



News-ness and Hybridity of News: What Audiences Consider News in Ghana

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Abstract: Today's information ecosystem generates a news media landscape that is multi-faceted and open beyond the traditional news-democracy narrative. Using an audience-centered approach in a survey of 419 respondents, we examined the types of media messages audiences characterize as news and the rating of news-ness of news outlets. Regarding media content, breaking news was the highest rated for news-ness, followed by fact-checking. News stories infused with humor, outrage and satirical angles were rated high, implying some hybrid news content in the Ghanaian media environment. Moreover, audiences' assessment of news sources indicates well-known legacy news organizations receiving the highest news-ness rating, after which well-known partisan sources came. Unfamiliar sources were rated low. The implication is that audiences are conscious of fake news in their news sources.

Keywords: Audience, news-democracy narrative, hybrid media, genre, news-ness

1. INTRODUCTION

Two learned friends, Zachary and Paul, differ in their choice of news and the type of media to access. Zachary considers only hard news as news and no other. Paul, however, won't want to miss the evening news on one FM channel he calls "concert" news that provides facts with tints of elaborations and amusing commentaries in the local language. In today's information ecosystem, information is an essential resource open to the public in a wide expanse beyond the traditional media to digital outlets such as digital journalism or social media posts. The diverse media forms provide different types of content with multiple news choices. At the same time, news organizations and users from such varied sources as entertainment, commercial and political backgrounds publish contents that look similar in tone, appearance, and topic to news (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019, 2020a; Jones, 2012; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011; Zhang, 2018).

This media environment gives rise to a hybrid media system that obfuscates the definition of news as known in the news-democracy narrative.

The news-democracy narrative, as Woodstock (2014) calls it, has provided the basic definition of news about the notions of citizenship and democracy since the early 20th century (Schudson, 1998). Because this narrative underpins the need for information for participation as informed citizenry in a democratic society, it follows that news satisfies this civic and core value of democracy. Thus, Fenton (2010, p. 3) describes the news as "the lifeblood of a democracy." Consequently, this framework shapes the public's basic understanding of news in a democratic society. Additionally, the news-democracy narrative sets norms about what constitutes news and people's motivations for news consumption (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019).

Regarding what news should look like, the narrative uses the normative role of news in a democratic society to separate the news genre from other media genre types like entertainment (Schudson, 1998). Because of its special qualities, news provides knowledge and engenders informed and participatory citizenry. Additionally, news embodies such norms of objectivity as value-free reporting and routines such as accuracy, fairness, neutrality, and the watchdog role to serve democracy (Media Insight Project, 2018). While audiences distinguish between news values and entertainment in their understanding of news, they expect news to be separated from entertainment (Höijer, 2000). Moreover, studies (Edgerly, 2017; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Media Insight Project, 2018; Woodstock, 2014) find that both journalists and audiences hold notions of news such as objectivity (accuracy, fairness), neutrality, and credibility as consistent, as well as pervasive in their description of news values and professional roles about democracy.

Despite the assumptions about news as a media genre with deep democratic meaning that defines the output of the journalism profession, the current media environment defies the traditional notions of what news is (news-ness). The new media environment signals the rise in media hybridity (Baym, 2017; Chadwick, 2013), which presents alternative journalism that blends news and entertainment (termed "infotainment") and devalues objectivity and professionalism espoused in the traditional news-democracy narrative. As a result, this hybrid media paradigm postulates that the "traditional journalistic values of impartiality and objectivity, and fixed notions that confine journalism to 'news' and 'information,' have lost much of their credence and authority. These categories have come to coexist and interact with other notions and values which have emerged, like immediacy, appeal and affect" (Mast, Coesemans & Temmerman, 2017, p. 3). This way, news media genre risks "entertainment becoming more news-like" and "news becoming more entertainment-like" (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a, p. 419).

Like satire and outrage, the media mix traditional news elements with entertainment, dabbling audiences' consideration of issue reports as trustworthy and as news (Young, 2020). Concerning distinguishing hard news from soft news, the former

deals with timely and important matters involving politics, economic topics and problems bedeviling society. On the other hand, soft news covers human-interest stories like celebrity, lifestyle, and crime. However, this distinction evaporates in media hybridity in that political topics may look "softer" if reporters highlight opinions and personal angles to topics (Martinez-Costa, Sanchez-Blanco & Serrano-Punche, 2020; Reinemann et al., 2011). In all, news-ness encapsulates what audiences understand as news and how much meaning shapes their response regarding learning and participation.

Again, Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) identify three possibilities regarding contending "news narratives" in the current media landscape regarding news-ness. First, some scholars identify a section of audiences that still use the traditional news-democracy paradigm that disqualifies sensationalism, soft news, outrage and political satire, or outrage topics as news (Höijer, 2000; Media Insight Project, 2018). This way, studies will find that audiences consider media that depart from the traditional news-democracy narrative low in news-ness.

Second, studies may find that some audiences subscribe to a hybrid news narrative where audiences seek flexibility in news by depending on a mixture of traditional news elements with a wider range of content (Edgerly, 2017; Feldman, 2013). Third, studies may show that audiences (or some segments) reject the traditional news-democracy narrative (Lazer et al., 2018; Media Insight Project, 2018; Woodstock, 2014). This narrative is possible in the modern media environment where citizen journalism thrives, and audiences do not consider news an exclusive genre necessary for democratic participation.

Within the global context, it is pertinent to consider how the modern media environment plays out in Ghana. Ghana is an emerging democracy with a liberal media environment. It is characterized by predominantly private ownership of media outlets and a wider range of content and sources to audiences, including a growing global concern over fake news (Višňovský & Radošinská, 2021), which "devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data"

(Fighting Fake News Workshop Report, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, Ghanaian society's cultural diversity and multi-linguistic nature may reinforce or lean toward more than one of the three contending news narratives.

Additionally, as an emerging democracy in Africa, Ghana currently has a rural population of 42% literate population of 69%. As portrayed in the opening anecdote, the two friends' divergence of media choices represents two different segments or audiences irrespective of their educational backgrounds. Some studies elsewhere (Chadwick, 2013; Voltmer, 2013; Mellado et al., 2017) reveal the hybridization of journalistic cultures that challenge the traditional notions of news and audiences' response to the trend. Given this media outlook, this study examines the relevance of the three possible narratives about Ghanaian audiences' sensemaking and news-ness response.

The unsettled distinction between news and entertainment in modern media calls for more conversations examining how audiences make genre assessments. So far, research has not focused on Ghanaian audiences, whether they still hold on to the traditional notions of what is news or are also caught up in a multilayered, hybrid concept of what is news. Therefore, to capture how Ghanaian audiences determine what news is, this study looks at the audience's perspective of what constitutes news and how that shapes their media choices. The next section briefly reviews studies on news-ness. Then, the method section mainly deals with the gathering and analysis of data on how audiences assess media messages generally of selected outlets as news. After that, the findings will be presented and discussed. The discussion of the results will lead to conclusions and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

News Media Genre

Specifically, the news media genre involves a communication format that people, over time, accept as a class of discourse having common characteristics and communicative purposes, which are socially agreed upon or inferred practices in the discourse community. According to Swales (1990), communicative purposes form the basis of the genre

that outlines the format of the information and determines the choice of both media style and content. In line with how people determine news-ness, McQuail believes media genre serves audiences in distinguishing between media and "finding one's way in the luxuriant abundance of media output and for helping to describe and categorize content" (2010, p. 373). As a result, the present heterogeneous media landscape is largely arranged in genre categories (e.g., news, comedy, drama, movies, podcasts, and so on) to enable audiences to manage, filter and find their media options.

Unlike other media types, news as a genre has a heightened place and close connection with democratic society in terms of contributing to an informed citizenry and participation (Schudson, 1998). Studies indicate that audiences admit the democratic value of news and apply such professional standards of factualness, neutrality, and objectivity to news but do not have the same expectations of other media genres (Edgerly, 2017; Gil de Zuniga & Hinsley, 2013; Høijer, 2000). The latter situation relates to the hybrid media context that blurs lines of genre distinctions that may upset audiences' concept of news-ness (Chadwick, 2013, Edgerly & Vraga, 2020b). News-ness

News-ness describes the level of audience perception of a media message as news. News-ness comprises three elements. First, the concept is related to audience-perceived-genre labels because it focuses on the audience, not producer labels. Second, while assessing news is complicated, it highlights how something is news regarding specific media contents (Baum, 2003). People find it difficult to define news, but they can identify one when they see it (Edgerly, 2017; Schultz, 2007). Third, news-ness involves variations in audiences' evaluation or rating of specific media as "news."

The concept serves media research in several ways. Firstly, news-ness is audience-centered and emphasizes audiences' agency in making sense of media genres and assessing media messages and outcomes. Secondly, the notion allows us to test the applicability of news as a democratic concept in today's media environment. It can be an avenue for researchers to address whether the traditional news-

democracy narrative, emphasizing objectivity and news values, still applies or whether new narratives compete with it. They may also consider whether audiences' rating of a media message for news-ness would affect higher learning and participation or if new standards and variations in audience evaluations may emerge because of content or media type.

Thirdly, recent concern over fake news has also attracted both public attention and the interest of researchers (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Fighting Fake News Workshop Report, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Višňovsky & Radošinská, 2021). Such studies of fake news relate to how audiences recognize and understand "what is news" and its meaning. Thus, the audiences' understanding of "what is news" impacts news-ness; invariably, how audiences assess media content as the news will determine its impact on the public. But, if they label certain media content as fake news, that would have low ratings and outcomes. Hence, news-ness has utility in audience studies in the current media environment.

Factors Influencing News-ness

Harold Lasswell's model of communication, developed in 1948, emphasized five components: (a) *who*, (b) *said what*, (c) *in which channel*, (d) *to whom* and (e) *with what effect*. From this paradigm, Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) conceptualize their theoretical model of news-ness that lays five basic factors that affect news-ness, namely, "what is communicated, how it is communicated, by whom it is communicated, and where ... [and] audience who receives the message" (p. 423). At the same time, the first four elements manifest in both the traditional concept of news and news narratives of hybrid media. However, the audience is the fifth factor that interconnects the message factors to account for news-ness.

About what is communicated, audience notions of news coincide with information type, which also relates to news values that shape journalists' view of events as more newsworthy under the news-democracy narrative (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Studies have explored how these news values can influence audiences' assessments of news-ness; they found, for example, that hard news characterized by "immediacy" as news

value remains highest in the rating of audience perceptions of news while fact-checking and opinion are more fluid, but an exclusive and forward-referencing place lowest in news-ness (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a; Hermida, 2010).

Regarding how the message is communicated, a media message is communicated with some emphasis on tone and framing. In terms of tone, the traditional journalistic practice emphasizes an unbiased and professional delivery style that uses quotations from news sources as a credibility tool and for context and angle (Baym, 2010). A hybrid media message may mix humor, sensationalism or outrage with current information. Still, while audiences rate a hybrid message in the semblance of a dispassionate delivery as news, they consider hybrid content infused with conflict or humor as less news (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Edgerly & Vraga, 2019; Young, 2020). Another way of emphasizing an event or issue is by either episodic or thematic frames, which can influence audience interpretations, attitudes, behaviors, and news-ness (Borah, 2011). For example, episodic framing that emphasizes the personal consequences of an issue in society could be considered less news-like than thematic framing that offers social context (Glogger & Otto, 2019).

On "who communicates the information," today's media environment is filled with various sources. The sources of media messages can have an impact on news-ness. Popular press sources are known for their hybridity, but audiences are often exposed to media messages from familiar, ambiguous, and unfamiliar source situations, especially on social media sites (Hallin & Mellado, 2018). Although some sources also may be linked to other genres, source familiarity and reputation help audiences to skim messages (Young, 2020). Unlike partisan sources that show politically biased patronage and rating, legacy sources have a mixed impact on news-ness (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019, 2020a).

Where the information is communicated relates to the form and context of the media message within which audiences interact with that information. In the current media environment, audiences can get news in multiple spaces, locations, and formats that may shape their evaluations of news-ness in encountering that

message so that their rating of television and digital video, as well as the use of satire and outrage, may be different from print media and (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Eveland, 2003; Hallin & Mellado, 2018). Similarly, audiences' perception of news-ness regarding social media may differ from its version in print form. Moreover, social media cues like the number of views, shares or retweets, and comments or replies provide context to audiences to gauge the attention a message receives from other audiences. Apart from social cues affecting audiences' story selection or engagement and having persuasive power on audiences, social cues may influence audiences' perceptions of what is news, particularly in low-source familiarity situations (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Sundar et al., 2007).

Audiences, the fifth factor, come with individual differences in interacting with a media message. Some theories of news consumption decisions suggest that many motivations drive audiences in their media choices (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011; Garrett, 2009; Ivengar & Hahn, 2009; Hastall, 2009). Lee (2013) suggests four motivations: entertainment, ideologically driven choices, socially driven consumption, and information need. The motivations shape audiences' processing, perception and assessment (McQuail, 2010). Consequently, different audiences may evaluate the news-ness of content differently, especially in a hybrid media context (Baym, 2017). Conspicuously dominant among the characteristics of individual differences involve age, prior media experiences, and political orientations.

Regarding age, youth and young adults born into a media environment with various media types and hybridity have standards and sensemaking of news that may differ. They would have a more flexible approach to media choices and embrace politically satiric content more than their older counterparts (Gottfried & Anderson, 2014). Moreover, regular users of particular media have a different sense of newsworthiness of media forms; particular media forms that audiences do access or are accustomed to would match their expectations of news-ness (McGregor & Molyneux, 2018). As a result, regular users of hybrid content such as satire or outrage are likely to rate satire or outrage higher in news-ness than nonusers of hybrid forms. Also, political orientations may determine partisans' high rating of media

messages to coincide with their political viewpoints (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019). Similarly, conservatives and liberals see hybrid media differently. In contrast, liberals would rate hybrid media such as satire and celebrity activism as high in news-ness; the rating of the same by conservatives is low (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019, 2020b; Young, 2020).

The interconnectedness of the various communication elements so far leads to understanding news-ness. Previous research (Höijer, 2000; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006) suggests that the audience's notion of news is traditionally based on the news-democracy narrative. However, recent understandings due to the hybrid media environment introduce a shift in the open and uneven concept of news (Baym, 2017; Mellado et al., 2017). Different audience characteristics shape their rating of news by looking at the range of norms (such as fairness, neutrality, and factualness), emotions (involving such affective dimension or feelings in rating a story as high or low in news-ness as being exciting, anxious, upset, playful), and attributes (criteria for characterizing messages as news) that are employed in evaluating news-ness. Whereas the stipulated factors regarding media content shape audiences' ratings of what is news, such considerations as accurate, relevant, exciting, entertaining, credible, and professional inspire what news-ness might mean for audiences.

While the notion of news-ness centers on describing the open but uneven assessments of news by different audience segments and how media messages can influence audiences, outcomes of news-ness account for the latter aspect. To summarize, studies suggest that genre labels hint at audiences' expectations of the types of media they consume, which can also create differential effects (Höijer, 2000). In addition, the news-democracy narrative expects highly rated media in news-ness to facilitate democratic citizenship outcomes, but some findings (Becker & Bode, 2018; Feldman, 2013; Young, 2020) indicate that some audience segments may assign a higher rating of news-ness to media messages with satire or outrage and that can result in learning. However, Edgerly and Varga (2020b) observed that such a rating might be due to partisan processing, where the audience has a lower intention to verify the message information (e.g., breaking headlines) coming from related partisan

sources. Given the literature, this study investigates how story type and source influence audiences' determination of what is news in Ghana. Therefore, this study explores the media in Ghana guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What story type do audiences consider as news?

RQ2: How would audiences' ratings of news content of source situations differ in levels of news-ness?

3. METHOD

This study investigated how story types and sources influence audiences' determination of what is news in Ghana. The cross-sectional design was used to collect data from different categories of people at the same time (Creswell, 2012). Again, the cross-sectional survey design allowed us to collect the needed information more quickly. This design was appropriate for the study because it enabled us to collect quantitative data on such variables as gender, age, political affiliations, occupation, and educational status. It allowed us to study how these categories of people currently react to media and news.

The target population was all adults (18 years and above) in Ghana. The accessible population was all adults in the Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, and Bono East Regions. Because the population size could not be determined (unknown), we used Kibuacha (2021) formula to determine the appropriate sample for the study.

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times sd \times (1 - sd)}{e^2}$$

Where:

Z= the z-score for a chosen confidence interval

sd = the standard deviation, how much variance is allowed

e= the confidence level.

A safe standard deviation of 0.5 (Kibuacha, 2021) was used. We estimated 95% confidence that the sample would represent the population. That is e = 0.05, and the corresponding z-score is 1.96.

Therefore, the sample size was

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{(0.05)^2} \\ &= \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025} \\ &= \frac{0.9604}{0.0025} \\ &= 384.16 \end{aligned}$$

From the value obtained, a sample size of 385 or higher was assumed appropriate for the study. Therefore, we conveniently selected 105 respondents from each region. Convenience sampling was used to select respondents willing to participate in the study. Four assistants were recruited in each region to administer the questionnaire to reduce researcher bias. The four research assistants sought verbal consent from participants. Those who consented to participate were administered the questionnaire. Again, to ensure gender balance, the recruits (research assistants) were asked to select fifty males and fifty females in each of the four cities. Of the 419 respondents, there were 210 (50.1%) males and 209 (49.9%) females. The majority of the respondents, 287(68.6%), were 18-34, and 132 (31.4%) were in the age bracket of 35-55+.

For the study, we used a questionnaire as our data collection instrument. The questionnaire was in four sections. Sections A to D were five-point Likert scale items used to obtain respondents' views about news and the media. Section A sought responses on stories that respondents consider news. Respondents were to rate ten types of stories as "Definitely news," "Definitely not news," "Entertainment," and "Not sure"]. Section B asked respondents to rate news content based on the news source. They were to rate news from five sources on a scale of "1: Very High", "2: High", "3: Moderate", "4: Low", and "5: Very Low". Items in section C were used to determine whether politically affiliated sources moderate their evaluation of news. Participants were to rate news from six politically affiliated sources as "Is accurate and trustworthy," "Offers a range of opinions," "Helps me make up my mind," "Helps me understand what's going on," or "Has a depth of analysis and content not available elsewhere." Lastly, the section D items were to determine whether respondents' news ratings moderate their behavioral intention to verify the news. The participants rated their behavioral intentions to verify news with eight items on a five-point scale, where "1: Strongly Disagreed", "2: Disagreed", "3: Uncertain", "4: Agreed" and "5: Strongly Agreed".

4. RESULTS

In total, 419 answered questionnaires were coded to examine story types and news outlets for news-ness. This section is devoted to presenting the results of the two research questions.

RQ1 asked what story types audiences consider news. The respondents were to indicate how they perceive 11 story types. The findings presented in Table 1 revealed that nine respondents, representing 2.1%, were unsure. Most of the respondents, 361(86.2%), perceived breaking news as definitely news. A small number of respondents, 9(2.1%), indicated they did not recognize breaking news as news, and 40(9.5%) perceived breaking news as entertainment.

On how audiences perceive "fact checks," four respondents did not respond to the item, and 33 (7.9%) indicated that they are not sure of which category to place "fact checks." Only 7(1.7%) said they do not perceive "fact checks" as news. Many respondents, 329(78.5%) representing the majority, indicated that they recognize "fact checks" as news. However, some respondents, 46(11%), believed "fact checks" are a form of entertainment.

Again, respondents were asked to indicate how they perceive stories that indicate "opinion and are exclusive." The analysis of the results, as presented in Table 1, reviewed that seven out of the 419 respondents did not respond to the item. Less than 10% said they were unsure, and 51(12.2%) said they perceived such stories as entertainment. However, 313(74.7%) said

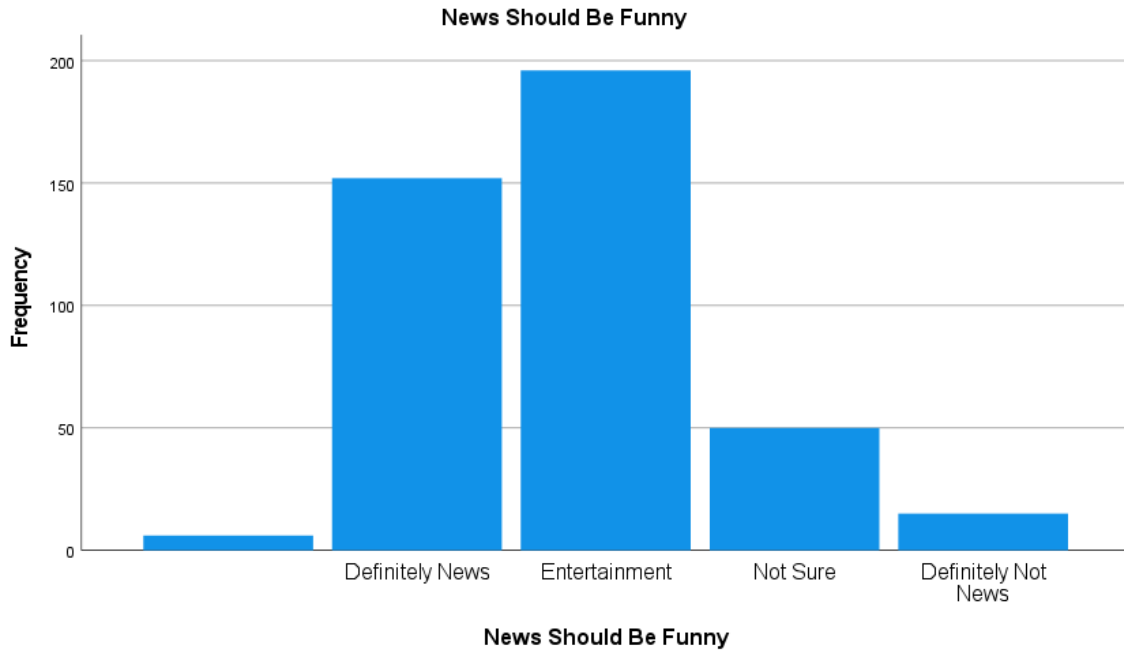
they recognize such story types as news, and 16(3.8%) said they do not recognize such stories as news.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their opinion about "Forward-referencing" stories. As shown in Table 1, 8(1.9%) did not respond to this item, and 85(20.3%) were undecided. However, 78(18.6%) categorized these news types as entertainment. We found that the majority of the respondents, 232(55.4%), believed that such stories are news, and 16(3.8%) believed that such stories are not news.

The result of the analysis of the responses to the item on how respondents perceive funny stories is reported in Table 1 and Figure 1. On how respondents recognize funny stories, it was revealed that entertainment had the highest frequency, 196(46.8%), indicating most respondents perceived these stories as entertainment, corresponding to the height of the bar on entertainment as in Figure 1. Nonetheless, a higher number of respondents, 152(36.3%), also indicated that such stories are news, and 15(3.6%) said they do not recognize such stories as news. Some respondents, 50(11.9%), indicated they were unsure, and 6(1.4) did not respond to the item.

Another item used to solicit respondents' views on stories was how they view "aggressively opinionated" stories. The result showed that the highest number, 250(59.7%) of respondents, indicated that aggressive opinionated stories are news, while only 50(11.9%) said they are not news. It was found that 49(11.7%) respondents regarded aggressively opinionated stories as entertainment. About one-seventh of the respondents, 60(14.3%), indicated there weren't sure, and 10(2.4%) did not respond to the item.

Figure I: How Respondents Perceive Funny Stories



It was also revealed that 337(80.4%) recognized that "news should show a calm, professional voice." Of other respondents, 33(7.9%) believed such news was entertaining. The analysis also revealed that 31(7.4) respondents were unsure how to categorize such news, and only 12 out of the 419 respondents, representing 2.9%, said such news is not news. Six participants did not respond to this item.

Even though 4(1.0%) did not respond to the item and 34(8.1%) indicated they were undecided, a great number of respondents, 306(73%), believed that "news should be conventional, policy-focused/one in which host adopts a dispassionate demeanor while moderating a high-quality conversation." And others, 18(4.3%), said these stories are not news. However, such news was recognized by 57(13.6) as entertainment.

Another item sought to elicit respondents' views about how they recognize stories that take an ideological, liberal confrontational angle in which the host remains non-partisan but aggressively questions his guests.

The responses, as shown in Table 1, indicated that 279(66.6%) of respondents identify such stories as news, while 71(16.9%) indicated these stories are forms of entertainment, and 19 (4.5%) said these are not news. It was found that 2(0.5%) participants did not respond to the item, while 48(11.5%) participants were unsure how to classify such stories.

While the news is typically considered a serious and factual source of information, there is a long tradition of using humor in news media. Satirical news shows such as The Daily Show and Last Week Tonight use humor to comment on current events and political issues. Similarly, some newspapers and websites feature humorous columns or comics. However, it is important to note that not all news is intended to be funny or entertaining. Many news outlets strive to present information objectively and accurately without injecting humor or commentary. It is up to the reader or viewer to decide what type of news they prefer and what sources they trust.

Table 1: Respondents' Views of Story Types

Type of Story	Definitely News Freq (%)	Entertainment Freq (%)	Not Sure Freq (%)	Definitely Not News Freq (%)	Missing Freq (%)
* Breaking	361(86.2%)	40(9.5%)	9(2.1%)	9(2.1%)	0(0%)
* Fact check	329(78.5%)	46(11%)	33(7.9%)	7(1.7%)	4(1.0%)

* Opinion and exclusive	313(74.7%)	51(12.2%)	32(7.6%)	16(3.8%)	7(1.7%)
* Forward-referencing	232(55.4%)	78(18.6%)	85(20.3%)	16(3.8%)	8(1.9%)
News should be funny	152(36.3%)	196(46.8%)	50(11.9%)	15(3.6%)	6(1.4%)
News should be aggressively opinionated	250(59.7%)	49(11.7%)	60(14.3%)	50(11.9%)	10(2.4%)
News should show a calm, professional voice	337(80.4%)	33(7.9%)	31(7.4%)	12(2.6%)	6(1.4%)
News should be conventional, policy-focused, one in which the host adopts a dispassionate demeanor while moderating a high-quality conversation	306(73%)	57(13.6)	34(8.1%)	18(4.3%)	4(1.0%)
News should take an ideological, liberal confrontational angle in which the host remains non-partisan but engages in aggressive questioning of his guests	279(66.6%)	71(16.9%)	48(11.5%)	19 (4.5%)	2(0.5%)
News should take a humorous, satirical angle in which the host infuses humor in his questioning	243(58%)	97(23.2%)	56(13.4%)	21(5%)	2(0.5%)
News should mix the use of humor and, to some extent, aggression in policy discussions	211(50.4%)	133(31.7%)	45(10.7%)	29(6.9%)	1(0.2%)

A large number of the participants, 243(58%), revealed that "news should take a humorous, satirical angle in which the host infuses humor in his questioning." Nearly one-quarter, 97(23.2%) of the respondents believed that the host infusing humor into the presentation makes the story more entertaining than news. In comparison, 21(5%) participants said such stories are not news. While 2(0.5%) did not respond to this item, 56(13.4%) could not categorize it.

The last item sought participants' opinions about "news should mix the use of humor and, to some extent, aggression in policy discussions." Only one participant failed to respond to the item. Of the 418 participants who responded to the item, 45(10.7%) could not classify such stories into any of the three categories. Less than one-tenth of the respondents, 29(6.9%), said such stories could not be classified as news or entertainment. More than one-half of the respondents, 211(50.4%), classified such stories as news, and 133(31.7%) believed such stories could be entertainment.

For the 11 items on story types presented to participants, most respondents in each case classified the item as news. This choice could mean that most

people receive all types of stories as news. It can also be seen that many people perceived these 11 story types as entertainment than recognizing them as "not news." Although of differing degrees, participants identified a measure of news and entertainment in each story type.

RQ2 asked audiences to rate the news content of selected outlets as news. Here, participants were to indicate their views on how five different sources of stories could represent news on a scale of 1 to 5, representing very high, high, moderate, low, and very low, respectively. Summary statistics involving the mean and the standard deviation were used to summarize how audiences rated the 'news-ness' of stories from these sources. The mean for the five-point scale used is 3, which was used as the value against which the mean calculated for each source was compared. A mean value of less than 3 indicates a higher rating, and a mean of more than 3 shows a lower rating. Table 2 suggests that participants rated news from well-known legacy news organizations highest over the other sources. Well-known legacy news organizations had a [M=1.76, SD =1.034]. The participants' views were only about one standard deviation dispersed from the mean, implying their views were homogenous. This homogeneity suggests that the respondents considered well-known legacy news sources as high of news.

Table 2: Respondents' Ratings of the News Sources by Means and Standard Deviations

Sources	Mean	Standard Deviation
The well-known legacy news organization	1.76	1.034
Well-known partisan source	1.96	1.145
Ambiguous Source	2.60	1.411
Unfamiliar partisan source	3.36	1.128
Unfamiliar legacy source	3.50	1.162

The respondents also rated well-known partisan sources highly. Participants indicated that they recognize stories from known partisan sources as news. With a mean of 1.96 and a standard deviation of 1.145, known partisan sources were the next source rated high by the participants, even though their standard deviation shows their responses were more heterogeneous than those of the well-known legacy sources. The respondents moderately rated ambiguous sources. Though the mean was less than the test value of 3 [M=2.60, SD=1.411], it is very close to 3 and hence can be said that participants were slightly restrained in recognizing news from such sources as news. Unfamiliar partisan and unfamiliar legacy sources were rated low by the respondents. With [M=3.36, SD=1.128] and [M=3.50, SD=1.162], respectively, unfamiliar legacy sources received the lowest rating, followed by unfamiliar partisan sources. These results suggest that participants did not recognize content from these sources as news.

Not only do audiences rate news sources, but several organizations and websites are also springing up to provide ratings and evaluations of news sources based on factual accuracy, bias, and journalistic standards. An example is the U.S.-based Media Bias/Fact Check, which provides ratings for news sources from extreme left to extreme right based on their bias and factual reporting. Another organization, All-Sides, rates news sources based on their bias and provides multiple perspectives on the same news story. However, it is important to note that ratings and evaluations of news sources can be subjective and may not reflect the views of every individual. Thus, reading news from various sources and critically evaluating the information presented is always a good practice.

5. DISCUSSION

This study used an audience-centered approach to answer our research questions about story types that fit audiences' assessment of what news is and their rating of news-ness from news outlets. Findings suggest that breaking stories mostly meet audiences' concept of news and that audiences rate well-known legacy news organizations highest in news-ness, followed by well-known partisan sources. We discuss this study's theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Concerning story types that audiences consider news, audiences' ratings did not suggest any "pure" news. However, breaking stories were rated the highest, followed by fact-checking. Opinion, exclusives, and news that take the ideological, liberal confrontational angle but a non-partisan and aggressive questioning approach, and the aggressively opinionated type and forward-referencing kind of stories were also rated high. The findings support Edgerly and Vraga's (2019) study that the news-democracy narrative dominates what constitutes news and people's motivations for news consumption. Traditional news values such as immediacy might have contributed to audiences' assessment of breaking news as the highest in news-ness. However, our findings did not support the fluidity of fact-checking and opinion in previous studies; neither were exclusive and forward-referencing rated low in news-ness (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a; Hermida, 2010).

Moreover, our findings indicate that news stories spiced with humor in aggressive policy discussions and with satirical angles were high in news-ness. Although the hybrid content with a blend of humor, outrage, satire or sensationalism is high in news-ness, this hybrid media paradigm does not compete strongly with the traditional narrative, which is rated very high.

Thus, our findings partly support previous studies (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Edgerly & Vraga, 2019; Young, 2020), which held that audiences rate a hybrid message mixed with conflict or humor as less news. However, "less as news" is to be taken in comparative terms where the normative role of news is higher than the entertainment or humorous tint, which is rated averagely high. So, we cannot agree with Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) that the news media genre risks being more entertainment-like because the hybridity is not as strong yet to impair the news-democracy narrative. We would rather side with Mast et al. (2017) that the traditional journalistic values have come to "coexist and interact with other notions and values which have emerged, like immediacy, appeal and affect" (Mast, Coesemans & Temmerman, 2017, p. 3).

The findings suggest that audiences in Ghana admit to the modern media environment but do not reject the traditional news-democracy narrative. This sensemaking of news could imply their high appreciation of notions of news such as neutrality, objectivity, factualness, immediacy and value to democracy (Edgerly, 2017; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Media Insight Project, 2018; Woodstock, 2014). Whereas entertainment was rated lowest in news-ness about specific story types, it was averagely high about story qualities such as humor. This observation identifies with the first and second possibilities of Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) that people subscribe to a hybrid news narrative where audiences seek flexibility in news content (Edgerly, 2017; Feldman, 2013). While this finding reveals some open notions of what news is, the third possibility of a segment of audiences rejecting the traditional paradigm does not seem to be the case in Ghana.

Generally, the findings have implications for an emerging democracy with a liberal media environment like Ghana. In this society of cultural diversity and multi-linguistic nature, the audiences lean toward two of the three contending news narratives. The audiences' sensemaking and the response of news-ness reveal the applicability of news as a democratic concept. However, some audience segments subscribe to the traditional news-democracy paradigm, and others to the hybrid news narrative. This study supports previous findings (Chan-Olmsted, Rim & Zerba, 2013) that social media platforms do not

displace traditional news media. Still, the former plays a more complementary than a substitutive role in news consumption.

The Ghanaian community mostly embraces the traditional form, but some audience segments enjoy the multilayered or hybrid news genre. As a result, the traditional news-democracy narrative's emphasis on objectivity and news values still apply, but it can be presented in a funny/humorous manner for appeal and impact. Humor in the context pertains more to the embellishment of local language (broadcast) news stories than infotainment. Therefore, the newscast in an entertaining manner would not be the same as emphasizing celebrity news and human drama with an accompanying profit-oriented tint.

In addition, breaking stories receiving the highest rating place a greater duty on the news media industry to sustain the traditional news-democracy narrative by providing more accurate and reliable information to the public. Because breaking stories involve working with speed, it demands more care and dedication from media organizations. In this way, reporters and editors must be more reflective than reflexive as they work under intense time constraints and with standardized routines to produce the stories. Their reflective approach to the task would make their content and impact stand out against a citizen journalistic alternative.

Regarding audiences' assessment of news-ness from news outlets, we found that audiences' ratings of news content of source situations differ in levels of news-ness. The results indicate that audiences rate well-known legacy news organizations highest in news-ness, followed by well-known partisan sources. While messages from ambiguous sources were moderately rated, unfamiliar partisan and unfamiliar legacy sources were rated low. But, comparatively, the unfamiliar legacy sources received the lowest rating. This choice-making is partly supported; however, Edgerly and Vraga (2019, 2020a) found legacy and partisan sources have mixed news-ness ratings. However, the heterogeneously high rating of familiar partisan sources may support previous studies that ratings of partisan sources are characterized by politically biased patronage and rating (Young, 2020),

which match audiences' expectations of news-ness (McGregor & Molyneux, 2018).

The low ratings of unfamiliar partisan sources and unfamiliar legacy sources suggest audiences' suspicion of fake news. If studies of fake news (e.g., Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Fighting Fake News Workshop Report, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Višňovský & Radošinská, 2021) indicate such news impact audiences' understanding of "what is news" and the public, then the low ratings of unfamiliar sources imply active audiences evaluate sources in consuming message content. While our study is not about fake news, we would argue by this finding that fake news is connected to how people understand and conceive certain stories as fake and lower their news-ness. So, considerations of news-ness should not overlook the reality of fake news.

However, well-known legacy news organizations receiving the highest rating in news-ness imply that audiences still consider traditional news media as having the capacity, including the necessary infrastructure, personnel, organizational routines and norms, to constantly supply trustworthy and relevant news. Traditional best practices should be sustained to provide an authoritative version of news rather than being eroded by bloggers and citizen journalists on social media. As in any study, we need to admit limitations to this work. First, the respondents' assessment in this survey was not based on a specific message content but on their general evaluation as consumers of news media (print, electronic or social media). Therefore, caution is raised that the generalization of the results might not be as valid as using specific news content measures. A future study may focus on audience assessments that compare a specific traditional news medium and social media platform messages.

Second, this study did not consider how prominent factors of outlets' credibility and partisan selective exposure influenced audiences' ratings of messages of news outlets. Understanding how these assessments are made is important, not only because we find those perceptions of news-ness drive intent to verify but also because considerations of what is or is not news can be strategically evoked to produce more or less favorable responses to media messages. A future should consider

how audiences' assessment of news media credibility influences their preference for news sources and intent to verify media messages.

6. CONCLUSION

Our findings provide insight into the type of stories people consider fitting the "news" strand. Breaking stories are more in line with audiences' concept of news. At the same time, familiarity with the message source and its relationship to people's party affiliation may produce different assessments of what is news. Put together, journalism practice in whatever medium needs to provide more reliable and truthful reporting that is not driven by ideology and partisanship. This need could be satisfied by having more trained journalists with substantive knowledge that preserves journalists' profession and practice.

In practice, audiences understanding of news-ness can direct their news choices and intention to verify the news, especially what they perceive as messages outside their concept of news or consider fake news. The findings indicate the audiences' schemas for responding to media messages. Moreover, this feedback informs producers or content creators about the direction the news they produce should take. However, news-ness is not the only important factor in the news. The prevailing context of the hybridity of news encompasses entertainment and related cultural, social, and political contexts influencing news stories.

The commercial interests of media outlets, the biases of journalists and editors, and audiences' expectations may influence news stories. These interests might have engendered recent growing recognition of the importance of hybridity in news reporting. Many journalists and media outlets are now attempting to provide more diverse and inclusive coverage of events, considering marginalized communities' perspectives and experiences. Yet, a balance between news-ness and hybridity is important in producing informative and well-rounded news coverage. So, journalists and media outlets should strive to report on newsworthy events while considering the broader context and diverse perspectives shaping the news.

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Data Availability

Data used for this research is available upon request from the corresponding author.

Notes

1. We appreciate the anonymous reviewer's comments, which we have noted and worked on to improve the manuscript's scholarly caliber and visibility.
2. All references to "ratings" or "levels" emphasize news-ness variability and apply to quantitative and qualitative measurements of news-ness.

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