Handout Galtung and Ruge's list of news values

One of the best known lists of news values was drawn up by media researchers Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge. They analysed international news stories to find out what factors they had in common, and what factors placed them at the top of the news agenda worldwide.

Although their research was conducted nearly four decades ago 1965, virtually any media analyst's discussion of news values will refer to most of the characteristics they list. This list provides a kind of scoring system: a story which scores highly on each value is likely to come at the start of a television news bulletin, or make the front page of a newspaper.

The values they identified fall into three categories:

- Impact
- Audience Identification
- Pragmatics of media coverage

Impact

- Threshold: The bigger impact the story has, the more people it affects, the more extreme the effect or the more money or resources it involves, the better its chances of hitting the news stands.

- Frequency: Events, such as motorway pile-ups, murders and plane crashes, which occur suddenly and fit well with the newspaper or news broadcast's schedule are more readily reported than those which occur gradually or at inconvenient times of day or night. Long-term trends are unlikely to receive much coverage.

- Negativity: Bad news is more exciting than good news. Stories about death, tragedy, bankruptcy, violence, damage, natural disasters, political upheaval or simply extreme weather conditions are always rated above positive stories such as royal weddings or celebrations. Bad news stories are more likely to be reported than good news because they are more likely to score high on other news values, such as threshold, unexpectedness, unambiguity and meaningfulness,

- Unexpectedness: If an event is out of the ordinary it will be more likely to make it into the news than an everyday occurrence would. As Charles A. Dana famously put it, "If a dog bites a man, that's not news. But if a man bites a dog, that is news!"

- Unambiguity: Events which are easy to grasp make for better copy than those which are open to more than one interpretation, or where understanding of the implications depends on first understanding the complex background to the event.

Audience identification

- Personalisation: People are interested in people. News stories that centre on a particular person, and are presented from a human interest angle, are likely to make the front page, particularly if they involve a well-known person. Some people claim this news value has become distorted, and that news editors over-rate personality stories, especially those involving celebrities.

- Meaningfulness: This relates to cultural proximity and the extent to which the audience identifies with the topic. Stories about people who speak the same language, look the same,

and share the same preoccupations as the audience receive more coverage than those involving people who do not.

- Reference to elite nations: Stories concerned with global powers receive more attention than those dealing with less influential nations. This also relates to cultural proximity. Those nations which are culturally closest to our own will receive most of the coverage.

- Reference to elite persons: The media pay attention to the rich, powerful, famous and infamous. Stories about important people get the most coverage. Hence, the American President gets more coverage than your local councillor.

Pragmatics of media coverage

- Consonance: Stories which match the media's expectations receive more coverage than those which contradict them. At first sight, this appears to contradict the notion of unexpectedness. However, consonance refers to the media's readiness to report an item, which they are more likely to do if they are prepared for it. Indeed, journalists often have a preconceived idea of the angle they want to report an event from, even before they get there.

- Continuity: A story which is already in the news gathers a kind of momentum – the running story. This is partly because news teams are already in place to report the story, and partly because previous reportage may have made the story more accessible to the public.

- Composition: Stories must compete with one another for space in the media. For instance, editors may seek to provide a balance of different types of coverage. If there is an excess of foreign news, for instance, the least important foreign story may have to make way for an inconsequential item of domestic news. In this way the prominence given to a story depends not only on its own news value but also on those of competing stories. This is a matter of the editors' judgement, more than anything else.

Galtung and Ruge's analysis cites pragmatic reasons why certain news stories are not reported. For instance, the mass Burmese demonstration in 1988 failed to receive much media attention because the hostile regime of General Ne Win barred overseas journalists from the country. By contrast, the mass demonstration in 2007 received far more attention because civilians themselves had the technology, with modern mobile phones and camcorders, to send instant messages and pictures out of the country to a waiting international media such as Reuters, BBC and CNN.
Galtung and Ruge argued that journalists tend to select stories with a high news value, that is, a high score on one or more of the news factors.   It is unlikely that a story will exhibit all of these.