

How does science become news?

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the news values and factors that influence the publication of science in South African newspapers

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Abstract

This study examines the news values and key factors that influence how science is selected for publication in South African newspapers. It explores the role of the media in making science accessible in a developing democracy and identifies the most significant science themes published in the South African press over a three month period in 2018. The results indicate that science features in all South African newspapers, albeit unevenly in terms of frequency, complexity, presentation and prominence. It demonstrates that science items that are exclusive, contentious, world-firsts or breaking news are more likely to be published and that the proximity of the science news or event, its relevance to readers, and whether it is in the public interest are news values that contribute to why some science items are selected over others. Other factors that influence the publication of science items include easy access to sources, the inclusion of elite voices and attractive visual material. Conversely, time, space and resource constraints hamper the production, selection and publication of science news items. The top ten science themes covered in the media during the period under review in descending order are the environment and ecology; the health sciences; science and technology; zoology; astronomy; energy; anthropology and archaeology; the engineering sciences and the palaeosciences; with food and nutrition sciences, and physics; in joint tenth place. Despite tensions between key social actors, all role-players believe that the media have a responsibility to make science accessible in a developing democracy.

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