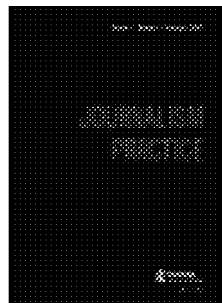


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journalism Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjop20>

THE THIRST TO BE FIRST

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Available online: 26 Jun 2009

To cite this article: Justin Lewis & Stephen Cushion (2009): THE THIRST TO BE FIRST, *Journalism Practice*, 3:3, 304-318

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512780902798737>

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THE THIRST TO BE FIRST

An analysis of breaking news stories and their impact on the quality of 24-hour news coverage in the UK

Justin Lewis and **Stephen Cushion**

This article explores the growth and character of breaking news on two 24-hour news channels in the United Kingdom, Sky News and BBC News 24. Our purpose is to examine, in detail, the nature and role of breaking news and, more generally, its impact on the quality of television news journalism. We draw upon a series of content analyses of news programming conducted in 2004, 2005/6 and 2007, and compare the elements of a breaking news item with more conventional forms of news. Our findings indicate that "breaking news" has become an increasingly important part of the 24-hour news culture. This growth means that the typical breaking news item is becoming increasingly predictable and routine. Moreover, by most measures, breaking news items are less well informed and feature less independent reporting than conventional news items. As a consequence, we argue, the decision to cover more breaking news stories impoverishes the quality of journalism.

KEYWORDS breaking news; content analysis; news values; public knowledge; sources; 24-hour news journalism

Introduction

In this article we explore the growth and character of breaking news on two 24-hour news channels, Sky News and BBC News 24. Our purpose is to examine, in detail, the nature and role of breaking news and, more generally, its impact on the quality of journalism. We draw upon a series of content analyses conducted in 2004, 2005/6 and 2007, and compare the elements of a breaking news item with more conventional forms of news. Our focus, throughout, is on the quality of information provided to viewers, which we assess by examining the topic and location of breaking news items along with the type and range of sources drawn upon to inform stories. Our analysis also evaluates the nature, newsworthiness and timing of a "typical" breaking news item.

New News Values

If immediacy has become the new life-blood of 24-hour news culture, breaking news is its apotheosis. There is nothing very surprising about this—the urgency and excitement suggested by the idea of breaking news is steeped in journalistic tradition. The "scoop", the "exclusive" and the competitive ethos between news outlets all find echoes in the notion of breaking news. News, after all, is partly about newness, and what could be newer than breaking news?

The expectation that journalists provide up-to-date news is well documented in academic literature on news values since Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified broad criteria for news selection over 40 years ago. Galtung and Ruge's (1965) study was preoccupied with the analysis of foreign news in Norwegian newspapers and was written against the frantic pressures to print and physically transport newspapers from Oslo to Bergen. Their attempt to explain why some stories became news and others did not lies at the heart of journalism studies, and many scholars have sought to update the relevance of these news values across media in contemporary news culture (Brighton and Foy, 2007; Harcup and O'Neil, 2001; Harrison, 2006). So, for example, Harcup and O'Neil (2001) revisited Galtung and Ruge's study by exploring *all* news items in three UK newspapers—*The Sun*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*—and found Galtung and Ruge's taxonomy of news factors appeared "to ignore the majority of news stories" (2001, p. 276). According to Harcup and O'Neil (2001, p. 279), UK national newspapers value stories that include a focus on power elites, celebrities, entertainment, surprise stories, *both* "good" and "bad" news, magnitude, relevance, follow-ups and whether news fits into editorial agendas. The relevance of particular news values, they suggest, will differ from one type of news outlet to another.

Brighton and Foy's (2007) systematic study of news values across a range of news media also suggests news selection differs across media. Based on an analysis of national newspapers, regional to national television news coverage, new media and conventional radio bulletins, they argue the relevance of particular news values differs from one type of news outlet to another. What makes news selection, in other words, is as *much a function of the medium as it is the message*.

At a time when electronic news culture is increasingly going "live" with "breaking news" stories, news values are increasingly subject to renegotiation and reinterpretation. As Brighton and Foy (2007, p. 29) put it: "The approach to the delivery and packaging of news has altered with the passage of time, and the shape of the media in the 21st century is quite different from how it was 40 years ago . . . [news] values will vary from medium to medium, and from each individual package to the next". Perhaps the most glaring examples of this are the imperatives that now apply to certain types of broadcast news, whereby the age of the 24-hour news cycle has created a medium that privileges immediacy (cf. Lewis et al., 2005) over more traditional forms of reflection.

By contrast, newspapers—as Harcup and O'Neil (2001) suggest—have given up competing with a medium that can deliver news almost instantaneously. So, for example, Bob Franklin has argued that the press are increasingly turning their attention to editorializing rather than reporting (Franklin, 1997). Similarly, Richard Tait (cited in *BBC News Online*, 2007) suggests that market competition has forced newspapers to become "viewpapers", unable to compete on the same terms as electronic news outlets. News values, in this context, change *within* media and are shaped externally by their relationship with rival news outlets.

Approaches to Breaking News

The notion of "breaking news" has quickly gone from being a possibility to a convention, one that defines our 24-hour news culture. Much like warnings issued around fast food chains, there has been a concern that a diet made up of "quick fit" breaking news stories might pose adverse effects on our democratic health. Anecdotal evidence from journalists suggests that constantly going live to "break news" might mitigate journalists

—and thus audiences—from fully digesting what they see or understanding the stories being told (MacGregor, 1997).

The delivery of what might be described as a “fast news” culture is nothing new to journalists: classic ethnographies—by Tuchman (1978) or Gans (1979)—depict newsrooms where snapshot decisions are made against complaints of lack of time or editorial pleas for more space. Thus, whilst the previous decade might have witnessed the emergence of rolling news channels, rolling deadlines have always played a part in news selection. Previous discussions of news values are not immune from time or spatial constraints, nor have studies ignored the competitive market-led demands of beating rival news outlets to stories and the journalistic thirst to be “first”. We ask, in this study, if breaking news items differ from conventional news stories, and what implications this might have on the quality of journalism.

Our study confirms the extent to which breaking news has become an everyday part of the 24-hour news cycle, a chance to highlight the “newness of news” regardless of its drama or its significance. While this point has been picked up by satirists (notably the BBC spoof *Broken News*), it tends to get lost in most discussions of breaking news, where the emphasis is always on dramatic, major news stories (see, for example, Bouvier, 2007 and Nacos, 2003, who discuss breaking news in the context of the terrorist attacks on September 11th). If the term “breaking news” is often associated with high drama, it is *not* reserved for such moments. On the contrary, breaking news has become a familiar convention, and major news stories like the 7/7 terrorist attacks or the Boxing Day Tsunami are no more typical of breaking news stories than they are of news generally. And while it may sound like a contradiction in terms, our focus here is on the *everyday world of breaking news*.

The United Kingdom’s first 24-hour news channel, Sky News (launched in 1989), boasts proudly of being the “first with breaking news”. BBC News 24 is a little more circumspect, claiming that: “we aim to be first with breaking news but our overriding commitment is to accuracy”.¹ Perhaps because of the criticism the BBC received post-Hutton and in the Neil Report (2004) about accuracy and balance, BBC editors are reluctant to enter too enthusiastically into a race where speed might supersede accuracy. And yet, as we argue in a moment, there are signs that both News 24 and Sky News are injecting more pace into news coverage by increasing the volume of breaking news items.

If the BBC’s position contains an implicit jibe at their commercial rival (which, by implication, has less commitment to accuracy, inviting the quip that they “are never wrong for long”), the BBC’s response is revealing in that it both stresses the importance of breaking news while hinting at a conflict between this emphasis and one of the BBC’s (and, in theory, journalism’s) core values.

This difference in emphasis and approach to breaking news was highlighted days after the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London. The (then) head of Sky News, Nick Pollard, stated their policy was to “tell viewers what we can see, what we know and what we don’t know” (cited in *Media Guardian*, 2005). By contrast, the BBC, according to the former head of television news, Roger Mosey, would only “put on screen what we know is right—reports from our own correspondents, the official emergency service figures and information from members of the public that we’ve checked out” (Lewis et al., 2005). Our analysis examines whether this editorial guidance is reflected in breaking news stories *more generally*.

Method and Samples

This article develops our first analysis of 24-hour news channels in 2004 (Lewis et al., 2005) and a more recent study into whether UK 24-hour news is becoming “Foxified” (Cushion and Lewis, 2009). The 2004 sample consisted of 84 hours (42 hours of each channel), giving a total of 1972 separate news items.² We repeated the analysis in 2005/6 and 2007, using many of the same variables. The 2005/6 sample consisted of 40 hours of BBC News 24 and Sky News (20 hours per channel) over three weeks in November 2005, December 2005 and January 2006, generating a total of 816 news items across the two channels. The 2007 sample consisted of 40 hours of BBC News 24 and Sky News (20 hours each) over a two-week period in February/March 2007, generating a total of 809 news items across the two channels. All three samples involved a variety of timeslots during the weekday daytime hours. In total, our samples generated 250 breaking news items, with an additional 63 items in our special sample from 2005/6 (since this sample excluded stories covered by only one channel as breaking news, we consider it separately).

Our analysis includes looking at the frequency of and time spent on breaking news items between 2004 and 2007 before examining, in detail, the topic and location of breaking news items, the sources drawn upon and the nature, newsworthiness and timing of a typical breaking news story. There are, of course, many ways to decide what constitutes “breaking news” (as will become self-evident from our analysis). We were interested in how news channels use and define breaking news rather than providing some kind of normative model of “breaking news”. We therefore took our definition from the broadcasters themselves, and our content analysis only quantifies “breaking news” items when they are defined as such by a news channel. Our subsequent discussion explores the characteristics of a typical “breaking news” story and reflects upon the nature of this type of journalism.

The Rise of Breaking News

In our first study of 24-hour news in 2004 (Lewis et al., 2005), we pointed out that although breaking news stories were often used to define rolling news they constituted a fairly small part of a 24-hour news channel’s output. We also noted that Sky News—faithful to their PR—devoted three times as much time to breaking news items as the BBC channel. This relatively parsimonious approach to breaking news—particularly by the BBC—is in keeping with a view of breaking news as a dramatic rather than a routine moment in news reporting. Our subsequent studies suggest that this has changed, with Sky News doubling the amount of time it devoted to breaking news by 2007, and breaking news on BBC News 24 increasing more than fourfold during the same period (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Percentage of time spent on breaking news items as a proportion of news time (including sport) overall on Sky News and BBC News 24

	BBC News 24			Sky News		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
Percentage of stories designated breaking news	3	11	11.2	4.5	13	11
Percentage of news time spent on breaking stories	2.4	8.3	11	7.3	21.4	13

While less than one in 30 stories were breaking news on the BBC channel in 2004, by 2007 this had increased to one in nine. The increase has been a little more uneven on Sky News, although this is, in part, explained by the more recent use of the “news alert” tag which by 2007 was being applied to stories that might have previously been labelled as breaking news.

It is possible that this significant growth is simply a consequence of technological developments which have given reporters greater freedom to travel and send back live pictures and which have produced a willing band of “citizen journalists”. News channels are, in theory, better positioned to report breaking news than ever before. So, for example, the adoption of cheaper, more portable means of shooting and transmitting images may well have been a factor in pushing channels like CNN towards more live news coverage during the 1990s (Livingston and Cooper, 2001). Similarly, Livingston and Bennett (2003) chart the increase in the volume of “*event-driven*” news on CNN (which they define as news based on unpredictable or unexpected events, rather than the more stage managed or routine forms of news)—a form of news that may lend itself more easily to the tag “breaking news”.

A closer look at the breaking news items in our sample, however, casts doubt on this explanation, or, for that matter, on the rather more fanciful idea that there is more exciting news available than there used to be. In short, the increase in breaking news cannot be explained by the increased capacity to report “live news”, since only a handful of breaking news items in all three samples involved live reporting. Most breaking news stories are fairly run-of-the-mill, and rarely involve the kind of spontaneous event-driven stories described by Livingston and Bennett (see Table 3). The other explanations for this increase are less edifying: either more items are being tagged as breaking news—so that what used to be just “news” is now labelled “breaking news”—or news stations are increasingly favouring information which *can* be tagged as breaking news.

Perhaps the best indicator of which explanation is most plausible is the extent to which the news channels agree about what constitutes a breaking news story. If there is broad agreement, it gives weight to the idea that the growth in breaking news is a product of systematic changes in news practices. If there is not, it suggests that there is an arbitrary quality to the notion of breaking news, with traditional news values falling by the wayside. We explored this issue in our 2007 sample, by looking at the number of stories shared by the two channels overall (i.e. both non-breaking and breaking news stories), and comparing this with the number of breaking news stories the channels had in common. Given the high news value associated with breaking news, we might reasonably assume that both channels are more likely to cover breaking news stories than other kinds of stories. At first glance, this does appear to be the case, although only marginally. We found that, on average, 79 per cent of breaking news stories were covered by both channels, compared with an average of 73 per cent for all news stories.

However, in one in five cases a breaking news story on one channel does not even merit coverage on the other. More significantly, while there is general agreement about whether a story is worth covering, *there is much less consistency about whether it is worth covering as breaking news*. We found that only 24 per cent of stories labelled as breaking news are covered by both channels *as* breaking news. In other words, in three out four cases the two channels agreed about which story was *news*, but in only one in four cases did they agree that stories were *breaking* news.

The stress on speed and competition means that it is possible that if one channel breaks a story first, the other simply nullifies the contest by withdrawing from the race,

refusing to tag it as breaking news and thereby puncturing any rival claims of being first (an important claim for both channels, as we explain shortly). Although we have some anecdotal evidence for this, the more important point suggested by these findings is that the label breaking news is applied somewhat arbitrarily, and that the distinction between breaking news and ordinary news is often unclear.

In other words, it appears that the growth of the breaking news genre has more to do with branding than with possibilities created by new technology. We agree, in this sense, with journalist Paul Mason's (2006) assessment of 24-hour news:

The battle of the "Breaking news" straps is just a symptom of how rolling news has run up against the limits of its technical capacity. The visual harangue of "Breaking news" is necessary to attract the viewer's attention, but head-to-head competition dictates it must be done as loudly for "Sharon suffers stroke" as for "Portsmouth sacks manager".

As Mason suggests, the breaking news tag has become an easy way of injecting drama into the largely routine business of 24-hour news gathering. So, for example, in our 2007 sample the biggest single topic covered in breaking news stories was crime—the subject of over one in four of breaking news items (see Table 2). This is notably higher than the proportion of crime stories in the 2007 sample overall (10 per cent), suggesting that crime news is particularly conducive to becoming breaking news. None of these crimes were especially dramatic, but the episodic nature of crime news provides a steady diet of "events" that fit the breaking news format. Much has been written about the routine nature of crime reporting (Reiner et al., 2003), and breaking news stories about arrests, trials, verdicts and so forth—despite the hyperbole of the breaking news tag—follow much the same kinds of routine.

This is not to say that the growth of breaking news is simply a cosmetic or semantic exercise. The competitive stress on being first with breaking news may well have lowered the threshold about which stories are important enough to interrupt a bulletin. In deciding "what's news", immediacy may now trump features like impact or importance. This presents a challenge to recent literature on news values, because it has little to do with the nature of the story itself, merely its timing. Harcup and O'Neil's (2001) revision of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) taxonomy of news values excluded the virtue of *immediacy*—perhaps understandably, in the sense that the notion of immediacy is almost indiscriminate. Yet

TABLE 2
Topics covered by breaking news items by percentage*

Topic	2004	2007
Business/consumer news	8	8
Crime	14	27
Celebrity/sport/human interest	6	10
Politics	9	8
Accidents/disasters	6	20
Terrorism	27	9
Socio-economic issues	8	4
Iraq	12	3
Other war/conflict	8	10
International law/diplomacy	2	1
Total	100	100

*The 2005/6 sample did not include this variable for analysis.

our data suggest that, for 24-hour news at least, immediacy, with or without live pictures or well-honed sources, is becoming an increasingly important criterion in deciding “newsworthiness”.

Table 2 also shows signs that the category of breaking news—traditionally associated with major “hard news” stories—might well be softening. Between 2004 and 2007, the proportion of breaking news items about tabloid news topics (crime and celebrity/sport/human interest) rose from 20 to 37 per cent. And while the 2004 proportion was roughly in line with the proportion of tabloid items in news coverage overall (Lewis et al., 2005), by 2007 breaking news has become notably more tabloid oriented than news overall (only 22 per cent of which were tabloid in 2007). This suggests that part of the rise of breaking news is an expansion of what constitutes breaking news—in this case from more “hard” news topics to more tabloid categories of news story. The rise in the number of breaking news items may thus be driving a shift towards a more tabloid news agenda.

Breaking Routines

Livingston and Bennett distinguish between “institutionally based” news, which comes from institutional sources and venues, and (following Lawrence, 2000) “event-driven” news, which involves “coverage of activities that are, at least at their initial occurrence, spontaneous and not managed by officials within institutional settings” (Livingston and Bennett, 2003, pp. 364–5). The archetypal breaking news story is full of images that set the journalistic pulse racing: of being first on the scene at a major news story or “breaking” a story through dogged journalistic endeavour. We tend to associate these images with event-driven stories—disasters, unexpected incidents, international conflicts or unspun political intrigue—rather than the routines of institutionally based news. But to what extent *is* breaking news event-driven?

We used a similar distinction in our studies, between more predictable, institutionally based or routinely gathered items (such as a ministerial announcement, or the outcome of a trial) and less predictable revelations or events. We included, in the predictable category, what Daniel Boorstin calls “pseudo-events”, which are “planned, planted or incited” (Boorstin, 1977 [1961], p. 11). Table 3 shows that an increasing proportion of breaking news is predictable, including anticipated political announcements, various stages in crime stories, sports news or news about economic indicators.

While just over two in 10 breaking items were predictable in 2004, this rose to more than half in 2007. This suggests that the rise of breaking news on both channels is due to an increase in branding predictable news items as breaking news. So, for example, on 12 January 2006, both Sky and BBC News 24 “broke” the news of a Bank of England announcement that interest rates would remain unchanged—an announcement that was predictable in almost every sense (it is part of a routine decision-making process and the

TABLE 3
Percentage of predictable and unpredictable breaking news items

	2004	2005/6	2007
Predictable	22.5	39.8	55.6
Unpredictable	77.5	60.2	44.4

announcement had been widely anticipated). While there are moments in which “nothing new happening” might be newsworthy (if, for example, a change had been widely expected), this was not one of them.

Moreover, if we look at who reports breaking news, we can see that it is often more a matter of processing wire stories than independent news gathering. Table 4—combining data from the 2004 and 2007 samples—shows that the great majority of breaking news items originate in the studio rather than from a reporter on location. While this is true of 24-hour news channels in general—which tend to be more dependent on its studio anchors/presenters than conventional news bulletins (Lewis et al., 2005)—it is far *more* true of the breaking news stories on those channels. The emphasis on breaking news, in other words, has little to do with the traditional journalistic virtues of independent news gathering.

In the same vein, if we look at all *non*-breaking news items in the 2004 and 2007 samples,³ one in three—36 per cent—involve reporters on location. The proportion of breaking news stories featuring reporters on location is much lower—only 16 per cent. As we might expect, this is especially true of stories when they first break—only 12 per cent of which involve reporters on location. Follow-up reports about breaking news stories are a little more likely to come from outside the studio (19 per cent of which involve reporters on location) although they are still more likely to be studio-bound than non-breaking items. Moreover, we cannot assume that this increase is explained by reporters rushing to the scene after a story has broken: the news channels are simply more likely to do follow-ups if there is a reporter already there (a convention satirized by the BBC’s *Broken News* series, in which we repeatedly return to reporters on location reporting a “breaking” story even where there is little new to say). It is a point echoed in MacGregor’s (1997) *Live, Direct and Biased?*—published the year BBC News 24 was launched—which warned that journalists, in an increasingly 24/7 news culture, would find it difficult to both investigate stories whilst being constantly “on air”.

In this context, the boast of being “first with breaking news” has little to do with the range of journalists at a news outlet’s disposal or their professional efforts. Being first means, most of the time, processing information in the studio from the news wires or other sources, branding it and putting it out as quickly as possible. There are, of course, exceptions to this, when a news channel genuinely “breaks” a story: the danger is in assuming that because such instances are undoubtedly more memorable—especially for journalists—they typify the genre. But the growth of the breaking news tag has meant a lowering of the bar. As a consequence, the breaking news routine has more to do with the *processing and presentation* of information than with independent news gathering.

We also get a sense of this from Table 5, which divides breaking news stories into the initial reports of a story as it breaks and subsequent follow-up reports. This shows that the ratio of “first reports” to follow-ups has increased. There could, of course, be a number

TABLE 4

Percentage of breaking news items/non-breaking news items reported on location*

First breaking stories on location	12
Follow-up breaking stories on location	19
Total breaking news items on location	16
Non-breaking stories on location	36

*This combines the 2004 and 2007 samples.

TABLE 5
Types of breaking news items (%)

	2004	2005/6	2007
First breaking	39.4	41.9	46.7
Return to breaking news story	60.6	58.1	53.3

of possible explanations for this. It does, nonetheless, fit with a more general pattern found in our data which suggests news channels have become less discriminating about what constitutes "breaking news". So, for example, in 2004, there were fewer breaking news items, and the fact that they were more likely to be followed up suggests, among other things, that they were *worth* following up. The growth in the volume of breaking news, by contrast, may have led to more "one-off" breaking stories that are either too insignificant to repeat or, in the case of institutionally based news, simply become conventional news items.

The Quality of Breaking News

A review of the BBC 24-hour news channel funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport revealed much about the way in which breaking news is interpreted by both media and political elites (Lambert, 2002). The author, Richard Lambert, insisted that:

an absolute determination to break news first must be at the heart of everything the channel does [News 24]. It does not matter how sophisticated its analysis may be if news seekers are tuned in somewhere else. (2002, p. 14)

And yet the picture painted by our finding suggests, at the very least, that the ability to be first with breaking news stories is a poor measure of a news channel's quality. Richard Lambert's statement about the centrality of "being first", is, in this sense, unhelpful. This is not to say that there is no journalistic value in getting to a genuinely important story quickly. But the emphasis on being first and the subsequent proliferation of breaking news appears to have created an assembly line of breaking news production that has little to do with being informative or communicating news well. On the contrary, our findings indicate that being first, most of the time, means an ability to process information with as little thought and discernment as possible. The main barriers to the immediate transmission of news, after all, are more matters of professional judgment than instinct: the time it takes to decide whether a story is worth reporting, whether it is significant enough to interrupt a bulletin, what the story means and how that meaning should be best communicated so that the viewer appreciates its significance. To boast of being first is, effectively, to boast of abandoning such judgments.

In our initial study of the 2004 sample, we noted that 24-hour news items in general tend to contain far less analysis of every kind than reports on a conventional news bulletin (Lewis et al., 2005). They offer less data, fewer meaningful comparisons, less historical background and less context. They are, in that sense, less informative and less likely to engage the viewer. The problem, we suggested, was that despite the luxury of having far more time to explore a story, the emphasis on immediacy rather than quality has pushed 24-hour news channels into a ticker-tape mentality where speed is all.

So, for example, when channels return to a “breaking story”, it is more likely to simply involve recapping information or the confirmation of details than substantive new information. Of the follow-up breaking news items in the 2004 study, only 11 per cent focused on new information, while 38 per cent simply repeated or clarified what was already known. We also found that the *lack* of information in breaking news stories, combined with the desire to broadcast breaking news, forced reporters to speculate rather than report.

So, for example, at around 9 am on the 27 July 2004 on Sky News, BBC News 24 and the (now defunct) ITV News channel “broke” a Reuters story that a United Airlines flight from Sydney to Los Angeles had returned to Sydney after an attempted break-in to the cockpit. Although the story fell apart about an hour later (the pilot’s return, it turned out, was prompted by a note in the plane’s toilet indicating that there was a bomb on board—a warning that quickly turned out to be a hoax), the news channels (especially Sky and ITV), returned to the story a number of times.

With little in the way of hard information to report, both Sky and ITV filled out their coverage with speculation about a terrorist attack—Sky’s anchor, for example, suggesting rather dramatically that “we know that of course at the weekend, there was a threat by a militant group which said it would attack Australia if the country didn’t pull its troops out of Iraq. It said it would turn Australia into pools of blood”. The problem, here, is symptomatic of an emphasis on breaking news, which values immediacy and drama above quality of information.

Since one measure of the quality of information provided is whether it is visibly informed, we explored the range of sources—actors journalists refer to inform a news story such as a politician or a member of the public—appearing in “breaking news” stories in the 2004 and 2007 samples (Table 6). Overall, the ratio of stories to sources in the 2004 and 2007 samples is 71 per cent (i.e. for every 100 stories there are 71 sources⁴), while for breaking news stories it is far lower, with only one source appearing for every five stories.

Lack of time for preparation means that breaking news stories are, by definition, less likely to involve well-constructed packages with a range of sources. The problem here is that, without a massive investment of journalistic resources, increasing the emphasis on breaking news means decreasing the stress on a journalist’s ability to make sense of a story and tell it well. In effect, *increasing the volume of breaking news means sacrificing a*

TABLE 6
Frequency of type of sources in breaking news items

Source	First breaking	Follow up	Total
Media		3	3
Politics		7	7
Law and order		3	3
Business	2	7	9
Medical		2	2
Trade union		1	1
Public		2	2
Witness/friend/relative		2	2
Military	2	1	3
Non-governmental organization	1		1
Monarchy		7	1
Total ratio (%)	12	35	20

more informed, rounded approach to news storytelling. As we might expect, the ratio for the use of sources for first breaking reports is particularly low (only 12 per cent of reports quote sources), but the ratio only rises to 35 per cent for follow-up reports, where we might expect reporters to be gathering responses and reactions, which is still only half that for conventional news items. The abundance of breaking news appears, in this sense, to force journalists on to the back foot, making it more difficult for them to do their job well. To put it another way, we have the strange irony that *more breaking news means less journalism.* The rise of breaking news thus appears to have ushered in a kind of news that is considerably less well informed—either by journalists on the ground or by on-screen sources—than conventional forms of news.

Our point here is not to chide channels for the failure to produce high-quality well-informed breaking news. On the contrary, the very nature of breaking news is that there is less time to attend to such things. The problem is that the editorial decision to increase significantly the volume of breaking news stories has consequences for the quality of news offered by a news channel.

In our 2004 study we also found that while there is a range of sources used on 24 news channels generally, four professions clearly dominate. This remained the case in 2007, and across both samples nearly half of all the sources appearing in the news—47 per cent—were from the worlds of politics, business, law and order, and the news media themselves. By contrast, if we take the five main “knowledge-based” professions (from the academy, medicine, science and technology, think tanks and government/public agencies), in aggregate they constitute only 9 per cent of all sources (and if we include non-governmental organizations in this list, the percentage only rises to 10 per cent).

Since the number of sources on breaking news items is so small, we should be careful about making comparisons. We note, however, that the domination of certain professions is exacerbated on breaking news items, where 65 per cent derive from politics, media, business, and law and order—with 47 per cent from business and politics alone. By contrast, only one of the 34 sources originated from one of the knowledge-based professions. This speaks, once again, to the routine nature of breaking news and to its informational limits: where sources are used, they tend to be from the usual suspects, with information-rich professions playing very little part.

This echoes Livingston and Bennett’s finding that “live news” (often associated with breaking news) is *more* likely to be informed by institutions and officials than “non-live” news. Their CNN study found that “institutions and officials were involved in approximately 74 per cent of all live transmissions . . . and 48 per cent of the ‘non-live’ transmissions” (2003, p. 375). They conclude that while “event-driven news stories are more common . . . officials seem to be as much a part of the news as ever” (2003, p. 376). While this might seem, at first, to be counter-intuitive, it demonstrates how far the image of journalists using new technology to liberate them from traditional constraints can be misleading. Far from freeing journalists, the emphasis on breaking news appears to have trapped them in a series of short-cuts and dead ends.

Our findings also indicate that claims that public participation in news is increasing—so-called “citizen journalism”—are perhaps exaggerated. While 24-hour news coverage after the tsunami disaster and the 7/7 terrorist attacks excited many commentators about the democratic possibilities of “user-generated content” or “witness contributors” (Bell, 2006), in the everyday world of breaking news, the public play, at best, a marginal role in shaping and informing breaking news coverage.

The Thirst to Be First

As we have suggested, the notion of “breaking news” is based on a long-standing principle of competitive journalism, and being first with breaking news is, on both channels, an end in itself. To many industry figures, it is conventional wisdom that Sky News is most likely to break important news events first. The *London Evening Standard*, for example, recently reported “Compare BBC News 24 and Sky News. While BBC News 24 rarely breaks a story, Sky News has about ten crews picking up events all day” (26 April 2007). Similarly, in Lambert’s (2002) report on 24-hour news, a section on breaking news confidently stated: “It is a fair bet that anyone who walks around a newspaper office where televisions are turned on the whole time will find them tuned into Sky News rather than to BBC News 24. The same applies to Government offices (including the Department for Culture, Media and Sport)”. While Lambert’s review was mostly impressionistic, our more detailed analysis looks systematically at who is first with breaking news over an extended period. Our findings suggest Sky News’ reputation of breaking news first is overstated. More importantly, our data suggest the difference is so narrow (by seconds or, at most, just minutes) that *it matters little to the viewer who is actually first*.

Because the two channels often diverge in their treatment of breaking news (with less than one in four breaking news stories in common) we looked at a much larger sample—gathered from 300 hours of news over three months in 2005/6—in order to examine those instances where Sky News and BBC News 24 both reported the same breaking news story *as* breaking news. This generated a sample of 63 breaking news stories covered by both channels.

Table 7 shows us that, in most cases, the difference in time between *when* the two channels report the story is minimal. On 43 of the 63 (68 per cent) occasions, the stories were broadcast within three minutes of one another, and a majority of these (or 38 per cent of the total) were broadcast within a matter of seconds. If we begin counting when a breaking news strap is shown across the bottom of the screen (rather than when it is reported) this increases the number of close calls (within less than a minute) to nearly half the total (46 per cent), seven of which were by a time difference of less than 10 seconds.

Since this sample involved only those instances (which, as we have seen, is a minority of cases) when both channels agreed that a story was worth covering *and* that it was indeed a breaking news story, we would expect the bar to be raised in terms of news value. However, very few of the “breaking” stories in this sample were of great significance, and many were routine, such as the scheduled announcement of the draw for the Champions League or the outcome of a (not especially newsworthy) trial. Indeed, far from being occasions on which a major story is broken, most were anticipated developments of ongoing stories—such as Ariel Sharon’s latest brain scan results.

Symptomatic of this is the very high proportion of *crime* stories that feature as breaking news—around a third (20 out of 63) of the total—an even higher proportion

TABLE 7

Difference between breaking times in minutes, by story, or strap or story

	0–1	2–3	4–5	6–9	10–19	20–29	30+	Total
By story	24	19	9	5	3	2	1	63
By strap or story	29	13	11	6			1	60

than we found amongst our more inclusive example of breaking news items (see Table 2). In only one instance did this involve reporting a *new* crime (the shooting of a Bradford police officer)—the rest were all announcements of various stages in the criminal justice process: arrests, trials, verdicts and so on. Moreover, we also found no evidence of independent reporting in any of the 63 stories we examined.

While the desire to be first to report a major “breaking” story is understandable, two points follow from these findings. First, the difference in time between the two channels is so small as to make very little difference to most viewers most of the time. If many journalists may share the assumption that “being first” matters, it is less clear—when the differences are so small—that anyone else shares this sense of rather contrived urgency. Indeed, the idea of a viewer sitting in front of a news channel waiting for stories to break—and being frustrated that this might happen seconds or even minutes later than if he or she were watching another channel—is almost comic.

Richard Lambert’s insistence that a “determination to break news first must be at the heart of everything” contains little supporting evidence other than to evoke this rather comic figure. His insistence that “it does not matter how sophisticated its analysis may be if news seekers are tuned in somewhere else” is revealing: the phrase “news seekers” evokes *journalists* rather than *TV viewers*, and suggests that Lambert’s imperative is steeped in a journalistic culture rather than audience need or desire.

This point is exacerbated by the routine nature of most breaking news stories when channels go “head to head”. Simply put, it is hard to see what justifies such urgency. From the viewer’s point of view, the breaking news stories that punctuate the news channels’ output add little value to the quality of the experience. We take up this point below.

Conclusion: The Breathless Routine of Breaking News

In recent years, our research has shown a sizeable increase in breaking news items on UK 24 news channels. This increase, our findings suggest, has little to do with technological advances, the rise in event-driven journalism or an increase in independent reporting. On the contrary, the rush to be seen covering more breaking news stories combines the frenetic with the banal. It takes place largely in the studio, as routine stories delivered by news agencies and releases are hastily processed, broadcast and tagged as breaking news. Unlike its predecessor, the “scoop” or the “exclusive”, breaking news has become a kind of breathless routine, a form of predictable punctuation marking out a news day.

It is not hard to see how this has happened: the virtue of breaking news has become taken for granted in a 24-hour news culture since its inception. When journalists or academics talk about breaking news, they invariably focus on untypical examples of great drama or import (Lewis et al., 2005). As a consequence, breaking news is seen as exciting, dramatic, unpredictable and, above all, a marker of news value. The problem is that, *most* of the time, it is none of these things. Indeed, the focus on breaking news means, in practice, *less* independent journalism, *fewer* stories on location and *a more limited range* of sources informing the news. Perhaps most damning is the low level of agreement about the nature of a breaking news story. What is breaking news on Sky News is, three times out of four, *not* breaking news on BBC News 24—and vice versa.

All of which leads us to two conclusions. First, the growth in breaking news is a perfect example of a victory of style over substance. Breaking news is there because it has a certain *feel*, rather than because of the significance of its content. Its function has little to

do with conveying to audiences the significant events of the day—it is there as a symbol of the *newness* of news. In short, the medium of breaking news *is* the message of breaking news. If audiences *do* want a constant ticker-tape of breaking stories—and there is little evidence of this—it has more to do with a semiotic display of immediacy than with becoming well informed.

Our second conclusion follows from this: an increase in time spent on breaking news impoverishes the quality of a bulletin. The discourse of breaking news works against a focus on the quality of information or the skill with which it is presented, both of which *necessarily* diminish. This is not a criticism of the way breaking news is presented: an emphasis on speed inevitably means sacrificing the quality of journalism. It is, rather, to point out that an increase in emphasis on this kind of news has consequences on the quality of journalism on news channels. To put it bluntly, a focus on breaking news comes at the expense of journalistic values—assessing the significance of a story and telling it well—that are, in the grander scheme of things, far more important to viewers and—without wishing to be too pompous—to public understanding of the world.

We are reminded of a cartoon in the *New Yorker* picturing one cocktail party guest plaintively asking another: “if this is the information age, how come nobody knows anything?” Perhaps the perfect expression of this paradox is the crowded screen of a news channel, one plastered with graphics to bombard us with the latest, most up-to-date information. It is a medium of constant interruption, of disjointed and distracted meaning. It may make us feel informed, but it is a lousy way of telling us what is going on in the world.

NOTES

1. These quotes can be found in both channels’ publicity material. So, for example, Sky News make this claim on their website: <http://news.sky.com/skynews>, whilst the quote referring to News 24 coverage can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/statements2005/text/news.html> (both accessed 19 September 2008).
2. Our unit of analysis was a news item/segment, such as a report on location, a two-way or a studio interview. While news items often constitute a whole news story, a story might include several news items.
3. The 2005/6 sample was not coded for reporter location.
4. This does not mean that 71 per cent of stories used on-screen sources, since some stories will contain more than one source.

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