

# What is news?



## Deciding What's Newsworthy

Why do journalists choose to write the stories they do in preference to others? How do reporters, and their superiors, judge that one piece of information is newsworthy, while another, delivered at the same time by the same person at the same meeting, is not?

There is no hard and fast answer, no rule book, no objective set of criteria, no news rule book that can be applied to each event to see whether it passes or fails the news test. It is an intangible decision-making process, largely based on experience and intuition; arbitrary, almost whimsical.

So what *is* news? Ask 50 journalists and you'll probably get 50 different answers. One Science Correspondent in BBC News and Current Affairs, said: 'I can't define what news is, but I know it when I see it'. That message is echoed by most journalists you ask.

What is clear is that it will contain at least one of five key elements

- **human interest,**
- **novelty,**
- **current affairs,**
- **conflict or controversy and**
- **local interest.**

News has to have human interest as it is invariably about people: what they do and why they do it. This is the most important aspect of any newsworthy story – it must be about people.

Novelty means the story must be new and fresh. There is no point in trying to flog old news to the media. It also means first, last, biggest, smallest – anything which makes a story different from the rest.

Anything with a bearing on other current affairs or events in the world stands a chance as it adds to the existing news agenda, as does anything with an element of conflict or controversy.

There's nothing which makes the news as well as a good row.

Stories with a local angle stand a better chance of being regarded as newsworthy. Localness doesn't just mean in the immediate neighbourhood though, stories from around the world run better when they have relevance to the audience they are presented to – this explains the "Two Britons injured in plane crash. 170 Chinese killed" type stories we see.

Local newspapers and radio programmes are always particularly eager to see a local angle on a story – when there was a fire on the Channel Tunnel in 2008 Leicestershire radio stations ran a story about a lorry driver from Loughborough who had been stuck in the resulting traffic jam on the M2 for three days.

In addition to these five features a news story must be "of the now", that is to say it must have currency and a relevance to today. News "goes off" very quickly and the news agenda is always moving. The only way to keep up on it is to read newspapers, listen to the radio and watch TV – from this you can gauge the current state of the news agenda and act accordingly.

Even with this in mind, spotting stories is still something of an art and some journalists certainly have better 'news radar' than others. A throwaway remark, a chance aside, and suddenly their eyes light up. 'Ahh, that's interesting. I didn't know that', they think to themselves.

The process is almost palpable. There's a kind of mutual telepathy over an item's newsworthiness amongst experienced journalists. This occurs especially between those who work together regularly, such as the specialist correspondents from rival media outlets who may see each other at different jobs three or four times a week.

Finally a word about exclusivity. Scoops, when only one paper has a story, are all

highly prized and are not shared, and it is very true that journalists do like to have a story to themselves, but the idea that reporters and specialists correspondent out in the field are in deadly competition with each other is largely a myth in terms of day-to-day working. They are more likely to be worried about their colleagues in their office getting a story before they do than rivals on other papers.

### **Same story - different angles**

Journalists frequently take different lines from the same meeting, depending on the seriousness or popularity of their market and sometimes the political complexion of the paper. From a meeting on the epidemiology of cancer, for instance, it's possible that the *Guardian* would highlight the different incidence rates between socio-economic groups, while the *Daily Mail* would possibly be more interested in statistics on breast and cervical cancer, to appeal to its female readers.

The *Mirror* might want to reflect on the North - South divide in cancer rates, while the *Sun* might pick up on the potential value of antioxidant vitamins as a protection against cancer, probably with a headline along the lines of 'An orange a day keeps the tumour at bay.'

By and large, however, there is a remarkable consensus between the various papers as to what is news. If something is news, then the same story, albeit longer or shorter, is likely to appear in all of them, just as it will on TV and radio.

### **Freelance journalists**

These individuals (there are thousands of them) are used increasingly within all sectors of the media to provide news and features to order. They usually work in fairly narrow areas, for example, science, or for identifiable sectors of the media, such as women's magazines.

Freelancers work in two ways: either they are commissioned by a news or feature editor to write on a given subject, in a given way, and to a given length; or they generate

the ideas themselves and then try to sell that idea or story to the news or feature editor. This latter method is preferred by the freelancer and this is why they can be useful to us in getting our story ideas out into the media world.

If you can cultivate a freelance journalist or three, then you cut down the distance between you and the various editors. In fact, they can almost act as a kind of agent on your behalf. Also, because they only make money by selling their ideas (and words), they can be a very useful source of advice as to the 'saleability' of your story.

### **News Agencies**

These are independent, commercial organisations, who make their money by selling news and features to individual papers, magazines, radio and TV stations. Most agencies do not receive commission. They work by writing what they want to and hoping that someone will buy it, although some of the smaller geographically based agencies will be commissioned by newspapers to cover, say, local football league games or local courts.

The largest, purely UK-based, agency is the Press Association (PA). This has many specialist correspondents as well as lots of generalists and feature writers. All their material is sent out 'on the wires' to both national, regional and local media outlets. These individual papers or radio stations pay PA for the totality of their service. They pay to have access to PA's news service, and then use whatever they want, either as straight copy or as source material.

PA also provides a "page ready" facility offering local papers a full page of national news which PA puts together on their behalf.

PA also has a reporter, more usually known as a 'stringer', in just about every town in the country. So making contact with your local press agency or local PA stringer can mean your story and your research being seen and read all over this country and possibly abroad.

## Making Your Story Newsworthy

The bottom line is that a story is a story if an editor thinks it is. The fact that something was 'said yesterday' at a meeting or conference can make it new as far as journalists are concerned, even though the work in question might be familiar to everyone working in that area. Publication in a journal makes it new, even though the field work might have been carried out years ago.

On the other hand, yet another report saying that cholesterol is bad for the heart and smoking damages the lungs doesn't necessarily change behaviour. Even though new groups of patients may have been studied, this is not going to excite anyone. Apart from 'So what?', the glummiest words a news editor can say to a journalist are: 'We know that, don't we?'

### Sexy soundbites

Sometimes the way things are presented can make them news, even though the contents might not be startlingly original. A nice 'sound bite,' as they say on radio, or a 'sexy' quote, can often mean the difference between something 'making' - getting in the paper - and being 'spiked' - not used.

For instance, it's hardly news that many young children smoke. But large headlines resulted from one British Medical Association press conference because a media-aware doctor deliberately said that shopkeepers who sold cigarettes to children were as bad as heroin pushers in the death and misery they caused.

This may, or may not, have been an exaggeration, but it allowed a presentation of the issues about underage smoking which would otherwise have been dismissed by news editors as "old hat".

### Use analogies and metaphors

Analogies, metaphors, frames of reference that ordinary people can understand, can mean the difference between a largely un-

read scientific report and a newspaper article which will be seen by hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of readers.

The fact that every person consumes so many kilos of sugar a year in their average diet means nothing to most readers. But when a Professor of Dentistry says 'The average person eats a pile of sugar the size of a football each month', that gets headlines.

### Use Real Life

Using real-life examples or real-life people, even though their identities are not revealed, can ensure psychology gets into newspapers where normally it would be written off as too specialised.

A debate on whether Asperger's syndrome is a separate disorder or a subclass of autism may fascinate psychologists, but it does nothing for the public. That debate *did*, however, receive considerable coverage because journalists probed for real-life examples of how Asperger's manifests itself and the researcher was happy to supply them.

People with this syndrome may obsessively collect carrots; the light fittings of tube carriages; or anything else it is possible to collect. The fact that these people were not simply eccentric, a kind of 'super train-spotter', but suffering from a form of mental condition was intriguing. The real-life details of their habits brought the story alive. These weren't laboratory subjects; they were real people.

### Status Does Count

Sometimes the status or notoriety of a person makes a story news where similar offerings from someone else would not. Complaints by junior doctors that they are still expected to work horrendous hours would not get much of a show, but a similar complaint by the President of the Royal College of Surgeons would be a different matter, especially if he or she were prepared to say patients' lives were being put at risk.

Rightly or wrongly some personalities are more newsworthy than others. Lectures by scientists already known to the media are far more likely to generate media interest than

those by other equally eminent scientists, often because they have a track record for being controversial, or at least putting their head over the parapet on controversial issues.

Attacks on the Government are far more likely to produce press coverage than an anodyne report which simply says more money is needed, or, even more tamely and all too usually, more research is needed and worst of all a bland welcome for government funding (usually sent out five days too late in any case).

### **When To Contact The Media With Your Story**

News stories have an extremely short shelf-life and are far more perishable than any other commodity. In general, if they are not used within 24 hours, they are not going to be used.

It may sound arbitrary that a project two years in the making which gains coverage when published in *The Lancet* on Friday is not deemed still newsworthy on Saturday or Monday, but that is how it is.

Sometimes it is possible to resurrect a story for use as a feature or on one of the specialist sections such as health or career pages now run by most newspapers. Stories can sometimes be saved if there is genuine follow up, for instance if the Government or a research body decides to set up an inquiry panel in the light of report findings, or a sufferers' group calls for compensation because they've been harmed by the drug or surgical technique.

### **Avoid busy news days**

It is a fact of life in the news industry that some news days are busier than others. This is largely unpredictable. But, with some planning and a little luck, we can sometimes take advantage of this to ensure coverage which might not otherwise be given.

Some events such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in 2001 cannot be anticipated and will generally knock any story out of the news.

But there are some known busy news days, which can be avoided, and quite a few known slack days which can be targeted.

There are fixed points in the news calendar which can for instance be avoided, such as Budget Day, the Autumn Statement, and the Queen's Speech. However, it is still possible to find people organising press conferences on Budget Day and then bemoaning the following morning that they didn't get any coverage.

If you have the luxury of time and the ear of a friendly journalist it is well worth asking a good few weeks in advance if anything else big is going to be happening on the day you are planning your press conference or report launch. If there is another major event, it might be worthwhile rescheduling your news conference, either for a different time or a different day.

### **Timing Is All**

The time of day when a press conference is held can make a big difference to whether or not something is covered.

Mid-morning is generally best, between 10.00a.m. and 11.30a.m. This will not suit evening papers and may be tight for the (lunchtime/mid-day TV and radio news, but it does ensure that most newspaper journalists will attend and be able to file their stories in good time.

Even on busy news days some of the early pages (those nearer the middle of the paper) have to be prepared by 2.30p.m. as not everything can be left to 7p.m. Providing a nice early page lead - can make a journalist very popular with the news desk, and perhaps ensures that the piece gets more coverage than it would if it were written at 6p.m.

Afternoon press conferences are usually a waste of time. Nor do journalists like breakfast meetings because they have to get in early and because these smack of American-style hype. Whilst it might be convenient for your organisation to hold a press conference at 6p.m. on a Friday you have to remember

that the event is not for you, it is for the media and as such needs to be arranged at the best time for them.

As the point of a press conference is to offer the opportunity for journalists to face you and ask questions it is essential that you choose a venue which is easy for them to get to. Again it is there needs which should dictate where you meet them, not your ease of operation.

### **Sunday for Monday**

Just as there are busy news days there are also slack news days. Usually these cannot be predicted, but there is one slack news day every week which rolls around without fail - Sunday.

It comes as a minor revelation to many people to realize that daily newspaper journalists work on Sunday. But this is only common sense. Monday's paper has to be put together by someone. There is never usually much news happening on a Sunday, so it can sometimes be a struggle to fill the pages.

Reports, studies, policy statements, even new books, can all be sent to papers for use as "Sunday for Monday" stories. The reporter or specialist will usually be extremely grateful, because desperate news editors start asking on Friday or even Thursday 'Got anything Sunday for Monday?' They do not want to have to go into the morning conference on Sunday with an empty news list.

It pays to send Sunday for Monday stories out a few days early so that they arrive on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday at the latest. This will allow them to be written on Friday and left in the news desk queue. If the stuff arrives on a Saturday it is possible, indeed likely, that the specialist or reporter may not physically be around (although they will be on call at home) and the material will lie there unopened until Monday morning when it is too late.

### **Seasonal slack days**

Other classic slack news days are Bank Holidays, and especially the Christmas period. August was traditionally a pretty slack time, with Parliament in recess and many businesses in the summer holiday period, and it once had the title "silly season" as newspapers ran so many lightweight stories.

Political media management means August is no longer free of politics, and it is now almost as busy as any other time in the year – and, of course, it's when many journalists go on holiday, so press conferences or events may be lightly attended.