

**50 years on: Galtung and Ruge's news value factors revisited in
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50 years on: Galtung and Ruge's news value factors revisited in online audience building for independent films by Nico Meissner

Abstract

In 1965, Galtung and Ruge published an influential list of news values. Fifty years later, my article takes this list to demonstrate how mass media principles still apply when building audiences for an independent film in the Internet age. The article builds on a constructivist approach that news values can be actively formulated and stressed. It uses the case study of independent film project *15Malaysia*, illustrating how this project, though unknowingly, actively created news value to convince opinion leaders of the worth of their project and, ultimately, build an audience of over two million viewers.

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Introduction

"It used to be said that it is difficult to make a film. Nowadays, I think the most difficult thing for films is to get distribution and find an audience."
 — Elsaesser quoted in Hyun, 2010

Fifty years ago, Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (1965) published a seminal article on how different aspects of an event increase the likelihood of it being selected as news story by journalists. News value, ever since, has been an important concept in journalism and communication studies to explain gatekeepers' choices in a media world of scarcity.

Fifty years later, the media world has changed from one of scarcity to one of abundance. In filmmaking, digital technology is celebrated for creating what film producer Ted Hope termed 'truly free films'. Making audio-visual content has not only become almost as common as reading and writing. The Internet also constitutes a freely accessible worldwide marketing and distribution medium. Film production, marketing and distribution, so it seems, became independent from the control of a few filmmaking centers, media conglomerates and gatekeeping intermediaries.

Maybe predictably, these developments also led to an explosion of available small-scale cultural content (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). One hundred hours of video are added to YouTube every minute. The Sundance Film Festival registers record submission numbers every year. The number of film festivals itself constantly increases. This over-abundance of cultural products leads to issues in terms of findability, threatening the promises of independence. Even if people make their own films and upload them to the Internet, most of them drown in the sea of filmic content available online, never reaching a meaningful audience.

To overcome these issues, intermediaries continue to play an important role. Today's media ecosystem is a complicated network of opinion leaders, professional and amateur, who use old and new communication technologies in online and off-line media (Graeff, *et al.*, 2014), to create what Benkler [1] termed a 'networked public sphere' [2]. In this networked public sphere, opinion leaders act as *de facto* gatekeepers, who connect films with potential audiences. Opinion leaders make sense of and help their audiences maneuver around the over-abundance of cultural products online (Meissner, 2014; Singer, 2006). On the Internet, we do not only find classical cultural industries intermediaries, like mass media journalists (cultural intermediaries according to Bourdieu, 1984) or film distributors (cultural intermediaries according to Iordanova, 2012), but also a growing number of bloggers, social media users and special interest opinion leaders, such as netlabels (Galuszka, 2012) or fansites (Rutherford, 2009), that are organized around specific topics. Even though there are important and widely discussed differences between these groups (see Chu, 2012, for an overview of the differences between bloggers and journalists from a communication studies perspective), all of them nevertheless can connect

independent filmmakers with potential audiences. In the audience building process, they are therefore bridges that ought to be crossed.

Building on Bednarek and Caple's (2014) constructivist approach to news value, I argue that news values continue to offer a strategy to influence opinion leaders' choices. News values can be actively formulated and stressed, and therefore exploited as audience building tool. I present an account of how the independent film project *15Malaysia*, albeit unknowingly, actively constructed news value that allowed it to focus its audience building campaign and ultimately attract over two million viewers.

Fifty years after Galtung and Ruge (1965) formulated a theory of journalistic choice for the mass media age of scarcity, all news value factors the authors identified can be found in the communication surrounding *15Malaysia*. The case of *15Malaysia*, thus, suggests that creating news value helps independent films to target their audience building and become attractive to opinion leaders. Opinion leaders, on and off the Internet, have to make decisions what news to publish, share or recommend. News values seem to remain a good theoretical concept to explain these decisions [3].



Dependent/independent film

Independent filmmakers, to me and therefore in this article, are filmmakers that are free to make their own creative decisions and follow a do-it-yourself audience building and distribution approach. As such, they have full control over their film — from ideation, via production, all the way to distribution. They do not only autonomously decide what kind of film they make but also what kind of audience they want to reach.

Independent filmmaking maximises digital technology's potential to grant an artist freedom from external control. This being said, a filmmaker will of course rarely work in perfect isolation and solitude. Collaborators, crew members, financial constraints, available time, knowledge, technology, socio-historical contexts and social contacts in general will always influence a filmmaker. But the independent filmmaker, as I understand the term, has the freedom to decide on all aspects of a film's content and audience building approach while, quite naturally, always taking into account the constraints he or she is working under.

On the contrary, then, dependent filmmakers would be those working with executive producers, film studios, broadcasting programmers, private investors or some funding agencies, whose roles as financiers put them into a position to overrule the filmmaker in creative decisions. Or they work with distribution/sales agents that take control over a film during its distribution stage.

My definition of "independent" film and filmmakers does not follow the academically more common definitions that contrast independent films to, usually, Hollywood films on the grounds of formal (for example, King, 2005; Newman, 2011; Staiger, 2013) or industrial (for example, Merritt, 2000; Perren, 2012) aspects. For the definition I apply in this article, it does not matter who paid for a film, what a film is about or how it looks, as long as the filmmaker controls decisions with regard to the film's content and audience building.

Traditionally, most filmmakers would rely on distributors or sales agents when it comes to building audiences for their films. Industry literature draws a clear picture with authors like Wiese (1989), Goodell (1998), Simens (2003) or Search and McCarthy (2005) all suggesting a classical division of labour between the "creative" filmmakers and the "business" people. Such audience building strategies are in stark contrast to what I describe as independent filmmaking. They are really dependent forms of filmmaking.

The Internet has generated a lot of claims that such dependencies might be overcome [4]. Practitioners and scholars seem to agree. Some quotes:

'[A]ll the means of producing and exchanging information and culture are placed in the hands of hundreds of millions, and eventually billions, of people.' [5]

'[I]t seems that [the Internet] is not just a technological revolution but a revolution in who is able to produce and distribute content to a mass market.' [6]

'[Inexpensive digital production equipment and the Internet as distribution channel have] create[d] the possibility of unprecedented freedom from external controls and restraint.' [7]

'[F]or the first time in the history of film making we can create powerful, sustainable and income generating distribution models without the exclusive need for third parties such as sales agents, distributors and even broadcasters.' (Jones, 2010)

'[D]irect access to content makes the intermediary in a supply chain obsolete — disintermediation — [this] is perhaps the main trend that characterizes the digital disruption.' [8]

However, as Hesmondhalgh (2007) argued, less gatekeepers also mean more small-scale cultural products that need, as Singer [9] put it, 'someone to sort it out as well as to lend it credibility and,

ideally, utility'. Audience building on the Internet is not free from the influence of intermediaries. But these intermediaries are no longer gatekeepers. They are opinion leaders who no longer possess the power to keep a cultural product out of the medium itself but who nonetheless influence their respective audiences' knowledge of available films and perceptions of quality (Meissner, 2014).

These opinion leaders, I hope to show in the remainder of this paper, can be influenced in their decisions through the creation of relevant news value factors — just like traditional mass media gatekeepers.



News value research

On its way to the audience, a potential news story has to pass opinion leaders. Traditional newspapers have space limitations, radio and television time limitations. For those media, journalists have to select what events will become news and which ones remain unreported. Walter Lippmann (1922) was the first to argue that journalists select the news they publish not randomly or because they are influenced by personal interests but according to the anticipated value a given news story would have for their audiences. There seems to be a news value system at work that journalists acquire in the course of their training or through socialisation (Harrison, 2006) and which guides them in their news selection. Through this 'College of Osmosis' [[10](#)], journalists subconsciously adopt the concept of news values.

In times of the Internet, one might argue, time and space limitations have become obsolete — and therefore the work of traditional gatekeepers and news value as explanatory concept for their choices. But an audience's capacity to absorb and digest news remains limited, as does the opinion leader's ability to share news — simply because of limitations to one's own available time. On the level of the individual online opinion leader, a certain filtration process still has to take place.

The first in-depth study of news values was undertaken by Galtung and Ruge (1965), who established a list of 12 factors that together determine the news value of a story. These factors have been validated by a number of follow-up studies (Peterson, 1981; Kleinnijenhuis, 1989; Leitch, 1990) while others (such as Schulz, 1976; Golding and Elliott, 1979; Gans, 1980; Hetherington, 1985; Staab, 1990; Bell, 1991; Herbert, 2000; Allern, 2002) have built on Galtung and Ruge's list, extending, summarising or restructuring it.

Despite the follow-up studies, Galtung and Ruge's pioneering work remains the most influential study in the field (compare Bell, 1991; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Clausen, 2003). I will use their list of news value factors in this article. I will, however, make two adjustments to their work. Firstly, I will limit Galtung and Ruge's list to news-intrinsic factors [[11](#)] as these are the ones filmmakers can control. Secondly, I will adopt some of Bell's (1991) naming suggestions for Galtung and Ruge's factors because they seem to be more in line with contemporary uses of the terms. The news value factors I will discuss in this article are:

- Recency (Bell's naming; 'Frequency' in Galtung and Ruge)
- Superlatives (Bell's naming; 'Threshold' in Galtung and Ruge)
- Unambiguity
- Relevance & Proximity (Bell's naming; 'Meaningfulness' in Galtung and Ruge)
- Consonance
- Unexpectedness
- Reference to Elites (Combined Galtung and Ruge's factors of Reference to Elite People and Reference to Elite Nations into one factor)
- Personalisation
- Negativity

These factors will be explained in more detail in the next part of this article.

Galtung and Ruge describe their list of news value factors as cumulative and compensatory. The more news value factors a story has, the more newsworthy it is. However, a missing factor can be compensated by another one (a really brutal killer, who killed a lot of people, does not have to be prominent or from a culturally/geographically proximate country).

Harcup and O'Neill (2001) tested Galtung and Ruge's news value factors in 1,200 U.K. news stories. The authors raised three points of importance. Firstly, some of Galtung and Ruge's factors seem rather vague (such as elites). Taking the same line, Palmer (2000) found, in an analysis of U.K. newspapers, that different news outlets may prefer different news stories. While the popular press focused more on human interests, quality papers concentrated on political news. Both observations, quite closely, reflect Galtung and Ruge's news value factor Meaningfulness. Different stories or elites are relevant to different audiences. Journalists decide what they think is relevant to their respective audiences and whether it can be understood (Golding and Elliott, 1979). News are commercial products. They have to reflect popular tastes in order to appeal to mass audiences (Allern, 2002). More cynically put, market mechanisms turn journalism into a service profession. Journalists are service intermediaries for their audiences [[12](#)].

Secondly, some factors (such as personalisation and unambiguity) are not primary aspects of the news story itself but rather explain the spin journalists take on it (see also O'Neill and Harcup, 2009). Journalists tend to personalise their stories, make them less ambiguous and rather report about the conflict in a story while downplaying its dull aspects. Curran and Seaton [[13](#)] struck a similar chord when arguing that news values help journalists to turn complicated reality into 'neat stories' that reinforce stereotypes and established points of view.

Thirdly, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) found a lot of good news and news that did not fit the frequency of a newspaper. But again, Galtung and Ruge never claimed that a story has to fulfill all of their listed news value factors in order to become news; their list is cumulative and compensatory.

In more recent cultural industries research, there are indications that news values remain an important concept to explain cultural flows. In her study of fiction writing, Rutherford (2009) identified elites (celebrities; blockbusters) and relevance (timeliness through cultural trends) as important marketing tools. Galuszka (2012) studied online music labels and found that they act as opinion leaders that provide a certain focus (relevance) to listeners in terms of music tastes and genre. Some of the most successful video mashups (see Edwards and Tryon, 2009) make heavy use of elites as well as relating their work to current affairs (consonance).



The concept of news value as audience building tool

The linguists Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple (2014) formulated an interesting constructivist argument about news values, which provides an excellent theoretical framework for this article: News values are not innately news-intrinsic, and therefore independent of reporters. They can be created through language. In other words, news values are not necessarily passive concepts of news, but can be actively stressed or formulated by those reporting about them: 'news values can be seen as discursively constructed, and newsworthiness becomes a quality of texts' [14]; through 'news values in a text [...] an event is 'sold' to us as news(worthy) — [...] newsworthiness is created for the audience through language, image, layout, typography, and so on' [15]. This constructivist approach to news values is an important concept for the audience building independent filmmaker.

My paper is part of a research project that explored how contemporary independent filmmakers are using the Internet to build audiences independently from traditional distribution intermediaries. Six independent film projects were studied: *15Malaysia*, *Shelter in Place*, *Tenner Films*, *The Hunt for Gollum*, *Valkaama*, *The Cosmonaut* [16]. I interviewed the director or producer of each of these projects, following McCracken's (1988) long interview technique — a form of the semi-structured interview. I prepared four grand tour questions that cover the areas of information I was interested in. Within these questions, my interview partners were free to lead the conversation anywhere they saw fit. The grand tour questions asked were:

- Tell me about your film project. How was it made?
- How did you reach an audience for the project? What was the audience building strategy?
- How did you distribute the films to your audience?
- What role did the Internet play in making, marketing and distributing the project?

I will use *15Malaysia* as my prime case study in this article. However, whenever useful, my arguments will be supplemented with data from the other projects to draw a more complete picture.

Some information on the socio-political situation in Malaysia seems necessary before focusing on the audience building of *15Malaysia*. Malaysia gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957. It is a multi-racial and multi-religious country with 50 percent of its population being Malay (Muslim by law), 24 percent Chinese (mainly Buddhist or Christian), 11 percent indigenous (mostly Muslim) and seven percent Indian (mostly Hindu). Major political parties are often associated with one of the main races. The ruling coalition, governing the country since its independence, consists of UMNO, the United Malay National Organisation, MCA, Malaysian Chinese Association, MIC, Malaysian Indian Congress, and a number of smaller parties. As the party that is representing the country's Malay majority, UMNO has traditionally taken the lead among coalition partners.

While Malaysia prides itself as being one nation of different religions and races that are all living peacefully together, racial tensions have grown beneath the surface. The Chinese minority has traditionally been involved in most of the trade in the country, accumulating wealth among its community and controlling the nation's economy at the expense of the Malay majority. This has led the ruling coalition to introduce the New Economic Policy in 1970, a number of ethnic affirmative action policies that were meant to eradicate poverty among Malays. These policies largely favor the Malay majority through the provision of race-based student quotas in public Universities and for scholarships to study overseas, subsidized housing, a Malay stake-holder majority in every company enlisted in the local stock exchange and an over-boarding public service sector that is dominated by Malay employees. Such political favoring of the majority has been pointed out as a major factor for racial animosities within the country (Chin, 2009; Jomo, 2004).

The opposition to the ruling coalition, rallying with concepts like unity, togetherness and anti-cronyism, has made up a lot of ground. In the 2009 general election, the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority. In the following general election in May 2013, the opposition won the popular vote, but failed to claim the majority of parliamentary seats. Specifically in the urban centers, a young elite is forming that challenges ethnic affirmative action policies and their socio-political consequences. *15Malaysia* is one form of artistic protest. It must therefore be understood as one aspect of a wider socio-political movement in the country.

15Malaysia is a project of 15 Malaysian filmmakers who all contributed one short film. It was initiated by musician Pete Teo and Albert Law in early 2009 and premiered on the project's Web site on 17 August of the same year. All films were, and still are, freely available for streaming (through embedded YouTube videos) as well as for download from the project's Web site. Individual short films premiered bi-daily over the course of one month. Until 20 January 2015, the short films were streamed a total of 2,495,637 times and collected 1,604 comments on YouTube and another 6,713 comments on the project's Web site. The films were downloaded 574,897 times from 15Malaysia.com. Most of these views, comments and downloads were generated during the project's launching month. *15Malaysia* has 109,188 fans on Facebook.

How did *15Malaysia* attract the interest of opinion leaders to build its audience? The concept of news values may offer an explanation. I will proceed by mapping the audience building of *15Malaysia* against Galtung and Ruge's news value factors. Every factor will be covered in a separate section. I will begin each section by describing the respective news value factor. I will then explain how *15Malaysia's* audience building constructed or stressed the factor. Overall, all of Galtung and Ruge's news value factors can be identified in the audience building of *15Malaysia*.

Recency

"We launch on monday! Woot!" (@15malaysia, 13 August 2009)

"The Son' is releasing in 50 minutes ... are you ready good people of Malaysia? :-)" (@15malaysia, 27 August 2009)

"The Son' is released. <http://www.15malaysia.com/films/the-son/>" (@15malaysia, 28 August 2009)

The best news is something that just happened. It increases the likelihood of an event to become news if it fits into a 24-hour news cycle. 'A murder takes little time and the event takes place between the publication of two successive issues of a daily' [17]. But long trends, like a war, are less likely to become news — unless offering specific short-term events.

The term "event" is key here. Filmmaking, in general, is a rather lengthy process. The release of a film offers only one specific event. *15Malaysia*, on the other hand, had 15 different premieres during a single month. This created a number of single events. Every premiere was a potential news story. The more often something is talked about, the bigger the chance that potential audience members will hear about it.

Especially early audience building initiatives, before VHS was introduced, relied on the creation of singular events. Films were taken to pre-existing audiences, sometimes packaged or accompanied by contextualising material. Such events suggest singularity and hence scarcity. A "must see" feeling may be induced in the audience, who only have one chance to watch a film. While the Internet has created a world of infinite availability of films, singular events may still add to the sole consumption of a movie through contextualisation or the packaging of filmic material. The ability to comment on Facebook or *15Malaysia's* Web site strengthened the event character of a premiere. It enriched the consumption of a film with contextualising discussions among viewers. The event character was reinforced by a sense of communal viewing.

Prior to the project's launch, the *15Malaysia* team leaked a photograph of a politician on set of one of the short films he was acting in.

'The whole strategy was to get conventional media interested in us — to introduce you to the website. [...] The first time we got the press interested was when one of the pictures leaked out. [This was a picture of a] very controversial politician [who played] a taxi driver in one of the films. [One newspaper] printed [the leaked picture] on the first page. And from that, the other newspapers looked at that and asked their reporters: "How come we don't have that?" And then the English press started to go in. And then the Chinese media.' (Law, 2010)

The picture leak constitutes a specific news event. The same can be said about the launch of the Web site itself or the premiere of every single film.

Even after the fifteenth, and final, short film was launched, the team behind *15Malaysia* kept the audience building going by creating additional events. This time, however, it made use of the interactive features of the Internet and outsourced the creation of events to its audiences:

'If you noticed our poster, it is actually 16 photos but one is blank. That is empowering. We say: "We have done our part. So now you do a project, put it up here — be the 16Malaysia, 17Malaysia." Now we are up to 84Malaysia. "Embrace that!" That itself gives the project life.' (Law, 2010)

'People came out with really cool t-shirt designs, websites with remixes of music and stuff like that. We have a young kid, secondary school, who started remixing the films and put them on YouTube. We have people singing songs from the project itself. People, at least, show their interest.' (Law, 2010)

Superlatives

"#15malaysia has just reached 10000 fans on facebook. ;)" (@15malaysia, 16 August 2009)

"'15Malaysia' is the 5th most frequent headline in the Malaysian cyberspace in 2009. Thanks you for your support" (@15malaysia, 31 December 09)

Superlatives relate to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news factor Threshold. The more intense a story, the more likely it becomes news. Ten killed is more news than five killed. One million dollars lost/gained is more news than five dollars. The 'biggest building, the most violent crime, the most destructive fire gets covered' [18].

This factor is about scale. *15Malaysia* created scale through the number of local filmmakers working on the project:

'This is the first time that in such condensed fashion, 15 Malaysian filmmakers got together.' (Law, 2010)

What is more, the socio-political theme of the project mattered to a lot of people (potentially all Malaysians). *15Malaysia*, hence, had a lot of support from a growing movement of people who were unhappy with the situation in the country (see also Relevance). Later in the audience building process, the reaching of certain milestones in viewer/fan numbers helped create news value.

The Hunt for Gollum and *The Cosmonaut* created scale in slightly different ways. Both included a lot of people in the making of their films — hence being filmmaking "mass-movements". *Gollum* has the look of an expensive production but was made on a shoestring budget of £3,000. *The Cosmonaut*, on the other hand, tried to crowdfund a production budget of one million Euros — an ambitious undertaking.

Scale, in these examples, is created through the number of people involved in the making of a project, the number of people who care about it or, in opposition to what might be expected, a low production budget compared to a high production quality. It is not created through the highest budget, the most spectacular stunts, the most elaborate visual effects or the highest grossing first weekend box office, as is often the case for Hollywood films.

Unambiguity

'15Malaysia is a short film project. It consists of 15 short films made by 15 Malaysian filmmakers. These films not only deal with socio-political **issues** [negativity] in Malaysia, they also feature some of the **best-known** [elites] faces in the country, including actors, musicians and **top** political **leaders** [elites]. You may think of them as funky little films made by 15 Malaysian voices **for the people of Malaysia** [proximity].' (15malaysia.com; bold added for highlight)

An event that is easier to interpret will have a better chance to become news than an event with 'many and inconsistent implications' [19]. News outlets prefer clear facts and figures over maybes.

15Malaysia had a simple message: Togetherness/Unity of all people in Malaysia. The message of *The Cosmonaut* was: This is the future of filmmaking. Similarly, *The Hunt for Gollum: Over 120 Lord of the Rings* fans came together to produce a professional prequel with a budget of only £3,000.

These messages are not only clear but they are indeed messages. The films have something to say. They are not just films, but films with an agenda — an agenda that is clearly communicated.

Relevance & Proximity

'Insofar as all our films touch upon Malaysian lives, it goes without saying that they are creative expressions circumscribed by the country's politics. However, 15Malaysia is staunchly non-partisan in party political terms. All **Malaysians** regardless of party political affiliations face the situations expressed in our films. As such, they are issues that **every Malaysian citizen** has a constitutional right to voice and are in fact above narrow party political interests.' (15Malaysia.com; bold added for highlight)

'There is nothing in the films that the public don't already know. It's just that people dare not speak before. People appreciate that we spoke on their behalf.' (Interview with Pete Teo in Sin Chew on 22 November 2009, Chinese language daily in Malaysia)

This factor relates to Galtung and Ruge's Meaningfulness. If an event has direct or indirect consequences to the audience, if it impacts audiences' lives or is at least relevant to their experiences, it is more likely to become news. This usually means that a story needs a certain cultural proximity ('the event-scanner will pay particular attention to the familiar, to the culturally similar, and the culturally distant will be passed by more easily' [20]), geographical or political proximity (Schulz, 1976) or temporal proximity (Herbert, 2000).

Relevance is one of the central concepts of audience building in the digital age. Because numerous cultural products are competing for attention, instead of just uploading information and hoping that they will spread, the question rather is, who is my material relevant to and who has access to these people?

15Malaysia is about and for Malaysians. Cultural, political and geographical proximity to the readers of the main press publications in the country is hence at a minimum. The films and their message are relevant to Malaysians, and therefore to the readers of all newspapers. Further, the films became even more meaningful because of the timing of their launch. They built up to Malaysia Day (14 September) and spun around Independence Day (31 August). Both are the two central national holidays in Malaysia with Independence Day, in particular, being preceded by a lot of political campaigns concerning national unity.

15Malaysia was part of a bigger movement trying to spark discussion and 'make people interested in and care about their country' (Law, 2010). Law continues:

'We are just one part, one small thing. The whole thing started after the general elections and has a lot to do with the Internet — free media. It is not just us. We just ride on that big wave.'

'[We were] talking about something that need[ed] to be talked about but had a tendency of being oversensitive.'

An audience related to the topic of the films (*i.e.*, "all Malaysians") was at the core of *15Malaysia's* audience building attempts. But the project was also relevant to other audiences.

'One [angle of audience interest] is the interesting method of using the Internet and viral distribution. A lot of new media took it up and started to talk about — how, why? ... The second angle is the filmmakers. This is the first time that in such condensed fashion, 15 Malaysian filmmakers got together. So people from the filmmaking industry looked at it and thought it was quite interesting. The new wave has been making their way. There are people like Yasmin [Ahmad] in there and eventually DaHuang [Pictures] got on board. They are award-winning people internationally. But showcasing 15 of that — kind of like bringing their buddies along saying "These are my peers, who never got the name but deserve it." So that got us some attention in the international filmmaking industry.' (Law, 2010)

'The third angle was, actually, people who do studies on Malaysia.' (Law, 2010)

Finally, subtitles make a film not only more accessible but also relevant to different audiences. If a film is subtitled into a person's language, it becomes a film for that person.

'The fact that our website is probably one of the very few websites that got four languages: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Do you know how much work that is? 32 films, four languages — all subtitled.' (Law, 2010)

Cultural proximity might be a little harder to identify in other independent film projects when limiting the concept to national or regional aspects. But cultures do not just constitute themselves through geographical proximity. *The Hunt for Gollum* is a perfect example of a film being relevant to a global cultural movement of *Lord of the Rings* fans. *Tenner Films* tried to tap into dozens of small organizations all over the world that shared its concern about nuclear energy or environmental issues.

Consonance (predictability, demand)

"15 voices out of 28 million. lets here yours" [sic] (@15malaysia, 19 August 2009)

"understand your zeitgeist and do something that taps into that pulse. 15malaysia viral advice from @peteteo" (@15malaysia, 19 August 2009)

The media will rather report about an event if it meets their expectation — *i.e.*, if they foresaw it happening or, even more so, wanted it to happen (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). A story has to fit preoccupations or stereotypes. Schank and Anderson (1977, cited in Bell, 1991) termed this "script" — a story has to fit the mental script for related kinds of events.

Albert Law (2010) said something about the way *15Malaysia* approached journalists, which I think resonates well with the notion of consonance:

We go to them and say: "This is what Malaysians do for Malaysia. I don't need your money. But what can you contribute to the project?" That moved the whole project along.'

If such an approach works for a project, it must be in demand.

15Malaysia happened at a time when socio-political assumptions and mental scripts were increasingly challenged and re-thought — especially among the more educated middle class in Malaysia's urban centers. Artists, researchers, journalists and other "intellectuals" started to voice their concerns about increasing racial tensions and unfair political favouring. *15Malaysia* was part of this discussion, it did 'just ride on that big wave' (Law, 2010). As such, it did not just challenge perceptions of life in the country but also fit the stereotypes and mental scripts of those who were part of this movement.

In addition, *15Malaysia* happened at a time when online film distribution and the accessing of large audiences independently of distribution agents was still in its infancy. Similar to projects like *The Hunt for Gollum* or *The Cosmonaut*, *15Malaysia's* initial audience building success paired with its bold attempt to use the Internet to explore new models of film marketing, distribution and exhibition got it attention from

the international filmmaking community. Filmmakers around the world saw these projects as blue prints for a more independent future of filmmaking in the digital age.

Unexpectedness (unpredictability, scarcity)

"#15malaysia facebook fans past 2000 first week." (@15malaysia, 21 July 2009)

"Rotterdam film fest picks up all #15malaysia films for exhibition next year. Woo." (@15malaysia, 21 July 2009)

This factor adds to the preceding two: 'It is the unexpected within the meaningful and the consonant that is brought to one's attention' [21]. Novelty is closely related: news have to be new. Schulz's (1976) factor of Success also belongs into this category.

Even though Albert Law claimed to 'just ride on that big wave', a project like *15Malaysia* was still unprecedented. The topic was fresh and the ambitions of *15Malaysia* (bringing together big names of Malaysian cultural and political life) huge. No other such project existed. It hence fitted perfectly into a certain mood in society but was still new enough to be covered by the media. What is more, its audience building success is not the norm in today's independent filmmaking.

Reference to Elites

"'Healthy Paranoia' releasing in 30 min! Featuring our very own Health Minister Dato' Sri Liow Tiong Lai" (@15malaysia, 13 September 2009)

This factor relates to Relevance. Events in powerful nations will be more consequential for an audience. Also, elite nations to some extent can 'serve as objects of general identification' [22]. The same applies to elite people. '[T]he eliteness of a story's sources' [23] is a related concept.

In *15Malaysia*, reference is made to Malaysia, which is of course the most elite nation for its own population. Further, the filmmakers, the producers and some of the actors (including one politician, a controversial musician and at least one actress) were local celebrities.

'I think the directors did a great job in casting the right actors — based on their social status.' (Law, 2010)

Similar national references do not exist in the case of the other films. There is, nevertheless, reference to elites. *The Cosmonaut* got support from one of the leading designers in Spain. It is also supported by national and international space agencies as well as by the composer of Andrey Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. Slightly different from such direct support from well-known people, *The Cosmonaut* used Yuri Gagarin's name for a drink during a fundraising party, hence indirectly "borrowing" the support from an elite person in the area of space travel. *The Hunt for Gollum* "features" Aragorn, Gandalf and Gollum. Though these figures are not portrayed by the same actors as in Peter Jackson's trilogy, their names alone surely lend their celebrity status to the film.

Personalisation

"Hard at work. Zzzz." (@15malaysia, 21 July 2009 — sharing a photo of editing work)

"Pete Teo tweets from film festivals over next 30 days — including @15Malaysia at Busan." (@15malaysia, 25 September 2009)

"Download traffic off the charts. Encountering major bandwidth problems. Upwards of 200tb/mth needed. Let us know if you can help." (@15malaysia, 18 August 2009)

Stories with a personal angle are more newsworthy than concepts, processes, generalities or masses. People are more interested in other people than in generalisations.

15Malaysia had three forms of personalisation: It (i) heavily promoted the 15 directors; (ii) tried to include the audience; and, (iii) created transparency and communicated in the first person.

Personalisation creates trust by revealing the people behind the camera and their filmmaking journey, through openly communicating in the first person with audience members, sharing problems and involving the audience. *15Malaysia's* Web site features a description of all 15 directors. The audience was able to comment on the site as well as through Facebook. The project's poster invited the audience members to participate and interact with the project creators. But interaction between creator and audience is much more than the plain provision of feedback options. It also means to enter into a conversation with the audience.

'Pete and I went through every single comment, every day.' (Law, 2010)

'On the first day alone we were downloading one terabyte for one video, and we still had 14 to go. That's going to bankrupt us. So what we did was we put it on Twitter — "We are in big shit, anybody can help out?"

And four Malaysians contacted us and said they had free bandwidth; a server we could use for free.' (Law, 2010)

Such form of transparent communication and filmmaking, of revealing the filmmaking process and the people behind the camera, is quite different from how things are done in the mainstream industry. Traditionally, audiences are presented with a final film only. The distributors control the marketing and storytelling around a film. In *15Malaysia*, the filmmakers communicated with their audiences themselves, in the first person and during the entire filmmaking process. This kind of transparent communication is unprecedented in film marketing. It helps to grow audiences continuously during the filmmaking process and turns the filmmaking journey into a longitudinal marketing story itself.

Transparent communication is of course time consuming. It is a low-cost alternative to more traditional mass marketing and therefore suits small-scale independent films much better than mainstream productions. It creates new audience building opportunities that potentially set independent films apart from their mainstream counterparts.

Negativity

"Bugger. The head of MCA says good things about 15Malaysia. :-)"
(@15malaysia, 30 September 2009)

"All our films have socio-political subject matters. These vary from corruption, race relations, inflation, Islamic banking, social apathy, ethical commerce, pedophilia, government health warnings and so on. Some are funny, other serious — all try to deal with aspects of Malaysian life."
(15Malaysia.com)

Galtung and Ruge (1965) argued that negative events are rarer and less predictable, less ambiguous (they are generally understood as negative by most people, whereas good news are often not good for everyone) and fit their frequency criterion (here "recency") better than positive events (positive events such as life in general or economic growth take time, negative events such as death or economic crisis do not). They are hence more likely to become news. Damage, injury, death, deviance and conflict are examples of negativity in the news.

15Malaysia demonstrated against the culture of fear, against political propaganda and censorship, against animosities among different ethnic groups; in short: against everything the filmmakers thought was wrong in their country. It was a demonstration for Malaysia as one nation, without fear of one another — and hence against the status quo. Any demonstration against the status quo is deviant behaviour and therefore negativity.

'We did have voices saying "You are playing with fire and will get burned":' (Law, 2010)

The 15 filmmakers represented the country's three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian). Most of the films included actors from at least two different ethnicities. Films were subtitled into the four main languages of the country. For every media interview, filmmakers of at least two different ethnic groups appeared together. Those "couples" were usually made up of one well known director and a lesser known filmmaker.

'[C]onventional media get to a stage where they get too big — have too much to loose. They then tend to not give away airtime. They wouldn't engage with any content that could get their companies into trouble.'
(Law, 2010)

'[T]he biggest thing was that the press would only want to talk to a Malay director — if they were Malay press, they wouldn't want to talk to a Chinese director. But we wouldn't have anything to do with that.' (Law, 2010)

Not every independent film can overtly demonstrate against socio-political circumstances. But their mere independence means that, at least tacitly, every independent film demonstrates against the status quo within the commercial media sector. *The Hunt for Gollum* and *The Cosmonaut's* exploration of alternative filmmaking and distribution models can be seen as a demonstration against the establishment — hence referencing to something negative (conflict). Both were vocal in being different, by either having a low production budget and the entire cast and crew working for free (*The Hunt for Gollum*) or giving the final film away for free in a day-and-date release while still aiming to be profitable (*The Cosmonaut*).

Discussion

There is a heated debate over the validity of news value as explanatory concept for journalistic choice (see for instance O'Neill and Harcup, 2009). What my article tries to highlight is that news value factors "can" be used to understand choices. But more importantly, news value is a useful concept if we argue from the perspective of the filmmaker as the news source, who wants to influence the opinion leader.

While fulfilling all news value factors is no guarantee for coverage, the concept of news value tries to explain on what basis opinion leaders attempt to serve their audiences. Since reaching these audiences is the common goal of the filmmaker and the opinion leader, the active construction and stressing of news value factors should at least be considered a useful option for the audience building filmmaker. The example of *15Malaysia* positively confirms the usefulness of such approach.

Following Bednarek and Caple's (2014) constructivist approach, news value can be actively created, or at least stressed, by the filmmaker. Bell (1991) called this "prefabrication": a news story has more chances of becoming news if a ready-made text exist for the journalist to use. *15Malaysia* understood this. The team created news write-ups, arranged press conferences and actively created news value.

'We kind of like half leaked [the photo of the controversial politician on set during the shooting of one of the short films].' (Law, 2010)

It is possibly predictable that news value is still an important concept when it comes to reaching audiences for independent films. After all, audience building remains dependent on opinion leaders — and therefore intermediaries. Just like traditional mass media gatekeepers, these opinion leaders have to make professional decisions what news to share with their audiences and which ones to withhold. News value factors remain an important theoretical concept to explain such choices.


15Malaysia fitted into its time. Using the Internet for marketing and distribution purposes was still in its infancy and the political climate in Malaysia suited its cause and message. The project had a clear idea of its audience and the opinion leaders that have access to them. By creating specific events, having a clear message, cleverly using elites and being relevant to its target audience as well as controversial, successful and personal in addressing its audience, the project was able to create news value and therefore attract a large audience to make its stories and message heard.

The example of *15Malaysia* shows that independent filmmakers can actively create news value for audience building purposes. They can take the list of news value factors Galtung and Ruge suggested as a starting point when developing their audience building strategies. Doing so, provides them with an alternative way to market their films — a way that is potentially more independent from traditional marketing and distribution intermediaries in the film industry.



Conclusion

With this paper, I attempted to make two main contributions to current scholarship. On a theoretical level, I offered the case study of *15Malaysia* to support the view that the Internet is not completely reversing mass media. Baym [24] noticed that scholarly theorizations of the Internet are 'plagued by the notion that everything is new'. I avoided such notion. News value, for instance, is a mass media concept that remains useful when analysing decision making on the Internet. This view of continuity follows Manovich [25], who argued as early as 2001 that: 'If we place new media within a longer historical perspective, we will see that many of these principles are not unique to new media and can be already found in older media technologies'.

On a practical level, I showed independent filmmakers, and other artists, that the concept of news value can help to cut through the noise of over-abundant small-scale culture on the Internet and hence overcome the problem of findability. Galtung and Ruge's 50-year old list of news value factors may help filmmakers to utilise the Internet's promises of increased independence. 

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<http://icabrisbane2014.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Session-3.pdf>.

Notes

1. Benkler, 2006, p. 10.
2. Graeff, *et al.* (2014) offer an excellent coverage of the news flow around the Trayvon Martin case for a discussion of what happens within today's networked public sphere once a story has found interested opinion leaders who are willing to push it through their personal and professional networks.
3. In this paper, I only focus on the news source, in this case independent filmmakers, and the ability to influence and manufacture the story of one's own film and therefore the ability to create and share news values. I do not engage in a discussion of the media ecosystem that transports the message from filmmaker to audiences. For a discussion of news flows see Graeff, *et al.* (2014) or Meissner (2014).

4. Interestingly, similar claims were made when the introduction of VHS promised more independence from distribution and exhibition intermediaries (see Knight, 2007).
5. Benkler, 2006, p. 34.
6. Berry, 2006, p. 159.
7. King, 2013, p. 1.
8. Iordanova, 2012, p. 3.
9. Singer, 2006, p. 265.
10. Evans, 2000, p. 3.
11. Bell (1991) suggested a division into news-intrinsic and news-extrinsic factors. Galtung and Ruge's news value factors that are external to the news story itself are Continuity and Composition. Both are excluded in this article.
12. In her study of Hong Kong journalist bloggers, Chu (2012) found that this service character and the resulting popularisation of headlines and news contents, can be factors that drive especially younger journalists away from traditional media and into the blogosphere.
13. Curran and Seaton, 2003, p. 336.
14. Bednarek and Caple, 2014, p. 137.
15. Bednarek and Caple, 2014, p. 139.
16. *Shelter in Place* (Zed Nelson, 2009) is a 48-minute documentary about the devastating influence of Texan oil refineries on local communities. *Tenner Films* (Vicky Lesley, ongoing) is a one-person documentary production company that explores the human stories and social impact of nuclear energy. *Tenner Films* and *Shelter in Place* were the first two U.K. film projects that successfully reached their funding goals on Indiegogo — as early as 2010. *The Hunt for Gollum* (Chris Bouchard, 2009) is a 38-minute prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* saga. It was made for £3,000 by more than 120 Tolkien fans and was seen over 12 million times on the Internet. *Valkaama* (Tim Baumann, 2010) is a feature-length no-budget film that, other than the other projects, did not successfully reach a meaningful audience. *The Cosmonaut* (Nicolas Alcalá, 2013) is a Spanish feature-length science-fiction film that successfully raised over 400,000 Euros through crowdfunding, merchandise sales and marketing events.
17. Galtung and Ruge, 1965, p. 66.
18. Bell, 1991, p. 157.
19. Galtung and Ruge, 1965, p. 66.
20. Galtung and Ruge, 1965, p. 67.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Galtung and Ruge, 1965, p. 68.
23. Bell, 1991, p. 158.
24. Baym, 2009, p. 720.
25. Manovich, 2001, p. 66.

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50 years on: Galtung and Ruge's news value factors revisited in online audience building for independent films

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