What is News?

Impact

How many people does a story affect, and how deeply does it affect them? For obvious reasons, this is the top item on the list. But it's not as clear cut as it may seem because how deeply an event affects people often depends on *where* it happened. Which brings us to the next criterion…

Proximity

For most newspaper, events that hit close to home are considered more newsworthy than those that occur far away. This is why editors search for the local impact of national and international stories. This is called "localizing."

Timeliness

"Old news" is an oxymoron. If it's "news," by definition it is, somehow, "new." So *news*papers report on late-breaking events, or new developments in events already reported. (The latter is called a "second-day story.") In practice, this usually means that newspapers — almost all of which are published in the morning — report on *what happened yesterday*.

Prominence

Magic Johnson made headlines around the world when he announced that he had HIV. Meanwhile, countless people who died of AIDS the same day either received no coverage at all or were mentioned only on the obituary page. Like it or not, people are curious about prominent people. And the "news" includes things people are curious about.
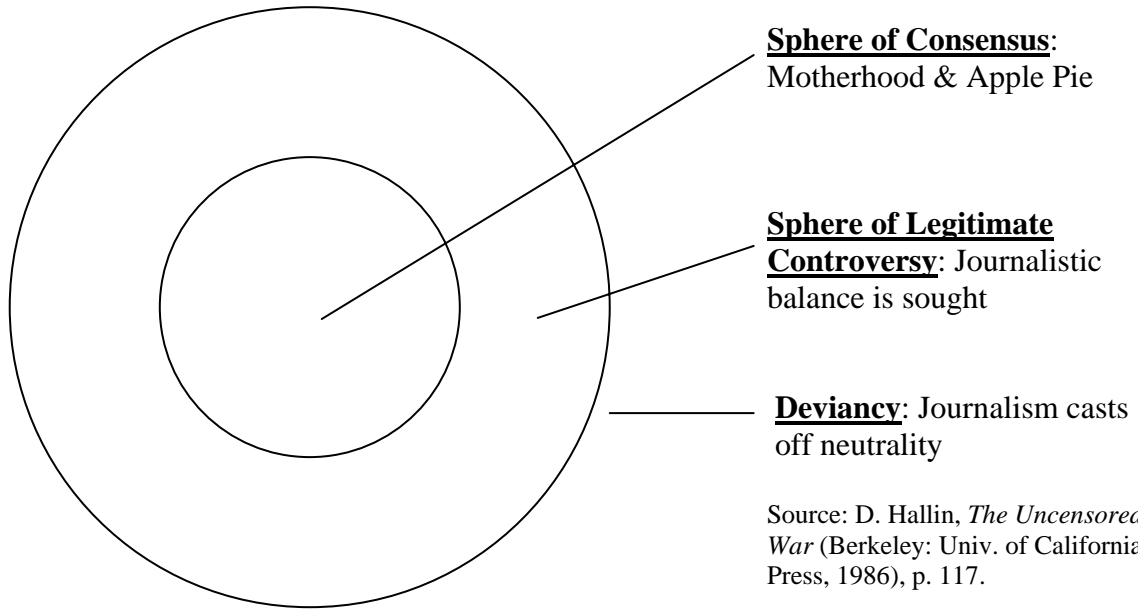
Conflict

Where there's smoke, there's fire, and where's there conflict, there's usually news. That's because conflict indicates people really care about an issue. That doesn't mean our job is simply to cover, say, a protest at a presidential innaugration. The protest should be our cue to explore *why* people are protesting. What are the issues that they care about?

Novelty

As John B. Bogart of the New York Sun famously said back in the 19th century, "When a dog bites a man, that is not news… But if a man bites a dog, it's news." Similarly, who would want to read a story saying that "no homes burned down today"? Let's face it, normal, humdrum, unsurprising things aren't nearly as compelling as novel, unusual, weird, surprising things.

Deviancy

This is really a variant of novelty, or perhaps a slightly different way of framing it. One way the media tell us what is normal is by showing us what is deviant. And here, according to media scholar Daniel Hallin, is one way to think about this:

Sphere of Consensus: Motherhood & Apple Pie

Sphere of Legitimate Controversy: Journalistic balance is sought

Deviancy: Journalism casts off neutrality

Source: D. Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), p. 117.

Reader Interest/Currency

Much of what appears in the newspaper is there because editors think their readers *need* to know it. But some events and situations simply are being talked about in the community. They have *currency*, meaning there is high reader interest.