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Towards a rolling news logic in fixed time bulletins? A comparative analysis of journalistic interventions in the US, UK and Norway

Introduction

The concept of media logic is broadly used in academic literature, but its meaning is not often empirically applied to specific texts by communication scholars. In this article we explore media logic in television journalism by comparing how far fixed time television news bulletins resemble the practices and conventions of dedicated news channels.

According to Altheide (2004: 294), media logic “refers to the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium”. Within the disciplines of political communication and journalism studies, debates about media logic often refer to a logic in news media, with literature about the commonality of news values and production oft-cited to demonstrate how journalistic norms, routines and story selection are broadly similar among competing media (Harcup and O’Neil 2001). In so doing, ‘logic’ is typically understood as a singular and uniform force (Lundby 2009). But a closer inspection of this literature also demonstrates a disparity in news selection and presentation between and within different media (Brighton and Foy 2007). Far from media logic being either linear or coherent in form or style, then, there are multiple ways in which ‘the news’ is understood and reported. Thus, as Lundby (2009: 113) points out, “The sweeping concept of ‘media logic’ hides...the constraints of specific formats and the transformations that are shaped in concrete social interactions and communication processes”.

It is in this context that our cross-national study of the US, UK and Norway seeks to interpret *the media logic of different journalistic interventions* used in fixed

time television news bulletins and in coverage of dedicated news channels. Routine conventions (edited packages, say, or two ways) will be understood as journalistic interventions, with live, unscripted and interpretive news viewed as resembling a greater degree of rolling news logic (e.g. adopting 24-hour news values) and representing a more interventionist style of journalism. While our empirical focus is limited to fixed time bulletins, the study is informed by previous longitudinal studies that have shown rolling news channels increasingly rely on live and breaking news conventions in routine output (see Cushion 2012: 150-181; Cushion and Lewis 2010). Our interest lies in exploring whether the media logic of fixed time television news bulletins is similar to or distinctive from the logic of dedicated news channels and, moreover, the wider culture of instant and rolling journalism (e.g. found online and on a multiplicity of platforms).

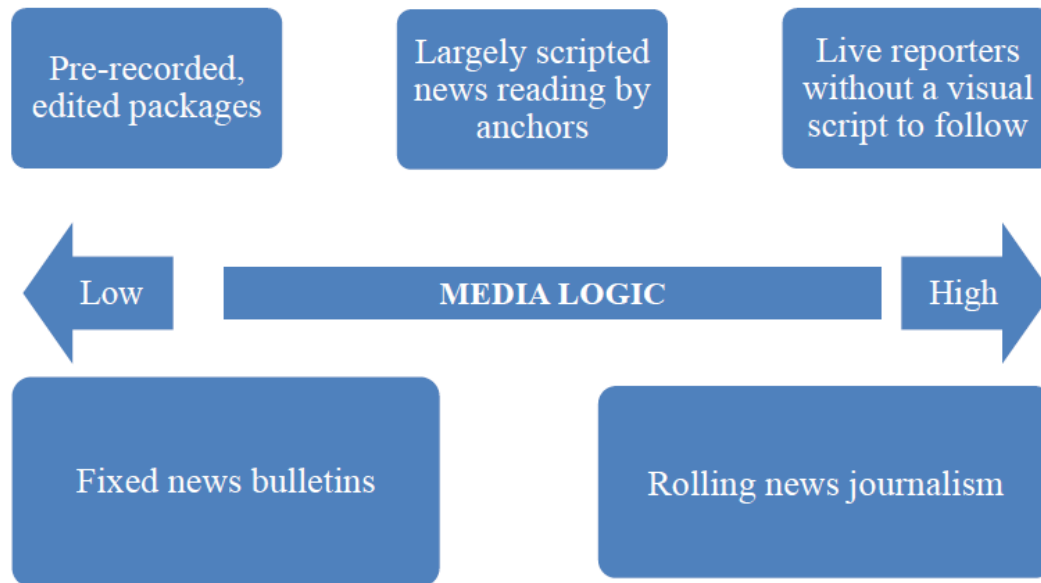
Understanding news conventions as journalistic interventions: Interpreting the relative ‘liveness’ of television news bulletins

Strömbäck and Dimitrova’s (2011) study of US and Swedish election coverage drew on the concept of media intervention to systematically evaluate how far journalists own contributions (rather than politicians directly) shaped news and to compare how far it conformed to a media logic. Rather than focus exclusively on election news, our cross-national content analysis of television news will examine how *all* news conforms to a media logic by breaking down each type of journalistic convention and re-interpreting it as a journalistic intervention. While interventions have primarily been used to represent how far journalists intervene in election coverage, we believe a journalistic intervention is exercised when editors select the

type of convention used to report *all* news stories. So, for example, the decision to include a live two way political reporter in a politics story is likely to feature some degree of interpretation or opinion from a journalist. Edited packages, by contrast, tend to be less interventionist, since journalists often try and construct 'balance' with on-screen interviews. We distinguish between the relative 'liveness' of news in three ways: – 1) pre-recorded edited packages, 2) largely scripted news read by anchors and 3) live reporters without a visual script to follow. Needless to say, the decision to report news in any one of these ways can impact on the nature of communication.

We anticipate that anchors presenting news and pre-edited packages will to a large extent structure the shape and form of bulletins in each country. But the intention of the study is to explore the *degree* to which less scripted and more live news is present in bulletins and to interpret the use of different journalistic interventions. Our conceptual understanding of the relative liveness of news is illustrated by Figure 1, where a shift from edited news towards more live, unscripted reporting represents a greater resemblance to television news bulletins e.g. an adoption of rolling news values and journalistic interventions.

Figure 1: Interpreting the relative ‘liveness’ of news in fixed television bulletins



Our central research questions are:

To what extent are journalistic interventions on fixed time news bulletins shaped by pre-edited or live news conventions? And, more specifically, what types of live journalistic interventions routinely shape coverage?

To what extent are journalistic interventions shaped by national journalism cultures or commercial and public service media systems?

Despite the rise of online media, television bulletins remain the most widely consumed form of news in all three countries. Our sample of television news includes the most watched bulletins: ABC and NBC in the US (both broadcast at 6.30pm)¹, BBC's 6pm and ITV's 6.30pm in the UK, and NRK's 7pm and TV2's 9pm in

Norway. We explore any differences between the public service broadcasters (BBC and NRK), commercial public service broadcasters (ITV and TV2) and wholesale commercial broadcasters (ABC and NBC).²

Employing a quantitative content analysis, the study systematically analyzes television news bulletins in the US, UK and Norway during two weeks in April and May 2012 when no major events or issues were scheduled. While there were some stories and issues repeated over the two weeks examined, none dominated coverage to the extent it distorted the sample.

After extensive piloting of television news in each country, eight categories were classified that reflected the type of interventions routinely used in coverage and could enable us to compare edited and more live forms of communication (see Figure 2). Each intervention acted as the unit of analysis, generating 1,417 news items overall. Researchers from the UK and Norway coded all the material and a great deal of time was spent piloting the material with regular team discussions.³ Consequently, intercoder reliability was high. Since our study involved several coders, we drew on Fleiss' (1981) approach to intercoder reliability. The overall score was 0.965, which, according to Fleiss' compressed scale, is interpreted as excellent.⁴

Figure 2: Television news conventions as types of journalistic interventions

Pre-edited news:

1. **Reporter Package** – a reporter is the main voice over a packaged report that typically features a journalist on-location. This can sometimes involve an anchor acting as a reporter.
2. **Anchor Only** – an anchor narrating a story with no visual assistance. The anchor is set against a blank backdrop, with no pictures or film.
3. **Anchor Image** – an anchor narrating a story with visual assistance from non-moving images.
4. **Anchor Package** – an anchor narrating a story with some visual assistance from moving images (film) or graphics packages.

Live news:

5. **Anchor / Live reporter two-way** – a reporter remote from the studio (or in a different studio) interacting in some form between reporter and anchor (even if only briefly).
6. **Reporter live on location** – a reporter is remote from the studio (or in a different studio) and where there is no interaction between reporter and anchor.
7. **Anchor / reporter live studio interview** - reporter is in the same studio as the anchor and there is some interaction between reporter and anchor (even if only briefly).
8. **Studio discussion** - a discussion which consists of more than the anchor and one reporter (could be additional reporters or guests).

Interpreting the media logic of fixed time television news bulletins: The use of journalistic interventions

Overall, a relatively distinctive cross-national pattern in the interventions used on routine television news bulletins in the US, UK and Norway was identified (see Table 1). As expected, the intervention most used in bulletins was edited packages – a

long held convention in fixed news bulletins (conceptualized in Figure 1). Nonetheless, some notable differences in the use of edited packages between broadcasters and countries were established (from 56-81%). In the US and Norway this was largely due to NBC's below average commitment to edited packages and TV2's well above average use of them. The public and commercial television news bulletins in UK, by contrast, were broadly similar.

Table 1: Types of journalistic interventions on US, UK and Norwegian television news bulletins (percentage by time)

	<u>US</u>		<u>UK</u>		<u>Norway</u>	
	<u>NBC</u>	<u>ABC</u>	<u>BBC</u>	<u>ITV</u>	<u>NRK</u>	<u>TV2</u>
Pre-edited news						
Reporter pack	56	64	66	65	63	81
Anchor only	0	0*	5	8	2	0*
Anchor Image	6	11	7	7	7	10
Anchor pack	26	14	8	4	6	7
Live news						
Studio discussion	2	0	0	0	3	0
Live location	0*	0	2	1	3	0
Anchor /report studio	3	9	3	2	11	0
Anch /report 2 way	7	2	9	13	5	2
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total n	222	216	325	285	372	201

*The time spent on these conventions was so low they did not round up to 0.1%

Another well established part of fixed news bulletins is the role played by anchors in the presentation of news bulletins (Meltzer 2010). While the stand-alone item was used relatively frequently by UK broadcasters – with items typically only lasting, on average, 21 seconds – it was barely used in the US or Norway. An anchor

narrating stories with a still image, by contrast, was used by all broadcasters. In most cases this was again a relatively short intervention (23 seconds, on average, in the US and UK, and just 15 seconds in Norway). But an anchor narrating a story with moving images in the background was the intervention that stood out most, since it accounted for a fifth of all time on US television news compared to 6% in the UK and Norway. This was underscored by the personality fused title of both programmes – *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* and *ABC World News with Diane Sawyer*. Overall, our expectation that pre-edited material would shape television news bulletins to a large degree was confirmed, but there were some striking differences cross-nationally.

Moreover, this meant in some countries live, less scripted forms of communication (compared to reading from a tele-prompter or voice-overs from edited packages) shaped a significant proportion of fixed time bulletins. Live two ways, for example, accounted for over 10% of time on UK television bulletins, but appeared much less on US and Norwegian bulletins especially. While conversations between anchor and reporter in the UK were relatively fleeting in two-way exchanges, in the US a far longer, more informal conversational style was present. In the UK and on NRK, however, live reporters outside the studio had a more active role to play in news bulletins. TV2, meanwhile, used no live reporters on location nor did they spend much time employing the two way convention.

TV2 had no live news in the studio either. NRK, by contrast, spent 11% of its news bulletin with a reporter and anchor in the studio similar to ABC (9% – far more than its rival NBC – 3%). The BBC (3%) and ITV (2%) also had minimal airtime in the studio. Indeed, if live, on location interventions are combined for both UK broadcasters they account for almost five times more coverage than their use of studio based discussion with reporters.

Displaying immediacy in television news bulletins: live journalistic interventions

As anticipated, live interventions played a significant role in routine television news but their use varied cross-nationally. Beyond simply comparing the time spent on live or non-live reporting, one measure of the relative importance ascribed to each type of intervention is in how far they are used in a headline story. Interestingly, while anchors or edited packages were still used the most in headline stories in the US and UK the use of live reporters in the studio or on location was not far behind. So, for example, almost a quarter of BBC headline items were made up of either two ways or reporters live on location. Considering just over 6% of NBC's time was spent on two ways overall (see Table 1), perhaps most surprising was NBC's enhanced use of this live intervention to punctuate the beginning of its programme (26%, more than edited packages). ABC, by contrast, used anchors discussing a story in the studio with a reporter in over a quarter of its headline news items (28%), matching the same proportion used for edited packages and almost on par with anchors (31%).

With the exception of Norwegian or ITV news bulletins, we did not anticipate how far live journalistic interventions would be used in *the most newsworthy stories of the day* – an influence, we believe, that could be shaped by the importance placed in delivering immediacy in the wider culture of broadcast journalism (conceptualized in Figure 1).

Table 2: Types of journalistic interventions used in headline news items on US, UK and Norwegian television news bulletins (percentage by news items)

	<u>US</u>		<u>UK</u>		<u>Norway</u>	
	<u>NBC</u>	<u>ABC</u>	<u>BBC</u>	<u>ITV</u>	<u>NRK</u>	<u>TV2</u>
Pre-edited news						
Reporter package	24	28	29	33	33	56
Combined anchor only, image and package	29	31	38	46	54	41
Live news						
Combined Reporter/ anchor 2-way and reporter live	26	13	24	18	7	4
Anchor reporter discussion/ studio discussion	21	28	9	3	6	/
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total n	42	32	63	55	46	27

We developed four categories to assess the value added by less scripted, live journalistic interventions (see Figure 3 for operational definitions). These categories broadly indicate a distinctive use in the degree of ‘liveness’ as well as in how interventionist an item was (for instance, reporting ‘the latest’ or being live ‘at the scene’) or, further still, offering more analysis (saying *why* something happened) than description (relaying *what* happened). The presence of interpretation and analysis in a news item was considered more interventionist than simply introducing a story or providing a latest update to a live report.⁵

Figure 3: Journalistic interventions in live television news bulletins

Live reporting associated with edited package
1. General intro / Summary – if a reporter just offers a general introduction or summarizes the details of a story. This was typically used to introduce/end a reporter package
Live or location reporting
2. Latest News – if a reporter adds new information not previously outlined anywhere else during the coverage of this story in the bulletin
3. On Location – if a location is integral to the news item
4. Interpretive/ what happens now / next - if a reporter offers interpretative analysis or speculates about likely subsequent events / consequences

The role of live reporters in news bulletins varied cross-nationally (see Table 3). Apart from ABC News, journalists principally adopted an interpretive role, analysing the day's events, most commonly in stories about politics or business. This was particularly striking in the UK where, on average, 62% of live reporting was interpretative, with the political editor regularly called upon to offer a verdict on the day's machinations at Westminster (see Cushion and Thomas 2013). The use of live reporters was also commonly used to introduce an edited package that would precede it. This was most apparent in the US, with reporters live on air (either in the studio or on location) presenting a more detailed package with a brief preamble to it.

Table 3: Types of live journalistic interventions on US, UK and Norwegian television news bulletins (percentage by news items)

	<u>US</u>		<u>UK</u>		<u>Norway⁶</u>
	<u>NBC</u>	<u>ABC</u>	<u>BBC</u>	<u>ITV</u>	<u>NRK</u>
Interpretative / What happens next / now	49	26	56	69	43
Latest news	18	28	12	17	35
General intro / Summary	33	46	25	14	22
On location	/	/	7		/
Total %	100	100	100	100	100
Total n	40	46	59	49	40

By contrast, we found a lack of emphasis on the location or backdrop of journalists in two ways or in stand alone items from reporters out in the field. After all, a reporter live on location can not only generate a semiotic display of immediacy, it can help journalists in ‘the field’ investigate or contextualize the latest twist to a story or issue.

Conclusions: Towards rolling news logic in fixed time television bulletins?

The aim of this study was to explore the types of journalistic interventions employed by television news bulletins in different journalism cultures and competing media systems. As expected, edited packages were the most widely used convention in news bulletins, but we found a distinctive cross-national pattern in its use as well as in other more live, on location or less scripted types of journalistic interventions.

US network television made the most use of news anchors – not least in the title of their respective programmes but also in the delivery and interpretation of news.

Since US network programmes operate under far less regulatory oversight than public service informed bulletins in the UK and Norway – which have to abide by strict rules on impartiality – the anchor has more freedom to be able to voice more opinion and conjecture. Despite the strict impartiality guidelines in the UK a high degree of interpretation in live news conventions was also identified, most notably in the use of two way interventions.

But while the UK's interpretative use of live reporters did not challenge the regulatory checks on 'balance' or 'objectivity' in reporting party politics, this more interventionist style of journalism – present also in US broadcasting – represents not just the editorial intention to de-spin the soundbites of political actors. It is arguably influenced by the wider culture of news and more specifically the relative presence of 24-hour television and integration of rolling news practices in each country. For the fast paced world of 24-hour news channels has been a feature of American journalism since CNN defined the genre in the 1980s. A decade later the UK had two dedicated news channels (Sky News and BBC). Of course, how integrated dedicated rolling news channels are with fixed time bulletins remains an important question for future research. Whether by interviews or ethnographic study, it would be interesting to learn how far presenters, packages and editors are shared across competing platforms including online sites.⁷ So, for example, in March 2013 the BBC's entire UK and global news services converged – including TV, radio and online – into one large newsroom in central London.

However, the culture of rolling, converged newsrooms is less evident in Norway. A rolling news channel was not launched until 2007 in Norway and is today only supplied by one broadcaster, TV2.⁸ Lund's (2012) ethnographic study of TV2 revealed a lack of convergence between the broadcaster's rolling newsroom and its

delivery of fixed news bulletins. This is perhaps reflected by our study's finding that showed – across the six broadcasters examined – TV2 had the least amount of live news conventions. More generally, the wider environment of 24-television news culture – in a domestic sense, since international news channels are accessible – has arguably not influenced Norwegian news bulletins to the same degree as it has in the UK and US.

But while the relative presence of 24-hour news culture in each nation appears to influence the immediacy of conventions used in today's television news bulletins, some of the more interventionist conventions identified in our study – where journalists supply live, on-screen reaction and interpretation – could perhaps relate to maintaining a story's newsworthiness in an increasingly crowded marketplace of news. For as journalists now have the potential to bring news to people's immediate attention (on Twitter or Facebook, say, or a rolling news channel), editors of fixed time television bulletins might believe viewers want more than the day's 'facts' in evening programming and would prefer the 'latest' views and developments. In doing so, this raises questions for future research about how far audiences are usefully informed *throughout the day* or whether many continue to rely on an evening bulletin to contextualize the day's events. While a greater reliance on live, up-to-date news might appear to make bulletins more relevant and cutting-edge within the news industry, it could ultimately be at the expense of supplying audiences with the necessary background/context edited packages have traditionally delivered.

In summary, our comparative cross-national findings suggest that the wider culture of 24-hour news could be having a systemic impact on the journalistic interventions supplied in fixed time television bulletins. We argue these types of journalistic interventions – which inject a sense of immediacy (reporting live), of pace

(constant updates) or extend geographic space (being on location) – represent *an equivalence of rolling news logic*, since they reflect characteristics of the wider culture of contemporary news, most recognisably in the format and style displayed on dedicated television news channels.

Notes

¹ We are grateful to John Huxford for recording the US material and sending it to the UK.

² It was beyond the financial scope of the study to obtain retrospective television news bulletins. However, if resources are available we recommend future research should longitudinally explore the changing nature of fixed time news bulletins.

³ We would like to thank Mari Nesbø and Annicken Sørum for coding the Norwegian television news bulletins.

⁴ We would like to thank Cardiff's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (CUROP) for funding Richard Thomas, a Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies undergraduate student at Cardiff University, over eight weeks to code and help analyze UK and US television news coverage. More details about CUROP can be found here: <http://learning.cf.ac.uk/cuop/> Accessed 22 May 2013

⁵ While there were some instances when journalists adopted multiple roles in a news item – offering both the latest news or being interpretive, for instance – our study quantified the *most prominent* aspect.

⁶ Since TV2 figures were comparably low, we excluded it from Table 3.

⁷ It should be noted that the level of integration between bulletins and rolling news channels/websites differs across broadcasters in each nation.

⁸ While NRK has a channel dedicated to news and current affairs, it does not have a continuous rolling news service.

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