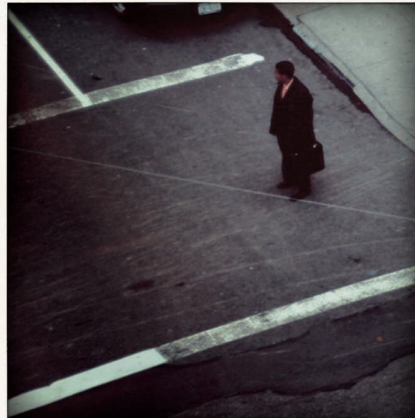


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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The role of 'Hey Mabels' in making sense of the world

Ebba Sundin

1. INTRODUCTION TO 'HEY MABELS'

How easy is it to become part of the global news flow as an ordinary person living in an ordinary place somewhere in the world? Perhaps Phillip Kerkhof, who lives in a small fishing village in Australia, knows the answer (see Figure 1). One night in February 2007, he drank too much vodka and did a classic 'man bites dog'. His story was published in newspapers all over the world. On the internet, the story was followed up by blogs in a variety of languages for people who wanted to discuss what he did.

Figure 1: Man blames vodka for shark-catching feat Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Feb. 18, 2007

Man blames vodka for shark-catching feat

SYDNEY >> A man who caught a 4-foot shark with his bare hands off an Australian beach said Friday he tried the feat only because he was drunk on vodka. Bricklayer Phillip Kerkhof was fishing for squid with a few friends off a jetty at Louth Bay on Monday night when he spotted the bronze whaler shark swimming in the shallows, the Australian Broadcasting Corp. reported.

"I just snuck up behind him, and eventually I went for the big grab and I fluked it and got him," Kerkhof said. "He was just trashing around in the water...starting to turn around and try to bite me and I thought 'Well, it's amazing what vodka does,' " Kerkhof said. "When I sobered up I thought about it, and I said, 'I'm a bit of an idiot for doing it.' " All he suffered was a slight scratch.

Kerkhof, a 42-year-old bricklayer from Louth Bay on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, did something unusual. It is difficult, however, to claim that it had any impact whatsoever on the world or on people. The story

cannot be categorised as meaningful to a majority of readers, but still it was translated into a great number of languages and published in a remarkable number of newspapers.

In this chapter, the story of the shark catch will be the starting point for a discussion about global news stories and their role in the individual's efforts to make sense of the world. One of the main questions is whether research into global news stories characterised as 'Hey Mabel' stories would contribute to a greater understanding of the global news flow not usually covered by the traditional and classic theories of news values.

The news concept was developed among newspapers in the 19th century, long before social research started to take an interest in understanding the mechanism behind news selection. An awareness of the essentials of news was, however, recognised. In the late 19th century, Charles A. Dana, publisher of the New York Sun, said that news is "*anything that interests a large part of the community and has never been brought to its attention before*" (quoted in Mencher, 1997: 57). One of his editors, John B. Bogart, provided this classic definition of news: "*When a dog bites a man that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, it's news*" (ibid.).

Within the professional language of journalism, odd and bizarre stories, like man bites dog, are sometimes referred to as 'Hey Mabel' stories. These stories are often of interest to news consumers despite their minor significance. They can sometimes be amusing or disturbing stories, leading to further discussion. Within the research tradition of news, this type of story has not attracted much attention.

1.2 THE VODKA-SHARK STORY

The story of the Australian bricklayer in Louth Bay is just one of these stories. Kerkhof's night ended in unusual fashion. After 'quite a few vodkas', he went down to the harbour and spotted a 1.3-metre bronze whale shark in the shallow water. He decided to catch the shark with his bare hands. And so he did, wrestling the shark onto the jetty. According to ABC Australia, he was the talk of the town. But he also became part of the global news flow. The story was translated into numerous languages and published in newspapers in many countries around the world, including, just to mention a few, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Spain, Italy, Belgium, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Estonia, Poland, Russia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, India, Chile, Cuba and the

USA. Along with the online editions of newspapers, thousands of blogs were set up to discuss Kerkhof's actions.

The Kerkhof story did not occupy much space in the world's newspapers. In many cases, it was to be found in their international news sections, and not as a top story, but as a one-column story at the bottom of the page. On the internet it is harder to judge how much space it was given, but it was often the top story on newspaper websites. On these websites, in many cases, the story was accompanied by a picture. Some of these showed a great white shark, and not the smaller bronze whaler shark. In the *Honolulu Star Bulletin's* print edition on 18 February 2007, the story was reported in one column and as the number eight story in order from the top of the page.

2. MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

'Hey Mabel' stories and other news stories play a role in the individual and collective forming of identity, in the sense of belonging to a place and culture, and in making sense of the world. The mental map of geography with centre and periphery is continuously negotiated, and media play an important role in this. This becomes especially clear when the geographical map is redrawn due to changes in political systems. No matter that the media sphere seems to be becoming more globalised, new cultures will develop where the media will play an important role in setting standards for the new cultural identity, or strengthening the old identity that has, for particular reasons, not been emphasised in the media. Mihelj (2004: 167) writes that

Far from being just passive mirrors of this ongoing process of constitution and reconstruction, mass media are actively involved in it, contributing to the reality of a given collective by invoking appropriate collective references and recreating the continuity of a collective over time and across space.

Thomson (1995: 34) expresses making sense of the world as 'mediated worldliness' and states that the sense of individuals' place within the world is shaped more and more by symbolic forms in media. This can also be interpreted as meaning that the media play an important role in the individual's collective understanding of phenomena beyond their own reach in space, sometimes shaped more as stereotypes than they really are. At the same time, Thompson (*ibid*: 189) argues that media content makes the individual more capable of taking an individual's view

of themselves. The main point in Thomson's (*ibid*: 187) conclusion is that "*individuals come to rely more and more on mediated and delocalised traditions as a means of making sense of the world and of creating a sense of belonging*". From another perspective, media content from distant places and cultures can play a role in strengthening people's own identities and excluding others (Gripsrud, 2002).

It is important to remember that global news communication developed over centuries. In fact, it was foreign news stories that may have come to people's minds first. From the European point of view, at least, domestic news was usually prohibited and regarded as dangerous for the powers-that-be in kingdoms which were more often than not at war. For example, early newsletters from 16th-century Britain contained translated "*reports of strange and sensational happenings, monstrous children and terrible earthquakes*" (Conboy, 2004: 18). The conclusion to be drawn from this is that 'Hey Mabel' stories are as old as other, more significant news stories.

3. THEORIES OF NEWS VALUES - NEWS VALUES IN EARLY NORDIC RESEARCH

Academic interest in news values in an international context intensified during the 1960s, and quite a few different studies and models can be found within the Nordic countries. Without doubt, one of the most famous and still valid models is Galtung and Holmboe Ruge's contribution from 1965. The conclusions were drawn from their classic study "*The structure of foreign news*". They examined how news about crises in what was then referred to as the Third World was reported in the First World, in this case Norway, and came up with a model showing twelve determining factors: 1/ time span, 2/ scale, 3/ clarity, 4/ meaningfulness, 5/ consonance, 6/ unexpectedness, 7/ continuity, 8/ composition, 9/ elite nations, 10/ elite persons, 11/ personification and 12/ negativity.

The first factor, time span, refers to the time it took for an event to happen, and, according to Galtung and Holmboe Ruge (1965), an event needs to follow the frequency of the medium, usually once a day. Events developing over a long time span may not be deemed to be newsworthy as they are harder to recognise as an event. The second factor has to do with the intensity of the event, and the two researchers explained that many events in poor countries needed to pass a threshold before being recognised as news. If this threshold was passed, it was likely to be part of the news flow more than once. The third factor means that the event must be clear and

easy to understand. This explains why some conflicts are not reported, because there is too much ambiguity.

The fourth factor refers to the relevance of the story to other people. The fifth and sixth factors might seem contradictory. First the fifth factor says that the event must in some ways be expected or predicted, and then the next refers to the unexpectedness of the event. This could be explained on the basis that, since the 9/11 terror attacks, the world has been more aware of the risk of new attacks, but when they occur the events come as a shock and are unexpected in time and place. The seventh factor is connected to the fifth in the sense that, when an event has become part of the news, it will be defined as news for a long time. There are many examples of the meaning of continuity; terror attacks for one, but also more recently the flu pandemic scares or global warming.

The eighth factor deals with the balance of other news. Depending on what happens on any given day, news evaluation can differ. One major event will affect all other events, and also explains why one event never becomes a part of the news flow even if it could be defined as newsworthy. The ninth and tenth factors refer to elites, first in the sense of countries, explaining why poor countries are not of such interest to rich countries, and then, in the sense of people, meaning that it is more likely for authorities and experts to be represented in the news than ordinary people.

The eleventh factor means that the news is mostly focused on people for different reasons. Galtung and Holmboe Ruge are aware of the problems with the idea of personifications and try to solve it with a number of explanations. One of them is that "*personification is more in agreement with modern techniques of news gathering and news presentation. Thus, it is easier to take a photo of a person than of a 'structure'*" (Galtung and Holmboe Ruge, 1965: 69). The final factor tells us that news is more likely to be negative than positive, at least when it comes from poor parts of the world, as the study showed.

In 1985, Hvitfelt conducted a study of the main stories in a number of Swedish newspapers, and developed a theory of ten news criteria. Compared to Galtung and Holmboe Ruge's twelve factors, most of them can be recognised, demonstrating that, from one perspective, news values do not differ from the international and domestic/local news flow. Newsworthy events are usually based on the same values, and nothing had really changed the perspective during the 20 years that passed between the

two studies. Hvitfelt (1985: 215-216) put his ten criteria in the following formula to explain why certain events were more likely to become news:

The probability that something will become news increases 1/ if it concerns politics, economics or crime 2/ if there is a short geographical or cultural distance, 3/ if it pertains to events or conditions that 4/ are sensational or surprising, 5/ about elite persons, 6/ and can be described sufficiently simply, but 7/ are important and relevant, 8/ that take place within a short period of time or as part of an established theme, 9/ with negative elements, 10/ and with established authorities as sources.

Galtung and Holmboe Ruge, along with Hvitfelt, have contributed to the theories of news values, but it should be noted that they are not the only Nordic researchers within this field. One of the early theorists who deserves a mention is Östgaard (1965; 1968). In his early writings he stated that cultural proximity had a strong impact on identification. With low proximity, the news was expected to be more sensational.

Contemporary theories also exist in the Nordic map of news theories. In 1999, Hjarvard presented his approaches to news communication, transmission and ritual (in Clausen, 2003). His point is that news can be studied from an epistemological view, meaning that the transmission view belongs to the empirical tradition, with objective reflection and facts, while the ritual view belongs to the social construction tradition, with subjective interpretation and fiction.

4. NEWS VALUES FOR GLOBAL USE

During the last two decades, two major changes have influenced views of the flow of international news; the development of new communication technology and the process of globalisation. The development of new communication technology has completely changed the sharing of news from around the world, via the introduction of the internet. Before the internet era, most news consumers were directed to the national news providers in order to obtain international news. Many of the research projects about international news carried out from the 1960s onwards focused on how certain parts of the world would be portrayed in a particular national medium: newspapers, radio or TV. But when news became an important part of the internet, the news consumer could look up the news directly from the source. The development of satellite and cable television such as CNN also brought foreign actors into people's living rooms.

The other major change is the concept of globalisation. News, in this context, can be interpreted in different ways. It could be the discussion of the global ownership of media, meaning that the old national frames of media producers are outdated. It could also be the question of a more global world, with a more complex news structure than before. In recent years, a new research field within news studies has developed to look more closely at news in the globalised society (Sreberny-Mohammadi, Winseck, McKenna and Boyd-Barrett, 1997; Taylor, 1997; van Ginneken, 1998; Nohrstedt and Ottosen, 2000 and 2005; Hjarvard, 2001; Campbell, 2004; Rantanen, 2005).

Today's new focus on media and globalisation is not only the result of media development but a great number of other factors which have changed the view of a world with or without borders between nations or continents. In many ways, globalisation is defined by factors that are political, cultural and economic. According to Rantanen (2005), the connection between media and globalisation is recognised by researchers but underdeveloped in studies. Therefore, Rantanen claims the need exists to know how media and globalisation are connected. Many studies have been conducted but a great number of them are still based on the early news flow theories.

The question of the role of journalism has been discussed in research over the past decade, but the new theories of news values that resulted have been few in number. In addition, the classic gatekeeping theory, used for the understanding of the international news flow from a global to a local context, is still valid. According to Hadenius and Weibull (2005), a gatekeeping analysis must be based on the material reaching the gate, i.e. a news bureau, and the material that passes the gate. Different studies show little variation, and the explanation for this is that the news values are strong and will not leave room for any personal judgments by the gatekeeper. White (1964) claimed that the gatekeeper's decisions to accept or reject news were highly subjective, but also based on the fact that the gatekeeper was a representative of his culture. Gieber (1964) made the same conclusion, stating that the story was controlled by the frame of reference created the bureaucratic structure of which the communicator was a member.

Despite the fact that the traditional news value theories were developed within another context, they seem to be easy to recognise when studying the news items of today. Galtung and Holmboe Ruge and Hvitfelt did

study different kinds of news items, spanning international and national news, and there are similarities among the different factors/criteria suggested by the researchers. Looking at different models of news values, it is obvious that they are often similar, and share some common factors/criteria (see Campbell, 2004). One common element in the different models is the view of news as something unexpected and surprising. Shoemaker et al. might come closest to 'Hey Mabel' stories by calling the element "*novelty; oddity or the unusual*" (Shoemaker in Campbell, 2004:118).

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter has been to highlight the question of news articles and their role in the individual's efforts to make sense of the world and to develop a sense of belonging to a culture and to its extension: the global community. According to Lie and Servaes (2000), all identities have global and local aspects and are reshaped by cultural consumption. Deuze (2011) comes to the same conclusion when he states that media form the building blocks of everyday life.

One suggestion to be made about the example of the single news item in this chapter, the shark-catch story, is that the spread of the news item also contributed to the spread of one of the images or stereotypes of Australia, i.e. sharks in Australian waters are extremely large and eat humans for dinner. This was especially obvious from the illustrations that accompanied the story about the shark-catch. The example also illustrates the long tradition of 'Hey Mabel' stories in the news flow. The news story was published in printed newspapers around the world and it took the traditional path, with gates along the way. The story appeared in numerous languages, which meant it was translated from the original English news text at national news bureaux around the world. It was published both in printed newspapers and online editions. In this sense, the internet did not change the news content.

According to Gunter (2003), there is little difference between news stories published in printed newspapers and online versions. He is referring to a report about American newspapers which shows that only about ten per cent of their news stories appeared only in online editions. Most of the news stories appeared in the same versions in the printed newspaper and the online edition. The difference between the printed newspaper and the online versions lies in the scope for instant interactivity. This is a new element of the global news flow, and what it means to the individual's sense

of belonging and efforts to make sense of the world could be studied further. In the case of the shark-catch, it was obvious that many of the articles were accompanied by blogs. Individuals also set up their personal blogs about this unusual event.

Furthermore, one might ask why people get involved in a story which is of no relevance and why they really feel the need to discuss it. News stories accompanied by blogs: do they have anything in common? This could be an interesting angle for news studies at the beginning of the 21st century, combining old theory with new aspects. The global news flow has been understood by the old traditional theories with a strong impact on political and economic values on the news content. Galtung and Holmboe Ruge (1965) had the starting-point in Third World countries, while Hvitfelt (1985) analysed the top stories on the front pages of Swedish newspapers.

It is unlikely that 'Hey Mabel' stories will ever appear as top stories, but the fact remains that they are printed and disseminated around the world. It would be interesting to see more research into these kinds of stories, especially from a historical perspective. It would also be interesting to find out if there is a pattern of news values within this context, or if we need to add different kinds of news criteria in order to explain why they pass the gates. So far, the discussion has concerned the news item itself, and less so the presentation. The original text, with its facts, underwent translations into many languages, but we can see a variety of presentations in newspapers and their online versions. The illustrations of Kerkhof's catch vary from the small bronze whaler shark itself to the great white shark. A study of how 'Hey Mabel' stories are presented in their full contexts with headlines and pictures would be a justified contribution to the field of news research.

The shark-catch story resembles a tale. We cannot be sure that the story is true, but the question is whether this really matters. Since it did not have much relevance, it did not harm readers around the world, in the way rumours of threats or disasters might if spread as news stories. Harmless or not, this news story, together with all the other 'Hey Mabel' stories, contributes to the individual's efforts to make a sense of a world which is not obvious to readers.

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