

COMMENT

The treatment of industrial relations in three major New Zealand newspapers: a journalist's comment.

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The research article, "The treatment of industrial relations in three major New Zealand newspapers", published in the April 1983 of this journal (Vol. 8, pp.11-21), omits factors and considerations crucial in any examination of this subject. Researchers and students using the Harbridge research as a reference may find this commentary a useful complement.

News item length and width is measured in the Harbridge research to help ascertain whether industrial relations is being treated differently from other types of news. A story's worth and significance cannot be judged by the amount of space it takes on a printed page.¹ The methods used in the Harbridge research fail to recognise this. Measurement by ruler cannot differentiate degree of importance of what is written; it can establish only the importance of the amount of space a particular piece of writing occupies. A diamond takes less space than a wad of dollar notes yet is far more valuable for all that.

Succinct writing by a reporter and further honing by a sub-editor may compress all vital points into a few words. Perhaps earlier publicity has made the public aware of the general nature of the subject and personalities involved. Recalling familiar detail may add to the bulk of the story but will be unimportant in comparison to the real news. Significant new developments or revelations may overturn all that has gone before or reduce the importance of earlier reports. Perhaps the reporter's quoted sources are so authoritative and certain that there is no need for roundabout expression to cover all possible eventualities.

The number of people likely to be affected by the content of a news story is one of the editorial measures of that story's importance. Measuring the story in centimetres overlooks that factor. Accuracy of the story is not measured in the survey, but that must be considered when weighing up a story's worth. The very newness of information that has not been revealed before, and which competitors do not have, is another aspect of story-content quality the survey misses. Nor is any account taken of the different levels of difficulty and lack of co-operation a reporter may have to overcome. That difficulty can influence content and length of a story but what the reporter can secure by way of information may still be important. Timing is important too. If a story breaks after a newspaper's publication time the story can be stale by the time the next news production cycle begins. If the story breaks close to deadline and/or there is pressure from competing news that day, those factors can dictate where a particular story appears in the newspaper and what space it is given.

If a range of conditions is met, then an editorial decision could be made to publish and present stories in a manner befitting their perceived importance. In the fast-running competitive news business, all of the necessary conditions for such wise judgment seldom come together. The amount of space available is sometimes too much, though usually too

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limited, for all of the day's news and features. The flow of news is erratic. Stories and photographs on different subjects and of different degrees of importance and quality are arriving from a variety of sources at different times or in a rush. Production schedules have to be met: decisions have to be made quickly. No one decides industrial relations stories shall always have X type of presentation, local government stories Y type, and so on through different categories. Space and presentation given to a story very much depends upon a range of variables. These include what each story is about, the quality of the writing and the sources, topicality, available space, proximity to deadline, legal and ethical considerations, what competitors have done and what other news is available. Post-event accurate weighing of these and other factors determining space and treatment of stories would be tremendously difficult, perhaps impossible.

Trivialisation and sensationalism simply because headlines are large in comparison with the size of the story is claimed in the research paper. The size of the headline may be an indication of the importance of even a brief story. Page layout design can be a factor in type size and display. Reference is made to words appearing in a headline but not in the newspaper text. While sub-editors must always be careful about this, a headline may use different words to capture the essence of the story just so long as there is no distortion or misquotation.

Judging bias

Subjective judgment is involved for any reader of news stories or features on contentious industrial relations personalities and issues. The nature of the "non-industrial items" recorded and used for comparison with "industrial relations items" is not disclosed in the research article. Therefore it is impossible to establish what kind of news judgment was used by the newspapers concerned in the selection, placement and treatment given to the mix of subject matter during the survey period. The worth, the content, the accuracy, significance and timeliness of news stories, features, editorials and published letters are not compared with those qualities in the industrial relations items.

Emphasis on manifestations of conflict is hardly surprising given the importance of conflict in the history of industrial relations and its enshrinement in the adversarial system used in our industrial law and institutions. Industrial conflict can directly or indirectly influence people's incomes or convenience. Its reportage deserves an important place.

Harbridge writes of the need for greater analysis and backgrounding on the reasons for conflict and other aspects of industrial relations. This area can be improved, but in fairness much depends upon one's interpretation of the terms analysis and backgrounding. Explanation of events need not be confined to features (see Harbridge's Table 1) but may be incorporated in news stories. Backgrounding and analysis of industrial disputes or impending disputes is often difficult. Tempers can flare and key people do not wish to be quoted, or to say anything that may exacerbate the situation or bring retribution. Nobody wants to expose bargaining strategy or to be seen to be making concessions.

The relative dearth of explanation and clarification of the wage-tax trade-off is mentioned by Harbridge. These talks are held behind closed doors with the participants bound to confidentiality, certainly so far as the press is concerned. The talks are of a long-running nature and not confined to the 3 months of the survey. Backgrounding developed later as more information became available through various sources.

The period of research covers the first quarter of 1982. This includes the long summer break with its reduced news volume and a period when most, and certainly the significant, award negotiations are finished. Some of the specialist industrial reporters may also have been on holiday for part of that time. These factors would influence the frequency with which industrial relations would arise as news and the manner of its treatment. Similarly, any major factory shutdown or rationalisation problem by chance falling in that period of survey could unduly influence the results.

Conspiracy

Dark reference is made to a possible conspiracy among newspapers over reporting industrial relations. The reference appears to be a straw man for the most part knocked down by later comments in the research article. As somebody who has reported politics and industrial relations, I have seen no evidence of any such "conspiracy". It is a sinister word which once having been raised in the context of research may be hard to dispel, whatever is said afterwards. Again, Harbridge used item characteristics like article length and width and headline depth and length which are not necessarily a basis for judging content worth and those other factors mentioned earlier.

The almost identical percentage of coverage of items about disputes and policy issues in the 3 newspapers surveyed perhaps can be explained by more than the nation-wide distribution of stories through the New Zealand Press Association. Reporters do local follow-ups to stories that have broken elsewhere. The geographical spread of particular industries, companies, unions, industrial awards and disputes helps to explain similarity of coverage in different cities. What disputes mean to consumer convenience, material supplies and other workers' jobs is not a story restricted to any particular location.

Conclusion

Examination of perceived bias in the reporting of industrial relations does not easily fit with academic theory or measurement. There are so many human variables which hopefully researchers and students will explore further. By failing to do so the Harbridge research is vulnerable.

The Fintan File

Fertiliser Strike Lingers On

By the end of this week, the threat of sackings is reported to hang over hundreds of workers in a variety of concerns where sulphuric acid, in various forms, is essential to production.

The secretary of the New Zealand Employers' Federation (Mr P J Luxford) would not comment on the gloomy situation today and the president of the Federation of Labour (Mr F P Walsh) was reportedly "tramping in the bush."

Evening Post 10 May 1962

Erratum

The paper by Geare in the December 1983 issue (Vol. 8, No. 3, pp.205-209) contained an error on page 208.

The eighth line on page 208 should read:

"was embarked upon in response to Government threats (p.201) is of doubtful accuracy".