

The Burglar Alarm That Just Keeps Ringing: A Response to Zaller

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It is hard to disagree with John Zaller's rhetorical formulation of two news standards: the useful "burglar alarm" that alerts busy citizens to important events in their public lives, versus the needlessly demanding Full News standard that issues detailed reports on matters of little consequence. Surely none could argue with the sensible burglar alarm or advocate the stultifying absurdity of the Full News standard when they are contrasted like this: "the news should provide information in the manner of attention-getting 'burglar alarms' about acute problems, rather than 'police patrols' over vast areas that pose no immediate problems." The trouble with this new standard for news is that, when specified more fully, it turns out to be a nearly perfect account of what the news is already doing. Yet, Zaller implies that the news is currently turning off citizens because it still clings to the progressive-era notion of the full standard—patrolling vast areas that pose no immediate problems. In fact, the trouble with news is precisely the opposite. What has happened to the news in the past twenty years is that it has shifted in the direction of soft news and sensationalism, resulting in the continual sounding of burglar alarms on any number of issues—often just because they are shocking—and turning citizens off in the bargain.

In short, the argument that Zaller offers to endorse his standard is almost perfectly backwards. The news, in fact, is sounding burglar alarms all the time. This incessant ringing of alarms about dubious problems, unseemly scandals, and daily threats to health and safety discourages citizens from taking the press, politicians, and public life seriously. For example, Patterson shows that people who have left the news arena in recent years do so not because news is covering too much barren ground, but because it is too negative, sensational, and alarming (Patterson, 2000).

Beyond this fundamental flaw in the reasoning behind the burglar alarm standard, there are several core problems with the argument that take it away from its opening and fairly agreeable—but rhetorically loaded—formulation and into far less compelling terrain. The first problem develops from my opening point: Nearly all of Zaller's examples of ideal, burglar alarm news involve news practices that already exist. The trouble is that a large volume of this alarming news is regarded by citizens, scholars, and journalists as

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false alarms: dramatic coverage that alerts us to problems that are often inconsequential or simply nonexistent. Zaller's proposed news standard has no provision for false alarms. And the news, unlike the ideal burglar alarm in homes or businesses, sounds false alarms at an alarming rate.

The second flaw in this model is that there is no provision for instances in which a public problem exists but no alarm sounds. How are we to develop a standard that has no corrective for this type of error? (Yes, Virginia, even good methodologists like John Zaller can overlook type I and type II errors.) Zaller's implicit hedge against the alarm that does not ring when it should is a presumption that the government functions properly and that officials or civil society groups will be able to sound alarms in the press when it does not. When there are no news alarms, there are no problems. If only government were so perfect we would scarcely need news at all.

The third problem with this model for news is that Zaller artificially sets the two news standards up as though they were choices or alternatives. Since his standard basically idealizes "what is," he would do well to acknowledge that it is precisely the Full News standard (albeit not the wooden version that Zaller constructs) that helps keep false alarms in check and larger numbers of problems from going undetected. Both standards generally operate in tension with each other in most news organizations. Without the check of the Full News standard, the balance of the news would be thrown irretrievably in the direction of false alarms. The remainder of this discussion explores each of these problems with an eye toward a more sensible formulation of a news standard.

What About False Alarms?

Perhaps we should give credit to Zaller as a provocateur. He takes what many critics regard as the worst trends in news and turns them back out as ideals. For example, it is hard to regard Sabato's account of feeding frenzies as a good thing. Indeed, he defines frenzies precisely as instances of the press losing control of judgment about the significance of stories in the process of sounding the general alarm:

A feeding frenzy is defined as the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably. (Sabato, 1993, p. 6)

Zaller finds the silver lining in frenzied news and claims that the feeding frenzy is close to his ideal, although he abjures excessive uncontrolled coverage, preferring mild frenzies to roiling boils. His standard is to have frenzies, but to make them more controlled and less excessive. In short, take the frenzy out of frenzy. At first, this seemed to me a picky distinction, but upon reflection it seems to miss the whole point with frenzies: They are by definition cases of journalism out of control, and worse, they are often triggered by events of dubious political significance. Yet, the frenzy is close to the Zallerian ideal.

To his credit, Zaller seeks to improve upon frenzies by introducing a late breaking standard that is slipped into the argument as though it would be no trouble for news organizations to implement: just stick to the important stories. Who could argue that if the story is important, a little frenzy becomes a good thing? The trouble is that Zaller's appeal to our best hopes betrays our best empirical knowledge about the workings of the press. Not only does this standard redefine press frenzies, but in the process of doing so,

it links them to the very aspect of news judgment that they most dramatically undermine: importance. And so, when Zaller finally defines the burglar alarm ideal, he finesses what is surely the largest criticism with contemporary news—the substitution of sensational, soft news for important policy issues. Zaller simply commands journalists to limit their frenzies to important issues:

Journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining, and that affords the parties and responsible interest groups, especially the political parties, ample opportunity for expression of opposing views. Reporters may use simulated drama to engage public attention when the real thing is absent.

One suspects that most journalists are already trying to cover the important issues and make them interesting. If only the contemporary news business could be made to put this standard in practice, we could all celebrate. However, what Zaller fails to recognize is that the news system is hammered by several major forces that impede an easy focus on what is important and that often result in settling for what is merely interesting, dramatic, or titillating. In other words, Zaller fails to address the realities of economics, marketing, ratings, and the over-the-shoulder competition between organizations that trigger uncontrollable frenzies, or, to return to the metaphor, false alarms.

In short, the news system that Zaller wants to tweak is a system that sounds many alarms, but only some of them attain Zaller's standard of importance. If Zaller wants the burglar alarm to ring mainly on important social and political events, there must be some attention in his standard to the reasons for the incidence of false alarms. There is none. There also must be some attention to how to fix the problem. Again, there is none. Contrast this idealized news world to the crime control world at the root of the metaphor. In the real world of crime control, false alarms are generally detected by security patrols or by the police. The aim is to find and fix what triggered the needless alert. Repeated false alarms may result in fines being sanctioned on homeowners or businesses that waste police (i.e., public) time. There is no provision for detecting false alarms in the Zaller model. There is no penalty for setting them off.

In the real world of news, there is, of course, a penalty in the loss of audiences (and democratic publics) who feel jerked needlessly to attention. Yet, unlike the crime control world, the "loss of the public" penalty does not produce self-correction in the news system. (Nor, for that matter, does the loss of voters produce self-correction in the electoral system.) One reason for the lack of a corrective response may be superstitious learning on the part of news executives who quietly believe that no matter how much they pander for audiences, the remote controls are likely to click to another channel. This superstition is challenged by studies showing that quality news actually sells. The research also illuminates what may be the industry's motive behind its superstitious learning pattern: Quality news costs more (Bennett, 2003, pp. 82–120).

Another contributor to elevated levels of false alarms may be the emergence in recent years of a less top-down news order, and a more distributed information system, with the rise of Internet sources and the proliferation of "24/7" cable operations. If we pursue a cybernetic analysis of such a system, we discover that even the most serious-minded news executive faces a feedback system that pushes tawdry stories into competing channels even if he or she tries to hold the editorial line—or, to return to the metaphor, tries to fix false alarms (Johnson, 2001, pp. 130–162).

The false alarm problem merits our attention, not just because it annoys people but because in the murky world of complex problems and personal risk, people may not always be able to decide if there is cause for real alarm. Worse, some news-induced problems may be taken seriously by publics and politicians, and acted upon, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. News alarms can misrepresent the magnitude or the direction of public issues, creating impressions of crises or worsening conditions where no such conditions in fact exist. Take the example of the now famous media crime wave of the 1990s, where news reports of murder and other serious crimes on both local and national TV became a routine news formula—a formula that just happened to be at odds with the incidence of actual crime. Despite declining murder rates and flat trends in other serious criminal categories, the news audience was shocked with growing regularity in the early 1990s by big stories of savage criminal mayhem (Bennett, 2003, pp. 12–15).

One could argue that such disjuncture between the news and social conditions is of little consequence, or even that it reflects the unseemly tastes of the infotainment-seeking audience. Neither of these accounts of the media crime wave turns out to be supportable. As for the “little political consequence” argument, we have long known that news accounts of problems can set the agendas of what people think about (Lippmann, 1922; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and that news can even cue what they think (Iyengar, 1991). In the case of the virtual crime wave, these media effects were magnified because politicians found crime to be a voter-arousing issue for which they could offer solutions. And so crime became a leading election topic, and major policy changes ensued, including the waves of three-strike laws that sent vast numbers of citizens to jail, often on relatively minor offenses. As a result, America has secured its lead nation status in terms of imprisoning more of its citizens than any other land. At the same time, these policies had little demonstrable effect on subsequent crime rates beyond the triumphal rhetoric of the politicians who orchestrated the crime control drama. Rather than sounding a burglar alarm that ended up creating a sensible public policy dialogue, this and other examples of news alarms more resemble Edelman’s account of media spectacles in which journalists looking for big news work in concert with politicians who construct problems to fit stock solutions (Edelman, 1988). Altheide (2002) applies this general framework to an empirical study of the rise of fearful images and narratives in news reporting, and finds that much of the alarmist news in recent years has been dramatized infotainment fare with little basis in social conditions.

As for the idea that audience tastes somehow drive spectacles like crime waves or the rising volume of scary stories, there is precious little support—beyond the equally superstitious logic that news marketing somehow reflects audience inputs. Even if we dismiss the notion that news should somehow inform and challenge its publics (presumably part of the onerous Full News standard), there is ample evidence alluded to at the outset of this essay that the alarming trends of mayhem, violence, and other soft news are turning people off. For example, during the rise of the Soft News standard in the 1990s, local newspapers and television discovered content formulas that actually produced record profits in the face of declining audiences. Rather than regard the audience declines as alarming signs of news being out of step with citizen needs, the trends were quietly celebrated since most of the lost audience segments were not sellable at premium rates to advertisers (Bennett, 2003, pp. 82–120). A strong case can be made that the soft news content formulas developed to market news more profitably actively drove audiences away. As noted earlier, Patterson found that not only is the news audience shrinking in absolute terms, but that many who have tuned out cite the negative, alarm-

ist content as their chief reason for doing so (Patterson, 2000). In short, it is not the tedious business of taking busy citizens on needless news patrols of uneventful terrain that drives people away, it is the incessant sounding of the (often false) burglar alarm that does it.

No Alarm? Democracy Must Be Working!

Implicit in Zaller's admonition to avoid patrols of uneventful terrain is a reassuring belief in the hidden hand of government. Most political terrain is uneventful because government is functioning well, and if there were anything untoward to report, we can count on officials or civil society groups to sound the alarm that would bring the press running. There are at least two problems with this account. First, we know that the alarms that satisfy Zaller's "good news" criteria (sustained exploration of important issues with diverse viewpoints) are sounded most readily when officials engage in public conflict about an issue. However, we should also know that the absence of public conflict does not necessarily imply a clean system. Second, we know that some problems thwart independent press investigation because they are either too complex to report easily or too expensive to warrant assignment of resources (Bennett, 2003, pp. 168–171). The result, at best, is an indexing of press alarms to levels of conflict among decisive political players (Bennett, 1990). This proposition has even been supported in research by Zaller (Zaller & Chiu, 1996).

Waiting until conflict breaks out between officials is an imperfect alarm trigger. In order to find this triggering mechanism acceptable, a necessary correlate of indexing (and, it seems, of the burglar alarm model) is the implication that the system is self-correcting and generally working well when there are no alarms sounding. Zaller clearly subscribes to this assumption under the burglar alarm standard, as illustrated in his discussion of coverage of uncontested congressional races. Zaller simply rejects the notion that the lack of competitive districts constitutes a "dirty little secret" of American electoral democracy. Since the "dirty little secret" angle on elections sounds like an important and potentially dramatic news story, why does Zaller reject it? I believe it is because there is no automatic (e.g., indexing) trigger for this story, and even if triggered by press investigation, there is no obvious supply of legitimate sources to advance the story after it breaks. Since most incumbents and many interest groups are served by the non-competitive democracy, they are not likely to sound alarms. Given the way in which journalists must advance stories either through indexing or through finding developments that push the narrative, there is no automated or routine way to "arm" the system for this story. And so, Zaller rejects this story as no cause for alarm. To the contrary, he seems to imply that the lack of electoral contest is really a cause for citizen celebration: The congressional system is working so well that citizens can safely ignore 90% of election races. Thus, there is no need for press coverage of the majority of election races. The real problem, according to Zaller, is that a press burdened with the dreary Full News standard insists on covering those races. I agree that the way the press covers such non-contests may miss the bet; there is little audience appeal in narratives about horse races with just one horse in contention. This is where the story idea of the "dirty little secret" comes back to mind. However, Zaller's standard implies that the system is functioning well if there are no claims to the contrary from inner circles of parties and interests. This leaves the press not only passive, but largely irrelevant as a teller of important public stories.

Part of the problem is that the Full News standard serves mainly as a foil in Zaller's

argument. It is a one-dimensional metaphor for patrolling the irrelevant beats of politics. There may be a faint echo of this in the beat system, but beats are just part of the news gathering process. And, with the exception of the White House, beats are not automatic producers of news on a given day unless some event or official gives cause for alarm. The main point is that the full standard is not as simple as Zaller implies, nor does it set the tone for the contemporary news system to the extent that Zaller suggests—at least compared to the incidence of burglar alarm news. But the most important reason to rethink pitting the burglar alarm against the Full News standard is that some version of each operates in concert in most news organizations to produce a news product that is rather close to Zaller's ideal. In the next section, I argue that attaining a burglar alarm standard geared to important stories would not be possible without the check of the Full News standard, albeit a more sympathetic version than Zaller portrays.

Toward an Ideal That Allows the Two Standards to Interact

Zaller pits the two news standards against each other. In most contemporary journalistic accounts of how news is made, it is clear that the two are in play and interacting with each other in ways that are actually helpful to his standard (Bennett, in press). It seems more useful to think about the full standard as an ideal that is never achieved, but when used by journalists to screen events, it keeps the burglar alarm somewhat less likely to sound frenzied false alarms. In order to see this, we simply must adjust the Full News standard from its current status in Zaller's argument as rhetorical foil, and shift its definition more in line with what journalists think of as hard news: coverage of events and public decisions that may affect life quality for citizens (see Patterson, 2000; Rosenstiel & Kovach, 1999).

In this reformulation, it is the hard news standard that keeps open the possibility for attaining Zaller's importance criterion in the burglar alarm model. Zaller's stereotype of needless patrolling is not helpful to understanding the tension between this version of a Full News standard and other factors that go into news construction (see Bennett, in press). To the extent that the current news system covers important events with some useful and engaging perspectives, the continuing journalistic struggle to keep the full standard (as redefined above) in play should be given much of the credit. Journalists understand that the economic and competitive pressures driving frenzied sensationalism make the full standard, at best, one of several often competing factors that shape news quality. Yet, it remains an important one. The Murphy Brown story is a good example here. I happen to agree with Zaller that this was a good story, both because it was entertaining and because the issues were important to public policy concerns involving a core struggle among parties and interest groups over family values and social policies aimed at promoting different conceptions of those values. Few public conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s were more important. The presence of these issues might well have been lost in the sensational exchanges between Dan Quayle and a television character if some attention to hard news values had not entered the frenzy.

In other words, the journalistic practices that result in burglar alarms are forged from a dialectic tension between the two standards, and through interactions with other factors as well. These other factors that affect the composition of particular stories include economic, technological, and production constraints in organizations. Journalists themselves often idealize the Full News standard, but realize that the business pressures under which they work result in burglar alarm coverage at best. And the dirty little secret of the news business is that those pressures already produce all too many false

alarms as knowing practice. Without a somewhat better articulated version of the Full News standard operating as one of many competing journalistic norms, there would be all too many burglar alarms desensitizing publics to their problems.

Conclusions

In most real news situations, different standards come into play, sometimes in concert and sometimes in conflict. To even expect journalists to adopt a single standard flies in the face of the multiple gate-keeping pressures under which the press operates (Bennett, in press). The news is not, and probably cannot be, the product of a single standard that triggers news alarms. Rather, different content patterns reflect the interplay of economic and marketing pressures, technological production innovations, the sociology of newsrooms and press packs, and yes, the Full News standard that journalists learn about in school and on the job—albeit in somewhat more compelling forms than Zaller describes. To ignore these various factors in the functioning of the burglar alarm standard makes this normative theory of little use because we are not directed to see what makes the alarm work properly or not.

This said, if we examine the end product, much of today's news could be characterized loosely as burglar alarm stuff, but only some of it attains Zaller's importance criterion. We need a theory behind this standard that offers conditions under which news frenzies do not spiral out of control and create negative relationships among politicians, journalists, and publics. Unless Zaller can offer an argument to compel lower levels of the two kinds of alarm errors (false alarms and alarms that fail to ring when important events might be detected), his burglar alarm standard cannot achieve the importance criteria consistently, even if we know what he means by importance. This raises a final point. We should ask for the importance criterion to be specified: importance by what measure, or by whose determination?

Until the conceptual work called for here is done, we must take this standard largely as an account of what already exists. Indeed, it is tempting to read the entire argument as a somewhat puckish endorsement of whatever news fits into dramatized formats ranging from the *New York Times*, to *Entertainment Tonight*, to *Cops*. Yet, this normative endorsement of news as we—or, better yet, news audiences—know it contains no provision for how news standards may be changing, or whether infotainment standards are interfering with the proper sounding of alarms. The model thus ignores the fact that the news is in a period of significant change. The long term content trends (sensationalism, negativity, fear) mentioned briefly in this essay suggest that the news has become more alarmist—which Zaller should find good. Yet, given the lack of much check on whether the alarms are sounded for the right events, we must ask if there is any level of alarmism to which the news might sink (or rise) that we should, if you will pardon the expression, find alarming.

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