

2. There is far less social and civic premium being paid to the value of a shared national information experience. In part that is true because of centrifugal pressures in a rapidly regionalizing society, in part it is true because news definitions have expanded so substantially that it is hard to assemble coherent, mutually agreed upon hierarchies of importance – the traditional core of what people used to call News Value. “What happened today” is much more complex question than it used to be.

News organizations have begun to reject their professionally articulated mandate, that of establishing and communicating Importance, to a much more commercially viable mandate of communicating issues of relevance and interest. The broader the range of issues, the more emotional, divisive, entertaining and interesting those issues are, the larger the prospects of assembling new coalitions of audience. However, by definition, that broader range of issues yields a series of eclectic choices made for different target audiences, rendering each news agenda idiosyncratic.

In fact, it is now possible to conduct public business essentially in private. If an issue, while Important in the classical sense, does not fit the changing media definition of news, it will not be reported on. There are no longer any “must cover” mandates.

In a process that began at least two decades ago, we have an increasing mismatch between the expectations and conventional wisdom of media consumers who believe news products continue to convey to them and order for them a hierarchy of importance and media producers who have moved to a far different news judgment model.

Where there is a common denominator for news organizations seeking wider audience, it is in information that is entertaining and inherently interesting. The irony, of course, is that as these organizations seek that common denominator, they begin moving downmarket into space that has been developed over the years by tabloid print, and now, tabloid television. And because they cannot fully compete, largely because of residual professional standards, they become squeezed at both high and low ends. The best illustration of this is the dilemma confronting CNN in the US. Its normal information audience is quite small but it peaks at substantially larger share when it has an attractive tabloid event. As it devotes resources to that kind of event, it renders itself less attractive to its core audience. However, when the event ends, the new audience abandons it every time.