1996)	Atlanta Olympic Games (1996)	Y2K and millennium (1999)
5	Presidential election (1997)	The former Yugoslavia (1995)	Clinton/Lewinsky scandal (1998)
6	Death of Princess Diana (1997)	The O.J. Simpson case (1995)	Iraq showdown (1998)
7	JFK, Jr (1999)	Y2K and millennium (1999)	Atlanta Olympic Games (1996)
8	Jonesboro, AK Shooting (1998)	Oklahoma blast (1995)	Presidential election (1997)
9	East Coast blizzard (1996)	Iraq showdown (1998)	GOP slide (1998)
10	US soldier captured near Kosovo (1999)	Global economic turmoil (1998)	The O.J. Simpson case (1995)

their national and cultural boundaries. For the foreign media, it suggests the dominating status of the US as the leading center of world news in international communication (e.g. Hachten, 1996; Stevenson, 1994).

The fact that the US media are excessively obsessed with violence, disasters, scandals and trivia (e.g. Fallows, 1996; Hachten, 1998) at the expense of foreign and international news may be partly due to their attempt to work out a menu catering to the news taste of the US audience. As mentioned in our literature review, past research (e.g. Stempel, 1967; White, 1950) has indicated that a successful way for editors to reach a goodness of fit between news to be covered and audience interest is classification or categorization of various news types. This observation is better exemplified in Table 4, which classifies the events that not only interest the audiences, but also hit the editors' top 10 list. A striking similarity can be identified. Both the audiences and editors placed calamities (either artificial or human), US military involvement in international affairs and trials higher in their ranking. In fact, the correlation between what audiences like and what the editors perceive to be important is an impressive .85 (p < .01). The finding points out an interesting journalistic news judgment: while editors agree moderately with the audiences what specific events are most important, they highly share the latter's view as to what types of stories are most newsworthy.

TABLE 4

Comparison of Events between Audience News Interest and Editors' Top Stories

Events	Audience News Interest (Out of a total of 50)	Editors' Top Stories (Out of a total of 50)
Accident/death/violence	17	17
Natural disaster	9	6
US military involvement	8	4
Trial	4	6
Politics/elections	5	4
Health	3	1
Scandal	1	2
Economy	1	4
Other	2	6

Conclusions and Discussion

The recurring claim that the ubiquitous news media provide only what the audiences want has stirred both professional debate and academic inquiry. Whether journalistic or scholarly, the pursuit for answers is both practical and intellectual, given the pivotal role of mass media in a democratic society. Being the immediate gatekeepers in the news production process, views from editors and news directors certainly are not only interesting, but also crucial in determining what news is eventually presented to the audiences. As the ultimate consumers of the news product, audience members have long maintained a love-hate relationship with journalists. How their perspectives interact with each other has significant implications for the news manufacturing process as a whole.

Against the backdrop of US and foreign media coverage, the comparison between AP surveys of news editors and Pew Research Center audience polls in terms of the top news events of the year indicates more divergence than convergence of perceptions between news editors and the audiences. The US audiences show only a narrow interest in a limited category of news stories and are generally inattentive to events outside their immediate environment, especially those in the remote setting. It appears that what the audiences want most are stories of natural or human-made disasters, unusual weather fluctuations, wars and terrorism involving Americans, and perhaps a dose of titillation and trivia. These are essentially the determinants in international news coverage and flow (e.g. Chang et al., 1987; Wu, 2000).

Probably due to their social and professional position, editors show a broader selection of events in their perceptions and actual presentation of news. Although they do share some congruence of opinion with the public they assert to be serving, significant differences exist. To a certain degree, the US and foreign media reflect the editors' perspectives on news, but for the most part they fail to capture what excites the audiences in their choice of coverage of significant events. This is not the whole picture, however. The media are

quite successful in presenting the kinds of stories that fall into the domain of audience interests. In other words, the media may not be successful in covering specific events that fascinate readers, but they are doing a good job in publishing the types of stories that readers seek.

If the findings in this study are any indication, it suggests that in the world of global news, audiences and journalists do not often see eye to eye as to what constitutes the most important stories of the year, particularly from a long-term point of view. The longitudinal pattern offers little support for the agenda-setting function of the mass media as far as the salience of news and audience attention are concerned. Nevertheless, because this study only analyzes data collected from major US and foreign newspapers regarding the top events ranked by nationwide editors and audience members, the findings cannot be adequately extended to other types of news media such as television and magazines. Different types of survey data from a wider array of media practitioners and analysis of news from the electronic media, especially CNN's world news report, should help illuminate the interplay between journalistic practices and audience preferences.

Note

An earlier version of the article was presented at the 84th Annual Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington DC, 5–8 August 2001.

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