

'Keeping the Gates' for Gatekeepers: The Effects of Wire News

Proportion of items in various categories found to have more effect than any shared news values on choices by gatekeepers.

► An enduring concern in the study of journalistic practice is the degree to which news is standardized. A number of commentators have noted that various constraints reduce the variability of news available to audiences. Most of these constraints are tangible, concrete and relatively well documented, such as time, "news hole," or space, money, standardized sources, organizational policy and craft norms.¹ Others are considerably less apparent, and one such "unseen" constraint is the subject of this paper.

Two recent commentaries have reexamined White's classic 1949 "Mr. Gates" study of the news selection behavior of one Midwestern wire news editor.² Both have argued that more remarkable than White's finding that the editor engaged in idiosyncratic, subjective selections and rejections of news items was that the editor apparently unconsciously mirrored selections already made for him by the wire services. Classifying the news available from the wire service into seven content categories (labor, accidents and disasters, crime and

vice, human interest, national, political, international), McCombs and Shaw³ note a Spearman's rho of .64 between ranks of seven news item content categories supplied by the wires and ranks of stories selected by "Mr. Gates," and a Spearman r of .80 for a replication study of the same editor 17 years later.⁴

Gold and Simmons, in a study of 24 Iowa daily newspapers relying solely on one AP wire circuit for state, national and international news found overall coefficient of concordance of .915 between ranks of proportions of content supplied by the wire service and ranks of proportion of content used by the newspapers in 13

¹ For time, see Robert L. Jones, Verling C. Troidahl and J.K. Hvistendahl, "News Selection Patterns from a State TTs-Wire," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 38:303-12 (1961); and Guido H. Stempel III, "How Newspapers Use the Associated Press Afternoon A-Wire," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 41:380-384 (1964); for space, see Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978) and David Manning White, "The Gate-Keeper: A Case Study in the Selection of News," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 27:383-390 (1949); for money, see Edward J. Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Vintage, 1973); for standardized sources, see Warren Breed, "Newspaper 'Opinion Leaders' and Processes of Standardization," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 35:277-284, 328 (1955); but for a contrary view, see Guido H. Stempel III, "Uniformity of Wire Content in Six Michigan Dailies," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 37:45-48, 129 (1959); for policy, see Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces*, 33:326-35 (1955), and John Dimmick, "The Gate-Keeper: An Uncertainty Theory," *Journalism Monographs* No. 37 (November 1974); for craft norms, see Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual," *American Journal of Sociology*, 77:660-679 (1972).

² Paul M. Hirsch, "Occupational, Organizational and Institutional Models in Mass Media Research: Toward an Integrated Framework," in Hirsch, Peter V. Miller and F. Gerald Kline, eds., *Strategies for Communication Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977), pp. 13-42, and Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "Structuring the 'Unseen Environment,'" *Journal of Communication*, 26:18-22 (Spring 1976).

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴ Paul Snider, "Mr. Gates' Revisited: A 1966 Version of the 1949 Case Study," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 44:419-427 (1967).

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categories.⁵

Stempel, in a 1959 content analysis of wire stories used by six small Michigan dailies, found agreement to be relatively low, with only eight of 764 stories used by all papers and with overall agreement at 31% of stories across papers.⁶ His 1964 study of 21 metropolitan papers offers findings more directly relevant to the research reported here.⁷ Average use of AP A-wire items by all papers was 22% ranging from a low of 11% by a New York paper to 34% by the *Rochester* (N.Y.) *Times-Union*. In the study period, the afternoon AP A-wire transmitted 97 Washington, D.C.-datelined stories (17% of all stories), 298 U.S.-datelined stories (54%) and 159 foreign-datelined stories (29%). While the numbers and proportions of stories bearing these datelines varied substantially, proportions selected by papers within categories did not: 22% of the D.C.-datelined stories, 20% of the U.S.-datelined stories and 24% of the international stories were selected by the papers.

These findings suggest that wire service editors, in broad terms, "set the news agenda" for newspaper news editors, by suggesting the proper "news mix" and proportions within news categories such as accidents and disasters, crime and vice and human interest news. Two possible explanations present themselves. The first is that the structure of each day's wire file, independent of proportions of content, influences editors' selections. For example, "soft news" such as human interest stories may be transmitted early in a wire cycle, leading to a higher proportionate selection for such early-moving copy, while "hard news" might move closer to deadline.⁸ While in an absolute sense editors might value later-moving stories more highly as news, they might not ordinarily alter previously-made news judgments.

Whitney, for example, recorded several such non-substitutions in story play in news scripts in a large metropolitan radio newsroom.⁹

A second and perhaps more plausible explanation of the correspondence between wire copy provided editors and their editorial choices is that wire service editors and news editors in media outlets share highly similar news values, and thus a finding that each select news items in similar proportions in news content categories merely reflects similarity of judgment.

If Gold and Simmons and the "Mr. Gates" studies are correct, the wire services "set agendas" for the news play "mix" of these various sorts of stories by transmitting them in varying proportions: if 5% of what is transmitted is labor news, then 5% of what is selected should be as well. Also implied is that the proportions in categories are consistent across time. The proportion of news within the content type becomes an added piece of information for editors to use in making story selections, information that would be absent if equal proportions of news were transmitted in each category.

An adequate test of an hypothesis that wire service editors' assignment of items in varying proportions to news categories influences other editors' selections of a subset of those items in similar proportions, then, would require variations in the wire file proportions assigned to various news categories. Where the file is "stacked," or proportioned much as news is routinely transmitted, editors' selections should mirror proportions transmitted. Where the file is "balanced," several outcomes, amenable to varying interpretations, are possible: a) if selections mirror the "balanced" nature of the "balanced" wire file, the outcome strongly supports the notion that wire editors "set the agenda" for news editors; b) if selections instead follow the proportions of news normally assigned by editors of both wire services and newspaper and television editors, the plausible interpretation is that in normal circumstances, both editors are applying the same

⁵ David Gold and Jerry L. Simmons, "News Selection Patterns Among Iowa Dailies," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 29:425-430 (1965).

⁶ *Op. cit.*

⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁸ Cf. Jones, Trolldahl and Hvistendahl, *op. cit.*

⁹ D. Charles Whitney, "Information Overload" in the Newsroom: Two Case Studies." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1978.

news values; c) if, however, selections in a "balanced" condition reflect neither the "usual" proportions nor the "balanced" proportions, this invites an "added information" interpretation—that where the proportioning approximates "normal" wire service distributions in the categories, it is followed, but when it does not, idiosyncratic selection will apply.

Methods

Editorial managers of the morning and evening newspapers in Columbus and Dayton, Ohio, and of the three Columbus and two Dayton commercial television stations with regularly-scheduled news broadcasts of 30 minutes per day or more were asked for lists of news employees whose duties included selecting wire service news one or more days per month. Fifty-two such editors were identified, and 46 (88.5%) agreed to participate in the study. Fieldwork dates were May 1-14, 1979, and each editor completed a news selection task and answered a dozen personal interview items. Administration was completed at subjects' offices at the beginning or end of their working days, and about 30 minutes was required of each. Fieldworkers were journalism graduate students.

The selection task was as follows: Two dummy files of what the editors were told were lead paragraphs of wire service news stories were printed on cards. Each file included 98 news items, roughly the number of items that a content analysis of a week of the Ohio AP newspaper wire indicated would be transmitted during a typical day's morning or evening newspaper cycle. About 275 items were selected from current and old newspaper files, from four-year-old wire service items and from fictionalized accounts similar to the newspaper and wire items. Omitted were sports, state and local items, weather and stock market quotations¹⁰ and items of especially important current interest. References to a day of the week were altered to "yesterday" or "today." Stories were coded into the seven categories mentioned in the "Mr. Gates" studies: labor, accidents and disasters, crime and

vice, human interest, national, political and international. Stories which could not be reliably coded into a single category by two judges were excluded. When the story files were completed, items were tentatively assigned to two decks. In the first, or "balanced" deck, 14 items were assigned to each of the seven categories; in the second, or "unbalanced" deck, proportions of items were used approximating those reported by Snider for wire items read by "Mr. Gates": labor 5 items (5.1%); accidents and disasters, 7 items (7.1%); crime and vice, 11 items (11.2%); human interest, 14 items (14.3%); national, 16 items (16.3%); political, 21 items (21.4%); and international, 24 items (24.5%). All items were presented to a panel of five Ohio State University journalism faculty and staff members with news editing experience for ranking on a Likert-type 1-5 "newsworthiness" scale. Their mean item rankings were then used to balance the overall "newsworthiness" within each category across the two decks.

A repeated measures counterbalanced design called for the experimental subjects (the news editors) to select 21 stories, or about the number of wire service items that the largest newspaper in the two cities ran in an average day, from each file. Fieldworkers decided by a coin toss whether the first subject to whom they administered the selection task would select stories from the "unbalanced" or "balanced" deck, or file, first; in subsequent administrations, each fieldworker systematically varied the order of administration. Twenty-four editors selected from the "unbalanced" day first, and 22 from the "balanced."

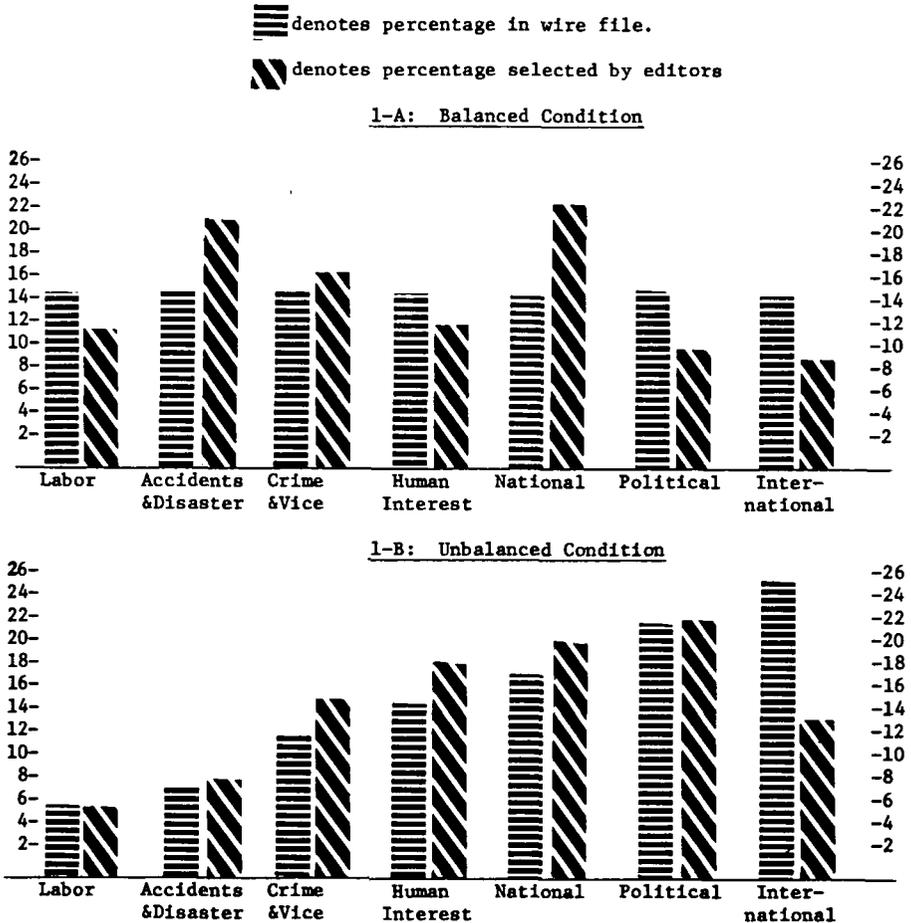
Results

Of the 46 editors who participated, 38 (82.6%) were male and eight (17.4%) were

¹⁰ Gold and Simmons, *op. cit.*, found such categories to be invariably applied by newspapers, which used a fixed proportion of such copy regardless of what was coming in. Whitney, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9, has referred to such stories as "policy" stories, since the rules for their selection or rejection are fixed and noncontemporaneous: A weather forecast for a particular region or state has a .0 or a 1.0 chance of being selected for a particular newspaper, regardless of its content on a given day, and the Dow-Jones averages will, or will not, be used by a particular evening newscast, regardless of whether they are up, down or unchanged.

FIGURE 1

Percentages of stories in wire files, and percentages selected by editors, in balanced and unbalanced files in seven content categories.



female; 29 (63%) were newspaper editors with the remaining 17 (37%) working for television stations. The editors spend a mean of 4.04 days per week editing wire news. They had been wire editors for a mean of 7.5 years with the most senior editor having been one for 28 years, and they had been professional journalists for a mean of 13 years.

Editors showed considerable variability in their selections of 21 stories from both sets of news leads: in the "balanced" deck, only six stories (6.1%) were selected by no editors, 19 (19.4%) were selected by 25% of

the editors, and only seven stories (7.1%) were selected by as many as half the editors. In the "unbalanced" deck, only two stories (2%) were not selected, and 24 (24.5%) were selected by as many as half the editors. The most favored stories in the "balanced" and "unbalanced" set were selected by 38 and 36 editors, respectively. A test for an order-of-administration effect was performed by computing t-tests on the mean number of items selected within each content category by order of administration ("balanced" or "unbalanced" first). In none of the 14

TABLE 1

Proportions in Wire File and Proportions Selected by Editors in
"Balanced" and "Unbalanced" Conditions

| | Balanced Condition | | Unbalanced Condition | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| | % in wire file | % selected by editors | % in wire file | % selected by editors |
| Labor | 14.3 | 11.0 | 5.1 | 5.3 |
| Accidents & Disasters | 14.3 | 20.7 | 7.1 | 7.3 |
| Crime & Vice | 14.3 | 16.0 | 11.2 | 14.5 |
| Human Interest | 14.3 | 11.7 | 14.3 | 17.9 |
| National | 14.3 | 22.2 | 16.3 | 19.8 |
| Political | 14.3 | 9.7 | 21.4 | 21.7 |
| International | 14.3 | 8.7 | 24.5 | 13.4 |
| | 100.1% | 100.0% | 99.9% | 99.9% |

comparisons was the t-value significant at the .05 level (pooled variance estimate). Thus an order of administration effect was considered unlikely.

Proportions of stories in the content categories in the "unbalanced" conditions by and large serve as excellent predictors of editor selections within the categories; only international news varies substantially from the proportion of incoming news, and international news was the *least* favored category in the balanced condition. (Figure 1).

A Pearson correlation coefficient between number of items incoming and number selected in the categories in the "unbalanced" set is $r = .71$ ($p = .037$, $n = 7$); the Spearman rank-order r is $.62$ ($p = .025$, $n = 7$). For newspaper editors the Pearson r is $.71$; for broadcast editors, Pearson r is $.66$. Since there is no variation in the number of stories presented to the editors in the "balanced" set, correlation coefficients between number of incoming and selected items in the "balanced" deck cannot be computed.

The notion that wire editors and news editors share similar conceptions of how many stories should be selected within each of the seven categories can be tested by comparing the number of incoming stories in the unbalanced set with the number of stories selected by editors from the balanced set. As both examination of Figure 1 and reference to correlations

suggest, this is not the case; the Pearson r is $-.41$ (n.s.) Spearman r is $-.33$ (n.s.). Examination of the rankings of selected stories in the "balanced" condition reveals no particular pattern of selection, although, as previously noted, it shows that generally editors are least likely to select international news, the category of news that in both White's 1949 and Snider's 1966 "Mr. Gates" studies accounted for the highest proportion of incoming wire news. A final internal check compared editors' selections in the unbalanced condition with selections in the balanced condition; they were virtually unrelated (Pearson $r = -.046$, n.s.; Spearman $r = .07$, n.s.), indicating that selection influence was not closely related to editors' news values.

Further Analysis. Newspaper editors were more likely in the balanced condition to select accident and disaster, crime, human interest and international stories than were their television counterparts, and the TV editors were more likely to select political, labor and national stories. In the unbalanced condition, newspaper editors and television editors are virtually identical in their selection patterns, except that newspaper editors were much more likely to pick human interest stories ($T = 2.34$, 44 d.f., $p = .02$), and TV editors were more likely to select national news items.

Several content variations seem counterintuitive and in some cases

contradictory to previous research. Becker has noted that broadcast newsmen are more likely to report they cover controversy and conflict than are print journalists,¹¹ and Buckalew has noted that for television editors, a visuality news determinant must be added to the list of traditional news elements judged by print journalists.¹² As such, then, the content variations may represent structural variations not controlled in the experiment.

Summary

Forty-six Columbus and Dayton, Ohio, editors cooperated in a counterbalanced-design field experiment to test whether proportions of news items in seven content categories transmitted by wire services served to cue editors as to proportions which should be selected from these categories. Support for such an hypothesis was found, but little support for an alternative explanation that wire editors and newspaper and television editors share an ongoing set of news values was found. In addition, it was suggested that international news was less valued by the

newspaper and television editors than was anticipated.

Gold and Simmons, in a reexamination of content analysis data of small Iowa daily newspapers, finding a similar pattern, noted that "This similarity in patterns of news emphasis may represent similarity of news judgments. An alternative interpretation is that the pattern of emphasis of the wire service, represented by the frequency with which various types of stories are set out, is more or less uncritically accepted by these...daily newspapers for their own patterns of emphasis." This study undercuts the notion that the wires and the editors routinely share news values. It supports the idea that news as routinely transmitted in stock categories is indeed "uncritically accepted" in newspaper and television newsrooms.

Sprinkled through the recent research literature on the role of the mass media in setting the political agenda are references to the nagging question of how the media formulate the agenda they present to their audiences.¹³ This study suggests quite strongly that the local media, at least, are influenced greatly by the decisions of a relatively few editors operating at the regional, national and international bureaus of the wire services. In other words, the agenda being presented by the media audiences is influenced by the newsgathering procedures of the media and the relationships among the media. The local media are hardly acting alone in shaping the political agenda.

¹¹ Lee Becker, "Organizational Variables and the Study of Newsroom Behavior." Paper presented to the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Warsaw, Poland, August, 1978, p. 10.

¹² James K. Buckalew, "A Q-Analysis of Television News Editors' Decisions," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 46:135-137 (1969).

¹³ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37:176-187 (1972); Shaw and McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues* (St. Paul, Minn.: West, 1977).

RESPONSE TO PHOTOGRAPHS

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the way in which the reproduction process changes the connotative meaning of the photograph.

Further, this research on the effects of still another "stylistic variation" on the perception of a photographic message adds to our knowledge of the potential influence which journalists have on the

content of what they report and on the interpretation of that content by message receivers. The variants of photographic style and structure are many. Relatively few of these variants have been subjected to systematic study, and the authors hope that readers of this report will be challenged to isolate other variants and to investigate them.