



Hard news, soft news, 'general' news: The necessity and utility of an intermediate classification

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Abstract

For at least the past three decades journalism scholars have focused on two types of news – soft and hard – without reassessing these categories or adding to them. The present article investigates whether such neglect is warranted, through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with 32 journalists and editors from the three main Israeli dailies: *Yediot Ahronot*, *Maariv* and *Haaretz*. The findings argue strongly for a third, intermediate category of news – ‘general news’ – as well as for more rigorous and comprehensive definitions of ‘hard’ news and ‘soft’ news that are here supplied. These three news categories were then tested on 465 news items of the above dailies which led to the categorization of a new newspaper type, lying somewhere between the elite and populist press. Methodological and substantive ramifications of this addition are discussed.

Keywords

elite newspapers, general news, hard news, middle(brow) journalism, news typology, popular newspapers, soft news, yellow journalism

Introduction

It is almost a tautology to note that news organizations provide ‘news’. However, one cannot relate to the term ‘news’ as of one piece.

The most basic distinction of news types, defined by Tuchman (1972), is dichotomous: ‘soft’ news and ‘hard’ news. ‘Hard’ news is characterized by Tuchman and others (Smith, 1985; Whetmore, 1987; Limor and Mann, 1997; Patterson, 2000) as having a high level of

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newsworthiness, i.e. news value (usually regarding politics, economics and social matters) demanding immediate publication. On the other hand, 'soft' news does not necessitate timely publication and has a low level of substantive informational value (if at all), i.e. gossip, human interest stories, offbeat events. This fundamental typology has held steady for more than three and a half decades without any serious attempt to reassess its continued relevance or the adverse research consequences of such a dichotomous, and perhaps overly simplistic, categorization.

The present study, therefore, has two goals – one direct and the other a by-product. The main purpose is to investigate whether there is a need to change this classic typology, and if so in what way. To that end, we distributed questionnaires to 32 Israeli journalists and editors of the three leading dailies, followed by in-depth interviews. We found, indeed, that there was a definite need for reclassification of news categories through the addition of a middle type – 'general' news. This new category was tested along with the two traditional types through an analysis of 465 news items from the three newspapers, on a randomly chosen day (that had no extraordinary or earth-shattering news). The results suggested that there also exists a need to extend the traditional types of newspapers, accomplished by establishing a scale running from yellow journalism all the way to elite journalism, adding mid-level categories.

In short, this article extends journalistic categories on two levels: type of news item and type of newspaper. These are not mere semantic additions; they offer the journalism researcher a more finely nuanced typology in which to understand and analyze the entire journalism phenomenon. Indeed, in the contemporary era of journalistic flux, such a reconsideration of traditional taxonomies is almost a necessity. We conclude with some thoughts of extending the typology even further: instead of a tripartite categorization, a spectrum of news types might be called for in the final analysis.

Characteristics of news types: 'hard' and 'soft'

'Hard' news has been defined and characterized in several mutually reinforcing ways. Limor and Mann (1997) note that it usually involves political (domestic and international), economic or social topics. 'Hard' news demands immediate reporting due to its importance and short lifespan (continuing stories tend to follow shortly). 'Soft' news, they argue, has little or no intrinsic social or personal importance, so that it can be reported on at any time (if at all). Smith (1985) takes a somewhat different approach, positing that 'hard' news remains relevant or newsworthy for a significant period of time. Tuchman's original focus (1972) was on the substance of the news: 'hard' news enables – almost demands – accompanying commentary and analysis, whereas 'soft' news involves gossip, local scandal (of the social, not the political type), and human interest stories, all having little ramifications beyond their immediate circle.

Whetmore (1987) emphasizes the factual nature of 'hard' news as compared to the subjective, colorful or offbeat nature of 'soft' news. Patterson (2000) characterizes 'soft' news as having sensationalist elements regarding famous personalities, utilitarian in nature (personally useful for the common reader), and/or based on a specific event (unconnected to any social trend or ongoing story).

Although the categorization of 'hard' and 'soft' news seems at first glance to be a relatively objective matter, feminist critiques place this dichotomization within a gender framework. Ziegler and White (1990), Lumby (1994), Liebler and Smith (1997), and Cann and Mohr (2001) all highlight this gender perspective: women tend to be asked to report more 'soft' news, being considered less professional than their male counterparts who carry the brunt of 'hard' (i.e. more important) news reportage. Surveys and interviews with female journalists around the world point to a dichotomy between news topics considered to be male (e.g. politics, crime, economics and education) and female topics such as human interest, consumerism, culture and social policy. Male journalists tend to hold stereotypical ideas regarding which gender should deal with what topic areas, preferring women journalists to report on fashion, children and cooking, but not 'hard' (important and emotionally difficult) crime stories. In addition, male journalists assume that women are better – and more interested – in stories that involve 'dealing with the public's needs' or 'human interest' news items (Van Zoonen, 1998).

Several researchers protest the lack of 'hard' news reporting afforded women, doubting the normative and professional value of such a gender dichotomization. For example, Lumby (1994: 50) argues that '[F]acts, objectivity, and the public sphere belong to men. Women line up with feature writing, subjectivity, and social or domestic issues.' Rakow and Kranich (1991: 11) add that 'hard' news is defined uncategorically as being serious, important and male, whereas 'soft' news is identified as 'human interest, lifestyle, the purview of women reporters and readers'.

Other researchers have analyzed the different venues specializing in these two types of news, without rendering any normative evaluation of the soft/hard news divide. 'Hard' news, argues Baum (2003), is normally presented in newspapers and news magazines (print and television), devoting a good portion of their space and/or time to public interest matters. He further notes that television talk shows, network (e.g. *Meet the Press*) as well as cable (e.g. *Larry King Live*; *Crossfire*) are also devoted to 'hard' news, albeit more in the guise of commentary and analysis. In a later study, Baum (2005) following on Prior (2003) widens the spectrum of 'hard' news programs to include television news magazines (e.g. *60 Minutes*, *20/20*) and morning shows such as *Good Morning America*, late night entertainment talk shows hosted by Jay Leno and David Letterman, and even political satire revue shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. These latter types are interesting in that their central purpose is entertainment and a not inconsiderable amount of their content is 'soft' news (if news at all). However, as Baum (2002b) discovered, such ostensibly 'soft' news programs do tend to cover significant political news, with their hosts/interviewers/actors offering jokes at politicians' expense (Niven et al., 2003; Young, 2004) and/or compliments to politicians appearing on the show (Baum, 2005).

'Hard' news, 'soft' news studies and their findings

This dichotomy is not merely a matter of taxonomy and semantics; it constitutes the basis of many journalism studies regarding both media production and audience research.² Among other things, these studies investigated the connection between 'hard' and 'soft' news in sundry media on the one hand, and political interest and involvement on the other hand.

For example, Prior (2003) asked whether 'soft' news consumers learn anything about politics, concluding that they are fewer in number than 'hard' news consumers and that their predilection for 'soft' news does not expand their (limited) political knowledge.

Baum (2003), however, discovered that being exposed to 'soft' news can, to a certain extent, influence the amount of political facts obtained, at least regarding important issues such as foreign crises. Such major news items tend to be covered widely in the 'soft' news sections or programs as well. Moreover, he suggests that it is worthwhile examining to what extent the general reading or viewing public gets political information from 'soft' news in addition to their 'hard' news exposure. Nevertheless, Baum (2002a) discovered that poorly educated or politically uninterested people tended to become more suspicious of American foreign policy as their 'soft' news consumption increased. In large part this is due to the fact that such news emphasizes the dangers, risks and possibility of failure and offers little commentary or explanation by trustworthy experts – dramatic events are presented without much context (Baum, 2004). Overall, then, Baum (2003) concludes that as a result of all this, 'soft' news can definitely influence voting behavior: among those uninterested in politics or foreign policy by strengthening isolationist feelings, and also among politically interested news consumers where the reverse occurs, i.e. leading to support for interventionist foreign policy (Baum, 2004). On the other hand, 'hard' news consumers of an internationalist bent found support for their views in such news.

Attitudinal and voting influence can also be found among infotainment and talk show viewers (Baum, 2005). Exposure to political candidates on such shows can change the viewers'/voters' stance and vote. Brewer and Cao (2006) studied correlations between political knowledge and different types of TV shows. They found that evening current events and/or political satire shows correlated significantly with knowledge regarding the 2004 election primaries whereas viewing morning shows did not evince such a correlation. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found the same regarding viewers' increased political knowledge among audiences of political satire programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* but also found increased political cynicism. The evidence for news magazine programs and political knowledge was not altogether clear. Baum and Jamison (2006) found that low political involvement viewers of talk shows tended more than non-viewers of such shows to vote for a candidate who could present their respective views in the clearest fashion. Thus, talk show 'soft' news can influence some viewers' political voting behavior as a result of a candidate's screen presentation ability.

From a civic standpoint, these findings constitute a problem as most of the public seems to prefer 'soft' news because of its entertainment value. As Davis and Owen (1998) and Hamilton (2003) point out, this is especially true regarding 'soft' news TV programs for viewers having low political involvement and low education levels. Four different PEW Center surveys (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) found this to be consistently the case: non-graduates of high school viewed 27 percent more 'tabloid' TV magazine programs than their more educated counterparts. And when comparing their viewership of such programs (including talk shows) to that of 'hard' news programs, the latter had a viewership moderately higher – 13 percent and 27 percent respectively – compared to higher educated viewers (who viewed 'hard' news shows at rates 34 percent and 56 percent above their viewership of 'soft' news shows). As with the above studies, here too is evidence that

(at least) for low educated Americans, infotainment shows (e.g. Jay Leno) can be an important source of ‘hard’ news, not seen as much less reliable than actual news programs.

All this should be understood in light of the trend towards more ‘soft’ news in the ostensibly ‘hard’ news programs and in the press. For example, Scott and Gobetz (1992) performed a content analysis on the nightly news between 1972 and 1987 shown on the three major American TV networks and discovered a small but discernible trend in all three networks towards increased ‘soft’ news, especially in the last third of the programs. Jurkowitz (2000) describes several studies that continue this line of research: the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) report written in 1998 analyzed over 6000 news items and found an increase in ‘lifestyle’, ‘celebrity’, and ‘entertainment’ items in news programs. From 1987 until 1997 the proportion of items dealing with domestic and foreign policy dropped by a third whereas the aforementioned ‘soft’ news types almost doubled in number. The subsequent 1999 PEJ report analyzed 9000 news items in 19 different markets and found that 30 percent of the items dealt in ‘soft’ news. Similarly, a Rocky Mountain Media Watch study of television news on 102 stations found 25 percent of the items to be ‘soft’ (Jurkowitz, 2000).

To be sure, ‘soft’ news is not just content; the medium (or its ‘packaging’) can be as important. Thus, based on McLachlan and Golding’s (2000) three planes of print news – content variety, page design, and writing style – Uribe and Gunter (2004) analyzed two British tabloids (*The Mirror* and *The Star*) for the years 1991, 1996 and 2001. The authors found that, among other things, the tabloids became more sensationalist or ‘yellow’ in writing style and design, but not in content.

What accounts for the overall trend to greater ‘soft’ news? A comprehensive answer would lead us too far afield, but briefly the following can be adduced:

- 1) audience research that found personal pleasure to be a prime ‘gratification’ for media consumers (Scott and Gobetz, 1992);
- 2) desire to be of ‘service’ to the reader/viewer, i.e. news you can use (Jurkowitz, 2000: 109);
- 3) greater pressure on media and especially news organizations to maintain or increase profitability, more easily accomplished by providing greater amounts of less expensive entertainment even within the news;
- 4) related to this were technological advances in the early 1980s that lowered costs of ‘soft’ news provision (Scott and Gobetz, 1992);
- 5) demands of advertisers to reach the broadest possible audience, not just ‘hard’ news junkies (Boyer, 1988); and
- 6) the increasing use of media consultants expert in knowing how to increase ratings (Zizzo, 1988).

The problem

Unfortunately, almost all of these (and other) studies regarding ‘soft’ news / ‘hard’ news suffer from a possibly significant methodological weakness: the gross way of measuring ‘soft’ news. In brief, whatever is not ‘hard’ news is ipso facto defined as ‘soft’ news and vice versa (depending which of the two points of this axis the researcher starts from).

There is one minor exception to the rule: Yang and Oliver (2004) used a news item scale from 1 ('soft') to 7 ('hard') but only as 'stimulus material' for their study of the effects of online advertising on online news perception. They started with 12 news items, and used their scale to whittle the material down to either end of the scale (three very soft = 1.25; three very hard = 5.91) in order to enable a 'pure' comparison between advertising effects on 'hard' as opposed to 'soft' news. In any case, for the purposes of the present study the focus is on the other half: if six of the 12 items they tested scored somewhere between 'hard' and 'soft' news as traditionally understood, this constitutes an initial hint (not more than that) that the classic dichotomous approach may be flawed.

The community of journalists is also beginning to grapple with the changing news scene. For example, Deuze discovered in his interviews with Dutch news editors and reporters (2005) that there seems to be a trend in 'homogenization' of popular and hard journalisms, with tabloid journalists adhering to the accepted discourse and professional vocabulary of elite journalism's professional ideology: objectivity, ethics, autonomy. This too may indicate the existence of a 'blended' type of journalism. More recently, Feldman (2007) has analyzed the fascinating 'discussion' in the trade press and the popular press regarding how to define the type of 'news' offered by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. As she notes: 'it problematizes for journalists the increasingly blurred distinction between news and entertainment and *poses a challenge to the historical conventions used to enforce this distinction*' (2007: 410; italics added).

The need for an intermediate news category becomes more apparent when one thinks carefully about the substance of what has traditionally been called 'hard' news and 'soft' news. For example, is every item related to 'sex' ipso facto sensational and 'soft'? Obviously not: the decrease in sperm count over the past few decades in the western world would be considered 'hard' news by almost everyone; similarly for an academic study on the sexual behavior of today's adolescents. Another category-wide example: are all 'personally useful news' items to be considered 'soft'? Most probably not; for example a report on a new internet site providing information about, and helping readers to cope with, mental illness. Not to mention news items regarding (really) important people doing not so important things. If a US President maintains that he hates broccoli and other green leafy vegetables – and the reports also offer expert advice as to the importance of such foods – is that 'soft' news? Not really. 'Hard' news, then? Not quite either. One can multiply such subject areas, specific topics and types of report many times over, all falling somewhere in the twilight zone between what has heretofore been defined as 'hard' news and 'soft' news.

Obviously, this also raises the question as to whether the entire gender-based 'hard'/soft news dichotomy (as noted earlier) is relevant. News items that fall between the two categories, defined here as 'general' – are they to be classified as belonging to the male or to the female journalistic domain? Moreover, *within* each topic area one can also find these three types of news ('soft', 'general', 'hard') so that obviously dividing news by gender is highly problematical, and perhaps has no real-life legitimacy at all. For example, a news item regarding a consumer product that has a life-threatening element is clearly 'hard' news, but within a theoretically 'soft' rubric. Any editor trying to hew to the 'traditional' gender line would have a hard time deciding whether a male or female journalist would best be able to report on this – and after several such 'hybrid' cases, most editors would probably cease considering the journalist's gender altogether.

A third category – ‘general’ news – also has clear ramifications on research. As seen earlier, several studies based on the ‘hard’ news/ ‘soft’ news split did not uncover statistically significant findings and/or their conclusions were somewhat ambiguous. It is also possible that ‘definitive’ findings in other studies might not represent the real picture because of their overly simplistic, dichotomous categorization. This is especially the case when dealing with ‘hard’ news subjects (people or events) in a ‘soft’ news venue (e.g. infotainment programs, talk shows), where the presentation may involve less than meaty news but offer more than inconsequential fluff. In any case, we are not suggesting that these studies are fatally flawed; we do argue that future research should try to take into account a more nuanced definition and mapping of news types. The same ramifications hold true as well for research into newspaper types (see following section), another field of research that might need recategorization as a result of the present study’s contribution of an additional – intermediate – category.

Types of newspapers: an ancillary research agenda

If we have dealt up to now with the micro level of news item types, then inevitably these should impact on any taxonomy of newspaper types, as newspapers present a conglomeration of news items. However, surprisingly enough, the research corpus of this macro level is far thinner than that of the micro level. Nevertheless, a generally accepted taxonomy of accepted wisdom can be outlined, and in most cases it turns out to be dichotomous as well, with some variation within each of the two basic categories: elite and popular.³

What are their characteristics?

- 1) *Contents*: The elite (or quality) press views its prime journalistic purpose as being democracy’s watchdog. It therefore emphasizes ‘hard’ news on topics such as domestic and foreign policy, politics, economy, and national security (Nir, 1984). In order to place such news in context, the elite press also provides much analysis, commentary and background reportage (Paletz, 2002). On the other hand, the popular press (variably called ‘yellow’, ‘cheap’, ‘sensationalist’, ‘mass’, ‘infotainment’) feels little social responsibility (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992) and thus emphasizes ‘soft’ news such as human interest, crime, sports, sex and gossip. In other words, the elite press addresses its readers’ logic and rational thought whereas the popular press plays on its readers’ emotions through images (see below) and word association (Nir and Roeh, 1992).
- 2) *Audience*: The elite press tends to have a relatively limited but well-defined audience: among the socio-economic elite, i.e. opinion leaders and/or possessing higher education (Goren, 1993). The popular press is mass-oriented, addressing the broader population.
- 3) *Graphic Design*: The elite press emphasizes words and substance; the popular press uses both content and form. The most obvious aspect of this is the proportion devoted to the text as opposed to the headline(s), pictures and other visual elements, with the elite press focusing on the former and the popular press on the latter elements. Moreover, elite press news text tends to be longer than the text of the popular press (Limor and Mann, 1997).

- 4) *Journalism ethics*: It is generally assumed that elite press journalistic practice is more driven by professional ethics than popular press journalists are (Limor and Mann, 1997).
- 5) *Format size*: Limor and Mann (1997) note the significance of newspaper size. Generally, elite newspapers are broadsheet-sized whereas the format of popular papers is tabloid. As they note, the latter size has become a synonym for sensationalist or yellow journalism.⁴

Of these five elements, only the last can be said to be truly dichotomous. The others – especially news content – are open to numerous intermediate possibilities, not to mention combinations of the two traditional types of news. Thus, here too one can argue for an intermediate form of newspaper between elite and popular, depending on the ratio found in each of the first four elements above. For example, one could envision a mass middle-brow paper that presents serious news and commentary but of short length, simple language, and accompanied by many pictures. Alternatively, it is certainly possible for a newspaper to include both hard and soft news in equal abundance (perhaps in different sections of the paper), in order to appeal to different audiences. Finally, if one were to use a ‘hard’/‘soft’ scale (e.g. 1–7) to grade each news item, it is conceivable that at least a third or more would score 3–4, necessitating the addition of an intermediate type of newspaper classification.

Indeed, two of the Israeli dailies used in the present study do not fit the traditional typology of popular or elite, but they are not necessarily unique on the world’s journalism scene. On the one hand, they are published in tabloid format but their news coverage is relatively comprehensive and deals almost exclusively with socio-political matters of serious import, and not crime, sex and the like. Moreover, while these papers have abundant (and occasionally overly colorful) graphics and photos, they also have serious literary supplements not found in almost any traditional tabloid (Limor and Mann, 1997). On the face of it, they could best be described as popular-quality papers, a hybrid not found in the journalism research literature. Nevertheless, based on actual content analysis of the news item topics they report on, we shall see in the Findings section that even ‘popular-quality hybrid’ is not a completely accurate description.

None of this is to argue a priori that a recategorization of news items must lead to a recategorization of newspapers, or that adding an additional newspaper category must be based solely (or at all) on an intermediate type of news item. Nevertheless, it would seem that both levels can mutually contribute to a more nuanced understanding of each other. This point is further elaborated on in the Discussion section.

Methodology

In order to see whether an intermediate news category was called for, and, if so, to develop it, two pre-tests were conducted. The first involved the following stages:

- 1 Drawing up a list of criteria for three news types: ‘soft’ news, ‘general’ news, and ‘hard’ news based on Tuchman (1972) and Limor and Mann (1997) for the

first and third types, and the author's own ideas for the second. These were the initial lists: '*Soft*' news (if the item meets at least two of these criteria): a) news you can use (on a personal level); b) news that need not be published immediately; c) news that can be left unreported altogether; and d) other (the respondents were asked to specify). '*General*' news (if the item meets at least four of these criteria): e) an important announcement regarding data or a report heretofore unreported; f) an item of very recent vintage; g) useful information to the general public, e.g. important upcoming events, explanation regarding contemporary trends or phenomena; h) news that must be reported but not necessarily immediately; i) news of some significance at the national level; j) news of some significance at the international level; and k) other (specify). '*Hard*' news (if the item meets both of the first two criteria): l) political, social or economic items of a highly significant nature; m) news that must be reported immediately; or n) other (specify).

- 2 Presenting these three lists to an Israeli editor and two senior journalists. For each list they were asked to identify the criteria with which they agreed or disagreed for that specific type – and also to add other criteria that they felt should be included in any of the three news types. The purpose here was to derive a consensual list of criteria, if possible – not only for 'general' news but also for the two traditional 'hard' and 'soft' news types, something that has never been tested for in systematic fashion.
- 3 The three respondents were presented with three dummy 'borderline' news items between 'hard' and 'general' news and another three dummy 'borderline' items between 'general' and 'soft' news. They were asked to classify each item as a specific type ('hard', 'general' or 'soft'). The purpose of this was to test whether they would agree on such difficult items, and if so whether a significant number would be classified as 'general' and not only 'hard' or 'soft' respectively. If there was no general agreement, and a number of the items were classified as 'general', then this would serve as an initial legitimization that such an intermediate category type was called for. In the event, 12 of the 18 categorizations elicited the answer 'general' news, two were classified as 'hard' and two more as 'soft' (two were not classified).

The results of the first pre-test elicited 17 criteria for which there was general consensus:

'Soft' news

- 1 Reports on a light or exotic topic (gossip, fashion, consumerism) that can be reported at a later time or not all;
- 2 Routine news without great or immediate public significance, and thus can be reported at a later time or not all;
- 3 News that is of interest to a narrow segment of the public;
- 4 Light or routine news that for non-substantive reasons (famous personality) or media competition ('scoop') must be reported immediately.

'General' news

- 5 Up-to-date news that must be reported but not necessarily immediately, i.e. can be published a few days later;
- 6 Important news that influences only certain groups;
- 7 Important news not on the present public agenda, so that if not reported would not be missed;
- 8 A recent announcement regarding new data or reports that should be published but not necessarily immediately;
- 9 Very important utilitarian 'news that you can use', but which need not be reported immediately;
- 10 An event from an important continuing story;
- 11 Relatively 'light' news regarding a person who has great influence over society;
- 12 Light news relating to important, quality of life topics such as ecology and health, which do not affect the public in the short term.

'Hard' news

- 13 Political, social, economic or serious environmental news of a highly significant nature that needs to be reported as soon as possible due to its immediate influence or ramifications on the public and surrounding world;
- 14 A breaking, surprising event of great import on most of the public and/or the environment (e.g. epidemic, natural disaster, terror attack);
- 15 New findings, discovery or report regarding a continuing story of great significance for most of the public and/or the environment;
- 16 Significant news on the national plane;
- 17 Significant news on the international plane.

With this 'refined' list of criteria, the research proceeded to the main part of the study in which it was decided to systematically query journalism professionals whose daily work involves precisely those editorial decisions being analyzed in the present study: what type of news stories to report on and how to write or edit them. Thus, six editors and 26 journalists from Israel's three largest dailies (*Yediot Akhronot*, *Maariv* and *Haaretz*) were presented with the entire list of 17 criteria and asked to place each criterion in one of the three category types.

They were told two things. First, they need not place a specific criterion in any of the three categories; that is, if they felt that an item was not worthy of inclusion in a newspaper, they could choose that option as well. This ensured that our list would not 'channel' them into news categorizations against their considered judgement. Second, they could place any criterion in more than one news category (e.g. 'soft' and 'general') – once again to avoid their being forced into a taxonomic Procrustean Bed. All 17 criteria were randomly mixed to avoid any influence based on order of appearance. The goal was to establish a comprehensive and final list of criteria based on a large sample of editors and journalists, in order to see first whether there was perceived legitimacy for this category, as well as overall agreement on the specific criteria underlying the new category 'general' news, and second whether the same was true for the traditional categories of 'hard' and 'soft' news.

The second pre-test involved choosing all 465 news items (long and short) that were published during a randomly selected week day (Monday, 5 January 2004; no 'extraordinary' event occurred the day before)⁵ in Israel's three major dailies (again, two 'popular' and one 'elite', read by the vast majority of Israelis). One of this study's authors then categorized each news item based on the final news criteria list. This was accomplished by reading the item's entire text and not just the headline. It should be noted that to control for scorer subjectivity, 10 percent of these news items were also given to a journalist and two other arbitrarily selected readers (with an academic degree) to score, based on the criteria list developed above. Inter-scorer agreement was 88.8 percent, a high level of trustworthiness.

A few problems arose here that were handled in the following manner. First, if an equal number of 'soft', 'general' or 'hard' news criteria were found in an item it was designated twice (once for each relevant category). However, if a news item had at least two more criteria from one category than from another, the item was designated as the type with the most criteria. On the other hand, if it had only one more criterion (e.g. 3 for 'soft' and 2 for 'general') then it was classified as both types unless the item had only one criterion for 'soft' and none for 'general' or vice versa (similarly for 'hard' and 'general' news), in which case obviously it was classified as the type with that specific lone criterion.

At this point, one could ask an important question: why stop at three news categories? Indeed, given the various criteria of each category, why not lay out a broad *spectrum* of news possibilities that would include several (or even more) variations and combinations of the 17 news criteria? As considered in the Discussion section, this is a legitimate option. However, given that the 'hard'/'soft' dichotomy has existed for several decades as a staple of the research literature, we felt that at this stage it would be too great a leap to jump from two categories to a broad, semi-structured, multi-layered spectrum.

Findings

'General' news: defining a new category

The results of the questionnaire given to the 32 journalists and editors were unequivocal: there is a clear place for an intermediate news type between 'soft' and 'hard' news that we call 'general' news. The following are the news criteria agreed upon by the group. The number of criteria was whittled down from 17 to 12, with some minor variations from the original list among those remaining.

'General' news

- 1 Recent economic, social or cultural news that should be published but not necessarily immediately;
- 2 Important demographic data, academic reports, scientific discoveries or technological inventions that should be reported but not necessarily right away;
- 3 Important news that is relevant or influential, not for society in general but only for a specific group;
- 4 Important news not on the present public agenda, so that if not immediately reported would not readily be missed;

- 5 Personally useful information for the reader ('how to'; analysis of how news can personally affect the reader, e.g. change in tax law) that need not be reported right away.

The criteria for 'soft' and 'hard' news were also altered somewhat.

'Soft' news

- 6 'Light' or 'spicy' news that need not be reported on immediately or at all, e.g. celebrity gossip, 'man bites dog' items (human interest);
- 7 'Light' news that needs to be reported immediately not for its intrinsic importance but rather because of its wide public interest (death or arrest of a major celebrity) or for professional reasons (exclusive 'scoop').

'Hard' news

- 8 Important news, especially in the fields of politics, society (education, welfare), economics or the environment that needs to be reported as soon as possible due to its influence or ramifications on the public and surrounding world;
- 9 A breaking, unexpected event of great import for most of the public and/or the environment (e.g. epidemic, natural disaster, terror attack);
- 10 New findings, discovery or report regarding a continuing story of great significance for most of the public and/or the environment;
- 11 Significant news on the national plane;⁶
- 12 Significant news on the international plane.

Based on the one-day survey of the 465 news items and on the above criteria, here are a few representative examples for each news type:

'Soft' news: Upcoming new theater production for children during the holidays; report of a modest increase in the sales of a large national company; the prime minister attending a local ethnic cultural event.

'General' news: An important agricultural innovation (e.g. development of a new sub-type of tropical fruit); unexpectedly sharp increase in revenues and profits of a leading national company; a report on additional species threatened with extinction.

'Hard' news: Arrest of government minister for graft; final government budget proposal for the ensuing year presented to the parliament; overseas peace treaty signed by traditional enemies; appearance of a new virus that could cause a world epidemic.

The ratio between 'soft', 'general', and 'hard' news

As noted earlier, all the articles found in the three newspapers were analyzed over a one-day period in order to discover the ratio between the three news types, and especially to see whether the quantity of 'general' news justifies the establishment of a separate category.

The first table here presents the overall results.

The next table displays the ratio of the three news types in the various major sections of the newspaper.

Table 1 Ratio between three news types

Newspaper	'Soft' news	'General' news	'Hard' news	Ratio between three news types
<i>Yediot Akhronot</i>	79	61	26	3: 2.3: 1
<i>Maariv</i>	62	72	29	2.1: 2.48: 1
<i>Haaretz</i>	36	62	38	1: 1.7: 1

Note: Not included in this analysis were Question & Answer sections, culture reviews, TV & radio listings sections, op-ed commentary, background analysis, sports pages, stocks & bonds section.

Table 2 Three news types in sections of the newspaper (weekday)

	'Soft' news	'General' news	'Hard' news
<i>Yediot Akhronot</i>			
Main news section	8	9	25
<i>24 Hours</i> supplement	13	2	1
<i>Yours</i> supplement	25	5	–
<i>Economics</i>	11*	35	–
<i>Finance</i> magazine	1	9	–
<i>Tourism and Leisure</i> supplement	22	1	–
Total	79	61	26
<i>Maariv</i>			
Main news section	8	9	28
<i>Maariv Today</i>	14	11	1
<i>Business</i>	22*	46	–
<i>Women</i>	18	6	–
Total	62	72	29
<i>Haaretz</i>			
Main news section	4	12	33
Section 2	–	8	–
<i>Economics</i>	4*	36	5**
<i>Gallery (Arts & Leisure)</i>	28*	6	–
Total	36	62	38

Notes: * In *Yediot Akhronot* and *Maariv* the *Economics* section had a large number of 'soft' news items (11 and 22 respectively) compared with *Haaretz* (four). The reason: in the two popular papers the *Economics* section includes numerous items on consumerism/marketing and tourism whereas such items generally appear in the *Gallery* section of the elite paper (under *Cosmetics* and *Consumers*), thus maintaining a more uniformly serious image in its *Economics* section (large business deals, mergers, conglomerate budgets, etc.).

** *Haaretz* also includes 'hard' news includes in its *Economics* section, mostly dealing with the national budget. In the two popular papers this appears in the main news section.

These findings show conclusively that Israeli popular and elite newspapers devote a proportionally large amount of the news hole to 'general' news. Even more suggestively, one popular, mass readership paper (*Maariv*) had more 'general' news than either of the other two types, while the elite paper *Haaretz* had almost as many 'general' news items as both other types together! Insofar as the different newspaper sections are concerned (Table 2), it is instructive to note that in all three papers 'general' news constitutes

approximately 25 percent of all the news within the 'main' news section, the first pages of the paper.

We now turn to a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Discussion

As noted earlier, despite the 37 years that have passed since Tuchman's seminal categorization of 'hard' and 'soft' news (1972), no one has addressed the possibility that this classification may need revision or updating. The present study's methodology and findings clearly show that there is prima facie evidence for the need to re-evaluate the traditional dichotomous news typology.

On further thought, this should not be at all surprising. The contemporary world of journalism – not to mention the reality that it reports on and reflects – is complex, with many possible shadings of variable importance attributed to its sundry events and discrete phenomena. Journalists and editors, of course, do not work with a 'soft' or 'hard' news score sheet but rather subconsciously juggle in their minds all sorts of criteria in their journalistic decision-making process. The more criteria that are involved, the greater the chance that the 'mental juggle' involves a decision to write or publish an item despite its lacking some criteria while having others – thus leading to a broad category we call here 'general' news.

The implications of this, however, are not reserved for journalism practitioners alone. Journalism *researchers* need to relate to this complex situation if they are to better understand journalism practice, as well as the general newspaper environment. Until now, journalism research (Scott and Gobetz, 1992; Prior, 2003; Baum, 2003, 2004) has used the traditional dichotomous typology; it is altogether possible that at least some of their findings and certainly their conclusions would have been different had they based their research on a more finely nuanced typology that took into account the broad middle range of news that does not easily fit into the 'soft' or 'hard' news categories.

To give but one example, studies of the influence of the news on reader political voting or involvement might well undergo revision once previously defined 'soft' news becomes 'general' news. This is especially germane to some of the most recent studies that dealt with infotainment television shows (Baum, 2005; Brewer and Cao, 2006) and talk shows (Baum and Jamison, 2006). By categorizing such shows (e.g. *The Today Show*, or *Good Morning America* – both of which present trivial items alongside serious issues and a host of items in between these two poles) as 'soft' news venues and not 'general' news programs, many of these studies' findings become strange if not inexplicable. Of course, research into newspaper journalism is the most obvious candidate for such reassessment. For example, Uribe and Gunter's findings (2004) of lack of change among tabloids in Britain would be more comprehensible if they were to classify much of the early 1990s British news as 'general' news instead of 'soft' news as the only alternative to 'hard' news.

Indeed, it is not only the popular press that needs such a recategorization. Under the onslaught of internet-based instant reporting, the elite press seems to have no choice but to present more news *analysis* and 'general' type news (academic studies, government reports, investigative series, etc.) that the 'fast-news' internet is not designed to offer. This would explain in large part our surprising finding that of the three Israeli papers analyzed here it

is the quality *Haaretz* that presented proportionally more ‘general’ news than its popular press counterparts. Indeed, based on this finding one can even make the argument that ‘general’ news is no less ‘serious’ than ‘hard’ news; the former provide a longitudinal perspective as well as informational background to news events; the latter report on the most recent events and phenomena of importance. However, one of the main factors rendering background material ‘general’ news and not ‘hard’ news is its lack of *immediacy* – in an ongoing story (which most serious ‘hard’ news items are part of) no harm is done if the analysis or explanation of the account’s historical evolution is presented tomorrow or the day after. In any case, the addition of a ‘general’ news category can go a long way to explaining fundamental changes in both the elite and the sensationalist press.

Certainly such an intermediate category is called for in the emerging research sub-field of e-journalism. Among other things, the internet has invented a novel news venue: portals. Here one finds fast-breaking ‘hard’ news, general news and sensationalist ‘soft’ news mixed together within a larger, non-‘news’ information framework. One cannot understand the types of news substance and also the types of news venues on the internet without adding a ‘general’ news category to the mix.

In addition, as was briefly suggested earlier, it is possible that discrete categorizations are no longer the best way to describe and measure the types of news being produced in the contemporary age; a multi-point spectrum might be more realistically descriptive. As one example among several, this could include eight sub-categories:

- 1 ‘Very soft news’ – highly exotic or easily digestible, entertaining but forgettable items that need not be published at all (man bites dog);
- 2 ‘Soft news’ – news of no great import but having publishing immediacy, if at all, or an ‘exclusive’ (a celebrity’s incarceration for drunk driving);
- 3 ‘Weak general news’ – having one or two of the five ‘general news’ criteria (impressive revenue increase of a large company);
- 4 ‘General news’ – having three ‘general news’ criteria (danger of a butterfly species’ extinction);
- 5 ‘Strong general news’ – having four or all five criteria (academic study of youth sexual behavior);
- 6 ‘Weak hard news’ – having only one or two of the five ‘hard news’ criteria (arrest of a minor government minister on corruption charges);
- 7 ‘Hard news’ – with three of the five criteria (peace treaty between two long-standing enemies);
- 8 ‘Strong hard news’ – including four or all five criteria (outbreak of a new virus threatening an international epidemic).

The major disadvantage of such an approach is greater complexity in analyzing and in writing up the results. On the other hand, such a spectrum would enable greater statistical flexibility and occasionally more fine-tuned statistical results. This is especially the case when these various news categories are utilized as independent variables to test other news-related elements.

For example, as noted earlier, there is a dearth of research regarding *newspaper* types. While a fully fledged discussion of this problem would lead us here too far afield, it can

be said at this point that if news *substance* demands recategorization, then so too does news *venue* – and not only because of e-journalism. The news venue spectrum of print papers could include at least five types:

- 1 *Sensationalist/yellow*: (almost devoid of ‘hard’ news, with mostly ‘soft’ and ‘very soft’ news);
- 2 *Populist*: (mostly ‘very soft’ and ‘soft’ news, with a smattering of ‘hard’ and ‘general’ news, presented in simplistic fashion);
- 3 *Popular/mass*: (a mix of ‘very soft’ and ‘soft’ news, and some ‘general’ and ‘hard’ news, presented in simple fashion);
- 4 *Middlebrow*: (almost no ‘very soft’ news, less ‘soft’ news, and more sub-categories of ‘general’ and ‘hard’ news, presented in reasonable fashion);
- 5 *Elite/quality*: (mostly sub-categories of ‘hard’ and ‘general’ news, presented in serious or thoughtful fashion).

Thus, while not the only element to be taken into account, ‘general’ news is an important key to understanding the differences between at least the three last newspaper types. If one were to base such a study on a spectrum of news item types, then each newspaper categorization could be more solidly grounded on the actual variety of its sundry contents.

Based on these Israeli findings one can categorize *Yediot Akhronot* as ‘populist’ to ‘popular’, *Maariv* as ‘popular’ to ‘middlebrow’, and *Haaretz* as ‘elite’ – not only because of the proportion of ‘hard’ news found in each but also because of their respective ‘general’ news ratio to ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news. This happens to sit well with each paper’s readership profile. According to the annual Israeli TGI readership survey (2005–6),⁶ *Haaretz*’s readers are on a high level socio-economically (income and education), followed by *Maariv* and then *Yediot Akhronot*. Thus, here too is indirect evidence that the ‘general’ news category reflects real world journalism (and audience) reality.

Obviously, this study is but the first word regarding ‘general’ news. Much remains to be done to declare it an integral element of journalism research. First, future research must analyze the respective newspapers over time, i.e. arbitrarily chosen days over several weeks or months, in order to ensure that the ‘soft’/‘general’/‘hard’ news ‘mix’ is relatively consistent. Second, this type of study must be undertaken in a few other countries to validate the ‘universality’ of the ‘general’ news category. Third, it must be noted that Israel does not have any yellow journalism newspapers. Thus, analysis of other types of papers (e.g. Britain’s *The Sun* and America’s *The New York Post* for sensationalist papers, and Britain’s *Independent* for middlebrow papers) is needed to understand the extent to which they offer ‘general’ news, if at all.

Fourth, the present study focused exclusively on topic substance. However, the three types of news categories also depend on other elements: pictures (small, abundant), size of headline (screaming, normal), graphics (garish, modest), and length of item (short, long), among others. Future research might usefully include these in the ‘grading’ of news type. Fifth, regarding type of newspaper the present study was based only on the *number* of ‘soft’/‘general’/‘hard’ news *articles* and did not include op-ed commentary, arts criticism (movies, books), sports pages, etc. Nor did it take into account the amount of pages devoted to news articles compared to the other categories of news or information that

were not counted. For example, if a paper has 20 ‘hard’ news, 15 ‘general’ news, and 10 ‘soft’ news items – but also has 50 sports articles, 30 movie reviews, 30 comic strips, etc. – this might change our definition of the type of newspaper it is. It may also be necessary to measure total ‘inch space’ of the various news types to get an accurate picture. On the other hand, it might not be at all easy to attain any sort of unanimity among researchers (or readers) regarding several of these items. For example, are yesterday’s sports results to be considered ‘soft’ or ‘general’ news? For many readers, ‘soft’ news at best; for the sports nut, perhaps even ‘hard’ news!

Sixth and finally, this study was carried out on newspapers. However, the research literature is replete with work on television news and to a lesser extent on other media. Each medium might have its own criteria for the categorization of ‘general’ news so that interviewing journalists and editors from the electronic media is also necessary to develop a universal ‘general’ news type or criteria relevant to each medium respectively.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether one could or should develop for each different medium a *separate* news spectrum, or whether our criteria are relevant to all media beyond the newspaper. This is necessary in order to ascertain how to go about researching both the type of news content and the type of news program, station, portal, site etc. through which the news is delivered. It need not be belabored that the contemporary age is witness to an explosion of new ways of presenting the news (graphics, pictures, typography, hyperlinks) and new venues for news reporting (free *Metro*-type newspapers, internet portals, blogs, convergent media). Moreover, even the more traditional media such as a specific newspaper now offer different types of news material to different members of the paper’s audience. Thus, with today’s ever-changing news media ecology, it becomes imperative for journalism scholars to sharpen their methodological tools by increasing the number of news categories, thereby enabling greater flexibility in analyzing the new news environment.

Notes

- 1 The authors share equal credit for this article and appear in alphabetical order. This article is part of a larger PhD dissertation (granted 2007) carried out in the Department of Political Studies (Communications Program), at Bar-Ilan University, Israel.
- 2 The present study focuses on print journalism. However, as briefly described above, many ‘hard’ news / ‘soft’ news studies do not limit themselves to the print media but rather include television and, more recently, new media (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2004). Moreover, as we presently show, most of these studies research the way the audience (readers, viewers, listeners) consume the different types of news. Our study does not relate directly to audience research. Nevertheless, we survey these other studies here for they too would be affected by our conclusions regarding a reclassification of news and newspaper types. In the Discussion section we elaborate on this point, suggesting ways that a new news category could affect previous audience research findings and conclusions, not only for the print press but also for the electronic media.
- 3 One interesting exception is Taylor (1992: 40) who offered a novel news media category that he called ‘new news’: ‘a mix of the serious, the slightly bizarre and the au courant’. Taylor, however, was interested more in critiquing the news product than in any methodological investigation of newspaper categories.

- 4 The format distinction is becoming less clear. For example, in Britain a few years ago both elite papers *The Times* and *Independent* changed over successfully from broadsheet to tabloid size.
- 5 The testing of only one day is justified by two things. First, newspapers try to keep to a very set format and division of types of news to meet their regular readers' expectations. Second, the number of items scored in only one day was large (465), so that it is unlikely there was any significant aberration. Having said this, it is clear that future similar studies should examine the news categories over a few randomly selected days, spaced over time and in different countries, to determine whether the findings here are 'universal' or an idiosyncratic outgrowth of Israeli journalism (e.g. Israel's ongoing serious security situation might tend to drive the newspapers to present more 'general' news instead of 'soft' news). In addition, as Israel has no 'yellow journalism' newspapers (e.g. *The Sun* in Britain) future studies might wish to include such a newspaper to understand how the three news types are divided up in the full spectrum of newspaper types.
- 6 This will have to be modified for some countries, e.g. the USA where most newspapers are metropolitan or at least city-wide, and not national as is found in Britain and Israel. Thus, for American newspapers, almost all of which cover both national and city-wide news, the latter would have to be included in this criterion.
- 7 This is based on the data reported by Teleseker's Single Source Research group (a leading Israeli marketing survey firm). The survey included 10,040 adults 18 years and older.

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