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Deliberative Newsworthiness: A Normative Criterion to Promote Deliberative Democracy

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ABSTRACT

What should be news in a democracy? This article offers a deliberative answer to this question by developing a deliberative account of newsworthiness. Drawing from the deliberative theory of democracy, I define the general criterion of deliberative newsworthiness as a mandate that commands journalists to seek, select, and report the contents that are most capable of stimulating high-quality deliberation. I then develop a two-step process through which journalists may apply this criterion. First, journalists should select the most newsworthy issues, which are those that most profoundly affect (or are likely to affect) how just our society is. Second, journalists should select the most newsworthy facts and the most newsworthy arguments, both of which are to be chosen on the basis of their capacity to promote quality deliberation about the newsworthy issues. Ultimately, what should be news is a context-dependent issue that only journalists can decide, but deliberative newsworthiness is the normative criterion that journalists should follow when making these decisions – at least, if they want to produce the news that deliberative democracy needs.

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It is widely assumed that, in democratic societies, citizens have a moral right to be offered the information they need to understand public issues and thus become able to make competent political decisions (Marciel, 2023, pp. 360–364). It is also widely assumed that journalists have the corresponding moral obligation to seek, select, and provide citizens with the information to which they are morally entitled (Marciel, 2023, p. 376). But what information is that? What is the content of citizens' democratic right to be well informed? Or, in other words, what information should journalists provide to the citizenry?

Most previous approaches to this, the question of *newsworthiness*, have addressed it only tangentially, while discussing other normative questions (Berg, 2022, pp. 258–259), or while developing standards for empirical research (Vössing, 2021, p. 581). Among these discussions, it is worth mentioning the debate about whether citizens need – and whether journalists should therefore provide them with – larger or smaller amounts of information (Zaller, 2003). This discussion is linked to the question of newsworthiness, since determining *how much* information journalists should provide is part of determining *what* should be news. However, by focusing on the *quantity* of information, this debate covers only a minor part of the broader debate about newsworthiness, which concerns the *quality* of the information that journalists should report.

Whether the question of newsworthiness is directly or indirectly confronted, the usual answer holds that citizens should be offered – and therefore journalists should seek, select, and report – contents of *public interest*. Journalism codes of ethics systematically reflect this view, as they almost invariably acknowledge serving the public interest to be the profession's normative cornerstone. Commonsensical as it might seem, this answer is problematic because, in most cases, the concept of

public interest remains “poorly defined” (Frost, 2011, p. 270), which makes it too vague a criterion to provide a conclusive answer to the question of what should be news in a democracy (Fink, 1988, pp. 3–5). There are, of course, specific definitions of the public interest – such as those that equate it with the interests everyone *actually shares* or with the interests that everyone *should share*; these accounts are, however, hotly contested (see Goodin, 1996) and in any case they still remain – as often noted by communication scholars – too “unclear and abstract” (Sanders, 2003, p. 90), which renders them hardly translatable into applicable criteria. Defining newsworthiness in terms of the public interest thus simply replaces this challenge with the similarly hard – or even harder – challenge of defining the public interest.¹

One might hold that while it is theoretically unsatisfying, the lack of a fully theorized answer to the question of newsworthiness is not a real problem *in practice*. After all, professional journalists can – and often do – intuitively recognize what should be news just by following their instinct: the so-called *journalistic gut feeling* (Schultz, 2007). Accordingly, one might consider specific conceptual accounts of newsworthiness unnecessary, since even vague criteria, such as the public interest, can effectively guide journalists’ news-making. Note, however, that even professional journalists often disagree on their judgments about what should be news, as proven by the fact that different outlets follow very different editorial lines. The so-called gut feeling is, then, equivocal, which means that intuitions alone cannot justifiably answer the question of what should be news. Answering this question also requires normative criteria of newsworthiness that establish in general terms what kinds of contents are democratically relevant. These criteria always operate, even if often implicitly, as the norms guiding journalists’ intuitions and decisions. Yet, to better guide those intuitions and decisions and to make them more accountable and understandable to non-journalists, these criteria should be acknowledged and explicated.

In this article, I offer an account of newsworthiness that is intended to provide more conclusive, unequivocal, and accountable answers to the question of what should be news in a democracy. This account, which I call *deliberative newsworthiness*, states that *contents become more newsworthy the more they contribute to promoting high-quality democratic deliberation*. Accordingly, journalists should seek, select, and report such contents.

Before proceeding, let me add three preliminary remarks. First, I acknowledge that the concept of newsworthiness might apply to non-democratic contexts. For instance, diseases are newsworthy within the doctor–patient relation, since patients have a right to be informed about their diseases by their doctors. I will nevertheless focus exclusively on the *democratic* sense of this concept, that is, on newsworthiness insofar as it applies to the role-based relationship between citizens and journalists, as articulated by the former’s *democratic* right to be informed by the latter. For readability, I will also employ the term “democratic relevance” (or just “relevance”) and derivative terms as synonyms for “newsworthiness” and its derivatives.

Second, and relatedly, since the different democratic theories encompass competing views on citizens’ rights to be well-informed, the concept of newsworthiness varies accordingly across these theories (Marciel, 2023, p. 373). Any detailed account of newsworthiness will therefore be acceptable only to those who share the democratic theory upon which it rests. In light of this, I adopt the theory of democracy that currently enjoys broader support among academics – namely, the deliberative theory of democracy – and I admit that the account of newsworthiness sketched here is valid only within the premises of that theory.

Third, and finally, my aim here is not to provide a *fully* conclusive answer to the question of what should be news. That is a highly context-dependent task that requires considering many factors on the ground. Such fine-grained reasoning is part of the job of journalism, which I by no means aim to usurp. As a theorist, all I can do is identify some general criteria of newsworthiness to guide journalists when they decide what to cover. The relative inconclusiveness of these criteria should then be seen as

¹I thank Pablo Magaña and one anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this point.

a virtue rather than a flaw, for it will enable journalists to autonomously apply the concept of newsworthiness in different scenarios.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 offers a brief sketch of deliberative democracy, which serves as the basis for the general criterion of deliberative newsworthiness offered in section 2. The subsequent sections further specify how journalists could apply this general criterion in practice, by developing a two-step process to select, first, the most relevant issues (section 3) and, second, the most relevant facts (section 4) and the most relevant arguments (section 5) bearing on those issues.

Deliberative democracy: a sketch

To answer what should be news in a *deliberative democracy*, we must first have an idea of what deliberative democracy is. I cannot provide an exhaustive characterization of deliberative democracy here, so I will limit myself to offering a sketch that I hope will suffice to contextualize my subsequent deliberative conception of newsworthiness.²

Let me start by noting that the term “deliberative democracy” does not refer to any real-world democracy, such as Canada or Germany, but to a *normative ideal* that states how political decisions should be made. The ideal of a deliberative democracy thus serves as a normative benchmark that enables us to assess existing politics and to propose reforms to improve them (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). As a normative ideal, deliberative democracy asserts that political decisions should be preceded by, and taken in accordance with, a process of *democratic deliberation*.

Democratic deliberation consists of a rational discussion between people who, as free and equal citizens, fairly weigh the reasons for a decision with a view to decide “on the basis of that weighting” (Cohen, 2007, p. 219). The ultimate aim of democratic deliberation – and also, one might say, of deliberative politics – is to reach a rational and mutually acceptable agreement on all the political decisions that we make as a collective body of free and equal citizens who exercise coercive power over each other (Marciel Pariente, 2020).³ The aspiration of deliberative democracy is that citizens understand each other and come to agree on a certain course of action, not because it is favored by the majority or by the ruling elites, nor because it is the most strategically convenient option, but because it is the course of action favored by “the forceless force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1999, p. 940; see also Habermas, 1996, esp. chaps. 7–8). Indeed, rather than as the rule of the majority, or even of the people, deliberative democracy has been defined as “the rule of reasons” (Forst, 2001).

In this sense, deliberative democracy clearly contrasts with two other views of democracy in which citizens are not expected to understand the reasons justifying political decisions. First, it contrasts with *pure aggregative* ideals of democracy, where citizens are not expected to deliberate, and political decisions are to be made simply by counting votes. Second, deliberative democracy contrasts with what Lafont (2020, esp. ch. 2) calls “deep pluralist” democracy, where rational agreement is deemed impossible, and decisions are expected to be struck by self-interested bargaining.⁴

The ethical theory upon which deliberative democracy rests – often referred to as *discourse ethics* – is essentially a neo-Kantian conception of moral justification. Roughly speaking, the idea is that a norm is morally justified only if all those affected by it could agree on it through discursive practices. By discursive practices, we should not understand just any kind of talk, but rather a specific form of communicative action through which uncoerced interlocutors reflect and present arguments aimed at reaching a rationally motivated consensus (see Rehg, 2011). When we move from the moral to the political realm, this ethical theory leads to a somewhat similar conception of *political* justification. Famously synthesized in the Rawlsian “liberal principle of legitimacy” (Rawls, 1996, p. 217), this

²For an introduction to deliberative theory, see Gutmann and Thompson (2004). For in-depth discussions, see Bächtiger et al. (2018) and Marti (2017).

³Unlike nonpolitical decisions, political decisions are those whose implementation is backed by the coercive force of the state. Since in democracy the state is controlled by citizens, “political power is ultimately the power of the public; that is, the power of free and equal citizens as a collective body” (Rawls, 1996, p. 136).

⁴For a discussion of alternative ideals of democracy, see Cunningham (2002) or Held (2006).

conception states that political decisions are legitimate (i.e., justified) only when they are justified by public reasons, that is, reasons which every reasonable citizen could accept. As Cohen (1997, p. 73) puts it: in deliberative democracy “outcomes are democratically legitimate if and only if they could be the object of a free and reasoned agreement among equals” (cf. Habermas, 1996 –458, p. 457; Habermas, 1998, pp. 40–46, 245, 259).

Crucially, the legitimacy of a decision does not depend on what citizens actually believe, but rather on what they would believe if they deliberated in a certain idealized way, as free, equal, and reasonable people. It is thus possible for legitimate decisions to lack popular support, and for citizens to favor illegitimate decisions. Concerned by these possibilities, deliberative scholars try to align popular will with political legitimacy through a participatory and inclusive models of democracy, in which ordinary citizens – and not only officials – engage in deliberation about public issues (Elstub, 2018; Lafont, 2020). Popular participation is meant to bring all valuable inputs to the debate, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the political decisions that are finally made. Besides, deliberation makes it easier for ordinary citizens to recognize which decisions are more legitimate, since deliberation helps them to transform their *mere* opinions – which might be unacceptable from a public standpoint – into “reflected” (or “considered”) *public* opinions – which, having passed through the filter of public discussion, can be seen as acceptable stances on what we as a society should do (Habermas, 2006, 2009, chaps. 8–9).

The foregoing already suggests why many – me included – find deliberative democracy preferable to other forms of democratic decision-making. On the one hand, there are *instrumental* reasons, both epistemic and of stability: since deliberation collects inputs throughout society and yields a publicly justified decision as an output, deliberative democracy seems more capable of producing just and well-justified decisions that are also recognized as such by the citizenry (Estlund & Landmore, 2018). Besides, there are *non-instrumental* reasons: compared to its alternatives, deliberative democracy better honors the ideal of equal respect for persons. Unlike mere voting or self-interested bargaining, deliberation entails treating fellow citizens as ends in themselves, as autonomous agents capable of offering and processing reasons, and whose interests deserve fair consideration (Forst, 2017).⁵

Of course, in nonideal circumstances reasoned consensus is often unattainable. That is why real-world deliberation can (and must) be complemented with nondeliberative decision-making methods, such as voting or compromising (Ferejohn, 2018, p. 246; Mansbridge et al., 2010). Relatedly, note that deliberative processes are often long and complex, happen at different venues and incorporate many actors. We should not assume, then, that only those discussions that yield a consensual agreement are good deliberations. Even though reasoned consensus is the ideal result, we can take as good deliberation any instance of discussion that provides citizens with a better understanding of the interests at stake and helps them to structure and clarify the issues at hand (Polleta & Gardner, 2018, p. 71). Indeed, we might say that the quality of deliberation increases as discussion improves participants’ mutual understanding and brings them closer to a reasoned consensus. This point is crucial, for as I explain below, the notion of high-quality deliberation is the ultimate benchmark that should guide deliberative news-making.

The general criterion of deliberative newsworthiness

Against the background of the deliberative model just sketched, we can now ask again the question of newsworthiness: what should be news *in a deliberative democracy*? In other words: What contents should journalists who want their societies to approach the ideal of deliberative democracy seek, select, and report?

The answer seems to be that, in deliberative democracy, contents become newsworthy as they better contribute to high-quality democratic deliberation. If so, then *journalists should seek, select, and report the contents with more capacity to stimulate high-quality deliberation*. I call this the general criterion of

⁵On the justification of deliberative democracy, see also Gutmann and Thompson (2004, pp. 13–18).

deliberative newsworthiness. Most approaches to the role of the media in deliberative democracy seem to share, more or less explicitly, this criterion (see Dzur, 2002; Ettema, 2007; Girard, 2015).

Compared to accounts of newsworthiness derived from less participatory models of democracy, this seems a broad criterion, for it qualifies as newsworthy a large quantity of contents. In an elitist democracy, for instance, the role of citizens basically consists in choosing the ruling elites that are to make the decisions, so all citizens need to know is how capable of ruling the competing candidate elites are (Marciel, 2023, p. 373). Accordingly, elitist accounts of newsworthiness consider a very limited amount of content to be newsworthy (Zaller, 2003). In contrast, in deliberative democracy, citizens should follow public issues up close, understand their complexities, and consider the reasons for and against the different political options. As a result, they need to be provided with more information and, accordingly, deliberative newsworthiness is *broader* than elitist newsworthiness.

But is it not too broad? Almost anything could be seen as a contribution to deliberation, so it might seem as if everything should be news according to deliberative newsworthiness. How to draw the line? Two considerations are worth keeping in mind here. First, consider the institutional role of the press within modern democracy, where there is a division of labor between *educational* and *informational* institutions. The former provide young citizens with basic political knowledge, while the latter provide adult citizens with information that updates and refreshes that political knowledge (Marciel, 2023, p. 371). Deliberative newsworthiness works within this institutional background, and thus applies only to those contents that would update or refresh citizens' political knowledge. Deliberative journalists should then seek, select, and report the contents that would maximize the quality of democratic deliberation by updating or refreshing citizens' knowledge, albeit assuming that they already possess the basic knowledge needed to engage in deliberation. This *institutional* limit substantially restricts what could plausibly be newsworthy in a democracy.

However, we might still think of infinite contents that could be seen as contributions to deliberation. This leads me to the second consideration, which concerns the scarce resources (e.g., time, effort, attention) that citizens have. Such scarcity sets another *de facto* limit to the quantity of contents that can plausibly be considered newsworthy. It is not for me to say where this limit stands, as this depends on contingent social and psychological factors. It seems clear, though, that in most scenarios the amount of information citizens can digest is dramatically smaller than the amount of information we might plausibly consider to contribute positively to deliberation. This is important from a normative standpoint, because it sets an ethical landmark for deliberative news production: *for each instance of reporting, journalists should communicate the maximum amount of information that citizens would be disposed to digest, prioritizing those contents that would best equip them for democratic deliberation*. If, say, your average audience member can digest 30 minutes of news per day, then as a deliberative journalist you should select the contents that would make the best use, in terms of deliberation, of those 30 minutes. The contribution to deliberation of those 30 minutes must be greater than that of any other plausible 30-minute-filling content.

By setting limits to the scope of deliberative newsworthiness, these two considerations restrict the *quantity* of information that might be considered newsworthy. They concern, so to speak, *how much* journalists should tell. However, these considerations do not tell us much about the *quality* of the information that journalists should report – that is, about *which contents* journalists should seek, select, and report. Indeed, the general criterion of deliberative newsworthiness might still seem too vague to guide journalists' decisions. After all, a general mandate to seek, select, and report the contents that would best contribute to quality deliberation offers little guidance on how to produce the news on a daily basis. This is precisely why I named this the *general* criterion of deliberative newsworthiness.

In the remainder of this article, I will develop more specific criteria of newsworthiness that, based on the general one, could more accurately guide journalists' choices. To that end, I will elaborate on Habermas's hints, who on several occasions has referred to three categories of particularly newsworthy content, namely *issues*, *facts*, and *arguments*.⁶ Habermas's intuition seems to be that the information

⁶See especially Habermas (1996), pp. 324, 448, 462; 2006, p. 420; Habermas, 2009, p. 171; Habermas, 2018, pp. 873, 877). He does not always use exactly the same terms, though (cf. Habermas, 1996, pp. 170, 183, 378–379, 485).

that citizens need to be informed about is encompassed by these three categories. Unfortunately, he has only mentioned them *en passant*, without elaborating on the kind of information they might comprise, or how they might relate to each other. In what follows, I will define these three categories as part of a two-step procedural framework through which journalists could implement deliberative newsworthiness in practice. In the first step, journalists should identify the most relevant *issues*, which – I argue – are those which most significantly determine how just society is. In the second step, journalists should pinpoint the most relevant *facts* and the most relevant *arguments*, which – I hold – are those that are more capable of fostering high-quality deliberation about the issues that were previously identified as newsworthy.

Step one: the Issues⁷

The first step consists in identifying the newsworthy – or, in Habermas's terms, *relevant* – issues. By their very nature, issues can be defined only broadly. I propose to conceive of them as the chunks into which reality can be divided. Such a capacious definition enables us to consider as newsworthy not only specific facts and spatiotemporally well-defined events (e.g., a hurricane or a mass shooting), but also broader and more structural questions (e.g., climate change or gun violence). These broader and structural questions are what I refer to as *issues*.

According to this two-step procedural framework, journalists' first task when producing the news is thus to draw the lines that divide reality into different issues and select those worth reporting on. The question is then: which segments of reality are newsworthy? It seems to me that the kinds of issues that we, as citizens, more urgently need to be informed about are those that have (or are likely to have) a greater impact on how just our society is. If so, then *issues become more newsworthy the larger their impact on justice*. And, accordingly, *journalists should seek, select, and report on the issues that more heavily determine how just our society is*.

Employing an ideal of justice as the baseline for determining what issues are newsworthy fits the common intuition that politics, economics, and social conflicts are generally more newsworthy than sports, celebrities, and car accidents. Sure, both kinds of contents typically appear in the news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016), but the former – which have stronger and more pervasive impacts on justice – are often perceived as more relevant than the latter – which often do not affect how just a society is. However, using a justice-based, issue-specific criterion could be problematic, for the concept of justice – just like the concept of public interest – might still seem too abstract a notion to guide journalists' decisions. To further specify what kinds of issues journalists should prioritize, let me add four remarks on justice.

First, within the deliberative tradition, justice is often conceived as a property of the *institutions* that distribute basic goods, and as composed of various *principles* that those institutions should honor (Rawls, 1996). Philosophers debate about the content, meaning, and hierarchy of the principles of justice, as well as about the connection between any principle of justice and more detailed subprinciples that may be applicable to specific institutions (Miller, 2023).⁸ However, deliberative scholars like Rawls or Habermas tend to think that *liberty* (or freedom) and *equality* are the main values making up justice. Indeed, Rawls (1996) famously held justice to be composed of a principle of a liberty and a principle of equality. Within this view, then, we might say that *a society is just insofar its institutions treat everyone as a free and equal person*. Note that this is exactly what democratic deliberation requires: participants should discuss as free and equal persons.

Relatedly, the second important remark refers to the connection between justice and democratic deliberation. As Forst (2017) argues, for justice to be complete, it is not enough that *distributive* institutions give to each one what they are owed; it is also necessary to have *justificatory* institutions

⁷I thank Amaël Maskens, Pablo Magaña, and one anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback on this section.

⁸Plausible subprinciples include the duty of civility, the rule of law, or the duty of care, while specific institutions include the legal system, the economic system, or the family.

that enable people to participate in deliberations about how to (re)design *all* institutions. In other words, from a deliberative perspective, *justice requires (a deliberative) democracy*. At the same time, *deliberative democracy is meant to produce justice*. The outcomes of deliberation might be open and unknown *ex-ante*, but deliberation is not purposeless: insofar as it aims to produce legitimate results (i.e., decisions acceptable to every person as free and equal), deliberative theorists tend to conceive it as the (imperfect) means by which justice is realized (Forst, 2017, ch. 8; Habermas, 1996, ch. 7; Rawls, 1996, ch. 4; Rummens, 2018).

Third, justice comprises two aspects: formal and material. The formal aspect of justice consists of the official recognition of our rights and liberties, for instance, through a bill of rights or a constitution. Although such a formal recognition is necessary, justice also requires access to the material resources that enable to exercise such formally recognized rights and liberties. This material aspect of justice is of paramount importance, since the use we can make of our rights and liberties, and therefore the actual *value* they have for us depends on whether we can access those material resources.

Fourth and finally, note that issues might have different kinds of impact on justice. On the one hand, their impact can be *positive* or *negative*, depending on whether they bring our society closer to or further from the ideal of justice. On the other hand, issues might be newsworthy in virtue of their *actual* effects on justice, but also in virtue of their *potential* ones. Crossing these two distinctions, four categories of plausible impacts appear: actual and negative, actual and positive, potential and negative, and potential and positive. Although each issue usually brings about impacts of different kinds, it is common for the impacts of an issue to be predominantly of one particular kind. Considering this, we can classify issues into four corresponding categories, depending on whether their overall impact fits better into one category or another (see Table 1 below). As I will try to show now, classifying issues into these categories allows for a better explanation of why each one may be considered newsworthy.

Table 1. Kinds of issues as defined by their main kind of impact.

Kinds of impact	Actual	Potential
Negative	Problems	Threats
Positive	Successes	Promises

Social problems are issues whose impact on justice is mostly *actual* and *negative*. As a result, they make our society less just than an alternative feasible society. Forced prostitution, poverty, or discrimination might be considered social problems in this sense. Social problems are especially newsworthy because informing citizens about them is likely to trigger the deliberation that is needed to find solutions. Indeed, the more an issue thwarts justice, the more pressing it becomes to find solutions, and therefore the more urgent it is to inform citizens about it. We may thus say that social problems are newsworthy because – and to the extent that – justice needs to be rescued from them.

Social threats are issues whose impacts on justice are mostly *negative* and *potential*. Overall, social threats represent a real possibility that our society will be less just in the near future than it is now. And that is why they are newsworthy, for as Mathewson (2022, p. 164) says, “the mission of journalism is to cover action – or, if necessary, lack of it.” When journalists inform citizens about the dangers looming on the horizon they assist the public sphere in functioning as a “warning system” – to use Habermas’s (1996, p. 359) terms – and catalyze the search for solutions that prevent, or at least mitigate, losses in our levels of freedom and equality. The risk of an invasion by an authoritarian country, legislative proposals that would curtail rights and liberties, and (at least for the moment) climate change may qualify as social threats in this sense. Social threats are newsworthy, then, because knowing about them enables us to protect justice.

Social successes are issues whose impacts are mostly *actual* and *positive*, as they overall contribute to bringing our society closer to the ideal of justice. Free and regular elections, the rule of law, and universal access to basic supplies can be reasonably seen as social successes. While it is less intuitive why social successes might be newsworthy, there are at least two good reasons for reporting on them.

First, being aware that something exists is very useful, if not a prerequisite, for valuing and protecting it. Similarly, awareness of the social successes that enable us to live in a relatively just society is very useful, if not a prerequisite to value and protect that institutional scaffold on which justice depends. This suggests that social successes are particularly newsworthy when the basic institutions of a just society are challenged – for instance, by antiliberal and antiegalitarian discourses. Second, recalling the distinction between formal and material justice, note that to truly enjoy our rights and freedoms, we need to be aware of both their existence and their functioning. If, for instance, you understand how votes are converted into parliamentary seats, then you can vote more strategically, perhaps by avoiding voting for parties that are unlikely to meet the minimum vote threshold. Regardless of whether you change your vote, knowing the rules enables you to exercise your right to vote more meaningfully. This second reason suggests that social successes are also particularly newsworthy when citizens need to exercise their rights and liberties – as in elections. Both reasons, however, ultimately point to the same rationale: social successes are newsworthy because, and to the extent that being informed about them helps citizens meaningfully enjoy the benefits of living in a (relatively) just society.

Social promises are issues whose impacts on justice are mostly *positive*, but still *potential*. Ambitious scientific projects or legislative proposals that may expand our rights and liberties, or better secure their material bases, may reasonably be considered social promises. Social promises are newsworthy because if we, as citizens, are to find which collective path is best, then we need to be informed not only about the problems we suffer, the threats that endanger us, and the social successes we already enjoy. We also need to learn about imaginative solutions that help us envision alternative courses of action that overcome the *statu quo* and improve our society. Moreover, informing citizens about social promises might break the self-fulfilling prophecy that occurs when excessive pessimism about a problem leads to inaction, which in turn decreases its chances of being solved. Social promises are thus newsworthy because, and to the extent that, informing citizens about them can trigger deliberative processes that are likely to make society more just.

In sum, the justice-based, issue-specific criterion that governs the first step of deliberative news-making states that *journalists should seek, select, and report on the issues that most significantly affect (or are likely to affect) how just society is*. The aforementioned qualifications and the four categories of newsworthy issues are meant to assist journalists in discriminating which chunks of reality are worth reporting on, and why.

Step two, part one: the facts

Once the relevant issues are identified, the next step consists in identifying the relevant *facts* and the relevant *reasons* bearing on those issues. In this section, I focus on the former. Unlike issues, which are the big chunks into which reality can be broken down, facts are the small parts that make up reality (and those issues). Journalists must select which facts to report because issues are too vast and complex to be exhaustively covered. When they report on facts, they provide *factual information*; that is, contents that reflect how the world *is*. Factual information might come at least in three forms. First, it might be simply *data*; that is, quantitative content made of numerical values, which provide a raw depiction of reality – for instance, the national unemployment rate or temperature fluctuations. Factual information also includes *descriptive statements*; that is, linguistic depictions of reality that explain events or more general phenomena that cannot be reduced to numerical figures – for instance, descriptions of a legislative proposal, of scientific laws, or of climatic impacts. Finally, factual information might also include *nonlinguistic contents* – such as photographs, video footage, charts, or diagrams (see Caple, 2018, p. 6).⁹

⁹In any of its forms, for factual information to be newsworthy, it must, of course, be trustworthy too. Roughly speaking, we might say that to be trustworthy factual information must at least be collected from authoritative sources (Fink, 1988, p. 19) and open to empirical validation (Cohen-Almagor, 2001, pp. 69–72). Determining in detail what makes content trustworthy is, however, a separate – and quite complex – issue. Here I thus focus solely on clarifying what makes factual content newsworthy, assuming that such content is already trustworthy.

But why would some facts be newsworthy? For citizens to deliberate properly, it is not enough that journalists provide them with a list of newsworthy issues. High-quality deliberation requires that citizens truly understand these issues, contextualize them, and assess their impact on justice – which in turn requires having an accurate account of the facts on the ground. Such an account is, precisely, what factual information is meant to provide. Accordingly, I suggest the following fact-specific criterion of deliberative newsworthiness: *factual information is newsworthy insofar as informing citizens about it contributes to their adequate deliberation about an issue that was previously identified as newsworthy.*

This criterion implies that the newsworthiness of factual information is *derivative*: whether facts are newsworthy depends on whether being informed about them contributes to a meaningful comprehension of an issue that was previously recognized as newsworthy. Moreover, the newsworthiness of facts is directly proportional to their capacity to enhance high-quality deliberation about the newsworthy issue in question. Things being so, it appears that deliberative journalists should seek, select, and report the facts that best represent and illuminate newsworthy issues.

It is of course impossible to know in advance which facts these might be, but in light of the foregoing we may imagine that human interest stories will be, in general, less newsworthy than dispassionate reports, aggregated data, and statistics. This seems to be the case, first, because human interest stories often focus on individual cases, which renders them less capable of shedding light on the entirety and complexity of relevant issues. Besides, due to their highly emotional nature, human interest stories seem more likely to trigger emotive responses, rather than good deliberation.

Despite this, sometimes human-interest stories might be newsworthy precisely because their emotiveness may trigger deliberation on relevant issues that remain neglected. Think, for instance, of the images of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian child whose lifeless body washed ashore on a Turkish beach in 2015. As noted by Fox (2019, p. 155), exposing citizens to these shocking images might have helped them to better comprehend the refugee crisis, in which the public remained too uninterested. A similar argument can be made for the famous photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the Vietnamese girl scarred by napalm, which became an icon of the Vietnam War. Yet, on the same grounds, one could oppose the display of other shocking contents, such as the images of the Charlie Hebdo killings, for exposure to them does not seem to enhance the quality of deliberation, but quite the contrary. Despite apparent differences, the principle underlying these cases seems to be the same: factual contents are newsworthy insofar as they contribute to high-quality deliberation on relevant issues. Consequently, seemingly similar human interest stories may possess radically different levels of newsworthiness. Suicide cases, for instance, are generally not newsworthy, but certain cases – such as those linked to the plight for the right to euthanasia – might merit reporting (Cohen-Almagor, 2001, pp. 116–118).

It is thus clear that we cannot identify which facts are newsworthy from a purely theoretical standpoint, as that depends not only the context but also on the issues that are worth reporting. What does seem possible, however, is to identify three sources that are particularly likely to provide authoritative factual information in almost any context. Deliberative journalists would do well to keep these in mind, so that they turn to them (among others) in search for factual information.

One of these sources is witnesses. Witnesses are people who are directly exposed to, involved in, or affected by the relevant issue. Witnesses can offer firsthand knowledge of the issue and provide newsworthy facts that may significantly illuminate citizens' understanding of it. Of course, witnesses may provide low-quality information, as their knowledge is likely to be limited to (and perhaps biased by) their own personal experience and interests. Hence the importance of deliberative journalists contrasting the information provided by as many witnesses as possible with further evidence that comes from other sources. While I cannot delve into the intricacies of verification, it is worth noting that the following two kinds of sources may substantially help journalists to verify witnesses' declarations.¹⁰

¹⁰See also previous note.

A second valuable source of factual information is databases, where extensive records of data are stored and organized. While databases may not provide explanatory descriptive statements, they provide invaluable raw, aggregated, and structured data, as well as photos, records, and visual contents. When journalists efficiently seek, select, and communicate the most illustrative factual contents that are available in databases, they can significantly enhance the quality of the debate. By empirically informing the discussion, they offer both a broader and a deeper perspective on the issue at hand, aiding citizens in contextualizing it and facilitating a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, as anticipated, these contents might also help to verify whether the information offered by witnesses is accurate.

A third source that is likely to offer newsworthy factual contents is experts; that is, highly skilled and experienced individuals on the issue at hand (Bohman, 2000). Experts can easily provide valuable data and insightful descriptions that may significantly expedite the process of comprehending complex issues. This factual information can, of course, be conveyed to the general public, possibly in a reformulated and more accessible format. But it can also help journalists locate other valuable sources and interact with them more efficiently. Expert knowledge is thus valuable for both audiences and journalists.

When citizens are offered the relevant facts, they can have an empirically informed view of the relevant issues. They can thus better understand how the world is – or, at least, those aspects of it that most heavily affect, or are likely to affect, how just society is. But in deliberative politics, this is only part of what it takes for citizens to be well informed. To properly discharge their civic duties, citizens must also engage in deliberation. It is thus not enough that they know how things *are*; they must also reflect about how things *should be*. This, in turn, requires that they consider the relevant reasons bearing on the relevant issues. Identifying which reasons these are is the next part of deliberative news-making.

Step two, part two: the reasons

The other kind of content that journalists should select during step two of deliberative news-making is the reasons, or the arguments, that citizens need to be informed about. Unlike the facts, which merely state how things are, reasons are statements about how things should be, or about what should be done. When journalists report on the reasons of different agents, they offer *argumentative information*.

This category of newsworthy information is, arguably, the most characteristic of deliberative democracy. As seen above, deliberative democracy harbors the twofold aspiration that, first, political decisions are justified by reasons that are acceptable to every reasonable citizen and, second, that ordinary citizens actually embrace these publicly acceptable reasons. Accordingly, deliberative scholars acknowledge the importance of journalists providing not only factual but also argumentative information (see especially Dzur, 2002; Ettema, 2007; Girard, 2015). Yet, we can find countless reasons both for and against virtually any option on virtually any relevant issue. Thus, we once again face the question of how deliberative journalists should select the most relevant contents. And, once again, I cannot offer a fully conclusive answer, as the newsworthiness of a reason depends not only on the overall pool of available reasons but also on the nature of the issue at hand.

However, as in the case of factual information, it seems clear that within deliberative politics the newsworthiness of argumentative information is *derivative from* and *proportional to* its capacity to stimulate quality deliberation on issues that were previously identified as newsworthy. Accordingly, I suggest the following analogous reason-specific criterion of deliberative newsworthiness: *argumentative information is newsworthy insofar as informing citizens about it contributes to their adequate deliberation about an issue that was previously identified as newsworthy*.

Newsworthy argumentative information may typically include reasons explicitly invoked by different actors in their discourses. Obviously, many of these arguments are hypocritical, partisan, built on lies, fallacious, or publicly unacceptable in other ways. If journalists limited themselves to reporting these *explicit reasons*, then they would not be doing much for deliberation, as most of the time they

would be merely reporting ill-constructed arguments. To promote high-quality democratic deliberation, journalists should therefore seek and provide two other kinds of argumentative contents alongside the reasons that are explicitly invoked. First, deliberative journalists should search for the *implicit reasons* that are most likely to underlie the actions of the actors involved in the discussion.¹¹ By reporting these implicit reasons, journalists can offer citizens a fuller view of the interests at stake. Second, and perhaps more importantly, journalists should also offer *critical reflections* which might help citizens to reason about the acceptability of both explicit and implicit reasons. Both implicit reasons and critical reflections may be seen as instances of what Fink calls “interpretive coverage” (1988, p. 21); that is, contents that assist the audience in judging other contents, in this case explicit reasons.¹²

As noted above, it is impossible to anticipate which argumentative contents would be relevant in a given context. However, I can envision three kinds of reasons that are particularly likely to be newsworthy, and which deliberative journalists would do well to pay special attention to. As I try to show, in each case the reasons come from a different source, and the grounds of their newsworthiness vary.

Reasons underlying prior political decisions

The first kind of reason that is particularly likely to be newsworthy consists of those that underlie prior political decisions. Political decisions are those whose implementation is “backed by the government’s use of sanctions” (Rawls, 1996, p. 136).¹³ Political decisions are often taken by official authorities, such as elected representatives and courts, which through their legislative, executive, and judicial actions exercise coercive power in the name of the people. However, sometimes the people themselves make political decisions, as in elections or referenda. Political decisions are especially important because they establish the norms that regulate how we live together, thus having a clear and direct impact on how just our society is. Besides, since political decisions are backed by the coercive power of the state, it is extremely difficult and costly – if not impossible – to oppose them once they are made. This explains why political decisions are likely to constitute, or be part of, newsworthy issues. But why would *the reasons* bearing on these decisions be newsworthy?

Imagine a decision that is publicly well justified. In this, *the good case*, knowing the reasons that support the decision could help citizens to understand it, recognize it as acceptable, and come to terms with it. This would make it more likely that citizens comply with the decision, thus strengthening in turn the stability and efficiency of the political system. Reporting these reasons is, then, particularly important when audiences struggle to see why an acceptable decision is so. As Dzur (2002, p. 331) notes, in a deliberative democracy, journalists are “key to rendering citizens vulnerable to the reality of official decision-making – for example, by reporting on budgetary constraints or conflicts within existing law.”

Imagine now a decision that is unacceptable on public grounds. In this, the *bad case*, citizens should be informed about the reasons that underlie that choice, because that would help them to realize the injustice, thus triggering the deliberation and popular contestation needed to correct it. In cases like this, as noted again by Dzur, “journalists are critical to ensuring accountability,” and “key to making representatives vulnerable to public rather than organized interests” (see also Lafont, 2020, pp. 213–216).

An additional explanation for why citizens should be informed about the reasons underlying political decisions is that doing so would contribute to fostering what Pettit (2012, p. 219) calls “resistive culture.” According to him, a resistive community is

¹¹Implicit reasons need not be deliberately concealed by the actors themselves, as we are often not fully aware of our own motivations and incentives.

¹²I thank Pablo Magaña and one anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback on this point.

¹³See footnote 3.

a community in which, as a matter of fact and/or common belief, people are disposed to resist government, should it ignore popular influence, and government is disposed to avoid triggering resistance.

In a society where journalists regularly report the reasons underlying the exercise of political power, citizens would probably become accustomed to checking whether political decisions are well justified. And, as a result, those making the decisions – finding themselves under public scrutiny – would have strong incentives to make the right choices.

In sum, the reasons underlying political decisions are very likely to be newsworthy, as reporting on them promotes, first, public acceptance of publicly acceptable decisions and, second, the detection, correction, and deterrence of publicly unacceptable ones.

Unacceptable reasons yielded by influential agents

The second kind of reason that is particularly likely to be newsworthy consists of unacceptable arguments put forth by powerful actors. By “unacceptable reasons,” I mean those that are *publicly* unacceptable, that is, unfit by the standards of a democratic deliberation among free and equal citizens. By “powerful actors,” I do not mean those with the brute force to impose a certain course of action on others, but, more specifically, those who have what Forst (2015) calls “noumenal power,” that is, *the capacity to shape the set of reasons that others consider during their deliberations*. Actors are powerful in this sense insofar as they can influence the array of reasons that others take into account. In a democracy, the paradigmatically powerful actors are political elites, such as members of political parties and elected officials; economic elites, such as bankers and executives of transnational companies; and social leaders, such as representatives of large religious associations and union leaders. These actors are powerful because they can make their viewpoints heard by thousands or even millions of people. The widespread circulation of these viewpoints significantly increases the likelihood that citizens consider them during democratic deliberations, which gives them a comparative advantage in the competition for support *vis-à-vis* the views of less influential actors.

Influential actors need not disseminate their views on their own. They can, and often do, use media platforms to regularly present their arguments before the public. Typically, within these controlled media environments, the viewpoints of less powerful actors are ignored or marginalized, while the views of the most powerful actors are not explicitly framed as elite perspectives, but are instead presented as common-sense views. This is precisely why the arguments that are trumpeted by powerful agents become particularly newsworthy *if they are publicly unacceptable*: flawed arguments disseminated by powerful agents could influence thousands or even millions of minds, thus misleading citizens into holding unreasonable views that they would not hold if they had been well informed. These misinformed citizens would then probably favor unjust policies, which would also probably unduly favor the very same elites who are misinforming them. To protect the quality of democracy, deliberative journalists should thus draw citizens’ “attention to attempts at manipulating public opinion” (Dzur, 2002, p. 335), by offering critical reflections about the unacceptable reasons yielded by powerful actors and explicating what makes these views questionable.

Of course, citizens might discharge elites’ unacceptable views as unacceptable without journalists’ help. Note, however, that deliberating requires a considerable amount of time and effort, both of which are limited resources. Since influential agents can keep on flooding the public sphere with contents that unfairly promote their interests, it is crucial that deliberative journalists help citizens (particularly those with fewer resources) to unmask the unacceptable arguments that are promoted by influential actors.

In sum, unacceptable arguments disseminated by influential agents are newsworthy because of, and proportionally to, their capacity to diminish the quality of democratic deliberation. By critically reporting on these arguments, journalists would protect not only their audiences from manipulation but also, and subsequently, others who might suffer the consequences of the unjust policies that manipulated citizens would promote.

High-quality reasons yielded by nonpowerful agents

The third and last kind of argument that is particularly likely to be newsworthy includes reasons with a high deliberative potential that are offered by nonpowerful actors. Nonpowerful (or uninfluential) actors are those who cannot reach large audiences on their own, nor can they therefore influence the set of reasons that citizens consider in their deliberations. Members of social, cultural, and religious minorities are paradigmatic uninfluential actors, though we might also say that ordinary citizens are also quite uninfluential in this sense.

Unless journalists amplify the reach of nonpowerful actors, their arguments will probably remain unheard by most of the citizenry. Considering this, deliberative journalists should always pay special attention to the views of nonpowerful actors, disseminating their arguments when these are likely to stimulate high-quality deliberation. Crucially, though, deliberative journalists should also ignore these views when their foreseeable contribution to deliberation is negative. Let me explain this in more detail.

Consider, first, the *good case*, in which an uninfluential source has a valuable input to offer – for instance, a novel, well crafted, and (at least *prima facie*) publicly acceptable argument, or a call for attention to the interests of a party that has so far been neglected. Coming from an uninfluential source, this valuable input would not reach large audiences if journalists did not echo it. However, if journalists help to disseminate this input, they will bring about two important benefits. First, they would enhance the fairness of the public debate, by approaching it to the deliberative ideal of a discussion among free and equal persons. Subsequently, this would bring about epistemic benefits too. In a society in which some have more power to make their views heard than others, rescuing and amplifying the views of the less powerful enriches the debate with fruitful inputs that would otherwise be ignored, thus increasing the chances that deliberation yields acceptable decisions (Bennett, 2020; Mathewson, 2022, pp. 163–164).

Consider now the *bad case*, in which journalists increase the visibility of an unsound and unknown view offered by nonpowerful sources. Depending on the impact of journalists' reporting, we might identify scenarios of varying badness. In the *really bad case*, the visibility given to bad arguments will increase their sway in the public sphere, leading some (or many) citizens to adopt wrong views, views they would not even consider otherwise. If, for instance, journalists report on an unsound and unknown denialist theory of climate change, then some (or many) might end up believing it, and therefore misleadingly defend wrongheaded climatic policies. Of course, it is also possible that most (or even all) citizens eventually reject the bad argument and refrain from promoting wrongheaded policies. Yet, even in this, the *not-so-bad case*, citizens would spend part of their time and attention, which are limited resources, on entertaining and rejecting ideas that they would not even consider if journalists had not put them in their heads beforehand. Thus, even in this case, reporting on unsound and unknown views seems unadvisable, as doing so entails a cost for citizens that affords them little or no epistemic benefit at all.

In sum, the arguments yielded by nonpowerful actors are particularly newsworthy when they are reasonably likely to stimulate quality deliberation about newsworthy issues. Yet, when nonpowerful actors promote unacceptable points of view, the best that deliberative journalists can do is to refrain from amplifying their reach, since echoing bad arguments from uninfluential sources is likely to diminish the quality of deliberation – by popularizing wrong views, or by simply wasting valuable resources.

Conclusion

Making the news is a very tough job, partly because only a small portion of what is going on can be reported. Yet, as I have defended, when deciding what should be news, journalists committed to the ideal of deliberative democracy could – indeed, *should* – guide their intuitions by a deliberative account of newsworthiness. What I termed “general criterion of deliberative newsworthiness”

commands journalists to select the contents that would best contribute to promoting high-quality deliberation.

Drawing from this general principle, I have developed a two-step process that incorporates more specific deliberative criteria of newsworthiness. In the first step, journalists should select the most newsworthy issues. As I hold, issues are newsworthy to the extent that they condition how just society is. Depending on the kinds of impacts they have on justice, issues may be classified as problems, threats, successes, or promises. In the second step, journalists should select two different kinds of content, which I refer to as factual information and argumentative information, and whose newsworthiness is both derivative from and proportional to their capacity to stimulate quality deliberation about the issues previously identified as newsworthy.

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