“Making the News”:
A Case Study of East Cape News (ECN)

THESIS

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AUDREY BETH DAVIDOW

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Acknowledgements

This thesis devotes a great deal of time attempting to demonstrate all the forces, both internal and external that shape the news. But ultimately, the process of "making the news" – selecting, reporting and writing – falls into the experienced hands of the journalist.

Without them, "making this thesis" would have been truly impossible.

It is dedicated to all the journalists who gave up their time to answer my questions with humour, humility, and insight. But especially to the journalists at ECN who graciously allowed me to observe them under the "microscope", and in the process, became not only my research subjects, but my friends.

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Abstract

To fully comprehend the complex process of news making, we must first understand that the events we read about everyday in the newspaper are not merely a reflection of the world in which we live. News does not just happen. Rather, it is a socially constructed product in which events are "made to mean" (Hall, 1978). Thus, the news plays a fundamental role in shaping our interpretations of reality – our perceptions of the world as we know it.

Informed by a structuralist approach to news making, this research provides a detailed ethnographic study of the determinants that shape and produce news in the South African print media. I provide examples of the influence various factors, operating at all levels, exert within the news making process.

The research focuses on the news production process at East Cape News Pty. Ltd. (ECN) a small news agency operating in the peripheral news region of South Africa's Eastern Cape. It considers the journalistic routines and interests of the ECN reporters; how these reporters select events and turn them into news, how they interpret their significance and how they formulate them as news stories.

The research also considers the second stage of selection ECN news must pass before it is read by the public – the "gates" of external newspapers. In this section, the study is primarily concerned with which ECN news stories succeed past the gates of national newspapers as these are the newpapers that play an influential role in shaping national perceptions of the marginalised Eastern Cape region.

A province burdened with devastating rural poverty, unstable government, and little economic growth, the Eastern Cape warrants little coverage from the national, Johannesburg-based news market. As a result, little news of the Eastern Cape is published nationally, further perpetuating the region's perceived insignificance on a national level. This point also demonstrates the fact that news both shapes, and is shaped by, our ideologies. News, therefore is ideological (Fishman, 1977).

My findings reinforce many of the observations of other media researchers informed by a structuralist approach in the field of news making. However, some elements of news making emerge which appear to be unique in terms of other studies of news making. These elements are primarily a result of ECN's informal organisational structures which allow the journalists a greater level of autonomy than a larger more bureaucratic organisation might. Thus, in addition to considering the structures that shape the news, I also discuss the role of human agency in making the news.

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Introduction

Every day millions of people watch, listen, or read the news. But rarely do they question where that news comes from, how it is put together or how the way in which it is assembled results in specific versions of reality.

It is these questions that provide the starting point for this ethnographic study which examines the practices and ideology behind the making of news at East Cape News Pty. Ltd. (ECN), a small, independent news agency operating in the Eastern Cape city of Grahamstown. In response to these questions I explore the process by which news is socially constructed, how occurrences in the everyday world become news stories and how news organisations, "by seeking to disseminate information that people want, need and should know," serve as both circulators and shapers of knowledge (Tuchman, 1978: 2).

Because the media are important generators and circulators of meaning in modern society, the process of news production needs to be theoretically scrutinised. The notion that news does not just happen – that events are "made to mean" (Hall, 1978) – prompts many questions surrounding the nature of news construction. Why are only certain topics, people or events included in the news? And why are they treated only in particular ways? Who shapes the news in South Africa and how does the Eastern Cape fit into that agenda? And finally, how do these ideologies shape the way reporters, specifically those at ECN, select and write their stories?

To answer these questions we have to understand the news not as a separate force outside the social relations it seeks to report, but as very much a part of them. Any consideration of the legal, institutional and socio-economic constraints upon the media leads, inevitably, to a discussion of the limitations within which most media professionals are compelled to work. Len Masterman points out:

> It is no denigration to the struggles of the individuals within the media to suggest that in the future any understanding of their work will need to be premised on a rather greater recognition of the structures within which they operate than we have acknowledged in the past (Masterman, 1985: 116).

Functioning in a province fraught with devastating rural poverty, massive infra-structural problems, inordinate distances between locales, language barriers and poorly organized

governmental bodies, ECN s constraints are certainly numerous. Through my research, it is my aim to unravel some of the main structural determinants of news and explore the inter-related nature of the complex web of influences present in any media text (Masterman, 1985).

In selecting a news agency, as opposed to a newspaper, I have been able to focus the research not only on the news that is made, but also on the news that sells. To do so, I first assumed the role of a participant observer to examine the factors that shape news production at ECN. It was this process that provided me with the detail rich descriptions that form the basis of this ethnographic study. Next, I conducted interviews with news workers throughout the country in order to ascertain which ECN news stories actually sell to newspapers located in the urban centres of South Africa.

Like many previous researchers in the field of news production, I found that in shaping the news journalists employ an informal paradigm of news values in order to decide which of the millions of events to cover on a given day. It is these decisions, this process of selection behind news making, that I seek to unravel in my study. These selections are significant because they in turn impact upon the way readers come to make sense of the world.

There are no formal guidelines to delineate this selection process. The process is rather based on a myriad of complex factors which inform and determine a journalist's "sense of news." This "sense" enables journalists, editors and news workers to "decide routinely and regularly which stories are newsworthy and which are not, which stories are major lead stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which stories to drop" (Hall, *et. al.,* 1978: 53).

One dimension of news as a socially constructed product relates to the issue of geographic power. Tuchman (1978) suggests that a fundamental factor in news selection relates to <u>where</u> occurrences take place. She argues that the news flow is heavily unbalanced as the news of powerful regions and the voices of powerful people tend to dominate, while the news of periphery regions and the voices of "unknowns" remain largely unrepresented.

The issue of centre-periphery relations of news selection (within the broader framework of news construction and selection) is central to this critical study of the media in which I explore how national news depicts the peripheral region of the Eastern Cape.

ECN's precarious financial situation as a newly independent commercial agency due to insufficient sales to the national market provides the impetus for this study. Until 1997, ECN formerly known as Ecna (East Cape News Agency) functioned as a trust operating with funds allocated from private sources. In 1997 the trust was dissolved and Ecna made the transition to ECN, a privately owned and operated news agency. As such, the organisation and its staff experienced many changes to the long established *modus operandi.* At the same time, ECN, now a commercial agency, became increasingly reliant on the national media market in order to remain financially viable.

As a commercial news wire rather than a newspaper, ECN's revenue is derived solely from stories it is able to sell to newspapers across the country. For the fledgling company, the first year has been fraught with financial difficulties. Twice this year, the company has faced bankruptcy, and in March of 1998, the agency lost its sole national contract with the Independent Newspapers Group. Currently ECN's sales focus primarily on the regional markets. The fact that national newspapers, none of which have Eastern Cape bureaus or correspondents, rarely commission or buy stories from ECN is arguably a direct indication of the Eastern Cape's perceived insignificance on a national level.

This study is based on the hypothesis that the Eastern Cape is one of the many peripheral regions in South Africa, and the world, where events remain unreported. By interviewing the news workers at newspapers throughout the country, I examine how news from the peripheral region of the Eastern Cape is perceived in the national and regional media markets. The study demonstrates that the centre-periphery notion of news selection is a primary factor which, both implicitly and explicitly, informs the news values adhered to by national newspapers when selecting ECN news off the news wire.

Stuart Hall (1977) argues that, over time, news actually creates the "consensus" knowledge by which reporters and viewers recognise newsworthiness. Aligning myself with this view, I then consider how the perceptions of ECN news held by national and regional newspapers filter back, to influence the way ECN reporters perceive the Eastern Cape and how this influences the way in which they shape news.

Considering the above elements as background information, the primary question tying my research together remains: "What makes the news?"

Attempting to answer this question, chapter one begins with a theoretical analysis of the structures and processes behind the production of news. Chapter two turns to an organisational profile of ECN and considers its role as a small, independent business in a capitalistic media market dominated by multi-national corporations. Chapter three then turns to an examination of how news is actually made at ECN. This section takes into account structural influences, organisational dynamics, and the role of the individual human agency in reporting the news. It also examines how ECN , in the process of establishing itself as a business, has had to re-examine its journalistic mission and maintain a precarious balance between the news it values and the news that sells. The research investigates how this dichotomy dictated by two very different agendas—one economic, the other developmental—is influencing the way ECN shapes the news. Finally, chapter four explores what ECN news is published both regionally and nationally and how this ultimately affects the way in which ECN journalists select, shape and write the news.

Chapter One
Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1.0 Introduction

This chapter intends to serve two purposes. The first is to theoretically justify news as a socially constructed product, rather than a mere reflection of the world in which we live. The second is to establish a theoretical framework in which to analyse the selection procedures applied to both the production and circulation of news emanating from East Cape News (ECN). To do so, I employ a modified, multi-dimensional model of gatekeeping theory which considers the procedures behind the selection of news items within the mass media.

The basic premise of gate-keeping theory suggests that news is the product of a process "in which the billions of messages that are available in the world are winnowed and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day" (Shoemaker, 1991: 1). In the realm of mass media, this person – the so-called gatekeeper – is typically the editor or journalist whose selections are influenced by a complex set of interwoven factors.

The primary theoretical context for my study stems from the culturalist/structuralist debates that emerged in cultural studies in the 1970s (Hall, 1981). A voluntarist stress of culturalism prioritises the importance of human agency. In studies of journalism the focus would thus be on the autonomy of the journalist (Windschuttle, 1997). While this model may be considered obsolete by most media theorists for its disregard of external structural influences, its remains a prominent reflection of how most media practitioners perceive themselves today. Voluntarists operate from an empirical world view and propose that the news is "out there" waiting to be reported by the "objective" eyes and ears of the journalist (Windschuttle, 1997).

In contrast, structuralist approaches to media theory suggest that news is the outcome of a socially constructed process. Structuralism argues that all the structures in which we are embedded, right up to the level of ideology, shape our consciousness. These structures, in turn, shape our output. For example, Stuart Hall (*et. al.,* 1978) shows how the routine

practices of media institutions help shape what counts as news. This view denies the significance of human agency espoused by the voluntarist approach and suggests that journalists are merely agents of more powerful structures. At a macro level, media theorists informed by structuralism ask: why is it, if the media are free do as they wish, do they tend to reproduce and perpetuate the status quo established by dominant power structures?

While I would disagree with a complete denial of human agency, the structuralist approach provides the primary theoretical framework for my study of news production at ECN. Drawing on various research paradigms, Jacobs (1996) advocates a multi-dimensional approach to the study of news making which considers the wide array of factors involved in an enormously complicated structuring of reality. Following Jacobs (1996) this study aims to produce a multi-dimensional understanding of the forces that influence news selection and production at ECN.

In order to illustrate the complex structures that influence the news, this research produces a study of news production that weighs the relative significance of human agency and ideological structures in producing the news. Consequently, the approach involves a consideration of the structure and ownership of media organisations; the social backgrounds, professional attitudes and functions of news workers; patterns of interactions between communicators and sources; and the influence of economic, cultural and political values.

The first step in this multi-dimensional approach is an understanding of how news workers negotiate with the different institutions in the course of their work and how they understand and receive the stories they attempt to produce. My aim is to unravel the types of news and the codes of newsworthiness adhered to at ECN. In turn, I hope to examine which regional and national newspapers adopt congruent news values and are thus more likely to utilise ECN generated copy.

While I do not treat reception in the traditional post-structural sense of studying audience interpretation, I hope to employ some aspect of the reception paradigm to consider the role the news workers' perceptions of the audience play in shaping the news they create

audience, whether that audience be the reading public or the newspapers which ECN serves.

Through examining the social world of the news worker and the process of news wire news production, this study attempts to discover those values and selective criteria that compose the unwritten rules of journalism and shape the informal paradigm of news values. However, before exploring this question, we must first address the more fundamental question: "What is news?"

1.1 What is news?

Defining “news” is a problematic task. Ask a dozen news editors and you’ll receive a dozen different answers. Not surprisingly, when I confronted the editor of ECN, Mike Loewe, with the question, he laughed and replied, “you tell me.”

While most news workers would agree that news is far more easily pursued than defined, there is a general, albeit vague, understanding of what constitutes news. A popular journalist definition describes what is allegedly an unmistakable news event: “When a dog bites a man, that is not news, but when a man bites a dog, that is news.”

Most journalists, on some level, would agree that unforeseen, startling events are inherently newsworthy. They know this because they are endowed with what they sometimes refer to as a “sixth sense for news”. Those news workers with a particularly refined sense of news are extolled as having “a nose for news”. This view suggests that a successful journalist operates within an empiricist methodology and is one who can uncover news that exists “out there”, under some tree or stone, just waiting to be reported.

Reflecting the voluntarist notion held by most media practitioners that it is their responsibility to report on the news objectively and empirically, Professor Keith Windschuttle (1997: 4) writes:

> Journalism is committed to reporting the truth about what occurs in the world. Journalists go out into society, make observations about what is done and what is said and report them as accurately as they can. Journalism in other words, upholds a realist view of the world and an empirical methodology (1997: 4).

A considerable number of professional journalists would uphold this view. They maintain that “the facts” seem to speak for themselves and rarely question how these facts are framed.

Contrasting this view, the structuralist approach sees “reality” as a social construct. It is this notion that news is a product of our own social construction that provides the primary theoretical framework for my research. Arguing for the complex nature of news production, Stuart Hall (1978: 53) states:

> The media do not simply and transparently report events which are naturally newsworthy in themselves. News is the end product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events. As Mac Dougal puts it:
>
> > At any given moment billions of simultaneous events occur throughout the world…All of these occurrences are potentially news. They do not become so until some purveyor of news gives an account of them. The news, in other words, is the account of the event, not something intrinsic in the event itself (Hall *et al.*, 1978: 53).

While the media may strive for “objectivity”, Hall's structuralist position highlights that even its selection of what is newsworthy is based on a complex set of socio-economic, political, organisational and ideological criteria. Everything, from what a reporter chooses to make newsworthy, to the style in which a story is written, to the sources attributed, is a product of the structured process of news construction. Even something as ostensibly innocuous as choosing which stories to cover on a given day, involves complex choices and thus helps to foreground particular realities while backgrounding others. Writing on the selective nature of news Walter Lippmann (1947: 364) states:

> The press … is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness and into vision (in Van Ginneken, 1998: 23).

Central to the notion of news as a socially constructed product, is the post-structuralist emphasis on the pivotal role language plays in the social process of constructing the subjectivity of the individual. Hartley (1982: 13) states, "the world is received, or realized (in both senses of the word - made real and understood as such) in language." Like any other social or cultural institution, the news is defined by one of our primary meaning systems – language. News then, is not a mirror but a frame. It is literally, made of words and pictures so comprising a specially differentiated sub-system within language (Hartley, 1982: 7).

In other words, the world is not just sitting "out there", ready made and waiting to be discovered as Windschuttle suggests. On the contrary, the reality observed depends on how it is received. Importantly though, our interpretations are not idiosyncratic but are shaped by the structures in which we are embedded (e.g., class, gender, race, etc.). These structures, in turn are made sense of and represented through language. Turner (1988: 43), highlighting the importance of theorising language, adds:

> What language does is to construct, not label, reality for us. We cannot think without language. So it is difficult to imagine thinking things for which we have no language. We become members of our culture through language, and we internalise the values systems which structure our lives through language (in Strelitz and Steenveld, 1998: 105).

Coward and Ellis (1978: 79 in Strelitz and Steenveld, 1998: 105) note, "the fundamental problem with the conception of language as communication is that it tends to obscure the way in which language sets up the positions 'I' and 'you' that are necessary for communication to take place at all."

This statement reflects the inherent power relations expressed through speech. As news is transmitted through language ideological power relations are revealed in its representation of events. Thus this critical study of the representation of the Eastern Cape in the national South African media market is tangentially concerned with how "ideology operates through language, mediating the reality it wishes to re-present, and in the process helping to sustain (often unconsciously) particular political positions" (Strelitz and Steenveld, 1998: 105).

Considering the role of dominant ideologies in structuring the news, I turn now to those forces and criteria that shape the selection of news on a daily basis, bringing certain features of our reality into the foreground, while backgrounding others.

1.2 How news is created Evolving applications of Gatekeeping Theory

Selection is inevitable. Lippman (1947) has noted: "All the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings in the world." And even if they could, argues Van Ginneken (1998: 77), someone would have to sift through their reports to determine what would actually appear in the newspaper. They would also have to mold those reports to fit the style of the newspaper.

The reporters at ECN face numerous potential news stories on a daily basis. From these options, they select the information that will be communicated to a news organisation based on the external criteria established by the receiving organisations as well as the internal criteria established by ECN as the producing organisation.

This process of selection and transformation is a fundamental characteristic of the news making process and is preformed by the so-called "gatekeepers". Dated applications of gatekeeping theory, such as White's (1950) benchmark study of "Mr. Gates", conceptualise news editors as the all-powerful gatekeepers responsible for passing events through the news making gates.

This original model, however, received much criticism for its narrow treatment of communicators and the roles they play as system controllers. Gallagher (1982: 153) argues that the original model, derived from early American functional and behavioural research methodologies, is limited in its ability to account for conflict and its causes, change and individual purpose. No consideration was given to the broader social structures in which the decisions are shaped or whose interests these decisions serve. In addition, no consideration was given to the personal preferences and interests of news writers.

In her recent study on gatekeeping, Pamela Shoemaker (1991) presents an updated version of the gatekeeping process in which editor selections may be considered within a framework of a total social system.

Thus, modern applications of gatekeeping theory enlist a far more multi-dimensional perspective which conceives of gatekeepers operating at every level from the ideological social system to the individual interests of journalists. In this conception gates are not only controlled by news editors, but may also be controlled by cultural beliefs, economic determinants, institutional requirements, organisational control, and personal bias.

Shoemaker suggests the way in which the world is framed in the news is largely a product of the gatekeeping process:

> Although each selection event in the gatekeeping process is itself ultimately trivial, the fact that millions of selection decisions are made every day makes the gatekeeping process highly

> significant. Add to that the fact that each outcome of gatekeeping is transmitted to millions of people daily and the result is a conception of gatekeeping as a crucial part of the process through which political and economic elites may control culture and the rate at which culture changes (1991: 4).

Shoemaker's model outlines the process that begins with hundreds of potential messages travelling through multiple channels to a communication organisation. The organisation may have multiple staff members operating in what Shoemaker refers to as "boundary role" input positions. Each with the power to control which potential messages actually enter the organisation and how they are shaped.

Within the organisation, these boundary role gatekeepers may channel selected messages to one or more internal gatekeepers, who may exert their own selection and shaping processes. The surviving shaped messages are then transmitted to boundary role gatekeepers for final shaping, selection and transmission.

1.3 Lewin s theory of forces

Shoemaker (1991) traces the origins of the concept to the German American social psychologist Kurt Lewin. Lewin believed that the forces that shape peoples' behaviours could be identified and studied (his work can be found in Lewin, K. (1951) *Field theory in Social Science.* New York: Harper). It is useful to return to Lewin's theory of forces for a better understanding of the various factors that shape the gatekeeping selection process.

Lewin conceived of a set of channels through which units pass, suggesting that at any channel gate, the units may be accepted or rejected. The decisions at each gate were controlled by one or more gatekeepers who were informed by forces acting on the messages from both sides of the gate. He realised that different forces act on the selection of a unit at different points in the overall channel. These forces can be either positive or negative and have the potential to change polarity as they pass through a particular gate.

Shoemaker enlists the example of a news story on location to illustrate Lewin's concept of forces in front of and behind gates (1991: 23). If, for instance, the story is difficult for journalists to reach, this will constitute a negative force that works against the story succeeding past the first gate. However, if the story is produced anyway, the force then

becomes a positive one. In addition, the time and money spent accessing the story makes it more likely to pass through subsequent gates. Shoemaker also acknowledges the editing process in the case of news selection and suggests that each pass through a gate could be dependant on the unit changing (O'Dowd, 1996: 19).

Shoemaker then extends Lewin's (1951) initial concept of forces acting on either side of the gate with four more significant points (1991: 23). First, she points out that while a force *may* change polarity once it passes through a gate, it does not necessarily have to. "Newsworthiness", for example, is a positive force that remains as it passes through the gates.

Second, she acknowledges that forces may vary in strength and at times conflict with other forces. Strong forces should, by definition, have more effect on the movement of items through gates than weaker ones. In addition, it should be noted that forces exist in relation to gates. At different gates different forces can be expected. The relative potency of these forces is likely to vary depending on the gate with which they are interacting.

Her third point is that forces acting at each gate may be influenced by units that are waiting to pass, or have already passed through the gate. If, for example, at the front of a gate, there are three stories about one event and only one story about another, the collective strength of the three item story may increase, entitling at least one of the stories to pass through the gate. Conversely, if three stories covering a particular event have already passed through a gate, the strength of the force acting on the fourth story may be weakened. Thus forces may possess a bi-directional influence through gates with forces behind a gate influencing those in front of the gate.

And finally she suggests that forces influence not only whether items get selected, but how they get presented. Items with positive forces are more likely to be shaped in an attractive or dynamic fashion and thus warrant more coverage, be timed to attract larger audiences and be repeated.

Thus the nature of forces—their number, strength and polarity—helps determine the fate of a message once it enters a communication organisation.

1.4 The interaction of forces and gatekeepers

Shoemaker's updated version of gatekeeping theory acknowledges that gates and forces do not exist independently of one another, rather gates and forces are mutually dependant. At any gate conflicting forces may influence a decision as to a news item's progress. Their interactions will depend on a number of criteria including the news organisations in which they operate and the individual gatekeepers who monitor them. An understanding of the forces at work in a given situation will help foster an understanding of how the final product came about.

Shoemaker then moves away from forces to concentrate on the broader determinants of a gatekeeper's actions. She outlines five levels of analysis which can be applied to the study of gatekeeping: the individual communication worker, the routines or practices of communication work, the organisational level, the social and institutional level and the social system level (1991: 33).

The extent to which individual communicators are responsible for gatekeeping selections varies from organisation to organisation and depends on the degree of decision-making autonomy the journalist is granted by his or her superiors. Gatekeeping selections at this level may have to do with personal likes, dislikes and biases. Here, Shoemaker maintains the relevancy of the voluntarist approach by acknowledging that some degree of human agency is involved in news making.

Considering the next level, that of the communications routines, Shoemaker acknowledges that even when an individual appears to be the gatekeeper, he or she may merely be carrying out a routine set of procedures. Routines may dictate the overall pattern of news, while individuals pick which pieces will make up that pattern today. Routines are necessary for they provide a way of coping with a virtually impossible task – reducing millions of messages into today's news (O'Dowd, 1996: 20). Gans (1979: 77) explains the benefit of news routines:

> In reporting the news, journalists could in theory choose from thousands of potential activities. Yet they can learn about only a tiny fraction of actors and activities. They are further limited by time and space and can only select an even smaller fraction of those activities which are presented to them. More importantly they cannot decide anew every day or week how to select the fraction

> that will appear on the news; instead, they must routinise their task in order to make it manageable (Gans, 1979: 77).

Hall outlines two fundamental ways in which news is constructed by way of routine. The routines constitute the structures within which journalists must operate. The first concept outlines the bureaucratic organisation of the media which facilitates the production of news in specific types or categories. One way in which this is accomplished is by organising a newspaper around regular types or areas of news also referred to as "beats". "Beats" constitutes one structure that facilitates the decision making process for journalists choosing from the millions of potential events a day. "Beats" also serve to foreground certain events and realities over others. Beats tend to be organised around institutions – the courts, crime, education, business etc. – thus dominant bureaucratic voices of those in authority tend to be over-represented in the media. Additionally, newspapers tend towards particular events and topics in terms of the organisation of their own work force (e.g. specialist correspondents and departments, the fostering of institutional contacts, etc.) and the structure of the papers themselves (Hall, *et al.,* 1978: 53).

Although the organisation and staffing of a paper regularly direct it to certain categories of items, there is still the problem of selecting from the many contending items within any one category. "This is where the second tool of selection, the professional ideology of what constitutes 'good news'—the news worker's sense of news values—begins to structure the process" (Hall, *et al.,* 1978: 53).

News values are certain criteria of relevance which guide reporters' choice and construction of newsworthy stories. These values are significant as they are subconsciously applied to news messages through the routine socialisation of journalists. These news values are implicit in news construction. They not only shape the story, but also the audience perceptions (O'Dowd, 1996: 20).

The role of news values was elaborated by Galtung and Ruge (1965b) in their benchmark study which outlined eight general news values and four additional ones applicable to western media. Galtung and Ruge hypothesised that these specified characteristics of an event would determine its chances of successfully passing through the gates into the world

of news.[1] While numerous subsequent studies have rendered slightly different sets of values, all news production studies are bound by their search for the criteria that inform the gatekeeping process. At the most general level this involves an orientation to items which are "out of the ordinary", which in some way breach our "normal" expectations about social life.

Obviously, however, the "remarkable" does not exhaust the list of themes. Additional news values refer to events which concern elite persons or nations; events which are dramatic; events which can be personalised so as to point up the essentially human characteristics of humour, sadness, sentimentality, etc.; events which have negative consequences, and events which are part of, or can be made to be part of, an existing newsworthy theme (Galtung and Ruge, 1965b).

These news values provide the criteria in the routine practices of journalism which enable journalists, editors and news workers to "decide routinely and regularly which stories are newsworthy and which are not, which stories are major lead stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which stories to drop" (Hall, *et.al*., 1978: 53).

Although they are not written as formal codes or guidelines, Hall (1978) suggests these news values are widely shared among the news media and form a core element in the professional socialisation, practice and ideology of news workers.

As journalists socialised into a profession, the news workers at ECN also share these news values which are readily apparent in the news they produce. While such news values are

[1] These 12 values are:
1. Frequency – events within a 24 hour cycle are favoured by daily papers
2. Threshold – events of great magnitude or recently increased magnitude
3. Unambiguity – events whose meaning is not in doubt
4. Meaningfulness – events in some way related to the home culture
5. Consonance – events that fulfill expectations
6. Unexpectedness – within the confines of 4 and 5, unexpectedness is favoured
7. Continuity – once accepted, an event is more likely to be accepted again
8. Composition – a selection of items in contrast to each other
9. Reference to elite persons
10. Reference to elite nations
11. Personalisation – individuals are seen as easier to identify with

indeed shared, Hall (1978) adds that they may be differently inflected. One aim of this research is to examine how these values are inflected at ECN. "Although individuals and routine practices generally determine what gets past the gate and how it is presented, organisations hire the gatekeepers and make the rules" (Shoemaker, 1991: 53). Thus, a consideration of the role of gatekeeping at the organisational level is also essential.

The culture of an organisation is built by and affects the gatekeeping processes. The organisation's power to hire and fire compels gatekeepers to represent the interests of the firm. Individuals in organisations develop a collective consciousness that results in the organisational interpretation being placed on new information. However, the influence of such organisational policy is not uniform, as workers may interpret or perceive policy in very different ways. Furthermore, centrally located gatekeepers, such as the editor, may have more power to develop organisational policies that may influence message selection (O'Dowd, 1996: 20).

Because this study seeks to determine not only how ECN selects the news that is dispatched over the news wire, but also how national newspapers select that news, the concept of organisational boundary roles outlined by Adams (1980 in Shoemaker, 1991) is particularly relevant. Boundary roles refer to activities that take place among individuals in the organisation and people in the environment. These activities include: (1) the acquisition of organisational inputs and the disposal of outputs; (2) filtering inputs and outputs; (3) searching for and collecting information; (4) representing the organisation to its external environments; and (5) protecting the organisation from external threat and pressure (Adams, 1980: 328 in Shoemaker, 1991: 56).

Of particular consequence to the study of gatekeepers are those individuals who engage in the activity of filtering inputs and outputs. For example, news wire editors filter outputs when they decide what news messages to send on to subscribing newspapers. In turn, the newspapers' editors filter inputs when they decide which of the messages to use. Gatekeeping then involves two processes: *inputs* include the messages that come to the

12. Negativity – bad news generally combines more of the above values than good

attention of communications organisations while *outputs* include those that are selected and transmitted.

> Therefore, the wire service organisation's own criteria should determine which stories will be selected for processing and consideration, whereas criteria established by the organisation's media clients should determine which stories are later transmitted to clients (Shoemaker, 1991: 57).

The organisational boundaries activities approach suggests that wire services transmit stories in patterns of selection in line with their perception of what the newspapers wish to receive. Gatekeepers at this level of analysis are seen to follow someone else's rules – either their own organisation's rules or those of the external organisation. However, there is still room for individual variation. While the organisation plays a significant role in shaping news values, personal bias and ideology also have an impact.

Now that we have considered gatekeeping as an activity performed by a communication organisation and its representatives, we must also consider its role in the broader context of social institutions. Communications organisations exist alongside other social institutions, many of which affect the gatekeeping process. Shoemaker (1991: 61) lists several of these institutional influences, which include sources, audiences, government, advertisers and market decisions. All of them exist co-dependently, each influencing the actions of the others. Together these institutions possess power to impact upon the output of media messages.

While the issue of power is central to the concept of institutional influence, its nucleus rests at the broader level of social systems where culture both influences the items that are allowed past a gate and is simultaneously influenced by them. Gatekeeping is also affected by the ideology of the social system. Raymond Williams (in Shoemaker 1991: 69) defines ideology as a "relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a 'world-view' or a 'class outlook.'" At this level, ideology does not refer to an individually held set of beliefs, but to an integrated worldview shared by almost everyone in the social system.

Hall (1977) suggests the ideological system within which news workers exist causes them to select items that serve the purposes of the powerful elites. The media is then seen as an

agent of the powerful—an institution which is ideologically programmed to retain the dominance of the powerful elites. Thus gatekeepers are influenced by the hegemony of the social system that they then work to maintain (Shoemaker, 1991: 69). This research will consider this function of gatekeeping with respect to ECN and explore the ways in which ECN upholds or transcends its implied role as a purveyor of dominant class ideals.

1.5 Centre/Periphery Issues

One factor that is particularly pertinent to the ideological structures and forces behind news production is the issue of geographic power. If we consider the media landscape on a global scale, it is evident that a few countries, typically the Western powers, dominate the global news industry (Tunstall, 1977; Tuchman, 1978; Van Ginneken, 1998). This domination in turn creates a glaring imbalance in the international news flow, often leaving developing and third world countries on the periphery of the news selection process (Van Ginneken, 1998: 128). This imbalance serves to maintain the power of the elite nations by subordinating those of less powerful and developing nations.

Writing on this global centre periphery system of news selection, Jaap Van Ginneken (1998) enlists the appropriate metaphor of a "world news fishing net". At the centre the mesh is tightly woven to fish out the most inconsequential events. On the periphery, however the mesh may be hundreds of metres wide, catching only the events of the most staggering magnitude. The world news net is extremely dense at the centres – New York, London, Paris – where the most influential new organisations, Reuters, The Associated Press and Agence France Presse have their headquarters (Van Ginneken, 1998: 120-140). The resulting incongruity is that centre cities, saturated with journalists, are over-represented in the news, while distant peripheral outposts receive hardly any coverage at all.

This unequal coverage of geographical space is inextricably linked to power. "The news net imposes order on the social world because it enables news events to occur at some locations but not at others" (Tuchman, 1978: 23). As a result great masses of populations are under-represented in the news, while those of relatively small elites are over-represented. Not only does this misrepresentation skew the way we make sense of the

world, it shapes general ideologies which in turn shape news workers' ideologies about the relative importance of certain geographic areas.

Within the broader framework of gatekeeping at the social systems level, the issue of centre-periphery relations provides the theoretical context for my study. I will argue that South Africa is one of the many countries that emulates the centre-periphery system of news selection established by the industrialised powers. Just as third world news is often of marginal concern in the first world media organisations, the news of the Eastern Cape is of little concern on the national, Johannesburg-based news agenda here in South Africa. The marginalisation of Eastern Cape news by national power structures is shaped by structure and ideology that places centres of power as centres of news, thus marginalising certain voices while highlighting others. As a result, the media, by primarily expressing the views of the elite, perpetuates and sustains the existing structure of power in society's institutional order.

1.6 Methodology

In order to explore the issues brought forth in this chapter, I will conduct a critical ethnography of the ECN organisation. Smith (1996: 5) states that the purpose of ethnography is to "learn about, record and ultimately portray the culture of a group." In an analysis of American news organisations, sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) combined participant observation of the editorial staff, the organisational structures and a content analysis of their published output in his ethnographic study of what became news and why. I aim to use similar ethnographic methods in my research, bearing in mind that this process can be problematic.

As the focus of my research is a study of news engineering and reporting, qualitative research methods are most appropriate. Qualitative research assumes that knowledge of reality is constructed by the individual's involvement in the research situation, where multiple realities exist (Cresswell, 1994: 6). It is context specific in that the researcher aims to give meaning and attempts to understand reality within a particular context.

As my study is concerned with how the national media market portrays the peripheral Eastern Cape region in the news, this research is framed within the paradigm of critical theory. In the context of media studies, critical theory seeks to examine the relationship

among the media, communications and social power. Fejes (1984: 220) states that the critical perspective focuses on the production and control of media messages, or their content, in the context of examining how the media develop a specific ideology that supports a dominant ideology. This point is central to my research which examines how the dominant media structures control the publication and even the production of ECN news.

Three methods were used in gathering most of the evidence to support the arguments developed here. First, participant observation of the working practices of ECN took place for six weeks. The other qualitative method employed was the interview. I interviewed the ECN employees, including the editor, the writers and the business manager, along with new workers of national and regional newspapers, in order to ascertain what criteria inhibits or promotes passage of ECN news through various gates.

While the bulk of my research reflects qualitative methods, quantitative methods are also enlisted to complement the approach. Quantitative research employs statistical focus making it possible for the researcher to measure responses according to a limited set of variables which, in turn, facilitates comparison and generalisation. Because qualitative and quantitative research methods involve different strengths and weaknesses they constitute alternative, rather than mutually exclusive, strategies (Patton, 1990: 14) and help to validate the findings of each approach. To assess what themes are considered newsworthy both regionally and nationally, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of published ECN material to support my qualitative analysis.

1.6.1 Participant Observation

The bulk of my proposed research will be conducted through the ethnographic research practice of participant observation. Smith (1995: 34) points out that "different cultural groups have different world views…or… paradigms that provide a frame of reference for perception, belief and behaviour." A naturalistic approach to research allows the researcher to uncover these world views and how they interact. It is these world views and patterns of interaction that are crucial to understanding the process and outcomes of news making.

Writing on the advantages of participant observation, Spradley states: Participation allows you to experience activities directly, to get the feel of what events are like, and to record your own perceptions (1980: 50).

For six weeks, I immersed myself in the daily routines of ECN as an active participant observer. I attended meetings, worked on stories both in the office and in the field, observed organisational methods, and interviewed, both formally and informally, the editor and the journalists to assess how they select and produce stories and interview sources.

Working from a sociological perspective, I aimed to grasp an understanding of how the world looks from the point of view of those being studied. Working as a journalist with ECN afforded a genuine opportunity for immersion in the news worker's world view. Additionally I was able to experience the atmosphere and social dynamics at work inside the organisation.

Schlesinger (1978: 1) argues that to arrive at a sociological analysis, one must go beyond immersion. "One must become disengaged and reconstruct the data gathered in terms of a number of themes deriving from a sociological perspective." While performing the day to day functions of a journalist, I aimed to maintain my distance as a researcher. This is not to suggest, of course, that my findings are entirely separated from my own experiences. Indeed I acknowledge that the findings and the analysis from my participant observation are the result of my own personal perceptions and insights into the ECN environment. For this reason, I used a number of additional data gathering techniques to check and cross-check information.

1.6.2 Content analysis

Kerlinger (1986) defines content analysis as a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (in Wimmer and Dominick, 1994: 164). To assess how often ECN news is utilised both regionally and nationally, I conducted a content analysis, spanning three months, of ECN stories sold to the following papers: three Eastern Cape daily newspapers, *The EP Herald*, *The Daily Dispatch* and *Die Burger;* one regional daily newspaper, *The Natal Witness;* three national daily news papers, *Business Day, The Star*

and *The Sowetan*; one Eastern Cape weekly newspaper*, The Weekend Post*; two regional newspapers, *The Saturday Argus* and *The Sunday Argus;* and five national weekly newspapers *The City Press*, *The Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Times, The Saturday Star* and *The Sunday Tribune.*

The quantitative content analysis revealed that the bulk of ECN's national news appears in the weekly, rather than the daily newspapers. Thus, in order to assess which themes are considered newsworthy on a national level, I conducted a thematic analysis of national weekly newspapers for a period of 11 months beginning in January 1998 and ending in November 1998.

1.6.3 Interviews

Wimmer and Dominick (1994: 167) state that content analysis alone cannot serve as the sole basis for claims about the media. To supplement the content analysis and the participant observation, I included a series of unstructured interviews. Fontana and Fray (1994: 365) suggest that unstructured interviewing "provides a greater breadth than the other types given its qualitative nature."

Lofland (1971) points out that participant observation and interviewing go hand in hand and that much of the data gathered in participant observation comes from informal interviewing in the field. To supplement the informal questions and discussions from my observation period, I conducted a series of unstructured, open-ended ethnographic (in-depth) interviews with the ECN employees. The interviews with the ECN workers included the editor, the reporters and the business manager and lasted approximately an hour each.

In addition I interviewed news workers of national and regional newspapers to ascertain their perceptions of ECN and its role in the media marketplace. These brief, semi-structured, telephonic interviews helped to highlight which Eastern Cape news topics are of significance to national newspapers.

1.7 Conclusion

News is much more than a mere reflection of the world we live in. Between the lines of newsprint lies a complex process of selection, modification and representation shaping how certain messages are framed. These messages are not reflections, but constructions. These constructions, in turn, play an important role in shaping our understanding of reality.

Content decisions are made at every level of the news production process. As the voluntarist approach suggests, individuals do play a role in shaping the news. However, the realities journalists construct are very much shaped by the structures in which they are embedded. Thus, this research is informed by a multi-dimensional structuralist approach which argues individuals, organisations, economic determinants and social systems all play a role in shaping news values which, in turn, inform the selection process which constructs the news. Ultimately these values are connected to the role of power. Thus, decisions in the gatekeeping process serve to validate and accentuate certain realities while sidelining others.

The following chapters explore how this process occurs and what structures influence the complex process of news construction at ECN. The decisions ultimately provide insight as to which power interests in society are promoted, and which are compromised.

Chapter Two
The Formation of ECN

2.0 Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide a contextual background for East Cape News Pty. Ltd. (ECN). An understanding of how news is formed at ECN must be prefaced with an understanding of the formation of the organisation itself and the economic and institutional frameworks within which it operates. This chapter demonstrates that such foundational structures have significantly impacted upon the production of news at ECN and have played an influential role in shaping the organisation's present goals and challenges.

As a rare survivor of the alternative news agencies that proliferated during the apartheid era, ECN's history has been an unsteady one. This chapter traces the organisation's development from its beginnings as an alternative news organisation, to its eventual and necessary transformation in 1997 to a fully-fledged commercial company. The chapter also considers the restructuring of the post-apartheid South African media market and the implications this bore for ECN's development.

2.1 Organisational profile

ECN began its organisational life little more than a year ago in July 1997. Yet the history behind this small news agency extends much further – to the early-eighties – when various alternative press groups surfaced throughout South Africa offering much needed alternatives to the white dominated, establishment press of the apartheid years.

Prior to 1997, ECN, formerly known as East Cape News Agency (Ecna), functioned as a trust operating with funds allocated from international donors; notably the British-based OXFAM, the Dutch-based NOVIB and the Swedish and Canadian embassies. Over a period of two years, beginning in 1995, the trust was dissolved, paving the way for the externally funded Ecna to make the transition to ECN, a privately owned and operated news agency. Today East Cape News (ECN), a rare survivor of the once vibrant alternative media sector of the apartheid years, functions as an independent commercial news agency headquartered in Grahamstown, South Africa.

The following history illustrates that ECN's commercial restructuring was necessitated by South Africa's radical political transformation. The end of apartheid in 1994 brought about significant political and economic changes which affected the entire country, including the alternative press market. First, the mainstream media, finally liberated from state control, began to encroach on news subjects (black politics, grassroots people and investigative journalism) that had previously been the "exclusive territory" of the alternative press (Berger, 1995a: 123). Moreover, alternative news agencies had to come to terms with the drying up of international aid after the end of apartheid. Both of these factors bore substantial implications for ECN, then known as Ecna.

The section also considers how ECN, in the process of establishing itself as a commercial business, has had to re-examine its journalistic mission, and maintain a precarious balance between the news it values and the news that sells. Chapter three will subsequently investigate how this dichotomy, dictated by two very different agendas – one economic, the other developmental – influences the way ECN shapes the news.

2.2 Historical overview

A historical sketch of the development of ECN may be guided by a straightforward proposition: the origins of Ecna and its eventual transformation to ECN were linked respectively to the domination and eventual collapse of South Africa's apartheid state. It was the domination of the apartheid state in the early eighties that necessitated the emergence of an alternative press. Likewise, it was the demise of apartheid in 1994 that prompted the elimination of the alternative press and the subsequent restructuring of Ecna.

2.2.1 The apartheid years

During the apartheid years, the media landscape in South Africa was characterised by a white-dominated, state-controlled monopolistic media system. This system marginalised black South Africans not only in editorial representation, but also as owners, journalists and readers. It was during this climate of veiled oppression in the 1980s that the

alternative press emerged as an exception to the establishment mainstream, providing a much-needed voice of opposition (Berger, 1995a: 125).

Committed to exposing the improprieties of the apartheid government, publications such as *The Weekly Mail*, *New Nation, New Era Magazine*, *Grassroots*, *Work In Progress*, *New African, Vrye Weekblad*, *South*, *Speak, Learn and Teach* and the *Eagle* surfaced on the South African media landscape throughout the eighties. Politically aligned with the struggle for liberation, their adversarial content offered a platform through which news neglected by the mainstream media could be disseminated to the public. Alternative media organisations such as these focused their reporting on black politics, human rights abuses, investigative and educational journalism (Berger, 1995a: 123).

This trend towards independent journalism affected the Eastern Cape, too, but in this region, no attempt was made to start a fully-fledged newspaper. Instead Ecna originated in the form of four local news agencies, Pen, Albany News Agency, Veritas and Elnews, which were set up separately in the mid-1980s as independent initiatives to provide alternative publications with broader scopes of coverage.[1] These agencies filtered news from out of the way areas onto the pages of alternative publications, as well as a growing number of mainstream publications (Kruger, 1998: 1). At that time Ecna was a forum, with the different agencies operating separately, although they did convene on occasion to discuss problems and plans.

The role of these agencies was twofold. First, they were committed to promoting the political agenda of the resistance movement and opposing the apartheid government and its restrictions on news reporting. Second, they fulfilled a developmental role in that their newsrooms doubled as training grounds for aspiring black journalists (Kruger, Interview, 1998).

During the 1989 state of emergency, Ecna faced a great deal of pressure – members were detained, offices burgled – and the agencies nearly closed down. During this time, a

[1] Veritas was established in King Williamstown in 1982; in 1986 Elnews and Pen agencies were set up in East London and Port Elizabeth respectively, followed by the Albany News Agency in Grahamstown the following year (Forbes, 1998: 166).

decision was taken to set up a central administration and news desk (Forbes, 1998: 157). Thus in 1991 the four agencies officially merged into a consortium with Grahamstown serving as the headquarters for the four branch offices.[2] The newly centralised Ecna trust retained the civil rights ideals advocated by each of the four separate agencies and remained an organisation committed to training, development, and investigative political reporting.

It was during this time that Ecna thrived. T he centralisation process resulted in greater efficiency, increased income, and improved routine (Forbes, 1998: 157). In addition, like many other alternative media organisations of the time, Ecna's political orientation as well as its fundamental role in enabling a democratic free press earned it support from politically aligned donors both nationally and abroad. Ecna's external trustees included human rights lawyers, civil rights leaders and academics. In addition, various international organisations demonstrated support for Ecna's anti-apartheid agenda through funding donations.

With support from these international organisations, Ecna grew to be a stable and successful news organisation. Having maintained the sites of the four initial agencies, Ecna boasted an extended network in which reporters stringing from branches in East London, King Williamstown, Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth offered the alternative press, and increasingly (in the early nineties) even the mainstream press, informative news coverage of the region. From the start, the Ecna agencies saw their primary purpose as being to put the region "on the map" for the national media. A general outline of Ecna's work written in 1990, put it as follows:

> [The agencies] see themselves as part of the progressive or alternative press in South Africa. They see themselves as committed to democratic media practices, which means covering issues of importance to the majority of South Africans, and consciously opposing government restrictions on reporting, as well as the selectivity and bias in much of our press (East Cape News Agencies: general outline, 20 February 1990 in Kruger, 1998: 7).

While news reporting remained their primary objective, the Ecna trust was also committed to community development. The news organisation played a dual role as a

[2] Billing was centralised and all salaries paid from the head office in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape. A news editor was employed, allowing the group editor to pursue other tasks (such as the individual coaching of journalists) besides his managerial role (Forbes, 1998: 166).

community media-training unit. The media-training unit became an essential and highly successful component of the Ecna trust drawing a large portion of the funds. Ecna, in turn, culled 10 % of the training program's revenue in the form of a management fee (Paterson, 1998: 4).

With apartheid still firmly in place, foreign funds continued to support Ecna's crucial adversarial platform for the oppressed voices of the struggle. At this time, Ecna's role was not only clear, but essential. But in 1994, in conjunction with the formal end of apartheid, came the beginnings of Ecna's own demise.

2.3 The media and transformation

As South Africa began its move from authoritarianism to democracy, politics and economics were not the only factors in the changing terrain. This radical political transformation bore implications for all sectors of the economy, and the media organisations were no exception. For the first time in many decades, the potential emerged for all the media to operate without the prohibitive government restrictions of the past. This prompted shifts in both media ownership and media content which have profoundly impacted on both the mainstream and alternative media sectors of today (Berger, 1995a: 123).

Kenyan Tomaselli (1997: 16) offers a political economic framework through which to understand the "skewed marketplace" (Berger 1995a: 123) that resulted from the substantial post-apartheid restructuring of the media industry. He attributes the major shifts in media restructuring to the interaction of both commercial and political forces:

> The termination of sanctions in the early 1990s witnessed significant political shifts in the previously stable South African commercial media industry. These took the form of acquisitions by international capital and the procurement of previously white-owned firms by domestic black empowerment groups. Changes also occurred in political and ideological allegiances of each of the media corporations which entered in the 1990s (Tomaselli, 1997: 16).

Berger (1995a) suggests that the most noticeable effect of these changes to a free-market system dominated by media conglomerates, was the collapse of the once vibrant alternative media sector. As Tomaselli points out, the media shifts occasioned by the end of apartheid, including the disintegration of the alternative press, must be examined from both political and economic vantage points. Hence no consideration of free market

effects in the South African context can ensue without an understanding of the political forces that shaped them.

2.3.1 Political structures

The impact of the political sphere is especially clear in the shifting political ideology of the time. De Beer and Steyn (1996) suggest that more than any other factor, apartheid prevented the development of "an even minimally homogenous public sphere or 'national culture' as called for by the Freedom Charter (1955)" in terms of media consumption. As a result, one of the most important characteristics in the process of media restructuring was the general commitment to improve the amount, quality and diversity of information being passed on to citizens (De Beer and Steyn, 1996: 213). The aim of the new government was to ensure that all citizens have access to knowledge and information about the burgeoning democratic society in which they live.

Thus, the mainstream press, finally liberated from state control, began to encroach on news subjects – (black politics, grassroots people and investigative journalism) that had previously been the "exclusive territory" of the alternative publications (Berger, 1995a: 123).

> The circulation's of the alternative's had never been widespread, but their influence, their congruence with the mass of South Africans had led them to believe they were destined to be the new mainstream in the new order. Having survived years under a state of emergency, they succumbed after liberation to the commercial realities of South Africa's skewed market place (Berger, 1995a: 123).

With such shifts in the political sphere, the alternative newspapers lost their niche market to the larger mainstream newspapers. Instead of becoming the "new mainstream", alternative news agencies were forced to restructure and serve the mainstream in order to remain commercially viable.

The shifting political ideology of the time also generated economic shifts as state control gave way to free-market control providing prime opportunities for increased commercialisation, internationalisation and competition in the mainstream press. Forbes (1998: 154) writes:

> Liberal markets make it easier for international players to operate, and may lead to a more intensive presence of global agencies on national markets, threatening the markets of the mainstream and alternative domestic players alike, possibly requiring greater collaboration

> between these latter in defense against the former, at the possible expense of alternative or developmental news.

This was the case in post-apartheid South Africa where increasing multi-national investment brought about significant changes in ownership. Joining the already established Times Media Limited (TML) corporation, Irish media baron, Tony O'Reilly moved into the South African media market with his Independent Newspapers Group. With these two conglomerates dominating the post-apartheid media market, increased commercialisation and competition drove up prices, and forced many smaller competitors out of the market.

2.3.2 Ownership and control

The issue of ownership in the media market is significant because as Van Ginneken (1998) Masterman (1985) and De Beer and Steyn (1996) point out, with ever larger conglomerates controlling media organisations, the media is actually moving closer to homogenisation than diversification.

With regard to media ownership, Van Ginneken (1998: 47) states a simple economic rule of thumb: "The strongest media groups have their home base in those media markets which are not only the largest in their category, but also the richest." As a result, a limited number of corporations control the national flows of media material leaving only a minority of the country's population to shape the news and views of the majority (Van Ginneken, 1998: 49).

This point is closely related to the centre/periphery issue of unequal coverage of geographic space. The unequal coverage of geographic space seems to be aligned with a vicious circle of ownership: corporate investors are attracted to centre areas as they are richer, more powerful and thus generate more news. But they also generate more news because they have more resources, money and journalists. With a decreasing number of media conglomerates dominating the media at its centre points, events on the periphery often remain undetected. And when periphery events are articulated, it is often from the vantage point of the power centres (Van Ginneken, 1998: 129-132).

The South African media market is no exception to Van Ginneken's rule of thumb. While the media in South Africa had long been concentrated in the controlling hands of only a few powerful media corporations, the end of apartheid initiated some significant changes in the country's media market.

2.3.3 Changes in ownership

In South Africa, changes in ownership date back to 1992 when the ANC voiced plans to establish their own daily newspaper. An ANC media charter that year called for the "equitable redistribution" of media resources and a need to "ensure a diversity of ownership of media production and distribution". At the time, the ANC had strong intentions of legislating an "unbundling of press concentration" of the then monopolistic media system (Berger 1995a: 126).

These developments provoked Anglo American Corporation which, through Johannesburg Consolidated Investments (JCI), owned the Argus Newspaper Group and Times Media Limited (TML), and thus maintained monopoly control over the white English-language press, to divest itself of the asset that was proving to be "far removed from their core business but one with the most nuisance value" (Berger, 1995a: 126).

Subsequently in 1994, Anglo American put the Argus Newspaper Group up for sale. Shortly afterwards, international newspaper magnate Tony O'Reilly bought the entire Argus company securing *The Star, Daily News, Pretoria News, Diamond Field Advertiser, Sunday Tribune*, the *Newspaper Printing Company* (which prints Argus and Times Media Limited papers in Johannesburg), and *Allied Publishing* (which distributes Argus and TML papers throughout the country) (Berger, 1995a: 127).

With this move, the longstanding Anglo American print empire was finally divided. The corporation was left with TML whose titles included the *Sunday Times*, *Business Day* and the *Financial Mail.* In Port Elizabeth, TML retained its monopoly on the English-language dailies with *The Eastern Province Herald* and *The Evening Post.*[3] However, in the rest of the country, TML's titles were swiftly bought out by O'Reilly's Independent

[3] In 1998, TML also acquired the Eastern Cape's *Daily Dispatch*

Newspaper Group. In Cape Town, O'Reilly acquired *The Cape Times* (where he already had the *Argus*) and, in Durban, *The Natal Mercury* (where he already had *The Daily News*) (Berger, 1995a: 127).

O'Reilly's acquisition resulted in the single largest concentrated newspaper holding in South Africa. By 1995 he held a monopoly on the English-language dailies in four major cities. In addition, he owned 50 percent of the commercial media market and 72 percent of the English-language papers. This significant holding bore wide implications for the South African media market.

2.4 Effects of restructuring

Where one of the main concerns of the past had been the role of the state in limiting, regulating and utilising the media for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others, De Beer and Steyn argue (1996: 213) that the post-apartheid media market is characterised by a similar role being fulfilled by the multi-national corporations who, by driving smaller competitors out of the market, have limited the opportunities for increased diversification in the press.

Berger (1995a: 128) acknowledges the advantages and disadvantages of multi-national investment in the O'Reilly case:

> Thanks to Tony O'Reilly, South Africa's media received an inflow of foreign investment and an injection of competition. However, probably for financial reasons, the new found rivalry between Argus and other press players has not seen any servicing of the lower end of the media market where the majority of South Africans readers are located (Berger 1995a: 128).

Thus, while multi-national companies may deliver much needed capital, technology and managerial expertise to improve the communication systems in developing countries, (De Beer and Steyn, 1996, Berger, 1995) the system also presents "downsides" in terms of concentration of media ownership, which ultimately bears implications for accessibility to and equal participation in the services provided (Sparks, 1992: 44; Corocoran and Preston, 1995: 8 in De Beer and Steyn, 1996: 223).

So, contrary to one of the basic ideals of democracy, the idea of the free-market benefits some to the disadvantage of others (De Beer and Steyn, 1996: 223). Where once state

interference dictated editorial content in South Africa, commercial involvement seems to have taken over, ironically neglecting the same groups apartheid sought to exclude.

Echoing this proposition Maya-Pearce, discussing the economic reasons for the decline of the alternative press in South Africa, refers to "the irony of a press which is politically free, but commercially hamstrung, leading to a situation in which minority views are sidelined when they are not completely ignored" (1995: 261).

Certainly the power of the new state in South Africa was also considerable. The government's ubiquitous application of the Reconstruction and Development Programme helped somewhat in alleviating the exclusion of black and other previously marginalised voices in the media that had been so overt in the days of apartheid. But ultimately, commercial companies are primarily interested in profit, increased circulation and audience figures. Moreover, advertisers are not interested in aiming messages at and structuring their ideas around members of the audience who lack the financial ability to respond (De Beer and Steyn, 1996: 223).

With TML and the Independent Group actively competing against one another, each group took measures to increase readership and profit. In turn, dependence on advertising increased, prices rose and the news from small independent agencies reflecting the voices of less accessible advertising markets, was marginalised. It seemed that market forces were subverting the ANC's call for media diversity. Furthermore, the increased commercialisation and ensuing dependence on advertising played a detrimental role in directing editorial content for the mainstream market.

Where the state had once held the job of stifling editorial independence, media owners now assumed the prohibitive reins. Despite assurances of editorial independence, it seemed O'Reilly required editors with strong commercial orientations. He subsequently issued a policy requiring all *Argus* editors to report to a regional business manager. Such a flagrant violation of editorial independence pre-empted the principled resignation of respected *Star* editor, Richard Steyn (Berger, 1995b: 22).

While O'Reilly's single-minded strategies were arguably deleterious, his foreign money did ensure the survival of many of his newspapers. This, however, was not the case with the alternative press. In the face of mainstream media restructuring, they lost not only their niche, but also their overseas funding.

2.4.1 Implications for the alternative press

As South Africa normalised, foreign agencies no longer saw the need to support the alternative press. Without external support, the narrow circulation of the alternatives could not compete with the mainstream. By April of 1995 most of South Africa's alternative press had folded. Among the sole survivors were *The Weekly Mail*, which continued through a partnership with the *Guardian* (UK) eventually becoming *The Mail and Guardian* and *New Nation,* which was eventually bought out by the mainstream.

However, enormous gaps in mainstream news reporting remained prevalent. Although the alternative press was no longer needed to promote ANC propaganda, there was still a place for them to diversify the homogeneous media landscape that had resulted from increased commercialisation. Responding to these gaps, a spattering of small low budget community and special interest publications surfaced in many small towns. Following this trend, the already established Eastern Cape agency, Ecna, was forging a new place for itself in the rapidly shifting market.

2. 5 Ecna s place in the transformation

Shifting patterns of ownership in the press were just one of the pressures Ecna was facing in the new order. With the decline of apartheid, Ecna's once necessary adversarial role became dispensable. By February of 1995, the promise of the new democratic government and free press had provoked all of Ecna's primary sponsors to reallocate their funds to the newly formed government. Funding for alternative media production ranked low on the government priority scale, and small media companies like Ecna were forced to restructure into the mainstream or face going out of business.

In addition, Ecna's production was held back by poor management and insufficient use of resources. "A lack of clarity as to its future role weakened the organisation further, with low morale among its workers…The climax was reached in 1995 when the agency was

faced with mal-administration, personality clashes, and a funding loss of R 400 000" (Forbes, 1998: 160).

With trust funds waning, Ecna was forced to downsize. Retrenchment packages were offered to the then staff of 20; the East London and Port Elizabeth offices closed while the King William's Town branch was moved to the Bisho Legislature; and subscription rates doubled.

In 1996, facing pressure to deliver speedier and more efficient service, Ecna signed an agreement with the national agency SAPA to distribute their copy. With SAPA's resources and broad national reach, Ecna hoped for a speedier delivery of news, wider promotion of the agency name and a potentially wider market share. However, Forbes (1998: 166) feels the advantages of the arrangement to SAPA outweighed those to Ecna. "The national agency is able to monitor freely events in the Eastern Cape put out by the Ecna wire. SAPA only pays if it uses Ecna stories." In addition newspapers throughout the country that subscribe to SAPA also have free access to monitoring ECN's news. Sometimes this means they will "lift the story"— that is take the idea but have their own reporter write it so as to not pay the Ecna freelance rate. Additionally, most national newspapers that subscribe to SAPA feel that SAPA provides adequate coverage of the Eastern Cape, and thus see no reason to enlist the additional services and rates of Ecna.

In the process of Ecna's structural shifts, an ideological shift also took place. The organisation's prior impetus of political activism moved to one of economic sustainability in the commercial world. Gone were the days of anti-apartheid voices, freedom fighting and "the struggle". Ecna was forced to develop a new business ethos to accommodate reporting in a post-apartheid commercial environment. This manifested in a shift in their reporting focus. Where they had once offered the alternative press investigative pieces on black politics and the liberation struggle, the bulk of their reporting now focused on providing the mainstream press with hard daily news.

In an effort to maintain the civil rights ethos that had previously fueled Ecna, a weekend news service was established in which journalists were allocated more time and space to

explore investigative pieces pertinent to the new local government and its vast array of new problems.

Despite efforts to streamline, Ecna remained financially unstable until December 1996 when, due to continued mismanagement and deficient funding, the bank was forced to freeze their R 60 000 overdrawn account. At this point Ecna's closure seemed imminent. By June 1997 Ecna was virtually bankrupt and the Ecna trust met for the last time. At this time, the organisation's media training program, DNA (Development News Agency) was separated from Ecna, reflecting an ideological split between the two organisations.

The climate of redress and development prioritised by the government listed training schemes as vital to the growth of a democratic society. Thus, DNA became a new trust and was renamed Development Media Agency (DMA). DMA is currently run by three freelancers. "We don't believe in a standardised news service", says Rod Amner, DMA news editor (Forbes, 1998: 167). DMA emphasises community news and journalism training.

Thus, as Ecna's training wing was entrusted to new management, the news agency component faced the very real threat of bankruptcy. Yet group editor, Mike Loewe was determined to see Ecna survive. Placing his own home as surety in December of 1997, Loewe initiated the process of dissolving the trust and converting Ecna into ECN, a registered commercial company (Paterson, 1998: 7).

2.6 ECN Today

Today, ECN runs a lean six-person operation out of a small Grahamstown office with an additional reporter operating from the Bisho office. The shift to commercial ownership has been reflected in the decreased distribution of ECN news to alternative newspapers and the increased distribution to the mainstream.

Where the staff of Ecna in the early 90s had been primarily black, today the ECN staff is mostly white and male, as many of its reporters, especially the black reporters, have been attracted to better paid jobs in mainstream media or in government offices. This has, in turn, weakened ECN's links with the black community (Forbes, 1998: 161).

Although salary and other expenditures are kept to a minimum, the company's financial situation remains precarious. In 1998 at least three months saw no profit whatsoever. According to Loewe the monthly profit average for the year was 5 percent, "if we're lucky". ECN is supplying news to a marketplace more concerned with profit than the marginalised voices of the Eastern Cape. For the fledgling company, the first year has been fraught with financial difficulties. Twice this year, the company has faced bankruptcy, and in March of 1998, the agency endured a debilitating example of direct proprietorial influence when the powerful Independent Newspaper Group withdrew their R 30 000 monthly contract. Loewe says: "The Indy group doesn't even realise the impact their little move had on us."

For ECN, this came as a nearly shattering blow reeling the already precarious financial situation of the company into dire straits. The withdrawal of the Independent Group deleteriously affected ECN on many levels from a loss of income, to a loss of labour, to a vast loss of market share.

As a result of the cancelled contract, four of ECN's most experienced senior journalists, cognisant of the deteriorating financial situation, left the company to seek employment elsewhere. Their departure at the beginning of 1998 compounded with the diminishing income compelled Loewe to restructure the company once again. Two younger, less experienced journalists were hired to fill the vacant slots of the four experienced Ecna-born news workers. One of the new journalists, Quentin Wray, was hired without previous experience as the business reporter in January 1998. He remarks:

> *I m really glad that they [the more experienced journalists] left. Because otherwise I would ve been without a job. They were all able to go off and do journalism elsewhere, whereas nobody else would ve hired me. I had no experience* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

This move had two main effects on the news output at ECN. First, the volume of the output decreased as a diminished, less experienced team of reporters assumed the reigns. Second, the reporting became more specialised around specific "beats".

According to Hall (1978: 53) "beats" are a commercial imperative for news room organisation. They provide one fundamental way in which newspapers routinely synthesise the structure of news selection with respect to regular types or areas of news.

Fishman (1977: 87) further points out that the beat system of news coverage is so widespread among established newspapers that not employing beats is a distinctive feature of being an "experimental" or "alternative" newspaper.[4] The addition of more beats at ECN is one indication of how ECN has been forced to restructure into the commercial mainstream in order to survive financially.

Loewe brought Wray on board to cover the business news—a beat entirely new to ECN. Mike Earl Taylor, who had been on staff prior to the departure of the other four journalists, was promoted to Senior Reporter and assumed an expanded role as the ECN Court Reporter. In addition, Nick Wilson, a recent Rhodes Journalism School graduate, was hired as the Government Correspondent in Bisho. It was not until almost a year later, in November, 1998, when the financial situation had somewhat recovered, that Loewe could afford to hire a General Assignment Reporter, Patrick Burnett (also a recent journalism school graduate).

Significantly the business beat and the court beat were commercially induced additions as both these sectors generate news that sells. Court stories reflect a high element of drama which is factor news organisations perceive as considerably newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Such copy moves easily through the gates of selection.

Business stories are also financially profitable as they serve a high-income audience of business men and women that key advertisers are anxious to reach. Reuter's recent restructuring into a primarily economic news service is evidence that the business niche is increasingly dominating the news market (Boyle, Interview, 1998).

In addition, the loss of the Independent contract meant a loss of the main share of ECN's market in the national urban centres of Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. As a result, these centres tend to use only the limited news of the periphery Eastern Cape

[4] Fishman cites the example of an alternative newspaper, *The Purissima Voice,* which prided itself on not using beats. When the staff of the newspaper began debating whether beats should be instituted in order to facilitate an expansion of local coverage, it was decided that they should not be instituted precisely on the grounds that to do so would cause the newspaper to drift from its distinctive "alternative" character (Fishman, 1977: 87).

supplied by SAPA.[5] However, because SAPA distributes ECN copy, even non-subscribers are exposed to the stories. Loewe feels that the nationals are using the service to monitor the Eastern Cape but using their own reporters to write the stories they actually deem newsworthy. Loewe maintains:

> *They re using the service picking it up and publishing it on the quiet. We just don t have the resources to play police. As long as we re out there, we re happy.*

Currently, ECN's sales focus primarily on the regional markets, serving the two Eastern Cape dailies, *The EP. Herald* and *The Daily Dispatch* and the targeted black audience newspapers *The Sowetan* and *The City Press*. Additional subscribers include *Business Day*, *Radio Algoa*, *The Evening Post*, *Die Burger*, and Grahamstown's *Grocott s Mail*.

Subscribers have unlimited access to ECN copy while newspapers that do not subscribe (this includes, but is not limited to, The Independent Group Newspapers and *The Star*) may purchase ECN news on a freelance basis.

The final effect of the *Independent* contract cancellation resulted in an increased emphasis on freelance pieces – the weekend service – which operates entirely on a freelance basis. Without national subscriptions, one way for ECN to extract profit from national newspapers was to offer more in-depth freelance pieces for their weekend coverage. Thus, while aiming to churn out three to four daily news stories a day, the staff must further constrain their time by researching and reporting freelance features for the weekend service. This service is more actively used than the daily service by non-subscribing newspapers such as *The City Press*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Independent* and *The Saturday Argus*.

While the withdrawal of the powerful Independent Newspapers Group left ECN teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, ECN has managed to survive the departure. It has not, however, been an easy task. This example clearly illustrates the enormous power

[5] SAPA, an autonomous, non-profit news organisation employs a copy-sharing method of distribution. Its member newspapers in one region supply copy to members in other regions. In the Eastern Cape SAPA relies primarily on the mainstream newspapers, *The Daily Dispatch* and *The EP Herald* for Eastern Cape news coverage. Even SAPA editor Mark van der Velden acknowledges that this arrangement does not provide broad news coverage of the vast Eastern Cape (Interview, 1998). There are still many voices left unheard. I argue ECN's role in bringing such voices to the fore is still vital.

corporate companies wield in the media market – even over firms they do not own – and the constraints ECN faces as a small player in corporate media market.

It is important to remember, however, that proprietorial influence is only one factor, albeit a highly significant one, in the complex mesh of influences which operate upon the media market. The next chapter will investigate the influences within the ECN organisation itself that shape the production of news.

2.7 Conclusion

This historical evolution of the ECN organisation illustrates the influence the external structures of politics and economics hold with regards to news making. This chapter has demonstrated that most of the impetus for change within ECN has derived from external factors rooted in the changing political and economic structures of a radically shifting South African society. In very simple terms, one can conclude that the establishment of Ecna and its eventual transformation to ECN paralleled the rise and fall of apartheid. It was the state-controlled press of the apartheid government that necessitated the formation of alternative news organisations such as Ecna in the first place. And it was the decline of that same government that provided the impetus for the media restructuring which pre-empted Ecna's transition to the privately owned and operated ECN.

The demise of apartheid occasioned both political and economic shifts which disturbed Ecna's place in the media landscape. First, with the mainstream press finally free from government control, there was no longer a need for an alternative press to serve as platforms for the oppressed voices of the struggle. This, in turn, prompted foreign sponsors to withdraw funding to organisations such as Ecna.

Second, the decline of apartheid opened South Africa's long closed doors to foreign investors such as Tony O'Reilly's *Independent Newspapers Group*. This internationalisation of the market prompted increased competition, commercialisation and market entry costs. Together these factors worked to push small, alternative, news organisations such as Ecna out of the market. It was in the face of these changes that Ecna was forced to re-evaluate its situation, work within commercial dictates and develop a new business strategy for survival in a competitive commercial arena dominated by only

two media conglomerates. It was this move that pre-empted the formation of the independent commercial news agency, ECN.

As a commercial operation, ECN changed drastically. Internal labour structures were modified and even the type of news reported was forced to change. Whereas Ecna had served a primarily alternative market with in-depth investigative pieces, ECN re-organised their labour around “beats” to facilitate expeditious production of hard news for the mainstream market.

Having examined the social, political and economic structures that shaped the organisation as we know it today, I turn now to the structures, both external and internal, that shape and determine the news generated by ECN.

Chapter Three
Internal Gates: The Formation of News at ECN

3.0 Introduction

The previous chapter traced ECN's history, providing a contextual background for its development. This chapter explores why ECN and the texts they produce are the way they are. Returning to the central question of this study: "What makes the news?" I unravel some of the main determinants, both within and outside the organisation, that influence how journalists at ECN select, shape and produce news.

Certainly a complex web of factors operating on every level from the social system to the individual journalist (Shoemaker, 1991) are at work in the social construction of news. This research however, is limited to an examination of those forces which, in my view, figured most prominently in the construction of ECN news. In addition to established constraints of money, time and deadlines, I also explore the social dynamics, the ethos, the attitudes and the perceptions of the journalists shaping the news at ECN.

While the main emphasis of this chapter is on story selection, I will also consider story production, for as Gans (1979: 73) points out: "how journalists choose the news cannot be fully understood without considering how they report, write or film their stories."

3.0.1 Definition of terms

Chapter one established that an event becomes a published news story once it has successfully passed through several gates with variable forces acting on either side. Like any other news, news produced at ECN, must also pass through a number of gates before it reaches the audience. While it would be impossible to identify every gate operating at every level, for the purposes of this research the two main gates through which ECN news must proceed shall be identified.

The first set of gates, which will be referred to as the "internal gates", incorporates the various channels through which news at ECN must pass before it is transmitted via "the wire" for potential publication by newspapers. The second set of gates, which will be referred to as "external gates", considers the gates a story must pass through for actual publication.

ECN is a news agency, rather than a newspaper, therefore its news must be distributed to various publications in order to be published. Thus news that succeeds past the internal gates of ECN must still pass through external gates of various news publications, before actually reaching the public. This chapter focuses on the factors determining passage through internal gates. Chapter four will then consider the factors that promote or inhibit passage of ECN news through the external gates.

3.0.2 The economics of news

At this point, it is also important to acknowledge that many of the issues to be discussed in this research -- questions of the audience, of institutional self-regulation, of the importance of new sources, for example -- are really, at the core, economic issues. Hence the economic forces at work in shaping the news underpin any discussion of news determinants.

Masterman (1985) argues that economics are fundamental structural determinant of news. He maintains that the output produced by news organisations, whether it is an entire newspaper or, in the case of ECN, individual news texts, is ultimately shaped more by economics than by events. Deadlines, space allocation, even the sources a journalist chooses to highlight are all functions of economic determinants.

Later in the chapter, we will see how ECN news adheres to these economics of format. But the more relevant economic issue for this study relates to ECN's deficient finances and the resulting structural constraints. On a day-to-day basis, production at ECN is noticeably hampered by a lack of financial resources, which manifest in time constraints, source constraints and labour constraints. I will touch on many of these throughout the chapter. For now, however, it is sufficient to remember that economic factors are a significant factor in shaping production, especially for a struggling company like ECN.

3.0.3 Controlling Production

Schlesinger (1972: 4) states that news is, among other things, "the exercise of power over the interpretation of reality." On a broad level, this study centres around how the production of news is controlled and those forces in power who shape it. The exercise of power over news construction extends to groups and individuals at all levels. It ranges

from media barons like Tony O'Reilly, to editors and journalists. It also includes corporations, organisations, audiences and information sources.

Proposing the central question "what is the interplay of factors which determine this ability [to control]?" Gallagher (1982) states:

> What is the relative importance, for example, of external, political, economic and social factors against internal factors such as professional ideologies, ownership and management structures, editorial policies and technical and financial constraints? How does the communicator preserve creative autonomy within the organisational setting? How and why, finally, does media output come to be as it is? (Gallagher, 1982: 152).

This chapter explores how this power is exercised and how it effects the construction of news at ECN.

While I have separated the categories below to facilitate the structure and accessibility of the research findings, it is important to remember that in practice, determinants of news making are never so clearly delineated. At all levels they are intertwined, with the forces in each sphere acting upon one another.

3.1 The role of the organisation – internal controls

While journalists are considered the primary shapers of news texts they are often not as free or autonomous, as they might believe. Journalists operate within organisations and possess just as much of an ideological and cultural framework as other people. These frameworks inevitably condition their reports and their interactions with sources (Van Ginneken, 1998: 69). Thus, while the first salient step in the gatekeeping process may be determining which activities are to become news, we must bear in mind that these seemingly simple decisions are informed by a complex set of multi-dimensional forces.

Decisions as to the definition of news – what will and will not be covered – are heavily influenced by the executives in a news organisation. Epstein (1981) reiterates the significance of organisational controls over journalists.

> In making such basic decisions, news organisations must consider their own requirements for surviving in a competitive environment. A news organisation obviously cannot spend more on news than it earns in revenues for a sustained period of time without going bankrupt. Similarly, a news organisation cannot advance the career of journalists who undermine its basic values. Eventually, it may be assumed, the key decision-makers [gate-keepers] in an organisation will identify with the needs of the organisation and they will make decisions consistent with its overriding interests. These decisions will in turn shape its product – the news (1981:120).

This section illustrates the degree of influence the ECN organisation has over the ECN journalists.

3.1.1 The social production of news – the routines of news selection

Referring back to Stuart Hall's (1978) notion of news as a socially constructed product, we can infer that news is by no means an accident. Rather, the news is the product of a work system that operates within a determinate set of routines (Hall, *et al.,* 1978).

Thus, a daily agenda of "news" reports is not the inevitable product of chance events. Rather, it is a result of numerous selection decisions made at various gate-keeping levels within the routines of an organisation. Gans (1979: 77):

> In reporting the news, journalists could in theory choose from thousands of potential activities. Yet they can learn about only a tiny fraction of actors and activities. They are further limited by time and space and can only select an even smaller fraction of those activities which are presented to them. More importantly they cannot decide anew every day or week how to select the fraction that will appear on the news; instead, they must routinise their task in order to make it manageable.

I turn now to an exploration of how ECN "routinises" the task of news making.

3.1.2 The newsday cycle: an overview

At ECN, news is routinised through daily cycles known as "newsdays". Each newsday is divided by a number of transmission times for which news bulletins and stories must be prepared to be dispatched on the wire. "These transmission times constitute a series of deadlines towards which the entire production machine is oriented" (Schlesinger, 1978: 48).

Production at ECN is primarily organised to serve subscribing daily newspapers. To fulfil this function, ECN transmits stories throughout the day to newspapers across the country via the South African Press Association (SAPA) wire. Copy for the daily wire is typically limited to approximately 350 words per story. This stipulation emerged at the behest of subscribing newspapers whose gatekeepers tend to "cut the copy" if it "runs too long". Although the scope of this research is limited to the majority of ECN's market—the print newspapers—ECN also transmits short copy blurbs throughout the day to Radio Algoa.

The weekend service offers in depth feature stories which run approximately 600-800 words. Deadline for "weekend stories" typically fall on Thursday mornings.

Daily news is disseminated at informal deadlines throughout the day; however, the final deadline occurs at approximately 4:30 pm. so that the text can be sub-edited and sent out on the wire to the daily newspapers for publication the next morning.

In addition to the daily cycle of news production, news at ECN is also organised around the division of labour. As discussed in chapters one and two, newspapers tend towards particular events and topics in terms of the organisation of their own work force. At ECN, three of the four reporters are "beat" reporters who cover a specific and bounded arena, while one is a general assignment reporter, who covers everything else and therefore appears in many arenas (Gans, 1979:80).

Hall (1978:53) suggests "beats" are one of the fundamental ways in which newspapers routinely synthesise the structure of news selection with respect to regular types or areas of news.

The ECN Grahamstown beats pertain to business and the courts, while the Bisho beat revolves around issues of governance. The ECN reporters are also assisted by two members of support staff, an office manager and the office assistant.

Production, therefore, as Schlesinger (1978), Gans (1979) and Tuchman (1978) propose, is organised in relation to particular cycles and is based on a division of labour within the newsroom.

Although the organisation and staffing of a paper regularly direct it to certain categories of items, there is still the problem of selecting from the many contending items within any one category. This is where the second tool of selection, the professional ideology of what constitutes 'good news'—the news worker's sense of news values—begins to structure the process. This is also where the editor or the executives in a news organisation implicitly affect a news workers sense of what is "newsworthy".

3.2 The role of the editor

Schein (1983: 13) proposes that an organisation's culture begins life in the head of its founder – springing from the founder's ideas about truth, reality and the way the world

works.

In this section I refer to Schein's (1983) discussion of the cultural role of an organisation's founder as an explanatory framework. Gans (1979), Epstein (1981), and Schlesinger (1978) all suggest that journalists must conform to the rules and news values of the organisation that employs them. At ECN, Mike Loewe is not only the editor, but also the founder and the CEO of the organisation. Thus his actions, words and deeds are crucial for establishing implicit values and norms considering "newsworthiness" at ECN. One of the clearest findings of my study was the ECN reporters' unanimous view of Loewe as a highly talented, committed and experienced journalist. The journalists' adherence to Loewe's vision and mission for ECN is indicative of the respect and regard they feel for him.

A journalist of the apartheid era, Loewe recalls the importance of journalism in exposing the improprieties of the National Party. He remembers fighting for a cause and using journalism as a platform for exposing civil rights violations. During this time he developed a growing commitment to activist journalism. Although apartheid is over and ECN has made many changes in its transition to commercial status, Loewe maintains that the "at the core of ECN, a civil rights ethic remains":

> *My understanding of the history of apartheid and oppression and of liberation conditions my recent history of the new stuff that s coming with the new government the new kinds of behaviour. Some good, some bad. Quite a bit of it bad. The bad stuff has been quite a revelation to all of us and it makes news. They re such a huge majority. If they stray from their excellent principles of non-racialism and democracy and become yet another tin pot, corrupt government, if that s what they are going to do, then the media, no matter what colour or class you are, has an absolute duty to report that* (Loewe, Interview: 1998).

Loewe's sentiments are echoed by his staff who consider their professional journalistic role as activists to be of prime importance. Even Mike Earl Taylor, the ECN journalist most frequently criticised for "unethical, sensationalistic reporting" feels very strongly about upholding professional ethics and defending the public interest. The following statement from Earl Taylor illustrates the respect granted to the ethics and public service elements of the journalistic profession in the ECN newsroom:

> *I think we both [himself and Loewe] are pretty radical. So, I think although sometimes, like everywhere else, you have tensions in the newsroom, I think if we feel that an injustice has been done somewhere, which is very much in South Africa because people have been so disempowered from the past, then I think we will find a way to try and sort it out. I think obviously there we exercise a lot of power, but with that awesome power also comes the awesome responsibility. I m a great believer in responsibility as a journalist and the ethical constraints I feel journalists should operate under* (Earl Taylor, interview: 1998).

This is not to suggest that Loewe has necessarily implanted such ideals in his journalists' heads, but rather that he hires journalists whose ideals parallel his own. Referring to ECN's most recent hire, Patrick Burnett, Loewe said, "I think he's got the mind which will bring us more freelance sales on very serious, interesting pieces of journalism. He's got that depth, which is great."

Of course not all text generated by ECN is driven by their perceived "watch dog/activist" status. Many of the stories are written for primarily commercial reasons. Indeed, Loewe instituted the business and court "beats" primarily for their commercial marketability. It is this dichotomy between the news ECN values and the news ECN sells that makes for a mixed organisational ethos and an un-unified collective consciousness among the reporters.

3.2.1 The businessman/journalist dichotomy

Typically a news editor's primary concern is news content. Consequently, he or she maintains an adequate degree of autonomy from the publisher, whose main concern is profit. This is not to suggest that an editor and his staff cannot be indirectly influenced by a publishers profit goals, however it does suggest that the editor (except perhaps in cases of extremely sensitive subject matter) is not expected to consult with the publisher on gatekeeping decisions. In the hopes of achieving editorial independence, the editor is to remain focused with news while the publisher is explicitly concerned with profit.

At ECN, the issue of editorial autonomy is complicated, as the editor and the publisher are one and the same. In addition to owning the company, Loewe selects, edits and occasionally writes the stories his company produces. For Loewe, the dual role poses a problematic conflict of interests. On the one hand he feels very strongly about providing the market with "good stories". "I want stories about poverty, where things are going wrong. Give me a story of some individual doing amazing stuff in the face of great odds." He also feels strongly about maintaining his own journalistic integrity. "The day I don't write a story because I think it won't make it into those papers[1] but I think it is a good story, I will resign." On the other hand he is faced with the constant pressures of making a profit, of keeping his business running and of serving the demands of external

[1] subscribers*: The Daily Dispatch, The EP Herald,* and *Die Burger*

newspapers.

Loewe does not hesitate to acknowledge his lack of business skills. “I’m a journalist, not a businessman”. As such, Quentin Wray, the business reporter, who had previously worked as an accountant was brought on board not only to report issues pertaining to external business, but to help direct the internal business structure at ECN as financial director. Wray also feels the day-to-day disparity of Loewe’s journalist/businessman dichotomy.

> *I don t know [if my first priority is as financial director or reporter]. It depends on the mood he s [Loewe] in. If he s worried about the business then my first job is financial director. If he s worried about the news, then my first job is reporter* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

Wray’s statement reflects not only the division of Loewe’s organisational mission, but also how this division seeps into the organisation creating a fairly disjointed ethos. Supplanting rigorous organisational regulations, ECN’s disconnected foundations seem to enhance the autonomy of the ECN journalist.

3.3 The role of the journalists

Gans (1979: 85) maintains top editors and section heads (senior editors) have the power to control news selection. They are responsible for selecting and readying stories in their particular sections, while the journalists are merely responsible for producing them. In larger news organisations these journalists have little power in selection other than to suggest stories or propose dropping them if the required information is not forthcoming from sources.

While ECN’s editor, Loewe, ultimately determines the level of autonomy suitable for each journalist, ECN’s small size, informal atmosphere and independence are fundamental factors in shaping the unconstrained environment in which personal tastes and interests are significant in story selection.

ECN’s small size eliminates divisions between senior editors and journalists because budget constraints do not facilitate a large staff complete with section heads and specialised reporters. Moreover, the roles and the power ascribed to the news workers are not as explicit as the distinct divisions of a larger, more bureaucratic organisation. In fact formal roles and functions are significantly blurred at ECN: beats are not stringently

adhered to; the business reporter is also the financial director; the office administrator is also a weekend service reporter; and the editor-in-chief wears the hats of sub-editor, reporter and CEO of the company.

Burdened with the time constraints imposed by his three major roles Loewe interferes very little in the daily news selection process.

On a day-to-day basis, selection is exercised through the daily editorial conferences which begin each news day. At ECN, this morning meeting is actually more of a morning "call out". Due to the intense and immediate time pressure of a news wire service, there is no time to pause for a morning meeting. The reporters arrive at 8:30 am. and are already fast at work before the "morning meeting" begins at 9:00 am.

Typically, Loewe does not allocate stories; rather he asks each reporter for a short description of the stories they are working on for the day. On average each reporter writes three to four stories a day. Typically at least two of those stories have already been planned. Breaking stories make up only a very small percentage of ECN reports.

Loewe then takes reporter's story descriptions and shapes them into "catchy blurbs" for the "daily diary". The "daily diary" is then sent out on the wire between 9:30 and 10:30 each morning in order to alert subscribing newspapers of stories for which they may want to allocate space. The diary serves as a daily advertisement for ECN's news and is written in fast-paced colourful language so as to elicit interest amongst the news editors of the various newspapers.

Rarely during the ECN 'morning meeting' does Loewe reject a story idea. Burdened with his own time constraints there is little room or time to discuss story selection. During my period of observation, all written stories, without exception, were dispatched on the wire in order to give the subscribing newspapers as much room for selection as possible. Loewe agrees that he is likely to let most things past the internal gates of ECN including animal interest stories from his court reporter:

> *My tolerance level when it comes to stories is extended to ET s [Mike Earl-Taylor] dog. E T loves his dog as his children. I let it ride. And this dog has become fairly famous [in the news]* (Loewe, Interview: 1998).

It was my perception that at this time of day Loewe is driven by a predominately commercial impetus opting primarily for quantity over quality. Loewe may suggest an angle, a source or offer some background contextual information, but for the most part the reporter is granted a great deal of explicit autonomy in story selection.

If the reporter is at a loss for ideas Loewe then assumes the role of story suggester. As Loewe suggests stories, the power individual reporters wield over selection decisions is evident as they will often argue with him regarding the newsworthiness of a particular story. Loewe remarks on his own lack of power:

> *My reporters reject story ideas more often than I do. I have to actually drive them. I use the metaphor of myself as a copy jock. I m riding this race and I m lashing them to get this copy. In a normal newspaper if a reporter did that he d be fired. If they refuse to give a story -- any story-- they re best shot, they won t last long, put it that way. But that s where we re different. We re so small. There are so few of us. I ve got these structures, but I have to recognise that we are ordinary people trying to keep our jobs together and do a good job of journalism* (Loewe, Interview: 1998).

That said, if the story is one that Loewe feels strongly about, however, he does assume editorial control and will insist that the reporter cover it. Wray confirms this: "If Mike [Loewe] tells me to write a story [that I'm not interested in], I'll write it. I'll argue with him about it. I'll say there's no story here, but I'll eventually write it."

While I have described a situation where reporters apparently maintain explicit control over story selection, one must bear in mind the potency of Loewe's implicit influence over story selection. ECN's small size, the relative inexperience of the reporters, and their high regard for Loewe's news sense facilitate his indirect supervision. Such supervision usually takes place in the form of guidance in which Loewe may push the handling of a story in a particular way by offering the background context or angle of a particular story.

On one occasion in December 1998 the morning meeting provided Loewe the opportunity to push Wray's story on chokka fishing licences in a particular direction. It so happened that the distribution of the chokka fishing licenses had been delayed. Subsequently Wray discovered that as part of the transformation process, only 70% of the former license holders (predominantly whites) would receive their licenses in order to make way for black entrants in the market. Loewe's "political nose for news"(Larisma, Interview: 1998) instantly sniffed out the "political angle" in the story.

He felt transformation was being handled in the wrong way and appeared angry that the ANC was taking away jobs from experienced fishermen and giving them to inexperienced fisherman. Both Loewe and Wray agreed that the process would not help the country in the long term.[2] By addressing the story in terms of "black" and "white", it instantly became a political issue worthy of political comment. Loewe said to Wray, "Make sure to get some political commentary on that. Try getting a hold of Mkhuseli Jack."[3]

Wray did not hesitate to adopt the political angle but questioned Loewe's choice of source. He responded: "Mkhuseli Jack is not political anymore." Shaking his head, Loewe emphatically replied, "of course he is!" Wray did not respond. My impression was the reporters knew when there was no further room for argument with Loewe. In addition Loewe's power in guiding and shaping stories was augmented when stories required a political source, especially if the source had been someone Loewe knew through his days as an activist journalist during the struggle. General reporter Patrick Burnett emphasises Loewe's influence in this regard:

> *Mike has an incredible background knowledge which impacts on your sense of context. You mention someone s name and he ll say something like, yeah, he used to be so and so [during the struggle]* (Burnett, Interview: 1998).

Thus, while a structuralist approach (Gans 1979, Epstein, 1981) to organisational control in news production grants the editor or the executives in a news organisation both explicit and implicit control over the journalist, at ECN, it is at the level of the editor that traditional structures outlined by media research begin to disintegrate.

As the gatekeeper, Loewe is driven to supply his clients with the maximum amount of output. Additionally he is burdened with various other tasks and is too occupied to play the role of story selector. Thus, the journalists at ECN are granted a great deal of autonomy when it comes to story selection. It is at this point in the production chain that the voluntarist notion of human agency is apparent. Unconfined by rigourous stylistic regulations or organisational boundaries, the reporters are free to write about whatever may interest them. Rarely does Loewe reject a story idea. However, it is at this point of

[2] They felt there should be a training programme for black fisherman and that the process of initiating black workers should not be to the detriment of white workers.

[3] Former prominent ANC party member. Now a prominent Eastern Cape businessman.

selection, that the professional ideology of what constitutes "good news" – the news workers' sense of news values – begins to condition the process (Hall, 1978). This is where Loewe's implicit power as editor begins to emerge. Certainly there are conflicts of interest between the reporters and Loewe in the newsroom and, as I have already pointed out, each reporter maintains his or her own specific style. However at some level, directly or indirectly, consciously or sub-consciously, Loewe influences the production of news at ECN. Office Administrator, Rita Larisma explains:

> *Mike is a very gung ho editor and very active and quite passionate, so I think that plays a part [in influencing story selection]. I think for myself, if I wasn t working under Mike, I might have some fairly cuckoo ideas that I might go ahead and think are interesting* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

For the most part the fairly inexperienced ECN reporters have been socialised into the profession by Loewe. Thus, while Loewe's influence may impact each reporter differently, some more directly than others, it is important to acknowledge that these reporters are not entirely autonomous.

3.4 Story selection

Gans (1979: 81) and Fishman (1977) suggest that events cannot be selected for news-making until they are made available to the journalist in some way.

3.4.1 Availability

Central to the notion of availability is the issue of accessibility. Before information can become news, journalists and sources must have access to one another. That access is based on a hierarchical system which reflects power. For example, the economically and politically powerful easily obtain access to journalists. Likewise, powerful sources are generally the ones most sought after by journalists. According to Gans, (1979: 81) those who lack power are generally harder to reach and are usually not sought out until their activities present social or moral disorder news.

While ECN's role in bringing some features of reality to our attention is vital, structured absences remain prevalent. Many voices in the Eastern Cape remain unheard. This is, in part, a result of ECN's inability to access the stories and, in part, a result of the external newspapers' unwillingness to publish them. This raises questions about which sources are absent, whose voices are left unheard, and which stories are not being told. Media theorist Len Masterman states:

> One of the most important, yet frequently unrecognised sources of distortion in the media lies in the sheer availability of dominant views. [Audiences] need to actively consider...those images which have been filtered out, those voices which are not easily heard, which tell different stories, offer alternative explanations and crack the unanimity of the subjects they raise (Masterman, 1985: 121).

This is a result of a complex set of structural pressures as well as logistical constraints on reporters such as time, distance, accessibility, knowledge, resources and cultural barriers.

3.4.1.1 Logistical constraints

Because of ECN's financial situation, logistical constraints play a particularly significant role in limiting access and thus subsequently impacting on story selection. According to Larisma "money" is ECN's biggest constraint:

> *Money is our biggest problem. We would love to grow and cover the entire Eastern Cape. We ve really shrunk. From having offices in Umtata, Bisho, East London, Port Elizabeth and East London. Now we just have a Bisho office, so that is a big constraint* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

Larisma points out that financial constraints have manifested into geographic ones. ECN's Grahamstown location limits access to events which occur in the (apparently) more "newsworthy cities" of the Eastern Cape such as Port Elizabeth and East London. It also limits access to the more rural areas. However, Loewe is always willing to send a reporter out into the Transkei for a story. He sees this as a newsworthy area, as do his reporters. Especially Burnett who was hired primarily to write investigative pieces and occasionally takes road trips to the more rural outposts of the Eastern Cape.

3.4.1.2 Cultural barriers

The issue of geographical constraints logically leads to a discussion of ECN's weak links to the black community. In the days of Ecna, the agency was a multi-racial environment and black reporters were prevalent. But with the end of apartheid and the institution of affirmative action, ECN's black reporters were swiftly lured to higher paying jobs. Now ECN's staff is entirely white with the exception of the office administrative assistant, Dumile Meintjies. Interestingly Meintjies often offers stories suggestions from the black community which are highly valued at ECN. Loewe says:

> *If I had my way I would just have black journalists. I love having black reporters there. They re great. They bring what we can t always get, which I want. I m hungry for that. I m really hungry. It upsets me sometimes that we don t get enough township news about black people in other areas because we can t speak Xhosa perhaps or because we don t have that history or experience* (Loewe, Interview: 1998)..

The journalists however, felt strongly and unanimously that being white was not a

prohibitive factor in reporting events from the black community. Burnett says:

> *I don t think because I m white I can t write for a black readership. I think in many cases I can probably provide a better understanding than a journalist who is black if he is writing from inside that issue. I think there s a huge advantage to be gained from looking from the outside in* (Burnett, Interview: 1998)..

Larisma reiterates this feeling emphasising that inter-cultural reporting is not restricted by journalistic ability as much as accessibility in terms of language and class barriers.

> *I m not saying a white journalist can t cover black news, because they can. The problem lies more in accessibility. Like David MacGregor[4], for example; he was a white sort of rastafarian who knew the lingo He could walk into the TK [Transkei] and get in and sit there and have beers with people and get the stories out. You know, he had the street signs, he had the lingo, he had the access. You know he was a white journalist, but I think we are all too middle class* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

Referring to a story Mientjies suggested in which the township was expanding and thus encroaching on the territory for the traditional Xhosa initiation rights ceremony Larisma said:

> *We could report on that. You know we could phone up sources and get the story. But only once Dumile told us about the story. I don t know that we would have seen it on our own. In fact, I remember a while ago we were having discussions about what we were going to do about affirmative action. Quentin made the point of when you talk about hiring someone on the grounds of merit, you have to break down what merit means. And access to stories, access to communication and language is such a strong point. So I do feel ECN is restricted in that way* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

Thus, while most of the ECN reporters feel they are equipped to cover events in the black community, they acknowledge they often have a difficult time accessing them in ways which perhaps a black reporter would not.

This discussion of which sources ECN has difficulty accessing, logically brings me to the next section which considers those sources ECN relies on quite substantially.

3.4.2 ECN news workers and source organisations

Writing on the autonomy of news workers within a media organisation Stuart Hall states:

> The media themselves do not autonomously create news items; rather they are 'cued in' to specific news topics by regular and reliable institutional sources *(et al.,*1978:57*).*

The influence of sources[5] in controlling and managing media texts is crucial. One reason for this has to do with the internal pressures of news production. Murdock writes:

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[4] Previous Ecna journalist.

[5] By "sources" I refer to the individuals or groups whom journalists observe or interview for a particular story. Their most salient characteristic is that they provide information as members or representatives of organised and unorganised interest groups as well as larger sectors of nation and society (Gans, 1979: 80).

> The incessant pressures of time and the constant problem of resource allocation and work scheduling in news organisations can be reduced or alleviated by covering 'pre-scheduled' events; that is, events that have been announced in advance by their convenors. However, one of the consequences of adopting this solution to scheduling problems is to increase the newsmen's dependence on news sources willing and able to pre-schedule their activities (in Hall, *et al.,* 1978:57).

Another reason why journalists rely so heavily on sources has to do with the fact that media reporting is underpinned by notions of "objectivity" and "impartiality". This means journalists must refrain from letting their own opinions seep into the texts they produce. As a result, sources are essential for ensuring that media statements are grounded in "objective" and "authoritative" statements from "accredited" sources so that the texts reflect "fact" rather than "opinion". For this reason sources are often people in power such as institutional spokesmen and government officials.

Certainly these frameworks hold true for the journalists at ECN. In order to produce the news, the news workers at ECN use a variety of sources to monitor the Eastern Cape. Each day Loewe receives a number of letters and faxes which often contain press releases and descriptions of upcoming events as well as information about past events. Information concerning past events usually comes in the form of the daily crime report issued by the various police stations throughout the Eastern Cape. Most other announcements tend to pre-empt the news and thus play a significant role in constructing it.

Institutional informants are heavily relied upon. Constrained by time and geography much of ECN's journalism is done over the telephone, rendering the majority of the sources institutional contacts. The beat reporters are especially tied to bureaucratic contacts. Earl Taylor has devoted a good deal of time establishing trustworthy contacts in the courts. The same holds for Nick Wilson with the Bisho government and Quentin Wray with the chamber of commerce, and other business officials. Other common sources include education officials particularly spokespeople from Rhodes University which is also located in Grahamstown.

So, while glamorous film and television representations of the news worker would have us believe journalists access the occurrence of an urban fire by storming into a burning

building, rescuing a screaming child with one hand and taking notes with the pen and paper in the other, the bland actuality of day to day news work is quite different. Much of what makes the news is not sought after by journalists, but revealed to them through extended networks of sources (e.g. press releases and official spokespeople).

While the ECN world is indeed "bureaucratically organised for journalists", as Fishman (1980: 51) claims, news workers at ECN have taken some steps to transcend some of these limits. There is certainly an awareness among the reporters that connecting with different sources can provide more diverse accounts. Especially if those sources are unknown to other journalists in the field and can provide exclusive information. Wray says, "I try not to rely too much on the same sources, otherwise people get bored." Burnett adds:

> *I do think it is quite important to access different sources of information so that you are not just churning out the same voices day in and day out. I mean it s important, if you re doing a story about education cuts not only to get the education departments view, but the school children s view as well. They re the ones who are most affected by it* (Burnett, Interview: 1998)..

As a graduate of Rhodes University Journalism Department[6], Burnett may be more sensitised to such issues than the other ECN reporters. While this does not change the fact that "news workers faced with constraints of time and accessibility must make a definitive selection of sources, it does suggest that there is a degree of reflexivity in their monitoring of the world" (Jacobs, 1996: 318).

However, speaking to sources at the ground level (school children, union workers, etc.) of bureaucratic institutions is not always possible due to time and accessibility constraints. Additionally such sources are usually only considered for "soft" stories[7] as explained by Wray:

> *People on the ground don t really know what s going on. And I write for people who want to know what the actual story is. You can t get a good story from the guys on the ground, because they don t know what s going on. But the guys on the ground give the human interest stuff. You know, Joe Bloggs has been on strike for two weeks he can t pay school fees, etc., etc.. But, you know, that s not my beat. My beat is to say what is causing the strike, how close they are to a resolution, what it s costing the industry. What it s costing labour. I m interested in the bigger picture* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

[6] Media diversity is a significant issue at the Rhodes University Journalism Department, where a great deal of emphasis is placed on training students to become responsible journalists in a post-apartheid South Africa.

[7] Generally, "soft" news aims to appeal to audience desires for human interest and entertainment, while "hard" news is meant to inform and expose. "Hard" news is generally considered more newsworthy.

Wray's statement reveals that such sources are best kept for the human interest stories, those which, in his view, are inherently less newsworthy.

So, while correspondence with government and bureaucratic sources are vital means for ECN's monitoring the "outside world", news workers at ECN do make an attempt to contact other sources of information. Additionally, certain structural constraints affecting ECN also serve to alleviate the dependence on bureaucratic sources.

Fishman (1977) describes the dilemma of a small town reporter attempting to ascertain the damage from a California fire. It is impossible to assess the total value of destroyed property by contacting those made homeless. Precisely because they are now homeless, they are difficult to locate. It is time consuming and therefore inefficient to contact every insurance company in the area to ask about claims filed. But the insurance companies must all report their claims to a central agency. Locating the central agency means locating data deemed essential to the expeditious production of news (in Tuchman, 1978:18).

For the Grahamstown-based ECN reporters, locating and accessing the central sources is frequently a challenge. With only four full time reporters, ECN does not boast the extended networks of contacts a larger, more centralised organisation might have. In addition, ECN's small size, peripheral location, and relative obscurity often hamper correspondence with institutional sources who would be more likely to cue their information to larger, more recognised news organisations. As a result ECN reporters are often not even aware that potentially newsworthy events may be occurring. This is especially true for business reporter, Wray, who considers Grahamstown's provincial location as one of his greatest constraints in accessing news sources.

> *Being stuck in Grahamstown is an enormous constraint because I don t do the cocktail circuit which the other business writers do. I don t socialise with the people who are moving and shaking. But some sources that I ve developed do tip me off. But a lot of the stuff that happens I do miss because I don t know these people socially. That s why I do a lot of travelling. You only get the releases over the phone. You don t get the deeper stuff the stuff that s a little more interesting. You actually have to know the people who know because business is very much an old boys club. People mix with other people and you need to know them otherwise you just wind up processing press releases* (Wray, Interview: 1998)..

While location is not a problem for government reporter Nick Wilson, who operates from Bisho right next to his government sources, or Earl Taylor, who operates in Grahamstown

where the seat of the Eastern Cape High Court convenes, accessibility may pose a problem. Especially in the case of Bisho where disorganisation and infrastructural dilemmas make Eastern Cape government officials extraordinarily difficult to contact via telephone.

The following example from my field notes further illustrates the problem of access for the ECN reporters:

> *Looking for story ideas for the day, Loewe is paging through the Herald and discovers that yesterday was World Aids Day. He shakes his head and raises his voice to the reporters in the newsroom. We missed the whole AIDS day! This huge event is going on and little ECN just sits there. What s wrong with us? Are we deaf or something? It was huge. He looks back down and mutters to the newspaper, This is terrible.* (Fieldnotes, December, 1998).

Even large scale, planned media events do not always make their way to the ECN news desk.

Furthermore, the deluge of information that filters through the news desks of recognised newspapers from national and international wire services, source organisations, and individuals does not necessarily reach ECN – a small town agency relatively unknown and seldom considered by potential news sources. Poor name recognition means many potential sources are unaware that ECN even exists. Likewise, when an ECN reporter phones a source, the source may not recognise the ECN name and thus be more hesitant to offer information. ECN reporter, Patrick Burnett who had previously interned at the *Cape Times*, described the situation in the following way:

> *[When] you re working for a larger organisation you get more credit when you phone sources. So when you say, I m from The Daily Dispatch , they want to speak to you. Whereas often you have to explain to people what ECN is, which might effect the credibility they give you. Maybe people are more apt to phone up The Dispatch if they ve got a great story where as they might not even know about ECN.*

As a result, ECN reporters must make a greater effort to investigate stories the newspapers would not necessarily handle such as news from the township. Additionally they rarely dismiss what Jacobs (1996: 387) refers to as the "phone-in public".

While being "stuck in Grahamstown" certainly limits sources in some situations, the parochial locale seems to enhance the role of this "phone-in public". In Jacob's study (1996: 387) of a Los Angeles newsroom, the phone-in public are quickly marginalised as

"crackpots" with nothing better to do. ECN, by contrast, relies on such sources for out of the ordinary news stories.

For example, Sgt. Lucas Mfino of the Tsolo police department would often send stories of interest from his home town along with the daily crime report. For the most part Mfino's suggestions were not considered newsworthy enough for production. Nevertheless, his role as a contact was valued. It was always important that the reporters return his calls and faxes in the hope that he might one day provide a newsworthy story from an area that receives little coverage.

This section has demonstrated how ECN's small size, provincial locale and relative obscurity in the media landscape hamper the extended network of contacts. As a result they are highly dependent on other media sources, particularly *The Daily Dispatch*, *The EP Herald* and *Radio Algoa* to monitor their surroundings.

3.4.2.1 Media Sources

Each morning, the editor and the reporters monitor *The Daily Dispatch* and *The EP Herald* as well as *Radio Algoa* in order to find interesting stories which may provide opportunities for "follow up" stories. By utilising daily newspapers and radio to provide story ideas for the day, ECN news workers are able to reduce the constraints imposed on them by time, location, and their relative obscurity in the media industry.

Furthermore, a story that has already passed through external gates is automatically affirmed as newsworthy at the entrance to ECN's internal gates. By complementing the newspaper's coverage, ECN reaffirms the sagacity of the newspapers initial identification of the occurrence as a newsworthy event.

Additionally, if an event is constructed as part of an ongoing story or as a "follow up", it is quite simple for news workers to access information. Previously researched news expedites story production in that issues of relevance are already highlighted and sources to contact are already identified within the text.

However, it should be noted that if too many stories covering a particular event have already passed through the external gates the strength of the force acting on the additional

story is weakened. If, for example, the newspaper has already run two stories on AIDS in a particular week, the third story may not succeed through the sub-gates of selection.

Having discussed factors which influence story selection, I turn now to a confined analysis of ECN story production.

3.5 Producing the news story – The problem with good news

Tuchman (1978) argues that journalists, in addition to producing news narratives, actually come to see the world through these narratives. It is not merely that news workers tell stories, but that they receive the world in a 'storied' way (Jacobs, 1996: 321).

Indeed, narrativity allows news workers to do much of the work of producing the news in the very act of discovering it. I turn now to the more specific elements of newsworthy narratives.

Jacobs (1996:322) posits that the central code of appropriate subject matter, at least for routine news, is the code of "public problems". By framing events as potential public problems, which need to be reported to their audience, news workers are able to organise how they determine newsworthiness and how they research and write a story. This organisation of the world around potential public problems is clearly reflected at ECN.

> It allows news workers to justify their decisions to superiors, to organise the placement of stories (those that present the most pressing problems -- the most important stories --receive lead placement or space priority) and to construct a public discourse about their own usefulness to society (Jacobs, 1996:322).

Some examples may help to illustrate the code of "public problems" determining appropriate subject matter.

3.5.1 *The Eastern Cape Bovine TB Epidemic*

On one occasion Loewe asked me to follow up an ongoing national story concerning the bovine TB epidemic ravaging the lion population in Kruger Park. He had the idea that if it was a problem in the Kruger area, it could very well pose a problem for cattle in the Eastern Cape, and asked me to find the local angle. Before I had even checked the story, it news value was justified through its potential threat to the public.

The potential story contained newsworthy elements. First, it was part of an ongoing story the media had already reported on and could therefore be easily seen as part of a sequence. Second it offered opportunities for narrative tension through the posed threat of bovine TB virus deleteriously effecting East Cape cattle. Third it had a national angle as it was something that could possibly effect the whole country.

Outside of the instance of the epidemic in the Kruger area, nothing in particular had occurred to make Loewe think this could be a public problem in the Eastern Cape area. However, by relating the idea to a story he considered significant and identified as contiguous in the Kruger Park, Loewe was able to code the event as a potential public problem and to plan for its construction as a news narrative.

Through research, I discovered there had indeed been a small strain of the disease effecting some of the cattle in the Peddie District. It had been discovered in February but since then the animals had been kept carefully marked in quarantine. I wrote the story in October at which point the strain, which had only affected a small number of cattle in the first place, appeared to be well under control. While I did not see this as a major problem, Loewe instantly knew it would make a "great story". Significantly the story was published in both *The Dispatch* and *The Herald*. Moreover, the perceived threat of the potential TB problem was great enough to warrant a follow-up article by a *Dispatch* reporter the following week.

3.5.2 *The Kingswood Prize-Giving*

In another example, Loewe asked Quentin Wray to cover a prize-giving speech at Kingswood College. Initially Wray protested that the story was not newsworthy enough. Eventually he agreed to do the story when he heard Clem Sunter, Chairman of the Anglo American Chairman's Fund, would be addressing the audience. Wray explains:

> *The only time I would cover something like a speech at Kingswood is if a national name was speaking. Like when Clem Sunter spoke there With someone like Clem Sunter it s really easy. He will say something like, South African schools are doing a great job of training people for the 1950 s job market. Which is true. Now that is a great story because it s an interesting thing that he s saying. I couldn t fault his argument it s an interesting angle, plus the fact that he is Clem Sunter.*

Wray took the event—the Kingswood prize giving—and reconstructed it from what he perceived initially to be mundane and non-newsworthy story to a newsworthy one around

the problem of South African education. While Clem Sunter was the newsworthy element of the story, it was Wray's coding of the story as a public problem around education that produced the narrative structure.

During each step of news production – discovery, research and production – events were constructed as parts of stories. They were perceived as newsworthy when they were recognised as plot elements in a story. They were researched for the purpose of character development and plot development. In all of this, the news workers operated according to a vision of an implied audience, "the public" (Jacobs 1996: 384-385). I turn now to how this image of the public was created, examining the role of the "audience" in the formation of news narratives.

3.6 Audiences

There is a view of the media which asserts that audiences exert decisive power through their active choice of certain media texts over others. This theory of *consumer sovereignty* proposes that the 'broad nature of the press is ultimately determined by no one but its readers' (Masterman, 1985: 114).

A contrasting view outlined by Masterman (1985:114) suggests that while audiences often have important influence, they do not exert direct power in relation to media texts. Of course any text must address its intended audience in a language and tone with which it will feel comfortable and must, to some degree, speak to its audiences interests. But the audiences addressed by the media are themselves selected on the basis of their importance either to advertisers or media institutions.

Masterman (1985:114) further argues that media organisations, by selling access to their audience to advertisers, have displaced power from the audience to the hands of the advertisers. In this view, the audience becomes a commodity sought after by advertisers, thus rendering the advertisers as the primary public.

Such contrasting views of the audience show that audience influence is differentiated and mediated. They also reveal that there are several different publics available to be read as "audiences" by news workers. Gans (1979) proposes yet an additional public, arguing that

reporters have only a vague image of their audience, tend to ignore this audience and instead, write for their colleagues and superiors. In this sense, the "public" is what Jacobs (1996: 383) refers to as an "interpretative community of experts" – the editors, news workers and competing publications of the media market.

So then, who is the audience for the journalist at ECN? Who do they write for, and in turn, who possesses the power to determine the nature of their news texts? Based on conclusions from my field observations, the journalists at ECN generally uphold the assessment of the public as an "interpretative community of experts" as proposed by Jacobs. Thus, the primary public for the ECN journalists are the editors and gatekeepers of the news organisations for whom they produce copy.

Because ECN provides external newspapers with news, the fact that they write for their colleagues and superiors may seem apparent. However, in-depth interviews with each ECN journalist revealed an apprehension to acknowledge that they may be writing for a specific newspaper's recognition of what is newsworthy, rather than an audience. The journalists unanimously agreed that they were writing for each newspaper's specific audience, rather than the actual newspaper itself. Identifying the ECN audience, ECN Senior Reporter, Mike Earl Taylor states:

> *Well, it s [the audience] the entire country isn t it? It s millions of newspaper readers, because of the number of papers we actually write for and send copy to. And I think to myself, when you ve got millions of readers like that you write very carefully for them , and you write very factually, and you also don t hesitate to be entertaining sometimes* (Earl Taylor, Interview: 1998).

It is worth stressing here, as Masterman (1985) does, that a text's inscribed audience is an abstraction:

> Real men, women and children have little direct influence upon media texts and it is not strictly accurate to say that media texts give people what they want. For there is no mechanism for finding out what this might be outside of the texts they consume (Masterman:1985: 115).

While journalists may speak of writing for an "audience', this audience of "millions of newspaper readers" is certainly not one that can be quantified or identified in terms of specific news interests. At ECN, the day-to-day process of news selection rarely warrants discussions or consideration of what audiences need and want. Rather it is subscribing newspapers, in particular *The EP Herald* and *The Daily Dispatch*—the newspapers which most frequently use ECN copy—who emerge as the primary audience in discussions among ECN new workers.

For the most part, the specific readers of these newspapers play a disengaged and distant role in determining the news, except for in the case of determining whether a story will be framed as 'black news' or 'white news'.

3.6.1 Black vs. white audiences

Media audiences tend to be qualified by vague generalised lines based on such indeterminate categories as socio-economic position, age, gender or race. In South Africa, not surprisingly, it is the line of race that most frequently and most overtly divides audiences to determine the news.

Certainly some newspapers such as *The Daily Dispatch* and *The Star* overlap to serve both black and white readers. However, newspapers such as *The City Press* and *The Sowetan* exclusively serve black audiences and are considered black newspapers, while newspapers such as the *Eastern Province Herald* and the *Sunday Independent* serve white audiences and are generally considered mainstream newspapers.[8] While specific interests of black and white audiences are difficult to quantify, news at ECN is frequently categorised as "black" or 'white' depending on which newspaper it is directed towards.

> *This is the problem of being at an agency that has clients of different needs. The City Press has certain needs for its paper, so one finds oneself in the rather ludicrous position where I m specifically writing an article for The City Press which the white papers aren t going to touch* (Earl Taylor, Interview: 1998).

While the news workers unanimously mentioned constructing news in terms of "black" or "white" audiences, their conscious assessment of what exactly constitutes "black" and "white" news was unclear. Earl-Taylor says:

> *Black news is a black angle that black people are involved or that black people are the main players* (Earl Taylor, Interview: 1998).

Wray offers an equally vague assessment:

> *Black oriented news [is a] story about black people, black business, issues affecting black people* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

[8] In transcripts of the in-depth interviews, the journalists did refer to such newspapers as "white newspapers", however they did so in the context of contrasting them with the "black newspapers". Generally, however, white newspapers are not referred to as "white newspapers", rather they are considered mainstream. Black newspapers, however are considered black. This relates to Richard Dyer's (1993) article, "White" in which the notion of the invisibility of the colour "white" is contemplated. "White power secures its dominance by seeming to be nothing in particular…" (141). While this discrepancy is certainly a significant matter for further inquiry, due to the limited scope of this research, it will not be considered in further detail here.

After acknowledging the division between black and white news, Burnett modified his initial perspective to offer the following ambiguous statement:

> *Well maybe there is no such thing as black news . But The City Press are definitely catering for a black readership whereas The Sunday Independent are definitely catering for a white readership. But for me a good story is good story* (Burnett, Interview: 1998).

While the assessment is imprecise, the division is highlighted in order to illustrate the abstract role of a generalised audience in shaping the news. The racial division of ECN news provides a clear and frequent example of how images of the audiences – however imprecisely formulated – are determinants of media texts.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the division of news along racial lines is not a construct developed by ECN. The journalists at ECN are merely serving their primary public, the 'interpretative community of experts' operating within a racially divided press born of the apartheid era.

This fact further supports the notion that images of the audience most frequently constructed by ECN workers are not based on their actual readers, but on the gatekeepers and editors of the news organisations they serve. The next questions to pose then are how, and to what extent, do news organisations which publish ECN copy influence the production of ECN media texts. First, however, I briefly consider the firms that own these organisations as they exercise a significant amount of implicit control in the structuring of ECN news.

3.7 Ownership and Control – proprietorial influence

Until now we have treated gatekeeping as an activity performed by a communication organisation and its representatives. Shoemaker (1991: 60) suggest that "we must recognise that communication organisations exist within the social system alongside other institutions many of which influence the gatekeeping process." Following this premise, we will discuss the firms that dominate the South African media market and how they may influence selection and shaping of ECN messages as they pass through external gates.

Masterman (1985) suggests that it is often difficult to identify the precise influence which individual owners and controlling companies have upon media organisations since "a

great deal of that influence is likely to be covert, indirect, structural and long term" (Masterman, 1985: 82). Generalisations are also difficult to draw as ownership styles and influence vary between different individuals and companies.

For ECN, an independent newswire, financially dependant on the highly concentrated media market, the issue of proprietorial influence is even more nebulous than in most news organisations. Barring the direct influence of The Independent Newspapers Group example discussed in chapter two, the role of proprietorial power for an independent news agency such as ECN is typically indirect and implicit. While ECN is not directly owned by any single firm, its sole revenue depends on the news stories it is able to sell to the organisations owned by such firms. Thus rendering ECN subject – albeit indirectly – to a significant amount of proprietorial influence.

As previously noted in chapter two, two large corporations, Times Media Limited and The Independent Newspapers Group produce almost 90 percent of all national daily and Sunday newspapers sold in South Africa.

One of the fundamental arguments against such a concentration of media ownership, lies in the lack of diversity of the press and in its failure to reflect the spectrum of views current within South African politics and society at the present time. The lack of diversity in the South African press, although alleviated since the demise of apartheid, still exists with regards to the distribution of geographic power.

As the only newswire serving the vast region of the Eastern Cape, one would expect ECN's services to be in high demand both regionally and nationally. However, national newspapers including *The Star*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Sunday Independent*, none of which have Eastern Cape correspondents or bureaus, rarely commission or buy stories from ECN. Loewe's comments reflect the perceived insignificance of the Eastern Cape on a national level:

> *ECN still essentially files from the margins. In terms of media diversity we are an independent voice in the midst of a highly capitalised and monopolistic media scenario. So to that extent we have incredible value. I would like to think that there are some merits in that but, of course, I know that out there media companies have absolutely no commitment, in terms of the boards, whatsoever to media diversity. There s lip service and lots of talking, but my experience has been that they are completely mercenary about it* (Loewe, Interview: 1998).

This relates to Tuchman's (1978) notion of a "news net" in which centre areas of power receive more coverage while periphery areas are ignored. The Eastern Cape – ECN's core coverage focus – is one such area that seems to be marginalised in the national news landscape.

It is against this commercial backdrop, that ECN struggles to remain commercially viable. ECN must supply the newspapers of this centre-based media market with news of what is nationally perceived to be an insignificant periphery region. At the same time, ECN is concerned with creating its own profit. The sale of news to newspapers throughout the country is ECN's sole source of revenue rendering it financially dependent on these news organisations and the firms that own them. Consequently such firms play a fundamental role in shaping news output.

Although ECN maintains control over the selection of news stories for transmission through its own internal gates without having to consult or inform any higher powers. The types of stories they select are certainly influenced, at least in part, by what the ECN journalists and the editor perceive to be newsworthy enough to pass through external gates of the subscribing newspapers. Bearing in mind that most of the subscribing newspapers are controlled by larger media corporations, I turn now to a consideration of the influence of such organisations in shaping ECN news.

3.8 External News Organisations

My focus on external news organisations is centred on the covert and overt ways in which the news organisations that ECN supplies with news influence the way ECN selects and shapes its texts .

On a daily basis, the reporters at ECN choose from a number of events to select the information that will be communicated as news. Because they are communicating this news directly to client news organisations, these receiving organisations play a significant role in establishing external criteria that blend with the ECN news workers' own internal criteria to inform their professional sense of news values.

It is important that this examination of external news organisations' role in shaping ECN

copy not be limited to ECN's subscribing newspapers. While these newspapers provide the bulk of ECN's usage and the mainstay of their profits, the non-subscribers, especially national papers such as *The Sunday Independent* and *The Sunday Times* contribute in the freelance arena which is an integral and growing revenue builder for ECN.

In addition, this section will demonstrate that because non-subscribing newspapers tend to be located in the powerful centres of the South African news net, and thus rarely utilise periphery ECN copy, the incentive for ECN to move their copy through these gates is enhanced for both political and economic reasons. ECN's desire to be published in these newspapers, for reasons of prestige and commercial gain, renders non-subscribing newspapers as influential as subscribing newspapers in shaping news values at ECN.

While I plan to demonstrate that these organisations certainly play a significant role in shaping ECN news values, this section will ultimately return to an exploration of the influence of the individual news workers at ECN and the ways in which they diffuse this power.

3.8.1 Journalists perceptions

Discussing the extent to which his news reports are influenced by external news organisations, ECN Business Reporter Wray states:

> *Well, I m not going to write something that nobody is going to use. If you want to write something that nobody is going to read, keep a diary. There s no point in generating news that no one will publish* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

Although Wray's sentiments reflect a strong cognisance of the external news organisations' power, not all the journalists at ECN share his views. ECN general reporter Patrick Burnett states:

> *For me, a good story is a good story and I m not necessarily thinking of what publication it will go into* (Burnett, Interview: 1998).

While some of the ECN journalists may not necessarily perceive the news organisations as playing a direct role in determining the way they select news, there is a pervasive sentiment that they must write news that sells. What is not consciously acknowledged, is that their news values, their notions of what makes a story newsworthy enough to sell are shaped, in part, by these external organisations.

Having acknowledged that news organisations which utilise ECN-produced texts exercise a certain degree of power over the way in which ECN journalists select and shape their news, the question then becomes, how and in what ways do they exercise such power?

3.8.2 Methods of control

Each day, upon arrival, the ECN journalists scan the morning editions of *The Daily Dispatch* and *The Eastern Province Herald*. On Monday mornings, the local weekend papers, *The East Cape Weekend* and *The City Press* are added to the reading material. This daily routine takes place for two reasons. First, the journalists are looking to determine which of their stories have been published. Second they are scanning the papers for story ideas (cf. chapter three: Media Sources).

This daily routine influences news selection at ECN on a much broader scale. The most obvious way in which external media organisations influence news selection at ECN is through their validation of what is and is not newsworthy. This is primarily accomplished in two ways. First, as I have already discussed, newspapers serve as a core source of story ideas for the ECN journalists. Second, as the gatekeepers of external gates, editors of such newspapers retain the power to accept or reject news generated by ECN. Consequently, their decisions as to which stories are newsworthy and which stories are relatively insignificant provide a measure of desirable and undesirable content for the ECN journalists who gauge a story as either a success or failure based on whether it is published.

Having already discussed the way in which media organisations validate newsworthiness by influencing the selection of story ideas, I will now turn to a discussion of the second process by which newspapers validate newsworthiness through serving as objective measures of the success or failure of the texts produced by ECN.

3.8.3 Measuring Newsworthiness

Every story that passes through the internal gates of ECN is considered newsworthy to at least to some degree.

However, as discussed in chapter one, what is newsworthy enough to pass through the internal gates, may not necessarily be considered sufficiently newsworthy to gain

entrance to the external gates. As a result, texts that do succeed past external gates are confirmed to ECN news workers as successful, while texts that do not are subsequently considered deficient in some way. Even if ECN disagrees with the selection of external gatekeepers, the story they had initially deemed to be perfectly adequate is consequently under-coded in terms of newsworthiness.

When a particular story is not published, self-doubting comments from the ECN journalists such as, "I thought it was a good story," reveal the power of the newspapers to verify for the ECN journalists what is and is not newsworthy. Similarly, a story that newspapers have acknowledged as newsworthy through publication may sway a journalist from under-coding the event's relevance to deeming it "a good story"

This validation of newsworthiness by external news organisations is significant in that it is one of the factors shaping a journalists' informal code of news values – their professional socialisation as journalists – which in turn determines their perceptions of what is or is not newsworthy.

Of course, merely passing through external gates is not the only indicator of success. Through my participant observation, I identified the following variables which contribute to the measurement of newsworthiness.

1. Frequency – the number of publications in which an ECN story is published;
2. Space – the space allocated for the story by each news organisation
3. Placement – the placement of the story within each particular publication
4. Classification – the classification of story as a "freelance" or "subscriber" piece
5. Geography -- the geographic location of the news organisation
6. Status -- the status of the publication.

While these variables are not listed in any significant order of importance, the first three – quantity, size, and placement – address tangible and objective measurements of success once the story has passed through external gates. The last three categories – classification, location and status – are less quantifiable. These variables gauge newsworthiness in that they deal with barriers to entry through external gates. A story thatsucceeds past these obstacles is deemed particularly newsworthy for its ability to transcend such barriers. It is also necessary to note that the six categories are not

mutually exclusive. Generally a combination of these gauges are intertwined in a "successful text".

Endorsing comments such as "it was the front page lead in three papers including *The Independent* [*The Sunday Independent*, considered by ECN news workers to be a prestigious national newspaper]" speak of three coterminous variables – placement, frequency, and status of paper – not only justifying the story as newsworthy, but as significantly more newsworthy than a story published in one local newspaper on an arbitrary page.

In addition to measuring a story's newsworthiness, publication also serves as a measure of a journalist's skill. After his first day of work, ECN's newest reporter Patrick Burnett secured a front page lead. ECN senior reporter Mike Earl-Taylor responded, "can you imagine? It's his first day and he gets a front page lead. That kid is a rising star."

3.8.3.1 The Variables

The first variable, frequency, suggests that the more publications in which an ECN text is published, the more successful it is. A notable exception to this rule is the 'exclusive' story. On occasion a particular newspaper will offer ECN an appropriate fee to cover a particular story which is not dispatched on the wire but written exclusively for them. In this case a story will appear in only one newspaper, but the fact that it was specifically requested and compensated speaks for its perceived newsworthiness.

The second variable, placement of the story, deals primarily with whether a story receives front page coverage. Placing a story on the front page so that the maximum number of readers are likely to see it, is an instant verification of newsworthiness. For example, ECN court Reporter, Mike Earl-Taylor responds to criticisms of his often garish court reporting with the fact that his court stories have made the front page more often than other ECN stories combined.

Related to the issue of placement, is the economic issue of allocated space which is supported by advertising. In print media, column inches possess a monetary value, thus a story that warrants more space, large headlines and room for pictures is considered

substantially more newsworthy then a relatively smaller, backgrounded piece.

While these variables may emerge as a result of other determining factors at work (i.e. on a slow news day an editor may be more likely to allocate more space to a particular story) the ECN journalists typically perceive these factors as measurements of success.

3.8.3.2 Barriers to Entry

The next three categories are somewhat less apparent. I refer to them as 'barrier to entry' variables because they are bound by a common power to inhibit a story's passage through Main Gate II. This section demonstrates that this power is typically exercised by urban-based newspapers which do not subscribe to ECN.

As we have seen, the South African news industry is dominated by two major players. The newspapers owned by these firms are located primarily in the major political and financial centres of the country. In South Africa, the predominant centre is located in Johannesburg as it is the base of South Africa's economic activity. Additionally Cape Town and Durban occupy somewhat less influential centre roles.

Significantly, most of the newspapers operating in these centres are not subscribers to ECN, nor do they employ other methods, such as bureaus or reporters to filter in news from the Eastern Cape. The resulting incongruity is that these centre cities saturated with journalists, are over-represented in the news while peripheral outposts, such as the Eastern Cape, hardly receive any coverage at all.

This incongruity relates to the global centre periphery system of news selection outlined in chapter one by Van Ginneken, (1998:120-140) and Tuchman (1978) who write of news selection in relation to geographic power. They suggest the news nets are extremely dense at the political and financial centres where the most influential news organisations are headquartered. As a result, occurrences in these centres are the ones most often foregrounded in the news.

The ECN reporters are aware of the unbalanced news situation as evidenced by ECN office manager and reporter, Rita Larisma's assessment of the South African news net:

> *The national papers will generally not publish a story that s just about the Eastern Cape unless*

> *there is something of broader impact. The Eastern Cape is just a bit of a forgotten province. It s one of the poorest. It doesn t really have a main urban centre. Natal s got Durban, Gauteng s got Jo-burg and then there s Cape Town. Those are the main areas of economic activity where most people live and work. The Eastern Cape is poor and backward* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

The common barriers to entry shared by the following three criteria are underpinned by this notion of unequal coverage of geographic space.

Classification

The fourth variable, that of story classification, proposes that freelance stories which are picked up off the wire by non-subscribing new-organisations are considered inherently more newsworthy than those which are used solely by subscribers. Significantly, however, this is only the case when the non-subscribing newspaper is a national newspaper such as the *Sunday Independent* or a regional newspaper based in a power centre such as the *Cape Times* or *The Star*.

Publication in such newspapers warrants additional esteem for three reasons. First the geographic distribution of power renders centre news inherently more newsworthy than periphery news. As a result, periphery news that is published in the centre, is also deemed newsworthy.

Second, non-subscribers do not regularly publish ECN copy and are therefore less likely to be monitoring the newswire for ECN text. Consequently, an ECN story that stands out among the deluge of information these organisations process on a daily basis implies the story was exceptionally newsworthy.[9] Thirdly, freelance stories point to newsworthiness on a financial level as well. Non-subscribers must pay higher fees than subscribing newspapers thus the text must not only be "news-worthy", but also "cost-worthy". The fact that a newspaper is willing to pay more for a certain story augments its perceived newsworthiness.

Geographic location

Because the relevant non-subscribers, such as *The Sunday Independent* and *The Star* are generally located in the urban centres, the fifth variable, that of geographic location, which reflects the geographic distribution of power in the media, suggests a higher degree

[9] Certainly other factors such as creativity of style, clarity of writing and accompanying photographs also factor in selection, placement and space allocation decisions.

of perceived newsworthiness for stories which are published in the centres of Durban, Cape Town and, most notably, Johannesburg.

Discussing the difficulty of accessing sources for a weekend service story she had written on Internet usage at national universities, Larisma said:

> *I did manage to get a hold of Durban Westville {University}, and the Natal papers ran it. So with something like that, if only I had UCT [University of Cape Town] and Wits [University of Witwatersrand] in Jo-burg, I could ve gotten [the story] into the Joburg and Cape Town papers as well* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

Although Larisma was speaking of the frequent difficulties encountered when trying to access sources, the fact that the Johannesburg and Cape Town universities were the sought after sources, reflects the power of these centres to organise the news around themselves thus perpetuating the views of the dominant structures and institutions in society. ECN's adherence to this then facilitates the tendency of the media to foreground certain realities – usually those pertaining to actors and activities involving centre areas involving money and power – while back-grounding others.

Status

The final "barrier to entry" – status of the publication – plays a role amongst both the subscribing and non-subscribing newspapers. Generally publication in prestigious newspapers implies a greater degree of newsworthiness as the barriers to entry at those gates require news of more value.

An examination of which South African newspapers are considered prestigious and why would be material for another study. For purposes of this study I acknowledge that the newspapers considered prestigious at ECN vary with respect to each individual news worker. Generally speaking, however, *The Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Times, Business Day, The Sowetan* and *The Star* are considered prestigious newspapers on a national level. Significantly all these newspapers are based in the power centre of Johannesburg.

On a local level, ECN news workers speak of an obvious disparity between their two main Eastern Cape subscribers, *The Eastern Province Herald* and *The Daily Dispatch*. Without exception, the ECN journalists regard *The Daily Dispatch* with far more respect

then *The Eastern Province Herald*.

Interestingly, my observation revealed that this assessment of the Eastern Cape newspapers does not seem to influence the ECN news workers perception of newsworthiness with regards to publication. In other words, while *The Dispatch* may be more respected as a newspaper, stories published in *The Dispatch* are not necessarily considered any more newsworthy than stories published in *The EP Herald*. The status criteria, then, only applies to a story that is published outside of the Eastern Cape.

These last three variables are significant in three ways. First, they highlight the obstacles ECN news must face when vying for entry into centre publications. Second, in one way or another these variables reflect the influential power of the news net in selectively constructing the news around centre cities. And finally, the status attributed to publication in such newspapers by ECN news workers demonstrates their own subconscious affirmation of the power of centre cities. These points of significance introduce the question of just how much influence external organisations yield.

3.8.4 Effects of Measures of Success

Having discussed at length the ways in which external news organisations exert control through their validations of what is and is not newsworthy, the next logical question to pose is: "To what extent do the aforementioned measures of success shape the news at ECN?"

Ultimately, measures of success cannot tell editors or journalists *exactly* what is newsworthy or how to construct a particular story; they can only provide a very generalised measure of approval or disapproval. But they are used, nonetheless, to measure a story's success or a journalist's skill. Publication as an objective measure of success and failure is also used to provide identification of desirable or undesirable content matter. A story that 'makes it' with respect to these criteria is then remembered for certain elements that are repeated often enough to become unwritten rules in a journalists' set of new values (Jacobs, 1996: 385).

One clear example of the way in which measures of success implicitly influence ECN's assumption of newsworthiness relates to centre/periphery issues surrounding event

selection, which I have already touched on throughout the section.

Because the journalists at ECN write primarily for the local market, a story that goes national, through publication in *The Star*, *The Sunday Independent,* etc. is instantly considered more successful than one that remains in the Eastern Cape. In addition these stories typically earn more profit. Thus the journalists strive to publish more stories nationally. However, as Larisma noted earlier, ECN journalists are aware of the fact national newspapers will not publish a story about the Eastern Cape unless it somehow pertains to them on a broader level. Wray supports this assessment:

> *If you ve got a Cape Town paper, unless a story about PE is completely fascinating, they re not going to run it. I think we need to put things in more of a national context. Until we start doing that, we won t re-enter as a national player* (Wray, Interview: 1998)..

Generally, "putting things in a national context" at ECN means accessing sources from the power centres as Larisma spoke of with regards to her story on Internet usage at universities. Had she only been able to get in touch with the Johannesburg and Cape Town universities, she said, her story would have been "national". But what making a story "national" really implies, is framing events around centre sources so as to present the issue in a way that reflects the dominant perspective, thus perpetuating the views of the already influential voices rather than foregrounding those of the marginalised.

Significantly, the reporters also consider their area as "poor and backward" and use this reason to justify why it is not in the news more often. Only once it is able to develop itself economically, an ideological value which confirms the social norms of the dominant structure, will it merit more attention from national newspapers. Wray says:

> *[We care about what happens in Johannesburg and Cape Town because] we depend on those places for more than they depend on us or we perceive that we do. The Eastern Cape has always been considered a black hole we need to start capitalising on the resources in this province. Then the business will start flowing and people will be interested* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

Thus even when Eastern Cape issues are articulated on a national level, they are usually framed from the perspective of the power centre, rather than the periphery.

This marginalised self-presentation is in part influenced by the centre-based newspapers who routinely marginalise the area thus actively supporting Stuart Hall's (1977) suggestion that "the media…tend faithfully and impartially to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order."

Hall further argues that over time, "news actually creates the consensus knowledge by which reporters and readers recognise newsworthiness." Such seems to be the situation in the case of ECN. Over time, external newspapers, especially those operating from centres of power, have informed the ECN journalists' sense of news values. This is evidenced by Larisma's suggestions that ECN needs to locate their news within a national context as there is very little intrinsically newsworthy about the Eastern Cape on a national level.

> *The Eastern Cape is poor and backward. Even African Eye, who is the only sort of other independent news agency on our scale they operate from Mpumulanga - is used extensively by the Jo-burg papers because the whole Mpumulanga, Gauteng Area used to be the Transvaal. There s connections there. People have businesses there. So we ve discussed how we must perhaps, even if it s an East Cape story, now get somebody on a national level to comment just so we can bring in the national picture* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

By comparing the Eastern Cape to Mpumulanga, Larisma highlights the increased newsworthiness of geographic proximity to the Johannesburg area. Additionally, connections with Johannesburg in business and politics are also considered inherently newsworthy. Because the Eastern Cape is more removed from Johannesburg, its links to the power centres are weakened.

Significantly, the ECN news workers' sub-conscious perpetuation of the power structure is revealed not only through those organisations who wield power, but also from those who do not.

3.8.5 The powerless external organisation

The last section examined the power and influence exercised by those newspapers operating from centre areas. While they seem to be indifferent to ECN and the Eastern Cape in general, ECN is clearly concerned with them. Certainly one of the reasons for this stems from the fact the ECN reporters aim to publish their stories in as many newspapers as possible. However, it is not just the quantity, but the quality of publication with which ECN is interested. Generally publication in periphery newspapers does not satisfy the last three measurements of success thus rendering them less powerful.

This discussion of powerless periphery publications, however, is not meant to undermine in any way the influence exercised by Eastern Cape publications *The EP Herald*, *The Daily Dispatch* and to a lesser extent *Die Burger* which are all frequent vehicles for ECN

copy and do not apply to this evaluation. These newspapers, while not operating from a centre in the South African news net, occupy the centres of the Eastern Cape news net and are thus highly influential in shaping ECN text. Indeed most of the ECN journalists perceive they possess a strong intuition as to what gets published in these newspapers—particularly *The Herald* and *The Dispatch*.

The periphery newspapers I am referring to here are those that exist in the peripheries of the Eastern Cape including ECN's home base town of Grahamstown.

This is my own perception formulated by my observations of ECN's disregard for the locally produced Grahamstown newspaper—*Grocott s Mail*. While *The EP Herald* and *The Dispatch* frequently utilise ECN text, it is only *Grocott s Mail*, a small town newspaper operating in the same peripheral location as ECN, which depends quite heavily on ECN and tends to publish an average of at least four of ECN stories per issue.

Only in the case of *Grocott s Mail* is the dependence relationship reversed, rendering ECN in the dominant position. ECN journalists rarely scan *Grocott s* fo*r* publication success or for story ideas. In addition, even though *Grocott s* uses a substantial amount of ECN news, news-making at ECN is never structured around *Grocott s* deadlines of Monday and Thursday afternoons. While *Grocott s* does pay the lowest fees of any of the subscribers, its perceived insignificance by the ECN journalists seems to be more an issue of geography rather than finances. Even to the Grahamstown-based journalists, Grahamstown news is relatively insignificant (cf. Wray, Larisma Interviews: 57, 72, 77).

Ironically, it is the newspaper that utilises the most ECN copy that proves the least powerful in shaping ECN news values and text. This lack of influence provides another example of how even the journalists at ECN perpetuate the existing power structures that subvert their own marginalised area of focus. In other words, the disregard for the local Grahamstown newspaper reveals that even the journalists at ECN perceive their periphery location in the news net as justified.

3.8.6 Explicit control

Thus far, the considerations of external control over ECN news production have dealt primarily with covert manipulations of power. We have seen, for example, that the

manner in which measures of success influence news selection and production are primarily implicit.

On occasion, however, the control of ECN story selection by external news organisations is far more explicit. This is especially evident when a newspaper requests an exclusive freelance piece and pays an increased freelance rate usually determined by the word count. If the story is particularly exclusive, the buying newspaper may increase the pay rate in order to ensure no other newspaper will have access to the story. In these scenarios, story suggestions flow in reverse from external gates to internal gates leaving ECN with little control in the selection process. The profit for exclusive freelance pieces is much higher than the subscriber fees, thus reverse selection is a particularly attractive option for ECN even though it may undermine their editorial independence.

The Heather Mann example

The "Heather Mann" example helps to illustrate an instance of direct external control over ECN story selection. In October of 1998, Britain's Prince Andrew was reported to be having a relationship with a young woman by the name of Heather Mann. ECN themselves could not have picked a better match for the Prince. Heather Mann was no British blueblood. She was a Grahamstown girl through and through. Before murmurs of the budding romance even cleared the palace walls, the notoriously sensationalist British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun,* had phoned ECN from their London offices offering R10 000 for an exclusive story on Heather Mann's Grahamstown roots.

At the price offered, ECN certainly did not hesitate to do the story. But to assume ECN's agreement was based solely on the money would be to suggest that had they stumbled onto the information would it have been an occurrence they considered newsworthy. To what extent exactly, did *The Sun* dictate ECN's editorial content that day?

One can only speculate as to whether ECN would have selected such a story without provocation from *The Sun*. On the one hand, the commercially oriented ECN receives much criticism from industry professionals and academics for "surface", "sensationalistic" reporting. A former Ecna journalist commented that "where Ecna was dedicated to serious investigative reporting, ECN has taken the surface sensationalistic route." Such critics would likely characterise the "Heather Mann" story as prime example

of the solicitous news often selected by ECN.

On the other hand the example provides an interesting insight into perceptions of the organisation held by the ECN journalists themselves. Larisma explains that the "Heather Mann" story was not characteristic of ECN reporting:

> *I would definitely say that we see ourselves as a serious news agency. I mean the Heather Mann thing caused quite uneasy ripples at ECN simply because it was so obviously British tabloid* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

The uneasiness expressed over the explicitly sensationalist nature of the "Heather Mann" story reveals that ECN journalists do indeed subscribe to a set of professionally organised ideals of newsworthiness. The strength of these journalistic ideals – the news workers' sense of news values – is one factor capable of diffusing the powerful influence of external organisations.

3.9 How internal gates relate to external power

The discussion of external influences has led us full circle to a discussion of how internal criteria can diffuse such power.

While the influence of external news organisations at ECN is certainly powerful, it is by no means omnipotent. This power is often diluted by the news workers' own ideologies, individual personalities and personal bias. As we saw earlier in the chapter, these forces are very much at work within the ECN organisation. Through participant observation I observed the following three diffusive forces operating within ECN:

3.9.1 Ambiguity of newsworthy criteria

The first force that diffuses the power of external news organisations is the general ambiguity of what news sells. Although ECN journalists scan the newspapers for their published stories, they do not quantitatively track those factors which enhance newsworthiness. Additionally, such factors are not universally defined. While certain assumptions regarding newsworthiness are universal to the profession (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), others are not as explicit. What appeals to one editor, may not appeal to others. Thus, what the newspapers want on a day to day basis is not clearly defined or universally applied, as Larisma explains:

> *We certainly have the state of mind that we have to write stories that sell, but because we don t always know what that is, I don t know how much it really does influence us. Like I said, we often*

think there s a great story and then the newspapers don t think so (Larisma, Interview, 1998).

3.9.2 Journalistic ideals

The second force is the issue of journalistic ideals as discussed previously in the chapter and revealed in the "Heather Mann" case. By journalistic ideals I refer to the collective tenets of professionalism (news values, ethics, notions of objectivity) embodied by the journalistic profession.

At ECN, the code of ethics and the journalist's self perception as a defender of the public interest are significant to the notion of journalistic ideals. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how both these element are regarded with the utmost respect by the journalists at ECN. Although it is now a commercial company, ECN perceives their roots in the civil rights ethics of the apartheid born Ecna to be very much intact. And while many of the stories, such as the "Heather Mann" story, are written for primarily commercial reasons, the role of journalistic ideals becomes greatly influential when a commercial story violates the journalist's "code of ethics" or "sense of news values".

While external organisations may solicit ECN to cover any particular story, as an independent company, ECN is in no way bound to do so. And although ECN is a commercial company driven by profits, the new workers are journalists before business men. If a story suggestion violates their sense of journalistic integrity they will relinquish all responsibility to it. Again, the "Heather Mann" case provides a pertinent example as explained by Larisma:

> *I had no problem with doing the story. What had happened was I had spoken to Heather Mann s mother on Friday when I was doing the story. She didn t want to speak to me and I didn t push her. And on Sunday she died. She had a heart attack and died. And then <u>The Sun</u> called me on Monday and wanted me to get a hold of her friends and get comments and stuff and I actually froze completely. And I was asking myself, Am I being too precious? Mike [Loewe] knew about the story but he didn t push it. Up until that point it was a very light-hearted piece for us. And after that, rightly or wrongly, we withdrew* (Larisma, Interview: 1998).

Although the second story would have been another profitable exclusive, Larisma and ECN opted to maintain their sense of journalistic integrity over commercial gain.

Similarly, an event an ECN journalist feels strongly about will be pursued vehemently regardless of cost to the organisation; as in the case of Patrick Burnett's exclusive for *The City Press* in which he exposed a construction company for their racist contract terminology. The story had been a contracted at the usual freelance rate from *The City*

Press. In addition to being an exceptionally time consuming story, the construction company threatened to sue ECN if the story saw publication.

Shoemaker (1991) suggests (cf. chapter one), that obstacles to a story, enhance its newsworthiness once it passes through the first gate of production. If a story is difficult for journalists to reach, this will constitute a negative force that works against the story succeeding past the first gate. However, if the story is produced anyway, the force then becomes a positive one helping the story to succeed past subsequent gates. In addition, Shoemaker suggests that the time and money spent accessing a story makes it more likely to pass through subsequent gates.

Thus, despite the obstacles to access in *The City Press* story, Burnett was determined to pursue it. The fact that the story put ECN in jeopardy of being sued further amplified Burnett's role as a "watchdog" journalist willing to get a story at all costs. Burnett later justified the story's newsworthiness by acknowledging its civil rights ethic:

> *it wasn t just a story. It indicated to me that a lot of people still have attitudes that come from apartheid and live in a world where they re still tops. So I knew it was important to put that story out. Because it wasn t just about one construction company. It was about a whole mindset. That s what was interesting about that story. That there are still people in the eastern cape that have that attitude and I thought we have to expose this just to show how wrong it is* (Burnett, Interview, 1998).

Although ECN is not a financially stable operation, commercial imperatives seem to be second to journalistic integrity. This brings me to the third force diluting external control, the individual personality and interests of the reporters.

3.9.3 The individual news worker

Rooted in a structuralist approach to news production, Masterman (1985:116) argues that most media texts "remain identifiably the products of their institutions rather than of the individuals who have produced them." He argues that many of the people involved in media planning or production have little or no say in the planning of their work and have, in Stuart Hood's words,

> as little real influence on the end product as they would have on an assembly line. Film crew for instance, will find themselves scheduled to shoot material for a programme about which they know little and about which they have not been consulted. The result is that they often have scant interest in what they produce (in Masterman, 1985:116).

However, throughout this chapter, I have highlighted numerous ways in which ECN is

distinct from most news institutions. Its unique aspects – its informal structure, its provincial locale, and its relative obscurity in the market place – are just some of the factors that make ECN journalists and the ECN organisation different from larger, more bureaucratic establishments.

At a larger news organisation, journalists may not diverge from their established beats. That would result in infringing on the territory of other journalists and be considered unprofessional. At ECN, the limited number of reporters covering a wide range of events facilitates greater autonomy in story selection.

Additionally, as a newswire, ECN is not bound to produce particular sections. While they do have beat reporters, these reporters generally have the autonomy to select their own stories which reflect personal interests. Sometimes the events selected are entirely irrelevant to the beat. And their editor, Loewe's, aim to "get as much out there as possible" seldeom prohibits personal selection. For example, Mike Earl-Taylor, the ECN court reporter is also extremely fond of animals. His dog, a seasoned newsmaker, is a local celebrity in Bathurst where he attends school each day with the children.

Thus story selection at ECN may be influenced more by each journalist's individual personality which is revealed by such variables as their interests, their tastes, their political affiliation, their background and their dedication to the job.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter set out to highlight the complex set of factors at work in selecting and shaping the news at ECN. It shows that the elements involved certainly are complex and numerous. The factors discussed in this chapter, from the role of the organisation, to the influences of sources, to the power of firms, only begin to scratch the surface of the news-making process at ECN.

Despite the numerous factors influencing the news workers at ECN, the organisation remains informal in structure and dichotomous in direction. It is this lack of organisational direction and structure that in turn allows the journalists a comparatively high degree of autonomy in comparison with news workers operating in larger, more

established news organisations. Thus while structuralist theories hold to a large extent, the voluntarist emphasis on human agency is not without merit. Although confined by certain structural constraints, the journalists at ECN remain a maverick set of reporters.

Having now explored the formation of news at ECN, chapter four tests the centre/periphery hypothesis outlined in chapter one through an analysis of what news actually sells in the national market place.

Chapter Four
Passage of ECN News through External Gates

4.0 Introduction

In chapter three, I examined the processes, structures and individuals behind news making at the "internal" gates of ECN. I also suggested that ECN's primary audience is not necessarily the readers of their copy, but the newspapers whom they serve. In chapter four, I turn to an examination of structural determinants at this next level of the gatekeeping process – the "external" gates of national newspapers. This chapter considers the factors that ECN's buyers (primary audience) apply to choose the news generated by ECN and how these factors in turn effect news production back at the internal gates of ECN.

To ascertain this information I enlisted the research process of triangulation and employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Webb (*et al*., 1966) have suggested that social scientists are likely to exhibit greater confidence in their findings when these are derived from more than one method of investigation.

I begin my research with a quantitative content analysis, spanning three months from September 1998 to November 1998, to measure the frequency of ECN publication in various newspapers throughout the country (see *tables a* and *b*). I then supplement these quantitative findings which answer the question of "how many" with a qualitative analysis to answer the question of "what kind". This thematic look at published ECN text assesses which themes are considered newsworthy on a national level.

Wimmer and Dominick (1994: 167) state that content analysis alone cannot serve as the sole basis for claims about the media. Thus as a final approach to supplement my content analysis, I have included my findings from a series of brief, semi-structured telephonic interviews conducted with newspaper editors and news workers throughout the country who make choices about stories from ECN.

Newspapers	Articles published			Total articles published	Total publishing days	Publishing Average*	Cumulative Average
	Sept 1998	Oct 1998	Nov 1998				
Eastern Cape dailies							2.56
Herald	61	96	88	245	78	3.14	
Dispatch	58	77	53	188	78	2.41	
Die Burger	38	68	60	166	78	2.13	
Regional daily							0.08
Natal Witness**	1	4	1	6	78	0.08	
National dailies							0.19
Sowetan	4	6	5	15	65	0.23	
Star**	0	1	2	3	65	0.05	
Business Day	3	7	8	18	65	0.28	
Eastern Cape weeklies							1.85
Weekend Post	4	10	10	24	13	1.85	
Regional weeklies							0.23
Saturday Argus	0	0	2	2	13	0.15	
Sun Argus	0	3	1	4	13	0.31	
National weeklies							0.52
City Press	6	7	16	29	13	2.23	
Saturday Star	1	0	1	2	13	0.15	
Sunday Independent	0	1	0	1	13	0.08	
Sunday Tribune	0	0	2	2	13	0.15	
Sunday Times	0	0	0	0	13	0	

Table a

** Non-subscribers

* Publishing Average = Total articles published / Total publishing days

4.1 Content analysis

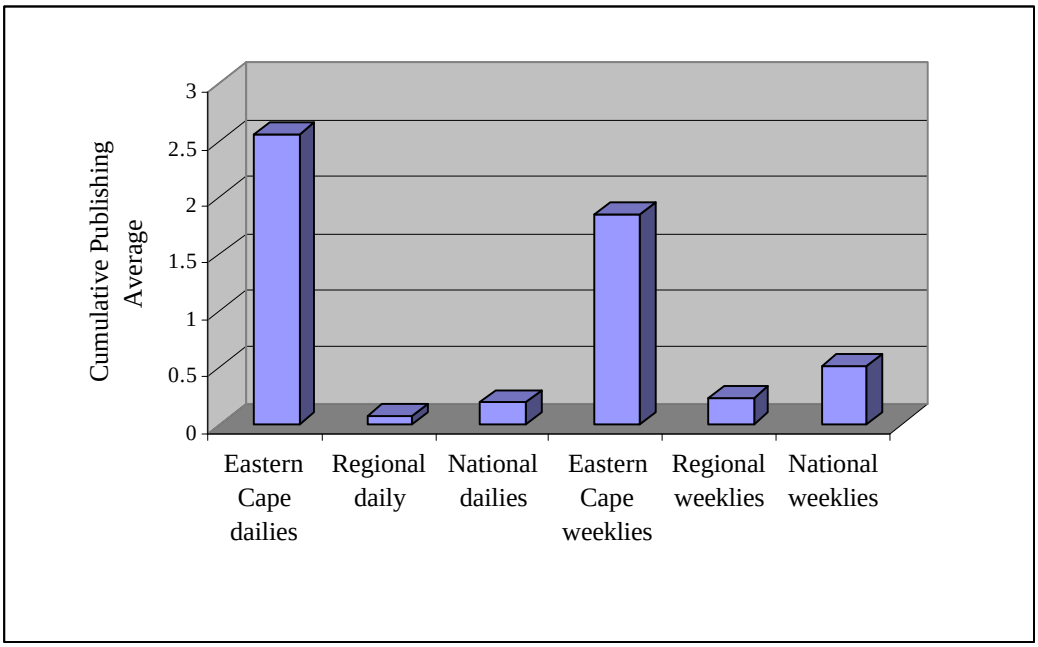

Table b

The newspapers surveyed are limited to those that ECN maintains on file. For this reason the only regional daily outside of the Eastern Cape included is *The Natal Witness* as other regional dailies are not delivered to ECN. Furthermore, most daily newspapers representing other regions do not utilise enough daily coverage to be useful in this examination. This is understandable as regional newspapers are generally committed to news reflecting their distribution regions. Thus, my concern here is focused on ECN news that appears on a national level.

If national papers aim to reflect the news of the entire nation, they should then also be committed to reflecting the news of the Eastern Cape. For this reason I focus my thematic analysis on the ECN news that is published in the national newspapers.

The quantitative table (see *tables a* and *b*) illustrates a number of conclusions concerning the publication structures applied to ECN news. First, the data shows that subscribing Eastern Cape dailies – *The EPHerald*, *The Daily Dispatch* and to a lesser extent *Die Burger* – are the most frequent publishers of ECN copy. This finding is not surprising as these newspapers are regional newspapers committed to producing exactly what ECN provides – news of the Eastern Cape. The table also reveals, that proportionally, weekend

non-subscribers[1] utilise more ECN news than daily non-subscribers suggesting that on a national level the weekend service is more successful than the daily service. This too is not surprising as daily news tends to be more incident driven (spot news) while weekend news tends to be more feature driven.

For the under-staffed and under-resourced ECN, incident driven news is not as accessible as feature news. Often, ECN does not have the resources to report daily news from the Eastern Cape of national merit quickly and efficiently enough for publication in national newspapers. Furthermore a daily Eastern Cape news event that would warrant publication in a national paper would typically be picked up by one of the larger news agencies, such as SAPA or Reuters. So, while the daily service provides ECN's "bread and butter" on a regional level, it is the freelance weekend service that provides the profit on a national level. Thus my thematic focus on ECN news in national newspapers focuses primarily on the weekend newspapers after a brief consideration of the daily news.

In analysing these results, it is important to bear in mind that this is a not a holistic study of each newspaper's production themes. It is rather a study of which *ECN news themes* emerge in particular national newspapers. By assessing these, we can begin to understand the criterion of newsworthiness shaping the structure of the external gates.

4.1.1 National daily newspapers

The structural pressures of time, labour and geographic constraints, as well as the external influences of the social system in shaping ideology and consequently news values, shape the prominent ECN news themes emerging in national newspapers (both dailies and weeklies).

In order to assess the prominent ECN news themes appearing in national daily newspapers I surveyed *The Sowetan*, *Business Day*, and *The Star* for the span of three months beginning in September 1998 and ending in November 1998. Although *The Star* is technically a Johannesburg paper, it is the most widely distributed daily paper in the

[1] The weekend service operates entirely on a freelance basis. In other words, all weekend papers are non-subscribers.

country and is generally perceived as a national paper by both its audience and staff. That considered, *The Star* will be treated as a "national" daily newspaper for the purposes of this study.

The Sowetan and *Business Day* are both ECN subscribers. *The Star* is not. This fact is reflected in the numerical results of the content analysis. While *The Sowetan* and *Business Day* published 15 and 18 ECN stories respectively during the time period, *The Star* published only three.

While similar themes failed to emerge in this analysis as these three newspapers serve particularly different audiences, similar variables were present. The ECN stories appearing in the national dailies tend to align with Galtung and Ruge's (1965) criteria (cf. chapter one) particularly with respect to the variables of *unexpectedness, elite persons* and *negativity*. The likelihood of an ECN story proceeding past external gates was increased when one or more variables surfaced in the same news story.

So, for example, *unexpected*, *negative* news involving an *elite* person (or group) would possess a strong chance of gaining entrance past the external news gates as in the case of "Former Biko Cop Dies of Cancer" (*The Sowetan*, Nov. 3, 1998) or "Historic Building, ANC Offices Destroyed by Fire" (*The Star*, Oct. 6 1998). In both cases the unexpected, negative event is elevated to national level by introducing an elite person (Biko) or an elite group (ANC).

In national daily publication the two topics that emerged most frequently were ECN business stories and crime stories. However, certain structural constraints prevent ECN crime stories from being used more frequently. Crime stories are generally "spot stories" and must therefore be reported within a day of occurrence. Crime stories worthy of the national market are difficult for ECN to access and are thus not typically high in number in national publications. Additionally, a national crime story must contain an impact or a variable that goes beyond misconduct. For example *The Star* ran an ECN crime story about a bank robbery in Umtata. What made the story newsworthy on the national level, however, was not the robbery itself but the vast sum of money stolen. The headline read: "Gang pulls off R 9.6 million in heist after kidnaps" (*The Star*, Nov. 19, 1998).

Another ECN crime story worthy of publication in *The Mercury*[2] earlier in the year reflects this principle of "added value". The headline ran: "U.S. Doctor and Elderly Companion slain in the Eastern Cape". In this example, it was not the shooting, but who was shot that was newsworthy.

In this instance gatekeeping has occurred at what Shoemaker (1991) refers to as the level of the social system. Brown (1979 in Shoemaker, 1991: 68) concludes that "gatekeeping, far from being a random process, faithfully mirrors the perceptions of the society." Indeed this story "faithfully mirrors" the prominence given to economically and politically powerful nations by the rest of society. Galtung and Ruge (1965) have noted that *elite nations* receive more coverage in the news. This story depicted a *person* of an *elite nation* as substantially more newsworthy than the "elderly companion" of South African origin.

Business news also featured quite prominently in the national dailies. I attribute this first to the fact that one of the newspapers surveyed was the subscriber *Business Day*, whose primary focus is business news. However, nine of *The Sowetan s* 15 stories also pertained to business as a result of structural influences at the communications routines level (cf. chapter one, Shoemaker, 1991: 48).

One of the communication routines that promote ECN business news past national daily gates has to do with the time frame. Business news does not have to be reported within a day. ECN Business Reporter, QuentinWray explains:

> *Business stories seem to build up on each other. It s an ongoing thing business deals are not just one event. It s not like a murder or a rape where the person does the thing and it s done. And then you do the trial however many months later. In order for a business story to be interesting, you can t just take one event people read it and say so what? You take the event and say: This has to be seen in the light of and then other developments around the environment in which that event took place makes it interesting* (Wray, Interview: 1998).

It is the broader context and wider time frame that Wray speaks of, which helps ECN's business news succeed in the national news arena. Furthermore, ECN's resource

[2] *The Mercury* was not officially included in the content analysis as they ceased using ECN copy when The Independent Newspapers Group withdrew their contract in March 1998. The story of the slain U.S. doctor and friend, however, provides a pertinent example for this study. The story was also picked up by many of the national weekend papers surveyed later in this study.

constraints do not inhibit accessing business sources which can be done primarily over the phone, as they do in accessing spot events which are more likely to require a reporter "at the scene" in order to beat other reporters to the "scoop".

Furthermore, there is little competition in the Eastern Cape for business news. David Marrs, finance editor for *Business Day,* says SAPA is "woefully inadequate" when it comes to business coverage of the region.

National business news from ECN tends to focus on market developments that will affect employment. For example "Infighting Denies Business Millions" (*The Sowetan*, Oct.10, 1998)' "Job Creation Drive Launched" (*The Sowetan*, Oct, 26, 1998) or "PO staff at Rhodes receive Intensive Training at RU's Department of Management" (*The Sowetan,* Oct. 2, 1998). These issues are also a result of structures in the South African social system which priortise employment and development.

Notably absent from the daily news were government authorities from the Eastern Cape. Gan's (1979) study suggests that the news tends to place a marked emphasis on formal political leaders. While ECN often writes copy reflecting the voices of Eastern Cape political and ANC leaders, such daily copy did not appear in the nationals. This too is a result of the social system structure that places the Eastern Cape, and consequently its leaders, as low priorities. This example also illustrates one way in which the media place some voices in the spotlight, while leaving others out.

Having briefly examined the publication of ECN news in national dailies, I now turn to the main focus of the chapter and consider the publication of ECN news in the national weekend papers.

4.1.2 National weekly newspapers

The bulk of ECN's national news sales are generated by the weekend service. The structural routines of weekend stories differ from daily news stories. "Weekend" stories are generally feature articles and thus warrant more time to research and write. Additionally, they are rarely focused on "spot" news events. The following description from News Agency Journalism Trainers Workshop Handbook, provides a customary

description of feature articles. Most journalists, including those at ECN, adhere to this general guideline.

> Feature articles which are longer deadline pieces written to explain, inform, analyse, amuse and entertain offer the news media (and especially news agencies) an opportunity to do much more than just reporting spot news. They offer a chance to report processes rather than events, to explain new things well, or why they fail or succeed. These are articles that could be written briefly but with humour. A good feature can be done between 750-1000 words (News Agency Journalism Trainers Workshop Handbook, Harare, 1986).

Because weekend stories allot more time for research and are not concentrated on "spot" events, daily constraints of accessibility and time do not apply as prominently. To warrant national publication, ECN weekend features must appeal to a wide audience, therefore they tend to be people-centred drawing primarily on human-interest themes. It is important to acknowledge, that while this weekend news may focus on people of the Eastern Cape, the fact that they are from the Eastern Cape is often of little relevance in such stories as the people are generally used to personify wide reaching themes.

In order to assess prominent ECN news themes emerging in national weekly newspapers I surveyed *The Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Sunday Argus*, *The Saturday Argus*, and *The City Press* for the span of 11 months beginning in January of 1998 and ending in November of 1998. Although *The Saturday Argus* and *The Sunday Argus* are regional Cape Town newspapers, their story selection emerged congruous to that of national newspapers and thus are also considered in the study.

Themes in the weekly publications were more apparent than in the dailies. Again, *negativity* and *unexpectedness*, in which unpredictability and scarcity play a role, were dominant variables. However, *elite persons*, especially those of the government, were notably scarce, as were what Molotch and Lester (1974) term as "routine events" such as the press conference.

The ECN news published in national weekly newspapers was primarily about individuals. Gans's (1979) study also found that news is primarily about individuals[3], rather than

[3] Galtung and Ruge (1965) suggest that one reason why news is personified has to do with the need for meaning and consequently, identification. "Persons can serve more easily as objects of positive and negative identification through a combination of projection and empathy. They further propose that personification is utilised "because it is more in agreement with modern techniques of news gathering and news presentations." Thus it is easier to take a photo of a person than of an issue or a structure.

about groups or social processes. He further suggested that these individuals could be divided into "knowns" and "unknowns" with those in the "knowns" category occupying between 70 to 85 percent of all domestic news. "Knowns" primarily belonged to categories of government and politics, while "unknowns" proved to be "convention breakers" belonging to five categories: protesters, rioters and strikers; victims of social and natural disorders; alleged and actual violators of the laws and mores; participants in unusual activities (such as fads); and finally voters, survey respondents and other aggregates.

My analysis diverges from Gans's in that the individuals in ECN news were primarily "unknowns". In line with Gans's assessment, however, these "unknown" individuals were typically convention breakers in some way.

Certainly the most common type of individuals appearing in the national weekly news were those involved with court cases. As the seat of the provincial High Court is located in Grahamstown, court stories are easily accessible for ECN. Furthermore, there is little competition in the arena as the Eastern Cape newspapers also rely on ECN for court copy to avoid deploying their own reporters to Grahamstown which is both costly and time consuming. Salacious material involving alleged and actual violaters of the laws appears often (relatively speaking) in the national newspapers. ECN Court reporter Mike Earl Taylor explains the appeal:

> *It s a mixture of factors [that makes court copy newsworthy]. Obviously, there are some that view the courts as very boring tedious places, but in fact they are full of every kind of human drama imaginable -- emotions, characters -- it s almost like being in a theatre and the fact that we get so many front page leads speaks for itself. It s not my writing. It s what is actually happening. I am only recording it* (Earl Taylor, Interview: 1998).

The Eastern Cape is certainly home to some incredibly bizarre court cases. The more outrageous the court copy, the more likely it is to warrant national coverage as in the case of the following examples of nationally published articles:

1. **Axe Killer Wants Love of Children** (*The Sunday Argus*, Nov.29, 1998).
   The Cop who Cracked (*The Sunday Tribune*, Nov, 29, 1998, p.15).
   A Port Elizabeth policeman who was on trial for axing his wife to death in front of their seven-year-old son has been found guilty of murder.

Furthermore, one interview yields a necessary and sufficient basis for a one person centred news story, whereas a structured news story requires more intensive data gathering.

2. "**Ex-EP Cricket Captain Held Over Teen Rape** (*The Sunday Tribune*, Nov. 29, 1998 p.23)
Laurie Wilmott, former Eastern Province cricket captain arrested on three charges of rape and two of indecent assault against two girls age 13 and 17. [4]

3. **PE s Monster Strangled His Victims while Sodomising Them** (*The Sunday Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1998, p. 3).
Sex Crazed Killer was able to Distinguish Right From Wrong, says Psychiatrist (*The Saturday Argus*, February 21/22, p.3)
Monster Accused of Killing his own Child (*The Saturday Star,* Feb. 14, 1998, p. 3)
Grisly Tale of Sex and Cannibalism (*The Sunday Argus*, Feb. 15, 1998)
Port Elizabeth serial killer Boetie Boer Stewart convicted in the High Court on seven counts of murder and two of sodomy is deemed the most sadistic killer yet to emerge from the Friendly City . One of the victims was his own daughter who he strangled. His psychotic crimes extend to necrophilia and cannibalism.

4. **Jackal Poison, Suicide and Wife s Two Lovers** (*The Saturday Argus*, Feb. 7, 1998, p. 5).
Housewife Denies Poisoning Husband (The Sunday Tribune, Feb. 8, 1998, p. 9)
Bitter Eastern Cape housewife is accused of poisoning her husband.

Apparently, the more dramatic a court case, the more newsworthy it is. The news stories even made use of narrative techniques to increase the dramatic tension as the lead-in blurb to "House wife Denies Poisoning Husband" demonstrates:

> *It has all the ingredients of a boere soap opera. The pretty housewife, an unhappy marriage, two lovers, poison, drugs, attempted murder and then death. In a case chillingly similar to the infamous Daisy de Melker serial poisoning, Annelize Alberts attracted public attention during her Port Elizabeth murder trial this week.*

The above examples illustrate that national court copy cannot simply report a murder or a rape trial. The crime committed must be far more heinous. If that crime is committed against family members or minors the dramatic narrative is further amplified. Additionally, if an *elite person*, such as a policeman or the former Eastern Province cricket captain is alleged to have committed the crime, its news value is substantially enhanced. The news value here is based in the story's capacity for drama. The story could have happened anywhere. The fact that it happened in the Eastern Cape is secondary to the dramatic appeal.

[4] This story topic appeared in several national newspapers. While ECN broke the story, their copy may have been lifted off the wire. In this case, a newspaper such as *The Star* may have used their own journalists to write the story. Thus, while the story appeared in several newspapers, it was not necessarily ECN copy.

While court stories are frequently used, they are not necessarily the stories that are the most popular. One of ECN's most popular stories[5] appearing in *The Sunday Independent* (Nov.21), *The Saturday Argus* (Nov.20) and *The City Press* (Nov. 21), was not a court story. However it did meet Gans's "convention breaking" criteria. Additionally, it was dramatically bizarre:

The Sunday Independent headline read: "Little Sisters Found locked in Cage-Shocking Case of Poverty and Neglect". ECN reporter Mike Earl Taylor wrote the story of the two young sisters found by Port Elizabeth police, locked in a chicken wire cage. Earl Taylor describes the young girls as "two starving, half naked and dirty little girls locked up like animals in a cage."

This story is also newsworthy in that it points to broader issues of poverty and child abuse. Thus, with regards to ECN's national news, Gans's suggestion that news articles are more often about individuals than social issues warrants an ammendment. Often news personifies an event (a court trial) or a broader social issue (poverty, child abuse, unity in society) by focusing on an individual.

ECN's most popular weekend stories tend to be human-interest stories that centre on "unknown" individuals who illuminate broader issues or events. Individuals are particularly newsworthy when their stories appeal to broader themes of humanity. In the news world such stories are referred to as general human-interest stories. The four main themes emerging from nationally published ECN copy that I identified were: Despair; Hope; Divisions in Nation and Society and the Unity of Nation and Society. Again, it is important to acknowledge that although these Eastern Cape stories are being brought to the fore in the national media, they do little to illuminate particular issues and voices of the Eastern Cape.

[5] Here I make the distinction between common stories (such as Earl Taylor's court copy) and popular stories. Common stories reflect frequency in that they are the type of stories that are published over and over again. Popular stories, on the other hand, refers to the marketability of one particular story. Story popularity was assessed by totaling the number of publications that ran a story. ECN weekend copy that is published in three or more national papers is considered highly popular. Both commonality and popularity illuminate newsworthy criteria.

4.1.3 Themes in the news

Despair

Unequivocally, the "Elsie Biko" story was ECN's most popular story of the year. It appeared in *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Saturday Argus*, *The City Press*, *The Saturday Star* and *The Weekend Post*. In each newspaper the story of a destitute, old grandmother who had not received her pension due to government mismanagement garnered full-page coverage and a large picture. While the story focuses on Elsie Biko, it points to much wider national themes of mismanaged governance and poverty. Personifying these themes helps readers to identify with the universal notion of despair. Loewe intended the story for national publication and personified the issue of poverty around one person for that reason.

> *I told the reporter to go and find me one pensioner; one person symbolic of the Eastern Cape s problems. I intended that story to serve me nationally. On a regional level, that one person would have just gotten lost* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

Loewe's comment reveals a cognisance of the external structures he serves. He is aware of what is considered newsworthy nationally as opposed to what is considered newsworthy regionally.

The emotive accompanying photograph of Elsie Biko certainly enhanced the news value of this story. *The City Press* caption read "*DYING FOR HER PENSION Elsie Biko (84) is praying that her pension will arrive before she dies of starvation*."

A few weeks later a follow up to the Elsie Biko story ran in several national newspapers. The story told of a Durban family who had read of Elsie's desperation and had driven out to her Grahamstown home with boxes of food, clothing and other household items. This time, the caption read: *TUCKING IN Starving Eastern Cape pensioner Elsie Biko thought she had died and gone to heaven when a Durban family arrived with boxes of food and clothing. (The Weekend Post*, Jan. 31, 1998, p.5). While this time the "Elsie" article pointed to the same issues of mismanaged government and poverty, the point of human identification was hope rather than despair.

Hope

"Hope" was also a prevalent theme as exemplified by the widespread publication of such

stories as "The School That Jakes Built -- *Professor looks back on classes attended in a mud hut*" (*The City Press*, April 19, 1998 p. 4) or "From Dust of Poverty, Crickets Future is Rising" (*The Saturday Argus*, February 28, 1998, p. 27). Both these stories focus on an individual who has "beaten the odds" and risen above poverty to find success. The broader humanistic points of identification include tenacity, determination, hard work and hope. Significantly, these stories point to the ideological foundations of news, as success in both these instances is defined by dominant western working class ideologies.

Unity in the New South Africa

This theme relates to Gans's category pertaining to violaters of laws and mores. However, these individuals are not criminals. On the contrary, they are presented as everyday people transcending the social mores of South Africa's apartheid past to create a new and harmonious society. Many of ECN's feature stories reflect this theme, including two of ECN's best sellers of the year. The two stories, one about a white witch doctor[6] and the other about a white man who had been circumcised in order to fit in with his black colleagues at work[7] earned a place in three national weeklies as well as the Eastern Province's *Weekend Post* (now called *The East Cape Weekend*). These two stories provide an example of the kinds of news stories that fit into this category.

The stories emphasise cultural assimilation in the "new" South Africa. Such stories typically illustrate white people assimilating into "African" culture rather than vice versa. However, these individuals are newsworthy not because of their assimilation, but because they are presented as achieving unexpected, extraordinary and abnormal actions.

This seemingly obvious formula of news as the unexpected presupposes a particular dominant-view. Hall (1977) suggests that in order to perceive an event as unexpected,

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[6] "White Boys Can Jump Cultures" (*The Saturday Star*, March 28, 1998, p. 9)
"From Model to White Witchdoctor" (*The Sunday Tribune*, April 5, 1998, p. 5)
"Meet Transkei's White Witchdoctor" (*The Saturday Argus*, March 28/29, p. 17)
"White Witchdoctor of Port St. Johns" (*The Weekend Post*, March 28, 1998 p. 6)

[7] "Chop and Change: The Way to be a man in the New SA" (*The Saturday Star*, March 21, 1998, p.5)
"Teased by his Colleagues – so Eddie decides to cut it fine – New respect from black peers since circumcision"
(*The Saturday Argus*, March 21/22 1998, p.5)
"Eddie Wiggins is a cut above many a white man – Getting a slice of the new SA"
(*The Sunday Tribune*, March 22, 1998, p.7)

abnormal or extraordinary we must be informed by background assumptions of what is expected, ordinary, and normal. In the news, the former are made largely explicit, while the latter remain largely implicit. The facts are emphasised, but the underlying ideology remains disguised. Van Ginneken states:

> It is like the proverbial ice-berg: a brilliant and impressive 10 percent of its mass is visible above the water-line, a dark treacherous 90 per cent remains invisible under water. Those who let themselves be attracted and dazzled by the former, may be ship wrecked and sunk by the later (1998: 32).

Here, the central question is: "whose ideas about what is new and 'nothing new', about what is unexpected/extraordinary/abnormal rather than expected/ordinary/normal, dominate the news?" Whose ideology is the major hidden key to the pre-selection and pre-interpretation of national news? In this case, the central answer seems to be the dominant ideology of the quasi-consensual white South African society (Van Ginneken, 1998: 32).

Significantly, both the story of the "white witch doctor" and the white man who was circumcised were widely published in newspapers throughout the country with the notable exception of *The City Press*, the only black weekend newspaper surveyed. Van Ginneken (1998: 32) suggests that the media serves as a "twenty-four-hour ideological repair shop for our world order and our world views. Possible anomalies are identified, labeled, categorized, dealt with and dispatched again." Thus, by framing the assimilation of white culture into black as unexpected and abnormal, the media may actually be perpetuating the cultural divide rather than unifying it.

Divisions in Nation and Society

Conflicts were not strongly apparent in ECN's weekend national news. However, when such news was revealed it was generally constructed around certain demographic categories, primarily race and gender. Gender conflicts were explicitly identified in such stories as "Bisho Blind to Sexism" which appeared in both *The City Press* (November 22, 1998, p. 14) and *The Saturday Argus* (November 21, 1998, p.14).

Racial conflicts were more implicit in the news and were typically buried in the context of tangible events such as the farm killings or members of Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) applying for amnesty at the TRC hearings. Only one story, an exclusive

for *The City Press,* "Peanuts Pay for Baboons" (Nov. 1, 1998, p. 4) in which an Eastern Cape construction firm was exposed for blatant racism towards it employees, dealt with the issue of racism head on.

Again, notably absent from the national news were the voices of Eastern Cape government or business officials. While the words and actions of Premier Makenkesi Stofile commonly appear in Eastern Cape newspapers, the only time his activities warranted national coverage was when they involved scandal as in the case of "Stofile's Affair Revealed" which appeared on March 14 in *The Saturday Argus* and *The Sunday Tribune*. Whether it be salacious court copy, or the Premier's affair, scandal is a clearly a powerful factor in elevating Eastern Cape news to a national level.

4.1.4 *The City Press* disparity

Two newspapers, *The Sunday Times* and *The City Press* provide exceptions to the themes drawn here. *The Sunday Times* published the fewest stories – four – in the given time frame, while *The City Press* published the most with 72. *The Sunday Times* stories focused primarily on issues of business and government. These stories focused on groups, such as the ANC or the Eastern Cape government rather than individual officials. Of the four stories, two focused on "positive" issues of development and growth, while two focused on "negative" issues of government corruption and mismanagement.

Because *The City Press* publishes vastly more copy than any other weekend paper, it is useful to examine what ECN copy they are using that the other newspapers are not, and vice versa.

Significantly, only three of *The City Press s* 72 articles, were court dramas. Additionally, *The City Press* publishes a considerable amount of ECN's development stories in which attention to real achievements of the Eastern Cape government, individuals and organisations are highlighted. Again, business stories pertaining to employment were prevalent as well as stories focusing on education. *The City Press* seems to be one of the few newspapers on a national level that is committed to portraying a more balanced picture of the Eastern Cape.

Additionally, Eastern Cape politicians and businessmen were featured in City Press stories regarding issues of governance and business aside from scandals and affairs.

While my consideration of themes has been largely descriptive, they are significant to this study in two ways. First, these themes paint a picture of the Eastern Cape for the rest of the country. Second, themes that succeed past the gates begin to condition the journalists' sense of what constitutes good news – the journalists' informal set of news values.

4.2 Interviews

Interviews with various news editors and workers throughout the country were used to validate and challenge my interpretative conclusions of the content analysis. The following data reveals their own reasons for accepting or rejecting ECN news through the external gates.

4.2.1 Ideological structures

Chapter one introduced the notion that gatekeeping can also be affected by the ideology of the social system in which the gatekeepers exist (Shoemaker, 1991). Reflecting this view, Hall (1977) suggests that the media are becoming increasingly responsible for providing the basis on which "groups and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices and values of *other* groups and classes." This section explores the ideologies of the dominant structure in shaping the "image" of the periphery region.

Underpinned by the centre-periphery issues involving news selection, this study hypothesises that the Eastern Cape is of marginal interest to those in the rest of the country. Testing this hypothesis, this section examines exactly how the Eastern Cape is perceived on a national level and how these perceptions, in turn, effect the passage of ECN news through external gates.

Franz Kruger a former Ecna journalist and editor has recently written an unpublished article entitled "East Cape news Agencies: reporting on a black hole" (1998). His perception of the Eastern Cape as a black hole seems to be a widely held view among newspaper editors and workers throughout the country. It is this view of the Eastern Cape that plays a significant role in limiting the passage of ECN news through national gates.

John Scott, Deputy News Editor of *The Cape Times* maintains newspapers rarely utilise ECN because they regard the Eastern Cape as a periphery region and thus demand that Eastern Cape copy be "exceptionally newsworthy".

Echoing this view, Yves Vanderhaeghen, News Editor of *The Natal Witness* considers this a primary reason why newspapers outside of the Eastern Cape may refrain from using ECN copy regularly. "If it's just an East Cape story, without any larger currency, then we're not going to use them. It's got to have bigger dynamics like the Eastern Cape going bankrupt."

For newspapers constrained by financial and space factors, the Eastern Cape is not high on the priority list. Ethene Zinn, Copy Taster at *The Cape Times* further illustrates the Eastern Cape's perceived insignificance on a national level.

> *We don t use them [ECN] because look, this is a very small newspaper if I had the money and the strings I certainly wouldn t take the Eastern Cape on. I mean it s the middle of nowhere. We don t have a lot of people who buy our newspaper out there.*
> *Regional news has to be very remarkable to get in. I mean we have these squares of news information in the paper it s called News Pulse I think Time and Newsweek have something similar. They re these little boxes which give news bites. You know, we have a world category, a South Africa category, and a Western Cape category but there s no Eastern Cape category even Joburg doesn t get its own box. We throw Jo-burg into the South Africa Box. So you can imagine what we re going to do with the Eastern Cape. This is a small newspaper. We don t have chasms of space like The Argus. We only have five pages of news an issue. We re not gonna devote that space to the Eastern Cape* (Zinn, Interview: 1999).

Most of the nationals complain that ECN is too localised in their news coverage. Mark Van der Velden of SAPA explains why national newspapers do not use ECN copy on a more regular basis.

> *They re too parochial. Whether it s right or wrong. In one of my many attempts to get the board of directors to agree to have a correspondent in Bisho or East London or PE , they basically said, Excuse the French, but who the fuck cares what happens in the Eastern Cape?*
> *And ECN news is largely an East Cape matter. And that just puts this glass box around it* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Van der Velden further suggests that the Eastern Cape is not only a periphery location, but a periphery location with substantially less to offer than other national peripheries.

> *Now there s another agency like ECN operating up in Mpumulanga African Eye have you heard of them? A lot of their stuff gets used. But Mpumulanga holds more national interest. They ve got Matthew Phosa and the National Game Parks up there. And those are both of national interest* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Other editors, however, expressed a significant interest in Eastern Cape news but felt ECN was not capable of delivering the kind of Eastern Cape news they were looking for. Generally these editors expressed a desire for in-depth investigative pieces exposing the rampant government corruption in the Eastern Cape. According to Van der Velden this is one reason why ECN news is not used more often.

> *Generally it s not used that much. I mean there s just not a hell of a lot of news coming out of there even though there s a lot going on down there. Corruption in the legislations: I don t see ECN getting much of that news - the corruption that shows what s really going on in the legislation* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Jeremy Gordon of *The Sunday Independent* attributes ECN's lack of access to their deficient resources.

> *They just seem to be a little thin on the ground. No sort of major stuff seems to come out of them, like the Heath investigation, for instance. Also they don t seem to initiate stories - you ve got to ask them for stories. We have an Eastern Cape edition, but you wouldn t know it because it hardly carries any Eastern Cape copy. It ought to though* (Gordon, Interview: 1999).

This coincides with the perception of Deputy News Editor of *The Cape Times* John Scott who feels ECN is operating under too many constraints to access newsworthy events.

> *They re too parochial. Look I m no saying we re not parochial but there are good stories that they are getting no where near. I mean there s corruption all over that province. But those stories require a lot of digging and they just don t have the resources to spare the staff for that length of time. They are very short staffed and have very limited resources* (Scott, Interview: 1999).

Significantly, the newspapers that expressed a desire for more Eastern Cape copy all spoke of corruption as an issue that warrants more in-depth coverage. Fiske (1987: 285) suggests that peripheries are represented negatively in national news as places of "famines and natural disaster, of social revolution and of political corruption." Fiske argues that the western media, by creating a negative image of the periphery regions, confirms the legitimacy of their own dominant status. Thus the Eastern Cape is typically only nationally newsworthy when it is confirming its status as a "black hole" region. Writing on the effects of representation Dyer (1993) states:

> How social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life…How a group is represented… [has] to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (1993: 1).

Whether the Eastern Cape truly is a black hole is difficult to determine as one's knowledge of the region comes primarily from media generated interpretations. The national media perceives the Eastern Cape in such a way and have thus painted it in such a light. This depiction in turn informs national perceptions, even those of people living in the Eastern Cape, as to the condition of the province.

4.2.2 Organisational structures

Usage of ECN news was also a function of structural constraints within the news organisations. ECN news was often used to compensate for what particular newspapers could not access themselves. Lew Elias, News Editor of *The Daily Dispatch* said he was more likely to publish the ECN stories his own staff missed. "So what [ECN] stories I publish depends on who I've got on staff at the time." Consequently ECN copy is considered most valuable by regional newspapers that do not have their own reporters covering a particular event or area. Peter Dickson, Deputy News Editor of *The Daily Dispatch* explains:

> *Well at the moment, with half our own staff on leave, they [ECN] are invaluable Also ECN is the only one with someone permanently at the legislature. So we use a lot of Nick Wilson s stuff. Nick is up there every day. In fact when ECN was scaling down, we said to them: As long as you keep your office in Bisho, we ll keep your service. And with the high courts located in Grahamstown Mike Earl Taylor fills those sorts of stories for us* (Dickson, Interview: 1999).

Elias adds that using ECN saves him time and money: "Their court copy we use a lot of. It saves me having to send somebody to sit in court. I prefer to have them [ECN] go to court—most of the time."

However the principle works both ways. According to Lourens Schoeman, Deputy News Editor of *The EP Herald,* when a newspaper staff reporter has already covered a story or has access to a particular story, ECN copy is less likely to be used.

> *There is such a variety of news that comes from ECN. So there s nothing really specific that we look out for. Certain stories we won t use because our guys have already done stories on it.*

In other words, if ECN covers a story that *The Herald* has already covered, *The Herald* will use their own copy over ECN's. This rule applies to regional Eastern Cape newspapers as well as national newspapers and regional newspapers of other areas.

Elias highlights another production factor that enhances ECN's passage through external gates. "If it's a slow news day and I have space for some soft news then I'm more likely to use their stuff."

In addition to competing with the newspaper reporters, ECN copy also competes with the larger national and international wires. Ethene Zinn, Copy Taster at *The Cape Times* explains why they do not use ECN: "We already have SAPA and Reuters and newspapers are tightening their budgets."

Yves Vanderhaeghen, News Editor of *The Natal Witness* echoes this sentiment:

> *Mainly we don t use them because if a story is already filed by SAPA we will use SAPA in preference. There s just no financial logic in us using ECN. We pay in excess of R 20 000 per month to subscribe to SAPA, so even if the ECN story is better, we re more likely to go with the SAPA story* (Vanderhaeghen, Interview: 1999).

John Scott, News Editor of *The Cape Times* adds that a newspaper's coverage reflects their geographic distribution areas.

> *We rely on SAPA for our East Cape news. I mean if there s a really big story we might send a reporter out as far as Knysna. But that s where our distribution stops* (Scott, Interview: 1999).

The issue of geographic distribution pertains primarily to national newspapers and regional newspapers outside the Eastern Cape. But even Eastern Cape newspapers are bound by distribution perimeters. Elias, of the *Dispatch*, said: "[ECN] stories I won't use are stories that are in the Eastern Cape, but outside my distribution, like in Graaf Reinet or Kimberly."

4.2.3 Factors promoting Eastern Cape news past regional and national news gates

It s got to be fairly earth shattering.
(John Scott, Deputy News Editor, *The Cape Times*)

For the Eastern cape to merit national or extra-regional attention, most news editors would agree something "big" has to happen. Of course, for every news editor, something "big" may mean entirely different things. Zinn speaks of *elite persons* and *unexpected* events in identifying criteria for "something big":

> *For an Eastern Cape story to get in the news here something really big would have to happen. The boss would pretty much have to be knocked off there [in the Eastern Cape] You know Nelson Mandela* (Zinn, Interview: 1999).

der Velden of SAPA acknowledges that it is very difficult to pinpoint specific criteria. However, he also refers to as a major criteria of newsworthiness, "big stuff, like the ship sinking or the tornado in Umtata," but adds "ordinary human interests stories" to the list. "Things that are interesting to people everywhere on a

The Natal Witness proposes ECN's court

and justice, even if it is in the Eastern Cape." Vanderhaeghen's comment subconsciously reveals his own assessment of the Eastern Cape's trivial status. Implicit in his statement

as the topic will appeal to a broad spectrum of people.

Scandal was also identified as newsworthy. Van der Velden said: "You know big names, scandal, salacious stuff. Like the Laurie Wilmott trial. It's the nature of news I

Jeremy Gordon, News Editor of *The Sunday Independent*

streams that are of current national importance [would be likely to make it on a national level]. For instance, issues pertaining to education and corruption are big at the moment."

Accessibility and competition

This national need for "big news" is problematic for ECN for two reasons. First, as I have

even days at a time to dig for "big" corruption stories in Bisho. Also their Grahamstown location inhibits access to stories based in the larger centres of the Eastern Cape such as

The EP Herald said, "often, when it

Secondly, while every editor defines "big" differently, there is also a general unwritten consensus about what is nationally newsworthy. For such stories, newspapers will send

ECN's coverage of the event obsolete.

The Eastern Cape warrants national coverage when national events (elections, voter registration) take place there. In these instances, the Eastern Cape is considered newsworthy – newsworthy enough for a newspaper, or a larger news agency to cover the event themselves. *Cape Times* Deputy News Editor, John Scott explains:

> *Well for the upcoming election we ll want coverage of what s happening in Port Elizabeth and East London, but we ll send our own person out because we want in-depth coverage that fits with our style* (Scott, Interview: 1999).

Thus when "big" things are happening, ECN has little chance of getting to them because of competition from larger newspapers with superior resources.

Additionally, when ECN does have access to national stories, as in the case of the 1998 voter registration, their copy faces widespread competition from larger agencies. Van der Velden explains:

> *During the voter registration we basically rented ECN for a couple of days and asked them to cover the area. But then it was SAPA copy, not ECN copy* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Although ECN did not receive credit for their voter registration coverage, they did receive payment. By partnering with SAPA, they were able to eliminate their most formidable national competitor.

Van der Velden sums up the dual constraints of accessibility and competition for ECN:

> *When those [big] things happen ECN must be able to move quickly and easily and I don t know if that s the case for them. Like when the tornado in Umtata hit we were the ones who were able to break the news we have stringers and contacts in Umtata. We broke the story that Mandela was in Umtata at the time. But we did it just barely. It s a race. And I don t know that ECN has the resources to win* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

4.2.5 ECN s business structures

Another constraint preventing the passage of ECN news through external gates pertains to ECN's business skills – or lack thereof. Many editors of national and other regional newspapers identified ECN's poor marketing tactics and logistical problems with the wire service as constraints to publication.

Gordon of *The Sunday Independent* said that he had requested two stories from ECN during the month of December but had yet to hear back. "Is their e-mail working?" he asked. Initially, Scott, of *The Cape Times* did not even recognise the ECN name. When asked why he did not use *East Cape News* more often, he replied that it was because he

did not have an Eastern Cape correspondent. Clearly he misunderstood the question. I then had to explain to him who ECN was and what they did. Once he was aware of their role, he thought it might be a good idea to enlist their services.

Logistical problems with e-mail, faxes and computers often pose obstacles for ECN stories to even reach the external gates. Additionally, Van der Velden of SAPA spoke at length about ECN's deficient business intuition.

Van der Velden attributes this lack of business sense to the ECN's leader and his strong sense of activist journalism.

> *Well Mike [Loewe] is an activist in the old sense of the word. And Justin [Arenstein] of African Eye[8], is nothing of the sort. They re commercial all the way* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Van der Velden feels Loewe needs to market his copy more aggressively and concentrate more heavily on commercial imperatives. "I mean it's all very nice to shake the world with righteous journalism – but you've got to make ends meet. You've got to get out there and sell that stuff – especially for a struggling company like ECN."

> *ECN mustn t cover things just because they re interesting -- they must reckon they can flog it out. They ve got to look not at this is a nice story -- they ve got to look at how much can I pluck out of it in terms of cash. The Dispatch has a circulation of 35,000 and The Sunday Times, well that s a circulation of half a million. They ve got to be prepared to negotiate hard with prospective copy buyers.*
>
> *Like there was this one story about these British tourists that got stuck up in a tree. It was a great story. I rang Mike about the story and asked for it. But Mike needs to market that stuff better. I mean I d get on the phone and ring The Sun or The Express or The Mail in London. I mean The Sun pays 60 quid for four paras. It s good money. Convert it to rand and it s even better. I mean if I were Mike I d be out there flogging this stuff to whoever might be interested. That s something he should be doing. He needs to break out of that parochial market with that parochial copy. So that s something to do. But then you ve got to work bloody hard* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

Van der Velden also expressed the importance of ECN establishing their own niche market so as to eliminate direct competition from the larger SAPA organisation.

> *There s certainly a big hole for East Cape news - it s sort of a forgotten province. But there s certainly stuff coming out of the Eastern Cape. But they need to have the resources to get to the type of stuff SAPA can t get to. Each and every item of news they ve got - - they mustn t just churn it out - they ve got to direct it and aim it to particular newspapers. I mean that s something we [SAPA] can t really do, but they can. Take a court story from The Dispatch and sell it to The Sun - you know - high drama in African court room . They ve got to think like that* (Van der Velden, Interview: 1999).

4.2.6 Quality constraints

Generally, the Eastern Cape regional papers were quite satisfied with the quality of coverage generated by ECN.

> *All in all we re quite satisfied with what we get from them. They are actually quite beefed up. They do quite a bit of sourcing. Their stories come through quite well. I must be honest. Very seldom do we have to go back to them and ask for more information or clarification. They ve also beefed up their service quite a bit. Obviously, the crime we use a lot of. They help us with the country news - you know not Port Elizabeth or East London - but things that happen in the smaller towns. That is a big help for us. They always give good follow up to stories we might run.* (Schoeman [*EP Herald*], Interview: 1999).

The news editor of *The Dispatch* also cited their follow up stories to be of substantially high quality. "Their follow ups on our breaking stories tend to be very complete. All the players get interviewed. I haven't seen a one-source story come out of there for ages." Jeremy McCabe, Managing Editor of *The East Cape Weekend* said, "on a scale of one to ten I'd give them a high seven."

The most common criticism that emerged was that ECN's writing style "tends to be a little over the top."

> *I wish they d be a little less of a boys own paper . They just take these events and blow them up. They sensationalise. But they sensationalise weird stuff. They put a lot more bells and whistles on something than it really needs. Like that Bakkies on the Beach story could have been half the length. And the Grahamstown burglaries? How many stories are they gonna get out of that? The story they re sending through today is basically just a regurgitation of the story they sent through two weeks ago. I don t need nine stories for 15 burglaries They blow minor things out of proportion. And they tend to take the parochial and put razzmatazz where it s not necessary* (Elias [*Daily Dispatch*], Interview: 1999).

Eastern Cape editors, however did not consider this reason enough to prevent usage. News Editor of *The Daily Dispatch* Lew Elias explains:

> *When Earl Taylor refers to someone as rat-faced - not because anyone said it but just because he thinks it - well I just take that out. But if I ve got a cowboy sub on duty it slips through and I get apoplexy the next morning. But when stuff does tend to slip through, I don t blame ECN, I blame my own staff* (Elias, Interview: 1999).

For the Eastern Cape newspapers, the content ECN delivers is more important than the style. McCabe agrees that stylistic inconsistencies can always be amended. "Generally I do rewrite their copy a bit. I find they're a little too over the top and I have to scale them down a bit." Thus on a regional level, style issues do not prohibit passage through gates.

[8] An independent news agency similar to ECN operating out of Mpumulanga.

On national level, however, ECN's (perceived) tabloid style does play a role in inhibiting passage through gates. Jeremy Gordon of *The Sunday Independent* explains why they do not use more ECN copy.

> *The quality hasn t been enormously high. It s been a bit tabloidy a bit shallow, if you know what I mean. Like if you ask ECN for a story on violence in Bisho, they ll tell you X people got killed and how. We tend to look for motivations and causes rather than the gory details.*
> *On education budget cuts for example, ECN will do a story on one school where the lights aren t working. But what one wants is a broader picture. They need to speak to a lot of schools and speak to the officials of those schools in order to get to the bottom of things. We need to see a wider context. I mean you get the feeling that they motor out in their cars, and just observe something. But we need to see the wider picture. We re a Sunday paper. They do very daily journalism. Even their weekend stuff is daily* (Gordon, Interview: 1999).

While some editors felt their sensationalistic style was out of place in the set routines of their newspapers, other editors, such Vanderhaeghen felt that ECN had perhaps found their niche with such journalism and valued such style for its ability to transcend the structured routines of news reporting and news writing.

> *I ve heard editors complain of ECN copy being too gung ho , too rah rah . But I don t necessarily object to that. I mean ECN can be a breath of fresh air. At least they re not stuffy like SAPA. They certainly have a talent for quirky offbeat stories. You know, light side stories. Not necessarily hard news, but funny stories written in a funny way* (Vanderhaeghen, Interview: 1999).

4.3 Effects of external news organisations on ECN

Having examined the external structures through which ECN news must pass, the important question becomes, "how do these structures impact on news making at ECN ?"

Faced with substantial constraints and pressures on a daily basis, ECN journalists are highly sensitised to many of the determinants, both internally and externally, that shape their news production. While they do purport to function, as Windschuttle (1997) suggests, as autonomous reporters reflecting reality, they are nevertheless cognisant that the news they write is very much shaped by the constraints they face. Loewe is the first to admit making news is about making profit. "There are two horses in this race. One is journalism, the other is finances. But if the journalism gets ahead of the finances, then it's over."

He also realises that if "finances are wobbly, then the Eastern Cape is the first cut [from external news organisation's budgets]." This statement reveals that the ECN reporters are very much aware of the Eastern Cape's perceived insignificance on a national level and realise that this plays a part in controlling the passage of their news through national

external gates. Loewe says: “We’ve managed to make ourselves valuable at a regional level, but the national market – it’s hard, cruel and indifferent to the Eastern Cape.”

While the ECN reporters may be aware of these external structures, the question remains: “how do these determinants, these structural constraints shape their output?”

In chapter three, I suggested that national news representations of the region have even made ECN reporters consider the Eastern Cape “poor and backwards.” Consequently the news they produce may work to justify their own marginalised place in the news net periphery. Following this, their attempts to “nationalise” Eastern Cape news usually involves accessing “national” (Johannesburg) sources and thus framing the news from the power center perspective. Another tactic that serves to elevate ECN news past this ideological structure seems to be the personification of themes as we saw in the “Elsie Biko” example.

Loewe, however, diverges from his reporters on this point as he seems less compelled to “nationalise” Eastern Cape news. Although Loewe does employ some nationalising tactics on a subconscious level, it is clear that he has not been entirely absorbed by this dominant ideology. While he acknowledges the region as “poor and backward” he considers this fact all the more reason for it to be newsworthy.

> *When they say we re too parochial, I say shame they re too parochial. It s the classic case of the developed and the underdeveloped. They just don t care. Well, that s not fair. There are some journalists who do. Peter Bruce of the Financial Mail, he s from the Transkei and he s keen to get the Eastern Cape in the news. So there are journalists who care, but at the executive level they are completely indifferent [to the Eastern Cape]. When there is a financial wobbly, the first thing cut is the Eastern Cape. It reflects their indifference to the poor regions where the wheels come off the train. They just care about the first class train. Mainly they just don t want to pay. They don t see the Eastern Cape as worth paying for. But I think they re too parochial. They need to rethink. What happens on the periphery is important. People are interested. And if they re not -- we ll lobby them to make them interested* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

Thus the dominant perception of the Eastern Cape held by national newspapers does very little to impact on ECN’s leader. This is reflected by the many ECN stories that are written but not sold. For example, Loewe is a champion of the inherent news value of the Eastern Cape and even Grahamstown.

> *I love Grahamstown. I m a Grahamstonian and I feel committed, so I ll write about Grahamstown things. I ll push that other papers should hear about Grahamstown. Often I think a story is never going to make it. But bugger that. If it s important to me it s got to go. And if that makes me a*

> *small town journalist trying to get a story into a bigger coastal paper then that s cool* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

While his reporters may or may not agree, Loewe's commitment to the Eastern Cape remains generally untainted by national structural influences.

4.3.1 Editorial response

In order to assess the impact of the comments made by news workers in this chapter, I conducted a second interview with Loewe allowing him the opportunity to respond. He acknowledged the truth in the criticisms about quality and attributed the lack of depth in some of ECN's news reporting to structural constraints within the ECN organisation.

> *I am concerned about the lack of depth. I ve got young news reporters those are the ones I can afford to hire and they don t have a sense of the history and the struggle. So I just keep them on hard news stories* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

He also spoke of time and, of course, finances as major constraints in writing more investigative in-depth pieces.

> *We d love to do that, but we just don t have the time. Much more is asked of reporters here than at any other newspaper. My reporters have to write daily stories and weekend stories. I can t just afford to send reporters out on spec. We do it though. But it s very dodgy. We can t run at a loss. We just don t have the resources* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

In response to the criticism that ECN puts too many "bells and whistles" on their stories, Loewe seemed genuinely concerned. He saw the validity in the statement and revealed that such narrative is very much the result of external influences.

> *It s one of our problems...writing for such different papers. We write for The Herald and The Dispatch. So The Herald wants it. They demand it. Their editor is an ex- Sunday Times editor and he runs The Herald in that fashion. But The Dispatch comes from a stiff upper lip tradition of British journalism. Lew[Elias] is an old SAPA reporter. They like crisp, clean reporting with maybe one good quote I guess when we put all those bells and whistles on, we re trying for The Herald. Maybe we don t need to try so hard with them* (Loewe, Interview: 1999).

This statement reveals a central point that needs to be recognized. While national newspapers hold greater prestige in the news net, the journalists at ECN write primarily for their regional market. Ultimately it is their primary customers, the regional newspapers – *The Herald* and *The Dispatch* - which play a significant role in shaping ECN news. While national newspapers may pick up an ECN story from time to time, ECN remains primarily committed to the region they serve – the region Loewe is "committed to putting on the national map" without compromising what he sees as its inherent news value.

> *I didn t come to Grahamstown to run a big New York style news agency. Our biggest strength is that we are small. We must occupy that sense.* (Loewe, Interview1999).

4.4 Conclusion

Exploring the factors, which inhibit or promote passage of ECN news through external news gates this chapter has attempted to answer the question: "What is the news that sells?" Answering that question, as any ECN journalist will tell you, is a difficult task as it is based on a complex set of intertwined criteria.

Every news organisation employs their own criteria of selection. We have seen that some are more apt to publish scandal while others may rely on ECN's business or government copy. Some feel the Eastern Cape is worthy of coverage, while others feel it has earned its place as the "forgotten province".

However, among these disparities, certain commonalties have emerged. ECN plays a vital role in foregrounding the voices of the Eastern Cape in the South African media. Whether they succeed in this role, however, is largely based on structural determinants within the media market. At all levels, regional, extra-regional and national, ECN news supplements what the newspapers themselves cannot access due to geographic, labour, time and space constraints. In addition, these news organisations must consider the news generated by ECN newsworthy enough for publication.

The chapter has demonstrated that criteria for selection within the Eastern Cape is not as stringent as at the national level. At the national level it seems that ECN news selection is based on two main factors. The first is the perceived significance of the Eastern Cape, and the second is the success of ECN in delivering that news. While newspapers differ on their perception of the Eastern Cape, they seem to agree that ECN is not always able to access the kinds of news they are looking for.

This relates to ECN's constraints as a provincial commercial news agency. Not only is ECN limited by their own constraints of time, finances and resources but the publication of their copy is inhibited by such factors as competition in the media market, accessibility to newsworthy events, standards of quality and business management. External news organisations cited these factors as reasons for disregarding ECN news.

The ECN news published by these organisations, plays a fundamental role in shaping external perceptions of the Eastern Cape. Their tendency to publish "human interest" weekend stories, based on "unknowns" engaging in unexpected activities does little to present a broad or accurate picture of the Eastern Cape. In addition, these organisations, especially the prestigious national newspapers, as well as the main Eastern Cape dailies, play a fundamental role in shaping perceptions of ECN news – perceptions that may not be an entirely fair or accurate picture of the news ECN can and does access.

For this reason, *The City Press* disparity offers a significant illustration in that it revealed many of the stories ECN has accessed which are *not* widely published. In so doing, it highlighted many of the people whom ECN has given a voice, but who the external newspapers have not.

Conclusion

If anything, this thesis demonstrates that there is no single or simple explanation of what makes the news. The most salient example of this is the fact that much of what is considered newsworthy at ECN, is not necessarily considered newsworthy on a national level. However, if a conclusion has to be drawn, this study maintains a broad structuralist approach concluding that various structures, from routine journalism practices to ideology and culture, interacting at all levels, play a fundamental role in shaping the news.

Highlighting these complex influences of ideology, economics, politics and organisations, this study demonstrates that the process of news making is a far cry from Windschuttle's voluntarist view of journalists "who go out into society, make observations about what is done and is said and report them as accurately as they can" (1997: 4).

This research transcends Windschuttle's confined views to consider the economic and political power structures in which news making takes place and the "attendant tension between the notions of free human agency and the structuration of experience" (Strelitz and Steenveld, 1998: 106). Illustrating the interplay of these factors, this study reveals that news is not a mere reflection of reality, but a socially constructed product that produces particular interpretations of reality.

While the central question of this study "what makes the news?" is certainly a general one, the research concentrates on two more specific issues. The study first examines the complex web of factors shaping the news at the internal gates of ECN. It then turns to an examination of the forces which promote or inhibit the passage of ECN news past the external news gates of national and regional newspapers. My identification of all the considerations that go into news judgement acknowledges that these two stages – the internal and external news gates – are intertwined.

Thus, in order to examine the complex web of factors shaping the news, this study employs a multi-dimensional model of the gatekeeping process which considers five levels of theoretical analysis from the micro-level of the individual to the macro level of the social system. This structuralist model of gatekeeping offers a much-modified

version of White's (1950) initial study in which "Mr. Gates", the all powerful news editor, was seen as responsible for all news making decisions.

White's study reflects Windschuttle's voluntaristic approach to news making which emphasises the individual level of analysis. Without completely discounting the role of human agency it would appear that news at ECN is indeed a socially constructed product produced within, and as a result of, interacting structures based on a complex set of socio-economic, political, organisational and ideological criteria.

Additionally, whether ECN news was considered newsworthy enough for publication on a national level was also a result of structural influences in the gatekeeping process, particularly the influence of a national ideology which seems to trivialise the Eastern Cape as a region of little significance.

The study began with the consideration of the effects foundational structures, such as history, politics and economics have in shaping the ECN organisation and the media market which it serves. Shoemaker (1991: 32) would classify these structures at the social and institutional level of analysis (which includes the mass media, advertising, and interest groups) as well as the social system level (which considers variables such as ideology and culture).

The chapter highlighted the influential role the political structure of apartheid played in shaping prejudiced ideologies which necessitated the role of an oppositional alternative press in the first place. It also considered the foreign economic structures which financially supported the alternative press at the time. These funders maintained a substantial degree of distance in directing editorial content, but supported the alternative press with the understanding that their primary mission was to expose the improprieties of the apartheid government.

Consequently, when apartheid ended in 1994, so did the funding for the alternative press. This move forced ECN (then Ecna) to change its internal structure, cut down on labour and increase production. Such a shift prompted an amplified focus on news that sells (i.e. business news and court reporting) as opposed to what Van der Velden (cf. chapter four)

refers to as “righteous journalism”. It is at this point in the research that the structuralist theoretical framework begins to shows signs of unraveling.

In light of these internal shifts, one might assume that ECN would be structurally bound to focus all of its reporting on the “news that sells”. However, chapter three demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case.

Certainly the ECN news workers are bound by structures at the communications routine level of analysis such as deadlines, beats, story length, etc. (Shoemaker, 1991: 50, cf. chapter one). The communications routines level includes communication practices that are common across many communication organisations. However, it is the organisational level that is reserved for those factors over which communication organisations may vary.

At ECN, this is indeed the level where variation occurs. While many of my findings are congruous with those of previous media researchers in the field, it is at this level of the organisation that divergent aspects emerge, most noticeably the prevalence of individual human agency at ECN not found at larger, more rigidly structured media organisations.

While ECN did institute beats around the “news that sells”, the study shows that the reporters were never tied exclusively to these beats. There is always room for specific reporter interests to prevail. For example, court reporter Mike Earl Taylor may choose to write about his celebrity pet or a craft show in his hometown of Bathurst. Office administrator, Rita Larisma writes only from time to time and when she does, she is motivated primarily by personal interest. As a general assignment reporter, Patrick Burnett has more leeway regarding choice when it comes to story selection than the beat reporters do. His news selection generally reflects his personal interest in human rights, activist reporting.

Shoemaker (1991) suggests individuals in an organisation develop a collective consciousness that results in the organisational interpretation being placed on new information. However, at ECN there is no collective organisational interpretation. This is a result of a noticeable lack of structure which begins at the top of the organisation with the over-burdened role of the editor. The editor, operating as both editor and publisher, is

often too preoccupied to direct editorial content. Furthermore, his dichotomous leadership role produces an undefined organisational mission. On the one hand the reporters are bound by commercial imperatives which compel them to produce as much news as possible. On the other hand, they are tied to a strong notion of journalistic integrity instilled in part by their socialisation into a profession which prioritises their role as public servants and in part by their own news interests which typically reflect or have been influenced by Loewe's strong civil rights ethos stemming from his days as an activist journalist during the apartheid era.

Outside of the ECN organisation, the research explores the factors external news organisations – the newspapers – apply to selecting ECN copy off the wire and how the news they select serves to depict the Eastern Cape. This is an important issue for consideration because the national newspapers play a significant role in interpreting the world for their audience. Hall (1977: 341) notes:

> [The] first of the great cultural functions of the modern mass media [is] the provision and selective construction of social knowledge, of social imagery, through which we perceive the 'worlds', the 'lived realities' of others and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible 'world of the whole', some 'lived totality'.

Thus, this research examines how the Eastern Cape fits into this "lived totality"; how its depiction in the national news serves to perpetuate its marginalised status. The research shows that economically and politically powerful sources of centre regions have more access to the media and, therefore, more opportunity to insert messages into media channels (Gans, 1979), leaving resource-poor groups, such as the Eastern Cape periphery, to resort to deviant acts in order to attract media attention, as evidenced by the popularity of Mike Earl Taylor's salacious court copy.

Other Eastern Cape news that attracted national attention revolved around one person or group who were used to personify a general human-interest theme. The allure of human-interest stories for national newspapers is that they provide a point of general identification for readers across the country, thus rendering the fact that the story originated in the Eastern Cape irrelevant. Only one newspaper, *The City Press*, displayed any sort of commitment to foregrounding diverse voices of the Eastern Cape focusing on issues of development and education, as well as crime and corruption. *The City Press*

disparity demonstrates that ECN does in fact access a multiplicity of voices, however the national papers are frequently reluctant to publish them.

In addition to revealing how the national media depicts the Eastern Cape, the study also considers how they influence the production of news at ECN. Although it is difficult to measure the extent of the influence, what passes through the external gates of national newspapers is certain to affect the news judgement of journalists, including the journalists at the internal gates of ECN.

While the regional newspapers, *The EP Herald* and *The Daily Dispatch* play a more significant role in explicitly shaping ECN copy, the study also considers the influence national newspapers exert in shaping the news values of the news workers. Hall (1977) states that over time the media actually create a consensus knowledge by which reporters and viewers recognise newsworthiness. Such was the case at ECN where news workers felt that accessing powerful centre-based sources was one way to elevate their stories to a national level. The consensus knowledge was also evidenced by the ECN workers own perceptions of their area as "poor and backward".

Although the ECN reporters are aware of this ideological structure inhibiting the passage of their news through national gates, and sometimes, even exhibit traits of the ideology themselves, they nevertheless continue to cover stories they know will not succeed past national gates. They are first committed to their primary market of the Eastern Cape and are devoted to putting the region on the national map. Referring to ECN's dedication, Loewe applies an appropriate slogan he adopted from *The City Press*: "Whatever it takes".

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Interviews

ECN Staff (December, 1998)

- **Mike Loewe**, ECN Editor (second interview, January, 1999)
- **Patrick Burnett**, ECN General Reporter
- **Mike Earl Taylor**, ECN Senior Court Reporter
- **Dumile Mentijies,** ECN Office Assistant
- **Rita Larisma**, ECN Office Administrator
- **Quentin Wray**, ECN Business Reporter

News Workers (January, 1999)

- **Brendan Boyle**, Reuters Bureau Chief, South Africa
- **Mark Van der Velden**, News Editor, SAPA
- **Lou Elias**, News Editor, *The Daily Dispatch*
- **Peter Dickson**, Deputy News Editor, *The Daily Dispatch*
- **Lourens Schoeman**, Deputy News Editor, *The Eastern Province Herald*
- **Jeremy Gordon**, News Editor, *The Sunday Independent*
- **David Mouse**, Financial News Editor, *Business Day*
- **Jacob Dlamini**, Deputy News Editor, *Business Day*
- **Jeremy McCabe**, Managing Editor, *East Cape Weekend*
- **Yves Vanderhaeghen,** News Editor, *Natal Witness*