

# News values in a time of terror

By [Thrishni Subramoney](#)

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It was clear to me that the social media tide had turned on the Paris attacks when the number of rants about unfair news coverage (if you somehow managed to miss the debate, [click here](#)) on my Facebook feed reached critical mass.



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"#F&\*%France," blared one particularly vehement armchair commentator, while another railed at those who used the French flag on their Facebook feeds. Facebook itself came in for the most vitriol for activating its Safety Check feature for Paris - which allowed people to check in on the network so their friends were aware that they were safe. The feature was activated after an attack on a market in Nigeria this [week](#).

"Do French lives matter more than Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish, and Yemeni ones? Were these not, too, 'heinous, evil, vile acts'?" wrote [Salon](#).

I don't wish to debate that skewed news coverage happens. Of course it happens. Let's talk about why we see this phenomenon play out again and again. I'm sure you have a theory.

I've seen arguments, from racism, to imperialism, to audience choice. Yet, underlying most of these arguments seems to be a lack of understanding about how news works - from the way that journalists are geared to think, to the global media landscape.

This skewed reporting can be traced back to that first lesson that most student journalists learn in their first year. It's an important lesson, and it is still very relevant. It's a lesson about "news values" - that very formulaic understanding of what makes the news and what doesn't.

I need to emphasize that news values weren't invented by journalists. They simply speak to the main elements of human curiosity - because it's curiosity, you see, that makes you pick one title over another, or turn up the volume slightly on the radio and pay closer attention to what's being said.

I'm not going to go into all of them. Entire textbooks have been written on this subject. But let's talk about the ones playing out in the coverage of these attacks, and how they've collided to create the skewed picture we see today - the values of proximity and timeliness.

Proximity is simply the "where" of a story. Humans care more about the things happening close to them. Put it down to a basic survival trait if you must, but it explains why fewer people watch the nightly news these days, but will still glance through their free, local tabloids. It's why community radio stations exist.

But the audience carries this news value with them when they go abroad. This is why we pay more attention to international disasters if there are South Africans involved or affected.

Proximity is why European and North American media outlets care more about Paris than they do about Nigeria. There is a greater chance that members of their audience have been affected by the tragedy.

It's also why Sky News, the BBC and CNN will go far bigger on the story of a US tourist killed by a lion in South Africa than they will about a tourist from any developing country suffering the same fate - because they go with what they feel is more relevant for their audience.

So why do South African and African newsrooms follow suit? This is where things get a bit shaky.

The first reason is the issue of timeliness. This is arguably the single most important news value. It's why news is called "news" and not "olds". This is why journalists will rush straight into a dangerous situation to report on that danger while it is happening, instead of, for instance, sensibly waiting for things to calm down before trying to get a soundbite.

But timeliness also extends to the things that people are talking about (this speaks to relevance), and the greater the number talking about a particular event/issue, the more likely it is to get coverage.

And right here, is the fly in the proverbial ointment. This is where it becomes all about the money. The developed world (North America and Europe) dominates the global media market. Look at the [McKinsey Global Media Report for 2015](#).

The media spend in North America was around 10 times the spend in Africa in 2014. Money expands the reach of your news. News organisations in the developed world are able to broadcast on platforms across the world (hands up if you've got Sky News, CNN and BBC on your DStv bouquet). And what do they broadcast? News targeted at their audiences. But because they reach bigger, global audiences, the news they broadcast becomes more topical.

So, you and I, far away from France, talk about what's happening there. South African newsrooms, geared towards timeliness, notice that the world is talking about France. What do they do? Broadcast news about France.

It's an endless spiral that has been going on for decades, and (perhaps this is an excuse, but it's also a fair reason) in many newsrooms where deadlines have now contracted to a few minutes (thanks Twitter) the cycle continues - and would probably have continued unquestioned, until social media came along (thanks again Twitter... and Facebook).

Social media audiences are a different kettle of extremely diverse fish - who all now, seemingly, have pretty much equally

loud voices. This is why a social giant like Facebook (which until recently seemed to treat the issue of "proximity" in a Western-centric way) is now offering Safety Check in Nigeria.

In addition, Facebook launched internet.org just this year to increase internet access in the developing world (cynical translation: increase audiences). And since social media is increasingly the tail wagging the traditional media dog, the news values mentioned above are going to have to be applied in a way that makes more sense for audiences all over the world. The "mainstream" is finally changing.

In fact, it's already happening. That's why this debate around skewed coverage, which has, until now, been relegated to newsrooms and academia, is happening right here.

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