

Gatekeeping, Indexing, and Live-Event News: Is Technology Altering the Construction of News?

STEVEN LIVINGSTON and W. LANCE BENNETT

We are interested in event-driven news, defined as coverage of activities that are, at least at their initial occurrence, spontaneous and unmanaged by officials within institutional settings. Most news most of the time has its origins in official proceedings and pronouncements. That may be changing. We want to know if event-driven news stories, facilitated by technological advancements such as the videophone, are becoming more numerous, and if they are changing the reliance of journalists on officials in selecting and cueing their political content. In particular, we are interested in coverage of international events as an interesting test of whether technological changes are liberating journalists to report far flung world developments with more emphasis on live feeds and less emphasis on officials in highly managed institutional settings providing the framing. An alternative hypothesis suggests that even if live event coverage is on the rise, journalists may quickly bring officials into the news frame, continuing the familiar gatekeeping practice of “officialing” (news management and cueing) those live events. We find that event-driven news stories are indeed more common, but that officials seem to be as much a part of the news as ever. When an unpredicted, nonscripted, spontaneous event is covered in the news, the one predictable component of coverage remains official sources.

Keywords event-driven news, gatekeeping, indexing, technology

It was a familiar scene: A bystander with a video camera records a White police officer beating a Black citizen at a traffic stop; the tape is then shown repeatedly on network news. In this case, the videotape was recorded by a part-time disc jockey named Mitchell Crooks. On the tape, an Inglewood police officer is seen slamming 16-year-old Donovan Jackson onto the hood of a car. In addition to Crooks’s video, two private security cameras captured Jackson’s encounter with the Inglewood police. Cameras seem to be everywhere in our media saturated environment. This point was illustrated again a few days later when police, having learned of outstanding warrants on Crooks, arrested him as he stood outside the CNN bureau in Los Angeles. Security surveillance cameras captured his arrest, too, as did a CNN cameraman (Gorman & Berry, 2002; Rutenberg,

Steven Livingston is Associate Professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University, and Senior Research Fellow, Center for American Politics and Public Policy, University of Washington. W. Lance Bennett is Professor of Political Science and Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communication, University of Washington.

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Address correspondence to Steven Livingston, School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA. Email: sliv@gwu.edu

2002). As with the videotaped beating of Rodney King a decade before, these episodes illustrate an important dimension of news—the power of dramatic visuals and the growing reach of the technologies that capture them. Technology appears to facilitate the penchant of television news for covering dramatic events.

We are interested in determining more about event-driven news stories in order to see if they are becoming more numerous, and if they are changing the reliance of journalists on officials in selecting and cueing their political content. However, since events such as police beatings are episodic—and inherently limited by the coincidence of an incident in a public space shared by someone with a camera at hand—we turn our attention to a larger body of routine, regularly occurring political news. In particular, we propose to look at coverage of international events as an interesting test of whether technological changes are liberating journalists to report far flung world developments with more emphasis on live feeds and less emphasis on officials in highly managed institutional settings providing the framing. An alternative hypothesis suggests that even if live event coverage is on the rise, journalists may quickly bring officials into the news frame, continuing the familiar gatekeeping practice of “officiating” (news management and cueing) those live events. Thus, we are also interested in whether any observable trends in event-driven news reflect changes in journalistic gatekeeping practices in the industry.

Much has been written about recent transformations of news content, such as so-called hard news about politics and policy being replaced by soft news and infotainment features (Patterson, 2000). A huge volume of literature has emerged suggesting that economic pressures have threatened traditional gatekeeping based on reporter judgment and professional editorial standards that define the quality of news organizations (Bennett, in press). Communication technologies that open news gates to more event-driven news raise interesting questions about how to theorize and measure changes in gatekeeping. On the one hand, technologies such as the videophone and portable recording and transmission systems potentially free reporters to roam widely, and to cover events at their own discretion without filtering them through officials along beats or well-cultivated source networks. Yet, there are no guarantees that technologies will not be used simply as glitz factors, helicopters pursuing freeway chases in local news, or live feeds from the White House lawn on the national networks.

Rather than generalize about “technology effects,” we suggest that technology trends in gatekeeping may vary from one industrial sector to another. For example, local news seems to have adapted technology primarily to enhance infotainment formats and branding processes. Action news brands emerged in the 1980s with ads and news stories featuring helicopters and satellite vans (Bennett, 2003). Even mundane stories could be dramatized by making the technology the center of action, as in “And now we go to a live report from Chopper 7.” By contrast, we suspect that technology introduces a different dynamic into event-driven news in foreign affairs coverage. As noted above, technologies potentially free reporters to go directly to serious events such as ethnic wars, terrorist attacks, or sites of humanitarian suffering, and transmit high quality images and original interpretive narratives. The core empirical questions we address in this article are: *Has event-driven news increased in the recent era of new technology deployment?* and *What becomes of officials in this event-driven coverage?*

A Brief Definition of Event-Driven News

For purposes of this initial exploration, we will define event-driven news as coverage of activities that are, at least at their initial occurrence, spontaneous and not managed by

officials within institutional settings. Of course, officials in institutional settings also produce press events, and journalists use live feed technologies to cover them for added drama, as in “And now we go to our White House correspondent . . . live from the White House.” Indeed, anyone who has strolled past the White House in recent years will have noticed the growing press encampment in front of the West Wing bristling with telecommunications antennas, satellite dishes, and the like. One could say that these feeds are event-driven reports, but the important question becomes whether covering a stage-managed event live changes the underlying relationship of reporters and officials in creating the daily narratives about politics. We thus define event driven news, insofar as it matters politically, by constructing measures that enable us to distinguish events in terms of their degree of freedom from institutional settings and by the presence of officials in the story. The core of our empirical interest, then, is whether trends indicate any changes in levels of news managed within institutional settings, live events outside of managed institutional settings, and the presence or absence of officials in these event-driven stories. In other words, we are interested in learning whether journalists who have greater technological freedom to go to the scene of a remote, unmanaged event take advantage of that freedom, and to what extent they still bring in officials to help them write the story.

Managed and Unmanaged News

The principal distinction between managed and unmanaged news parallels the differences between what Daniel Boorstin (1977) called a pseudo-event and what Regina Lawrence (2000) has more recently referred to as event-driven news. We will first discuss the nature of pseudo-events and then turn to a discussion of event-driven news.

Boorstin captured the fundamental nature of institutionally based news in describing what he called a “pseudo-event.” A pseudo-event, said Boorstin, lacks spontaneity. It comes about “because someone has planned, planted, or incited it” (Boorstin, 1977, p. 11). This very quality is what makes them appealing to journalists and their news organizations. Pseudo-events can be anticipated, administratively managed, and coordinated with the organizers of the event. Press conferences, for example, are timed to facilitate news production routines and deadlines.

In his classic study of reporters and government officials, Leon Sigal examined the routines that define the interactions among reporters and news sources, and in the process vest power in sources to shape and define political reality. Because reporters cannot witness many events directly, they “must locate themselves in places where information is most likely to flow to them.” Efficiency therefore dictates “newsgathering through routine channels.” The result is that the reporter “looks to official channels to provide him with newsworthy material day after day. To the extent he leans heavily on routine channels for news, he vests *the timing of disclosure, and hence the surfacing of news stories*, in those who control the channels” (Sigal, 1973, p. 119, emphasis added). In this way, official frames of reference and interpretation have tended to dominate public discourse, including the timing of debate.

Sigal’s work laid part of the foundation for what Bennett refers to as the organizational gatekeeping model (Bennett, in press). Although Sigal found that official voices dominate the news, we are still left to wonder how, and to what political effect? Hallin’s work on the expansion and contraction of spheres of official debate, and Bennett’s indexing hypothesis both addressed how official views are processed and synthesized by reporters (Bennett, 1989; Hallin, 1986). Officials in a liberal democracy typically do not

speak with a uniform voice; there are variations in elite consensus on important policy issues. Indexing understands variation in elite consensus as the centerpiece of variation in news content. According to indexing, controversy and debate in media content conform to the contours of debate found among political elites whom journalists regard as decisive in the outcomes of the issues in the news.

Pegging news stories to official input does not mean that reporters cannot participate in writing the narrative. Robert Entman, for example, has argued that just because the White House dominates the news, that doesn't necessarily mean it controls the selection of news frames. As defined by Entman, framing in the news involves the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality, to highlight connections among them, and thereby to make a particular interpretation and evaluation more salient than others" (Entman, in press). Regarding indexing, Entman concludes that journalists may indeed limit their criticisms of presidents and policies at one level, but at another level, "journalists feel quite free and even obligated to engage in evaluation of the president's success in applying power, and his technical competence as a leader" (Entman, in press).

We expect that the ratio of reporter to official cues varies across different news situations. For example, scandals and feeding frenzies are, by definition, driven at least partly by reporters advancing stories through speculation and leading questions. Yet, we also know that in some cases even high levels of reporter and journalistic cueing may have relatively little effect on some audience judgments. It is clear that more research needs to be done on the effects of reporter cueing in various situations—particularly when obvious predictions are clouded by a combination of low public esteem for the press and evidence that journalists are insinuating themselves more into news frames in some kinds of stories (Patterson, 2000). These concerns notwithstanding, we expect that the presence of officials in news coverage matters, particularly when credible officials take strong policy positions in the media, and the stakes seem important for domestic peace, economic prosperity, or for easing moral outrage in extreme cases of ethnic cleansing or other human suffering.

Beyond the institutional staging, there are other types of stories that seem driven by the impact of spontaneous events. In some cases, news images of spontaneous events are so powerful that they become "icons," focusing attention on problems that often seem to dictate the scripts that journalists write for them (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995). The attack, rescue, and heroic patriotism scripts arising from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, come to mind here. The meaning of such news icons is of course far more complex than a picture providing the proverbial thousand words, but the point is that some events seem to gain public attention and policy significance through the impact of indelible and endlessly replayed images. Technologies may give journalists more routine access to situations in which such images are likely to occur.

News icons are just one example of what Lawrence (2000), more generally, calls event-driven news: "Event driven news is cued by the appearance of dramatic news events and the 'story cues' for reporters that arise out of those events" (p. 9). In her view, the institutional domination model of news explains much but not all news content and public problem definitions. "In institutionally driven news, political institutions set the agendas of news organizations; in contrast, as event-driven news gathers momentum, officials and institutions often respond to the news agenda rather than set it" (p. 9). Lawrence notes that problems and problem definitions arising out of event-driven news are "more volatile and difficult for officials to control or to benefit from and are more open to challengers" (p. 9). In this view, officials are challenged, sometimes even put on their heels, and rarely in complete control of an issue agenda.

As noted earlier, our preferred empirical window on event-driven news trends is international affairs coverage. With a steady stream of wars, terrorist incidents, famines, and humanitarian crises, international news would seem to have the greatest numbers of events subject to the greatest possible shift from institution-driven to event-driven coverage due to the greater journalistic access provided by new technology. Indeed, Lawrence's account of event-driven news has a parallel in the lore of international affairs coverage in what is often referred to as the "CNN effect." This legendary effect is reportedly caused by coverage that brings crisis events so quickly and dramatically to public view that officials often lament a loss of policy control to media (Livingston, 1997; Livingston & Eachus, 1995; Robinson, 2002).

In its more exaggerated versions, compelling images are transmitted in real time from distant hotspots, galvanizing new policy coalitions around some new media-induced challenge, resulting in the reordering of U.S. foreign policy priorities. Advocates of this "media lead the policy process" position argue that the U.S. responded to crises in northern Iraq following the Persian Gulf War, Somalia in 1992, Rwanda in 1994, Bosnia in 1995, and Kosovo in 1999, among others, not because of clearly defined national priorities established through deliberative institutional processes but because of the emotionally compelling pull of television pictures (Livingston, 2001).

Critics of this position argue that many of these episodes were already on the policy agenda, but not in such public forums as congressional—White House debates. In some cases, NGOs had cultivated both policymakers and journalists as part of their agenda-setting efforts. For example, the humanitarian crisis in the Sudan was arguably greater than that in neighboring Somalia at the time the press adopted Somalia as the poster country for human suffering in the early 1990s. However, Somalia offered far better logistic support capabilities for both journalistic and military intervention, and so reached the press and government agendas more easily following intense lobbying by NGOs and advocacy coalitions (Livingston, 1995, 1996).

For our purposes, however, the more generally interesting question is whether *event driven news is on the rise, and whether officials quickly get into the picture even if they did not orchestrate the events to begin with*. In addition to answering these questions, we also want to help set a research agenda in this area by providing a theoretical context in which to locate findings. That theoretical context is provided in a multigated model of news construction.

A Multigated Model of Gatekeeping

The news business is undergoing tremendous change (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Yet, there is a risk of overgeneralizing about the sweep of trends in a complex news landscape that seems to vary from local to national, elite press to tabloids, cable to broadcast, and even across topics or issues. The unevenness of the news terrain warrants a bit of theorizing about how to understand the gatekeeping process across time and news sectors. For example, we may not expect changing political content trends to be uniformly distributed across different news sectors given the different news construction formulas that operate in those sectors of the industry (e.g., local television chains vs. national networks owned by industrial conglomerates vs. prestige privately held print organizations). Thus, the shift from hard to soft news has surely been more dramatic in local than in national television news, yet greater in national television news than in the *New York Times* in the past 20 years. Similarly, how technology shapes local television news may not be a good predictor of how it affects content in world cable news organizations.

When thinking about the effects of factors such as economic pressures, infotainment trends, or new technologies within the gatekeeping equation, it seems reasonable to consider that those effects may vary from sector to sector, story type to story type, and even organization to organization. Bennett has proposed a model of news gatekeeping that identifies four main news gates, each representing an ideal type that may be useful to explain some proportion of content construction under particular circumstances (Bennett, in press). According to Bennett, the four main ideal-type gatekeeping factors scattered throughout the literature are:

1. The reporter's personal and professional news judgment.
2. Organizational news-gathering routines that establish the working relations between reporters and sources.
3. Economic constraints on news production.
4. Information and communication technologies that define the limits of time and space in news gathering.

Each gate is actually a set of journalistic norms and practices that affect news content. The economic gate, for example, emphasizes the commercial appeal of particular news stories. In this view, news is the result of a series of decisions concerning how a product (news content) can be collected, packaged, and presented to maximize the producer's return on investment. News decisions that rest on the organizational, technological, and personal (reporter) gates are premised on other defining assumptions. The organizational model, for example, understands news as a symbiotic, mutually beneficial, record-keeping transaction between institutional actors (primarily public officials and news organizations).

In all, Bennett identifies six defining elements of news construction that vary across the four gatekeeping types. When these elements are taken together, they distinguish each of the ideal gatekeeping factors from the others. Space does not permit a complete review of this model here, but a quick summary will help the reader grasp Table 1. Each of the four gates begins with a *decision basis*. This concerns the principles on which a news decision based solely on a particular ideal type would rest: personal judgment in the reporter ideal, bureaucratic routines in the organizational ideal, business calculations in the economic ideal, and considerations of immediacy (access, speed, fidelity) in the technological ideal. Each gate is also defined by a characteristic *information gathering and organizing style* (investigation, beats and assignments, marketing formulas, and informatics considerations in recording and transmitting information). Each factor is associated as well with a dominant *journalist's role*, such as the "watchdog" role associated with the independent reporter or the record-keeper role of the organization model. Similarly, each ideal dimension also adopts a characteristic *concept of the public* for which its product is aimed. The public counterpart to the watchdog journalist is the engaged citizen, while the dominant organizational model primarily regards the public as monitors of the security or safety of their worlds, and for the economic gatekeeper, the public is an entertainment audience. Finally, each model is defined by what Bennett refers to as an "overriding *gatekeeping norm*" that captures the ethos of each factor: *independence* for the reporter-driven ideal, *objectivity or fairness* for the organizational ideal, *infotainment* for the economic ideal, and *eyewitness immediacy* for the technological ideal.

Ideal type models strain against complex realities in the sense that few real-world constructions are produced on the basis of a single ideal type alone. Thus, attempts to analyze complex authority relations using Weberian ideal types often employ hybrid

Table 1
A multigated model of news gatekeeping

Defining elements	Gatekeeping principle			
	Reporter driven	Organizationally driven	Economically driven	Technologically driven
Decision basis	<i>Personal</i> (implicit news values)	<i>Bureaucratic</i> (professional journalism values and editorial standards)	<i>Business</i> (profits and demographics)	<i>Immediacy</i> (information fidelity)
Information gathering and organizing	<i>Investigation</i> (personal sources and leads)	<i>Beats and assignments</i> (official pronouncements, pack journalism)	<i>Marketing formulas</i> (infotainment)	<i>Systemic transparency</i>
Journalist role	<i>Watchdog</i>	<i>Record keeper</i>	<i>Content provider</i>	<i>Transmitter</i>
Conception of public	<i>Engaged citizens</i> (public interest)	<i>Social monitors</i> (Is my world safe?)	<i>Entertainment audience</i> (consumer content)	<i>Voyeur</i>
Press-government relations	<i>Personalized</i> (cultivated source relationships)	<i>Symbiotic</i> (routinized information and status exchange)	<i>Commodified</i> (manipulative transactions)	<i>Real-time event driven, requiring reaction, crisis oriented</i>
Gatekeeping norm	<i>Independence</i> (what the journalist decides is news)	<i>Objectivity-fairness</i> (officials and established interests define news)	<i>Plausibility</i> (If plausible, would it make a good story?)	<i>Eyewitness</i> (Let the audience decide what's news)

combinations of legal-rational, charismatic, and traditional authority. In the case of news, the four gatekeeping ideals are often in tension (and, sometimes, in open conflict) in actual news reporting situations.

As an illustration of the interactive effects of the different news gates, Bennett offers a case study of the 1998 CNN fiasco involving a story that alleged the U.S. military used poison gas against its own deserters in a secret air raid code named "Operation Tailwind" during the Vietnam War (Bennett, in press). The story, dramatically titled *Valley of Death*, launched a merger-driven news magazine intended to boost CNN in competition with network news magazines and to create "synergy" with its new partner *Time* magazine. The story exceeded expectations in terms of its splash, but it did not draw the kind of attention the network was seeking. Government and Pentagon officials, past and present, denounced the story so vehemently that top CNN management ordered an internal investigation led by outside counsel.

The aftermath revealed that several senior journalists not affiliated with the news magazine unit had applied standard organizational routines to vet the story after they learned of it. When the official sources they consulted expressed doubts about the nerve gas charges, those journalists—operating under the organization gatekeeping ideal type—tried to stop the story by lobbying the highest levels of CNN management. At the point of the ultimate editorial decision, the economic gatekeeping standards that defined the new and much-heralded magazine unit narrowly trumped the organizational standards which produced the doubts about the nerve gas charges. Yet, when the integrity of the company was on the line following the harsh official reaction to the story, CNN ended up refuting the story, firing key personnel associated with it, and branding it as a lapse of good journalism—in short, holding up the organizational ideal as its standard.

One can argue that the fact that such a crisis in an organization occurred at all attests to the pressures of economics in the industry. Yet, the history of journalism could be written in terms of an enduring clash of such standards (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985). More importantly, CNN's resolution of the crisis by reaffirming the organizational ideal over the economic ideal suggests that the trend toward economically driven infotainment at least occurs with pockets of resistance in different places in the industry.

To understand how technological gatekeeping works, we also need to look for interactions with economic, organizational, and personal journalistic considerations that may work differently in different sectors of the news business. For ample evidence that there is nothing deterministic about technology and gatekeeping effects, we need look no farther than the emergence of new technology in local news in an earlier period. One can argue that technology transformed local news, but in a sector-specific interaction with economic factors that not only tended to drive officials out of the local news frame, but virtually eliminated serious political reporting altogether.

Technology and Local Television News

Beginning in the 1980s, local television news began promoting “eyewitness” or action news formats in the hope of bolstering ratings in an increasingly competitive local news market. In the view of critics, including a good number of journalists, the results were, at best, mixed. The economically driven action news format placed too much emphasis on immediacy and drama, while it eroded more traditional news values such as professionalism and journalistic obligations to cover stories of weight and civic relevance (Fallows, 1996). Rather than report on government and political activities with the aim of informing citizens, local news merely entertained and scared them with stories of scandal, crime, and violence—at least this is the view of a substantial number of critics.

Though motivated by economics, a key component in the shift to action news formats was an array of advancements in broadcast technology. In the 1950s, viewers of television news were treated to rudimentary visual aids such as still photographs, charts, and maps. In the words of former chief field engineer for the BBC Jonathon Higgins, “television was little more than radio when immediacy counted” (Higgins, 2000, p. 16). Beginning in the 1970s, tape replaced film as the recording medium of choice, and by the mid-1980s, the first one-piece camcorder appeared. These and other advances in transmission technology began to change the basic nature of local news broadcasting, taking it out of the studio and placing it in the field. Once news gatherers switched to video formats, processing delays were eliminated. More importantly, images could be sent back to the studio electronically, rather than via physical transportation. “All the equipment (cameras, field editing equipment) could be transported easily in one small

truck that was customized for field use and equipped with [a] portable microwave transmission system” (Higgins, 2000, p. 19). As a result, reporters were able to venture further from the confines of the studio to report live from remote locations. News helicopters eventually became iconographic components of the eyewitness news format. One Seattle station even leased a Lear jet for the ostensible purpose of bringing viewers breaking news from afar. It was not by coincidence that pictures of the jet banking into the sunset were featured prominently in promotional spots aired by the Seattle station.

What is interesting is that technological freedom did not encourage local news organizations to roam more freely across the political landscape of communities. To the contrary, the interaction of technology with the marketing logic of regional media markets all but eliminated political news from the local television mix. That is, as local television media markets became regional, political news rooted in particular towns or cities in a region became regarded as detrimental to attracting audience interest across other localities in the market. (Scandals, of course, were the exceptions, as they became emblematic of politics in our time.) Thus, technology became something of a stand-alone story element—a means of dramatizing and stimulating story formats, and delivering the promise of the action news brand.

We suspect that technology interacts differently in the mix of international news gatekeeping decisions. In part, this may simply reflect the somewhat drab nature of local politics compared to the inherent drama of many world events. The more interesting question, however, is whether that drama stands apart in its own policy frame, as implied in the CNN effect thesis, or whether officials are invited quickly into stories to manage the problem definitions.

New Technology and International News

If the icon of the local eyewitness format has been the helicopter (and the live feed technologies hidden inside), its iconographic counterpart in international broadcasting is the videophone (Livingston, 2003). Whether reporting live from the caves of Tora Bora, the war front in Iraq, or from the rubble of an earthquake in Turkey, videophones and other mobile transmission technologies leave their signatures on the stories they transmit. Yet, international affairs live coverage has not drifted away from politics the way local news has. To the contrary, there is some reason to think that the promise of technology has been realized in recent years: We routinely see journalists reporting from the scenes of wars, terrorist attacks, humanitarian crises, and other events, relatively *free of formal institutional constraints*.

The last half of the 1990s witnessed the introduction of technologies that enabled journalists to roam rather freely. Thus, we have chosen this period to chart event-driven international news trends. In the early 1990s, when live television transmissions from remote locations were first introduced, the equipment was large and cumbersome, and expensive to deploy. Perhaps most importantly, C and Ku-band satellite uplink units were (and are) subject to host country broadcast regulations, licensing fees, and other potential impediments to their use (Higgins, 2000, p. 217). On average, transporting a mobile satellite uplink unit from London to the Middle East or Africa cost tens of thousands of dollars in excess weight fees. Since the mid-1990s, with the introduction of smaller, more mobile digital transmission equipment, the situation has changed dramatically.

By 1999 CNN began using videophones—a camera, digital compression unit, and satellite telephone, all of which fits in an overhead luggage bin on a commercial aircraft. How might these changes in broadcast technology affect international news? It seems

reasonable to assume that as costs and encumbrances associated with covering distant events live diminish, news directors will become more willing to take advantage of the opportunities to broadcast distant, breaking events. (This trend depends, of course, on interaction with the economic gatekeeping considerations, which can cut at least two ways depending on whether the costs are justified in terms of brand enhancement.)

The more interesting and challenging question is whether any increase in event-driven news corresponds to other gatekeeping changes such as whether officials are still incorporated in most of those stories. Anecdotal evidence may suggest that in the field, broadcasting live from war zones and other unedited, unscripted venues, journalists and camera operators appear to decide the question of what is news. For example, MSNBC reporter Ashleigh Banfield notes that being all live all the time from a remote location (as she often was in Afghanistan, where she presented a two-hour nightly newscast live via videophone) means that she and her camera operator learned to define the shot and her personal relationship to it—moving as the “news” moved. In contrast to the traditional stand-up presentation in an edited piece, she had to consciously be a part of the live story, to stand inside the story (Banfield, interviewed in Jerusalem, May 25, 2002). Much of the time she determined what the story was without an editor or producer back in the studio intervening.

At this anecdotal level, a correspondent such as Banfield is a key gatekeeper, empowered by a technology that allows her to roam freely, with few encumbrances, exercising her own will in the determination of news. At another level, she is a technologically enhanced marquee component of a marketing strategy rooted in the economic gatekeeping model’s emphasis on profits, infotainment, and dramatic content. Banfield live sells.¹

Such anecdotal evidence might suggest that a combination of technology and economics is pushing international coverage into a quasi-dramatic mode in which political narratives are written by the stars who step into the live picture: Banfield’s human interest tour of Afghanistan, Geraldo Rivera’s misbegotten “hallowed ground” piece wrongly claiming to bring the viewer to the scene of American friendly fire casualties, or Christiane Amanpour’s impassioned pieces asking what would be done to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

While such episodes may attract our attention, what does the run-of-the-mill series of event-driven international news look like? How far afield do reporters generally get from official story minders? In order to assess these questions, we looked at a sample of eight years of CNN international affairs coverage. Our findings reported in the next section confirm how dominant extra-institutional event coverage driven by technology has become in foreign affairs reporting, even to the point of dominating institution-based stories with live feeds (as in “live from the White House lawn”). The more interesting finding is that there has, indeed, been a decrease in institution-based stories of all sorts, and an increase in event-driven news. But the event-driven stories overwhelmingly contain official voices. While we need further analysis of the hundreds of stories in the sample to determine if officials have a different role in framing event-driven or institutionally based reports, we have no *a priori* reason to think that evolving news management techniques are any less effective in one context or the other. What we can say is that event-driven news has not changed the core of the organizational gatekeeping process from its reliance on official sources.

Method

To explore these considerations, we have analyzed CNN international desk stories from 1994 to 2001. CNN was selected because of its global dominance in international affairs

broadcasting, particularly when covering breaking developments live. Using Lexis-Nexis, an electronic archive of news and public affairs texts, we identified over 50,000 international desk stories aired by CNN's U.S. domestic feed between January 1994 and December 2001. Because of our interest in press-state relations in international affairs we limited our search to stories assigned to the international desk—stories concerning events originating outside the United States or involving states other than the United States. From this population of CNN international desk stories, we drew a sample of 1,200 transcripts.² We will turn first to an analysis of our sample of international desk stories.

International Desk Stories

The coding protocol for the international desk sample centered on four variables: date, length, use of technology, and initiation. *Date* is straightforward and consists of the date the news story appeared on CNN. *Length* is the magnitude of the news item as measured by word count. Both date and length serve as measures of story intensity or volume. On any given day, how many international news stories of various types are reported by CNN? How long is each of these stories as measured by word count? (Nexis does not provide the length of a story as measured by elapsed time.)

Our remaining two variables are *use of technology* and *initiation*. The use of technology variable asks whether the report was presented as a live report or as an edited package. Live transmissions are quite evident in the transcript, identified as they are by contemporaneous exchanges between two or more correspondents and anchors. Packages are also easily identified in the transcript.³

Initiation identifies the origin of the story.⁴ Whereas the technology variable asks *how* a particular story was covered, the initiation variable asks *why* it was covered in the first place. Is it a story about an event occurring outside of an institutional proceeding, such as violent acts, natural disasters, or accidents, or does it describe routine institutional proceedings such as hearings, court cases, negotiations, conferences, or meetings between officials? In all, there are five response categories associated with initiation: (a) institutional initiation, (b) event-driven news with official reaction, (c) event-driven news without official reaction, (d) reporter initiative, and (e) feature stories.

Institutional initiation is defined as all news stories that result from the actions and pronouncements of government and sometimes supra-governmental organizations (such as the United Nations) and their spokespersons, ministers, and leaders. This is news rooted in institutions and is essentially identical to Leon Sigal's routine news channel. Diplomacy, peace negotiations, press conferences, summits, and official visits are examples of institutional initiation.

Event-driven news results from happenstance and accidents, natural disasters, or unanticipated acts of violence. Earlier, we defined it as "coverage of activities that are, at least at their initial occurrence, spontaneous and not managed by officials within institutional settings." Officials, as we note, may become a part of the story, eventually fitting an event-driven story back into organizational routines. Our coding scheme asks how frequently official responses are made a part of event-driven stories. Event-driven news with official response was defined as the presence of any official—U.S. or non-U.S., named or anonymous—who is turned to by reporters for comment on the meaning, significance, or disposition of the event at hand. Official responses also include "building speak"—when reporters use terms such as "The White House this afternoon said. . . ." Alternatively, officials may be ignored or decline involvement in the story. Instances such as this were coded as event-driven news without official response.

Another initiation response category measures the frequency of stories resulting from reporter initiative. Again, these are stories defined by reporters serving as experts and often interviewed by other reporters, or reporters interviewing experts or discussing studies. They are differentiated from live coverage of an event-driven story (certainly a form of investigative journalism) by the temporal qualities associated with the report.

The final response category under the initiation variable is *feature*. A feature story is characterized by its timeless quality. It is news that can wait for another day. An example would be a report on the aging of veterans of the Second World War or the effects of Chinese cultural preferences for the birth of boys.

In sum, we are interested in measuring the frequency or magnitude of CNN international desk reporting. We are also interested in learning more about patterns in the use of technology (live or packaged) and how those uses affect who defines the political significance of news events. With these issues in mind, we turn next to a review of our findings to date.

Results

We begin with a description of our international desk sample and then take a closer look at the longitudinal trends in the use of technology and the initiation patterns in the news.

Table 2 divides our data into story initiation categories according to whether the story was live or not live (i.e., a package). Generally speaking, Table 2 points to reporters' continued reliance on officials. A little over 35% ($N = 155$) of the stories in our sample were reported live from an institutional setting, and just under another 40% ($N = 171$) were event-driven stories with official involvement. Only about 6% ($N = 25$) of the stories in the sample were event driven *without* official involvement. The balance of live coverage was distributed between the two remaining response categories—reporter driven with about 11% ($N = 49$), and feature, with 9% ($N = 40$). While “not live” has a different distribution, particularly with the large number of feature stories, the same general pattern found in “live” regarding institutions and officials is evident. Over 26% ($N = 150$) of the not live stories come from institution settings, and another near 23% ($N =$

Table 2
All initiation categories by live and not live

	Institution	Event driven/no official	Event driven/ official	Reporter driven	Feature	All initiation
Live						
No.	155	25	171	49	40	440
%	35.2	5.7	38.9	11.1	9.1	100
Not live						
No.	150	19	129	8	266	572
%	26.2	3.3	22.6	1.4	46.5	100
Combined “use” of technology”						
No.	305	44	300	57	309	1,015
%	30	4.3	29.6	5.6	30.4	100

129) are event driven with official involvement. For all international desk stories, 30% ($N = 305$) are institutionally driven and almost another 30% ($N = 300$) are event driven with official involvement. Only a little over 4% ($N = 44$) are event-driven stories without official involvement.

Overall, institutions and officials were involved in approximately 74% of all live transmissions (35% of the institutional initiation and 39% of event-driven stories with official responses) and 48% of the “not live” transmissions (26% and 22%, respectively). Leon Sigal’s findings from over a quarter century ago concerning the central role of officials in news reporting seem to hold for news reporting today. Reporters rely on official resources for news cues and frames.

What are the longitudinal initiation trends? Figure 1 tracks the percentage age of live stories within each initiation category across time. Figure 2 does the same for not live news coverage. Though more pronounced in live coverage, in both live and not live coverage one can see the same trend: Institutionally initiated news declined over the course of the eight years reviewed here, while event-driven news with official involvement increased. The steepest increase took place in live coverage beginning in 1998. More news was reported live over the course of the decade, a finding that is consistent with the results of a study conducted by Livingston and Cooper (2001) of CNN “live” coverage in the 1990s. They found that as the decade progressed, more of CNN’s coverage was live. Regarding the results of our present study, although it is impossible for us to make causal links between these trends and advances in technology, we can point to CNN’s use of live transmission technology in Kosovo, and the Balkans more generally, during the 1999 war. Though modestly at first, CNN also began using videophones in 1999.

Hugging the bottom of Figure 1 are trend lines for the other initiation categories. One can see that live and not live event driven news without official involvement was rare.

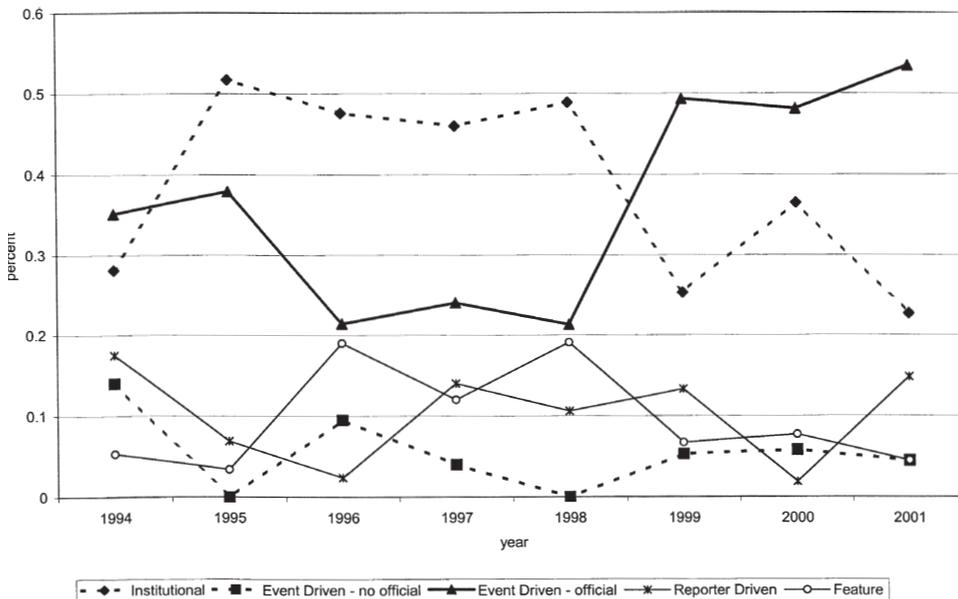


Figure 1. CNN international desk live stories by initiation type ($N = 440$).

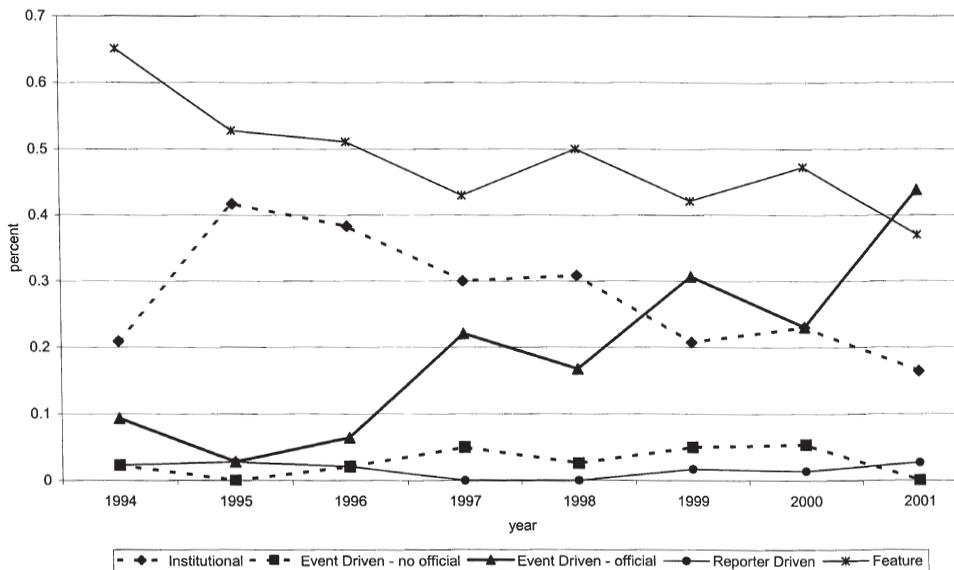


Figure 2. CNN international desk “not live” stories by initiation type ($N = 572$).

Live event-driven news without official involvement reached its greatest prominence in 1994, the year Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia dominated the headlines. Haiti’s proximity to the United States and its quasi-domestic news qualities (Haitian refugees were reaching the Florida coast in large numbers) boosted its prominence as an international news story. In a clear sense, it was also a domestic story. Concerning Rwanda, Livingston has noted that most American broadcast and CNN news of events there came in the late summer of 1994, not during the actually massacres beginning in April. Most of the news centered on the refugee camps in Goma, Zaire (now the Congo), and elsewhere. Surrounded by hundreds of thousands of starving refugees, media encampments sprung up in refugee camps complete with generators, refrigeration, satellite uplinks, and all of the other paraphernalia of satellite broadcasting (Livingston, 1998; Livingston & Eachus, 1999).

Conclusion

Overall, the initial evidence presented here suggests that event-driven news is overtaking institutionally based news, at least in the technology-charged environment of cable television international affairs news. We began this article by asking if event-driven news stories were becoming more numerous and whether they are changing the reliance of journalists on officials in selecting and cueing their political content. The answers seem to be yes and no: *Yes*, event-driven news stories are more common; *no*, officials seem to be as much a part of the news as ever. When an unpredicted, nonscripted, spontaneous event is covered in the news, the one predictable component of coverage is the presence of official sources. Several questions remain, however, concerning the nature of official involvement in the live event driven stories.

Entman refers to the political and interpretive contests of meaning that permeate news as framing contests (Entman, in press). Framing contests are struggles over the meaning of events in the news. Additional research is needed before we can say whether

officials are met with greater challenges in framing contests as a result of the increased prominence of event driven news. Although we have no a priori reason to think that evolving news management techniques are any less effective in one context or the other, future research must isolate differences in the nature of official involvement in institutionally initiated stories and event driven news.

More also must be learned about differences in event-driven news. Not all events demand official involvement. More importantly, strategic political communication calls for an array of responses, calculated according to, among other considerations, the nature of the event. Not all events command the same degree of attention from officials. Events of direct national interest, such as a terrorist attack on a military or commercial interest, will be treated much differently than would an identical attack on less politically salient targets (Livingston, 1994). We have cast a wide net in our present study of official involvement in stories. Future research must differentiate patterns of official responses according to nationality and official position. What are the response patterns of officials in event-driven news, and how do they correlate with different categories of events? There are even interesting things to be learned about the technology employed by news organizations in covering breaking events from afar. A good many of them are covered by reporters on telephones, rather than the stereotypical dramatic visuals. What proportion and what kinds of live event-driven stories are telephone reports?

Most importantly, we need to understand the processes by which official sources in event-driven news stories attempt to recapture control of unplanned events. Implicitly, each instance of event-driven news with official involvement found in our sample is merely a snapshot of a process of “reinstitutionalizing” a storyline. Our random sample of discrete news stories cannot capture that process. It would seem unlikely to expect that reinstitutionalization of the news is a uniform process across event types. The September 11 attacks were certainly clear examples of event-driven news. But reinstitutionalization of news of the attacks quickly followed events, despite considerable chaos involving officials, including the president, who were kept from public view due to security concerns.

In closing this article with a research agenda, we add a call for better integration of case study and large sample analysis. Case studies, a dominant methodology for event-driven news analysis (including case studies of the CNN effect), offer limited generalizability. Indeed, some of them would seem to contradict our finding by concluding that event-driven news gives journalists greater gatekeeping and framing freedoms. We think not. We need case studies to understand how press-politics processes work, but then large sample studies are needed to overcome the tendency to theorize from what are often atypical cases. The remaining research agenda is large and challenging, but certainly well worth pursuing. Understanding who constructs what is political about news events remains one of the most important subjects in political communication.

Notes

1. Indeed, the fact that Banfield was chosen for the assignment in Afghanistan reflected her demonstrated adeptness at working in the technology-fueled reporter/economic gatekeeping model hybrid. A profile of Banfield in *Vogue*—which itself suggests the entertainment quality to Banfield’s career of late—captured well the essence of the new techno-correspondent. According to the profile, Banfield was nearly killed when the first World Trade Center tower collapsed, having ventured too close in an effort to learn what was happening. After pulling a police officer and security guard to safety, she began offering on-the-spot-witness/participant reports with a cell phone and a Handi-cam she had commandeered from a stranger. When the second tower collapsed, Banfield helped shelter a young woman and child from the dust and debris. Banfield

offered a seamless blend of witness, narrator, and participant. As the magazine profile put it, Banfield was at that moment “catapulted into the national consciousness as the first Reality-TV News Grrrl” (The Anchor Who’s Changing How We Watch,” *Vogue*, July 2002).

2. Nexis categorizes stories according to the desk assignment from which they originated at CNN. The Nexis search term was *Section (international) and date is nn/nn*. Sequential numerical values were assigned to all 50,906 stories found from 1994 to 2001. A random number generator created a list of 1,200 numerical values between 1 and 50,906. Using that list as our guide, we retrieved full-text transcripts of 1,200 news stories. The results presented here are drawn from 1,086 cases. The balance of the 1,200 stories in our sample were rejected during coding for a variety of reasons, most commonly because of a mistaken designation of domestic desk stories as foreign desk stories.

3. Live exchanges are often punctuated by “hand-offs” between correspondent and anchor. This involves the familiar statement of the anchor’s name by the correspondent in the field, and vice versa. Packages are indicated in the Nexis transcript by the style of the introduction. A package has “(Begin Video)” at the start and “(End Video)” at the end. Packages sometimes have live introductions or conclusions. But if the main point of the story was presented as a package (indeed, was the package), then it was coded as a package. Because of the unambiguous nature of live versus not live (packaged) news, intercoder reliability measures were not run.

4. Of our four variables, initiation is the only one for which intercoder reliability is a concern. The other variables offered “manifest content” and required only clerical coding (Neuendorf, 2002). The distinctions among the various response categories of our initiation variable are less direct. Coding was performed by seven coders: one of the authors, a graduate research assistant at George Washington University, and five undergraduates at the University of Washington in Seattle. For the purposes of this study, we are most interested in three of the response categories of the initiation variable: (a) institutional initiation, (b) event-driven news without official reaction, and (c) event-driven news with official reaction. Of these three response categories, the greatest challenge for coders was differentiating the institutional initiation stories from event-driven stories. The subsequent determination concerning the presence or absence of officials was quite straightforward: Were officials present in the story or not? At times, the difference between an event-driven news story and an institutional story is ambiguous. By definition, an event-driven story is distinguished by the occurrence of an event. An event of some sort has happened, and the news is there to cover it. However, a pilot reliability assessment revealed weaknesses in the operationalization of event-driven versus institutional news. For instance, references to the September 11 attacks during the reporting of congressional hearings or White House press conferences (institutional news) were sometimes understood as constituting an event-driven news story. This is understandable given the ambiguous quality of the origins of news during a transformative phase as news of an event such as September 11 is “reinstitutionalized” over time through official action. There is no unambiguous point at which a news organization’s report of “This just happened” becomes “This is what the president (or some other official) said today about what just happened.”

Intercoder reliability coefficients were not obtained for reporter initiative or feature stories. Given our central focus on institutional and event-driven stories, and because of the relative paucity of reporter initiative and feature stories, this is an acceptable omission. Because of this, however, we may well have misattributed reporter initiative stories to feature stories, and vice versa. In other words, one of the primary distinctions between a report initiative story and at least some feature stories is a temporal component. A feature story is a form of reporter initiative story, but concerning a topic of less temporal relevance. A similar potential blurring of categories concerns the possibility that an event-driven story is the consequence of reporter initiative, such as when an enterprising reporter positions him- or herself in a location where breaking events are likely to occur. In such a case, the story is just as properly ascribed to reporter initiative as it is to the happenstance of the event. At the risk of artificially driving up the number of event-driven stories and driving down the number of reporter initiated stories, we coded all news of events as event-driven news. Given the inability to reconstruct the circumstances and motives of reporters

at the scene of an event, we had no other choice. As a result, we may have underreported reporter initiative stories and overreported event-driven news.

Our intercoder reliability measure was run on a subset of 100 CNN international news stories for the initiation variable. As we relied on two coders assessing a sub-sample of stories and focused on distinctions between two latent content categories (event-driven versus institutional), we used Holsti's simple agreement measurement method. The formula is as follows: $PA^o = 2A / (nA + nB)$, where PA^o stands for proportion of agreement observed, A is the number of agreements between two coders, and $nA + nB$ is the number of units coded by the two coders, respectively. Our intercoder reliability coefficient for the two initiation response categories was .85, well within acceptable limits of reliability.

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