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WHAT IS NEWS?

News is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read.

And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead.

E. Wagh, *Seoop* (1982)

This chapter:

- examines the definitions of news
- asks what makes something newsworthy
- looks at different types of news stories
- questions who decides what is newsworthy
- looks at how journalists identify stories.

Various attempts have been made to answer the question 'What is news?' It is a tricky one. Lynette Sheridan Burns (2000: 50), for instance, in *Understanding Journalism* defines news as something that binds 'people together in a sense of community'. Certainly, freelance journalist Carole Richardson buys into the notion of community – at least in the sense that news is something that individuals want to share with one another. 'News is something you *have* to tell a friend before the credits on your mobile phone run out', she says – a definition that suggests an element of urgency, which is an element that is somewhat lacking from the universally accepted assertion, usually credited to former editor of *The Sunday Times*, Harold Evans, that news is people.

On one level, it is hard to argue with any of these descriptions, yet none of them tells the whole story. Indeed, although most journalists would

reach some sort of consensus on what constitutes the key ingredients of news, it is unlikely that they would agree on a precise definition. Some would say that it is something new that has just happened or is about to happen; something that is immediate, exciting, unusual, unexpected, amazing, vital, important and interesting.

Others would describe it as newly received, fresh information that has not been published or broadcast before. Adam Wolstenholme, a reporter on the *Dewsbury Reporter*, adds a further qualification. 'News should be something surprising, something we didn't already know, that will either affect the readers directly or, as in the case of a "human interest" story, inspire their empathy or interest.'

Another colleague defines news as something that could pass the 'pub door test' – that is, if you burst into a pub with some information and managed to get everyone to stop what they were doing and listen to you, you would have a decent story on your hands. Alan Powell, editor of the *Sheffield Telegraph* puts it even more succinctly: 'News is what you talk about over a pint.'

This is all very well for national reporting, but, as Adam Wolstenholme observes:

Local journalists will write plenty of stories that are of enormous interest to their readers, but would mean nothing to someone "down the pub" in the next city. Essentially banal subject matter, like roadworks, for instance, can be a great source of local stories because they have a genuine impact on people's day-to-day lives. You have to bear in mind, therefore, not just what excites you as an individual, but what will excite your readers, who might live in a different town and have very different interests.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION ...

Adam Wolstenholme's observation is interesting on a number of counts. First, because it introduces the idea of location – that news is only news if it happens in the right place. So, the *Selby Times* devoted pages of coverage to the Selby train crash, which occurred on the very limits of its geographical circulation area, while the neighbouring *Pontefract and Castleford Express*, the circulation boundaries of which fall just meters short of the crash site, had less to say about the crash and instead concentrated on the efforts of the medical teams at Pontefract Hospital to treat the injured. Other regionals would have checked the list of victims to see if any came from their circulation area. They would have given the story more or less coverage depending on whether or not there was a strong local angle.

Second, Wolstenholme makes it clear that news does not necessarily have to be either dramatic or exciting. The most mundane occurrence – roadworks,

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say – may be newsworthy simply because of the scale of the impact that it has on the lives of ordinary people. Diversions and long tailbacks for rush hour motorists may not be hugely important in the great scale of things – unless, of course, you happen to be a tired and hungry driver stuck at the back of the queue, in which case, they become immensely significant. That brings us to the third point – news is not just about people, it *affects* people. News impacts on their lives, even if, in the case of the rush hour motorists, it means something as simple as changing their route to avoid traffic hold-ups.

Finally, although he does not say so directly, Wolstenholme implies that news must be based on facts, not fiction. This emphasis is significant. ‘Facts,’ the late Paul Foot is quoted as saying, in *The Penguin Book of Journalism: Secrets of the Press* (Glover 2000: 80), ‘are the crucial standard by which opinion can be judged.’ Without facts, it becomes impossible for individuals to make accurate, informed judgements about the community in which they live. This is important – locally, nationally and globally. Essentially, journalism acts as ‘our means of contact with a world which, though shrinking, is still largely beyond our direct, personal experience. It provides the information from which we draw our “cognitive maps” of reality’ (McNair 2001: 21).

Our acceptance of the truthfulness and accuracy of the word pictures that journalists, or rather, reporters, paint when they describe what is happening at home and elsewhere informs our opinions about events and issues outside our own narrow compass, thus, underlining the role that journalism plays in maintaining and reinforcing democracy. Ian Hargreaves (2003: 25), former editor of *The Independent* newspaper and *New Statesman* magazine, and a former professor of journalism at Cardiff University, but now group director of corporate and public affairs at BAA, believes that this is why, above all else, reporting the news matters: ‘Good journalism provides the information and opinion upon which successful democratic societies depend. Corrupt that and you corrupt everything.’ Without such knowledge and understanding, it would be all too easy for those in power and authority to pull the wool over our eyes.

During the 2003 Iraq war, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, the Ba’ath party’s minister for information, was roundly ridiculed for what one journalist described as his promotion of the party line – assuring the world that all was well, even as battles raged visibly behind him (‘Free to do bad things’, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2003) Iraq’s authorities recognised only too well the importance of spinning a good war and controlling the images and information conveyed through the media, both to their own domestic audience and the wider global community.

By the same token, both British and American governments were highly critical of what they termed the pro-Iraq bias of some UK and US media coverage. A spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair accused the BBC – in particular, its Baghdad-based correspondents Rageh Omaar and Andrew Gilligan – of ‘trying to make the news rather than reporting it’ (‘Free to do bad things’, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2003).

Gilligan (now better known for the events that led up to the Hutton Inquiry), who was targeted after he reported that people of Baghdad were experiencing their ‘first days of freedom in more fear than they had ever known before’ (‘Rageh Omaar wins it for BBC in Baghdad’, *Guardian*, 14 April 2003), was defended by his Today colleague John Humphrys, who said, ‘We are not part of the propaganda war. We are meant to do what, in my view, Andrew Gilligan has done brilliantly over the past few weeks, which is telling us what he sees and hears’. (‘BBC defends its reporter in Baghdad’, *The Observer*, 13 April 2003).

In a sense, the fact that the press were being squeezed from both sides suggests that they were on the right track in terms of presenting the facts truthfully and impartially. This is a journalistic truism that applies at both local and national levels. As Adam Wolstenholme says, ‘There are times when one feels exasperated by people who want only their point of view to be publicised, but then annoying people is something we inevitably have to do from time to time. Once, when I complained to my former news editor at the *Spensborough Guardian*, Margaret Heward, that I was being berated by people on both sides of a squabble that I’d done a story on, she told me that it probably meant that I’d done a good job and ‘It’s when you take flak from only one side that you might have messed up.’

NEWS IS ABOUT FINDING OUT WHAT’S GOING ON

In part, this is what makes journalism such a rewarding profession – in reporting what is important and newsworthy, journalists have an opportunity to draw to public attention matters that might otherwise be ignored. ‘The business of the press,’ said nineteenth-century editor of *The Times*, Thaddeus Delane, ‘is disclosure’ (Delane in Wheen 2002: xi). For Wolstenholme, this notion of finding things out goes to the heart of the news business:

I like to be in search of the truth. Reporters who feel envious of the money people make in PR should console themselves with the thought that reporters, unlike PR people, are basically after the unbiased truth, rather than spinning a line. In spite of the bad press we sometimes get, I think we are essentially doing something worthwhile.

The role of *The Sunday Times* in securing compensation for the thalidomide babies and that of Bernstein and Woodward in exposing the complicity of

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President Nixon in the Watergate break-in are prime examples of this kind of pure journalism – newsmaking that is driven by what Philip Knightley, who spent five years on the thalidomide investigation, describes as ‘moral indignation, outrage at the sheer efforts of men who could put pecuniary interests before their victims’ lives’ (Knightley in de Burgh 2001: 22).

WHOSE TRUTH IS IT ANYWAY?

It is easy at this point to become almost evangelical about the role of journalists. However, an implicit trust in the truthfulness of journalism argues a lack of understanding about the nature of truth as the way in which facts are presented can persuade readers to ‘see’ the news in a particular way. At a very simple level, journalists select and interpret ‘news’ so that it fits and influences the culture of understanding of its readership. The aim is achieve a ‘balance between satisfying reader demands and shaping the news to influence what the readership understands’ (Lacey and Longman 1997: 194–5).

Journalists may strive for objectivity, but, rightly or wrongly, their perceptions about news are determined primarily by what, in their view, their readers will consider newsworthy. This is a complicated and, for theorists, a somewhat problematical issue, but, broadly speaking, as Marina Lewykca, a senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University observes, journalists tend to see themselves as contributing to an informed democracy, while theorists see their role as creating consensus and confirming ideology,

The upshot of all this ambiguity about the nature of news, however, is that a trawl through one day’s newspapers will produce a wide variety of different stories on different subjects, none of which appear to be linked in any way, yet each one is defined as news. Hence, front page news in *The Sun* was ‘Never a rape: snooker case insult to real victims’, which is not necessarily front page news in *The Daily Telegraph*, which has instead ‘Tear up chaotic planning reforms, say MPs’, nor is it front page news in the *Daily Mail*, which has ‘Who cares? At 108, Alice Knight starved herself to death, a despairing victim of how our old people’s homes have been wrecked by red tape and cost-cutting’. Each choice reflects the perceptions and priorities of the readers of each publication – or the editors’ perceptions of what these are, – demonstrating both the symbiotic relationship between journalist and reader and the truism that there can be no single classification that sums up news in a nutshell.

Chris Page, editor of the *Selby Times*, sees his paper as an integral part of the local community, campaigning and crusading on local issues as well as offering an informative package of exclusive news, features and photos, sport and grass roots stuff, such as what's on and leisure information, as well as letters, competitions and promotions:

It's important to get the mix right. On a local newspaper like ours, people are quick to pick up the telephone and tell you if they're not happy about something. By the same token, they will also let you know when they like what they're reading. Such feedback is invaluable. It means we're able to respond to our readers and to be sensitive about what they expect from us. The important thing, though, is that we should always be telling readers something new, something they didn't know before, about people or events in their community.

YES, BUT IS IT NEWS?

What is a journalist looking for when he or she sets off on a news story? What is it that makes one person more newsworthy than another? Why is a news journalist likely to consider covering one event but not another?

The answers to all these questions depend on a number of factors. Timing, for instance, is hugely important. Former government spin doctor Jo Moore became infamous for her advice that September 11th would be a good day to bury bad news. What she meant was that stories that might otherwise be front page fodder would be ignored by journalists and readers alike under the weight of news generated by the New York and Washington terrorist attacks. Similarly, stories that might be ignored on a busy news day achieve a disproportionate importance at quiet times of year – the August silly season, which regularly spawns a raft of stories about the Loch Ness Monster and other improbable happenings, is a classic example.

The celebrity (or notoriety) of the person concerned also matters. Nobody really cares if student Wills A. N. Other marches through the streets of Edinburgh clutching a Tesco carrier bag. However, as soon as Prince William, putative heir to the throne, does the same, it is a safe bet that his picture will be splashed across the tabloids. Significantly, the newsworthiness of the story is reinforced by the possession of a good, clear photograph as 'Pictures govern things to an extent' Adam Wolstenholme admits.

The picture, in fact, adds impetus to a weak story – after all, Prince William, poor lad, has to buy his groceries somewhere.

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By the same token, an appealing photograph can add weight to a story that, by any standards, might be deemed newsworthy: ‘Sadly, a missing teenager has more chance of making the front page if there’s a good-quality picture of her looking sweet and pretty’, says Wolstenholme.

Such stories also possess the vitally important news qualities of drama and rarity. Because murder and rape remain, mercifully, uncommon, they are, therefore, correspondingly bigger news than events that occur more frequently. They are dramatic and immediate and, from the point of view of the reader, do not require detailed explanation or interpretation – they are easy to understand and absorb. Murder equals a victim equals tragedy – stories do not come much more straightforward than that. Economic, social and cultural trends, on the other hand, take place over a much longer period of time – they, by and large, unfold rather than explode into our cultural consciousness and, because of their complexity, lack the immediacy and drama usually associated with news. The only exceptions to this rule concern the release of statistical reports or surveys – for instance, a study into the link between adult violence and the viewing habits of children – or a special inquiry, for example, into the death of a child in the care of social workers.

Former broadsheet newspaper editor Ian Jack, currently editor of *Granta* magazine, puts this preoccupation with the dramatic and the immediate down to the fact that Britain has developed a singular sort of media culture which places a high premium on excitement, controversy and sentimentality, in which information takes second place to the opinions it arouses’ (Jack in When 2002: xiii).

On one level, his comment could be read as suggesting that modern journalism is shallow and sensationalist. Some of it, perhaps is. However, another interpretation might be that journalists seek to write news stories that excite, stimulate and move their readers while also provoking discussion and debate.

Chris Page, editor of the *Selby Times*, finds it hard to define the precise nature of news, saying: ‘News is news is news. Journalists develop an innate ability to know what it is – a taste.’

In a sense, he is spot on – journalists do seem to develop a taste for news and most of us never question or interrogate the specific nature of the tastes that we acquire. Theorists, on the other hand, are much exercised by this. It was only when Tony Harcup, a lecturer at the Centre for Journalism, Trinity and All Saints University College, Leeds, moved from freelance journalism to academia that he realised just how much academic time and energy had been spent on trying to understand the journalist’s craft.

While initially the names John Galtung and Mari Ruge had meant nothing to him, he soon discovered that the Norwegian academics had produced a classic list of 12 factors that they identified as being particularly pertinent in the selection of news. These were, in order of importance, frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, reference to something negative (Fowler 1991: 13). Harcup, however, thought that this list was fundamentally flawed. In his view, it represented the academic equivalent of the cuttings job, with the authors regurgitating a 40-year-old Norwegian study of foreign news stories. Dissatisfied, he and colleague Deirdre O'Neill carried out a detailed month-long analysis of more than a thousand page lead news stories in three national newspapers and produced a new list that they felt better represented the news values of working UK journalists (Harcup 2004: 36).

Although they acknowledge that there are exceptions to every rule, they conclude that news stories must generally conform to one or more of the following criteria

- *The power elite*: stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions.
- *Celebrity*: stories concerning people who are already famous.
- *Entertainment*: stories concerning sex, show business, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.
- *Surprise*: stories that have an element of surprise or contrast.
- *Bad news*: stories with particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy.
- *Good news*: stories with particularly positive overtones, such as rescues or cures.
- *Magnitude*: stories that are perceived as sufficiently significant, either in terms of the number of people involved or their potential impact.
- *Relevance*: stories about issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.
- *Follow-ups*: stories about subjects already in the news.
- *Newspapers agenda*: stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda.

SO, BACK TO THE QUESTION: IS IT NEWS?

At a very simple level, all news stories answer the questions 'Who?' and 'What?' Who has the story happened to? What has happened to them? The best stories will also tell the reader where it happened, why it happened, when it happened and how it happened, but, almost without exception, news stories concern people and what has happened to them.

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In addition, news stories may also be split into two distinct categories – hard news and soft news. Hard news stories are those that deal with topical events or issues that have an immediate or catastrophic or life-changing effect on the individuals concerned. In short, hard news is (often) bad news and often deals with serious matters that require equal weight to be attached to both the who and the what. For instance, a terrorist hijacking an aeroplane is hard news. So is a murder or rape.

Soft news, on the other hand, has more of a human interest focus and, although, in the short term at least, events may be equally immediate or important for the individuals concerned, they are rarely life-changing in quite the same way. Accordingly, an exposé in *The Guardian* newspaper on 7 March 2003 about the involvement of a UK company in building a chemical warfare plant in Iraq – ‘Dismay at chemical plant link’ – is hard news, while a story in the same edition about a survey into the sums paid out by the parental tooth fairy – ‘Tooth fairy posts 100% dividend’ – is unmistakably soft news. Both have their place within a lively, modern newspaper.

WHAT MAKES A STORY NEWSWORTHY?

As well as the definitions of news that we looked at earlier, a simple guide as to what makes a story newsworthy follows. A story is newsworthy if it is:

- something that affects a lot of people – new legislation, political or social issues, jumbo jet crash, for example
- bad (or hard) news – accidents, such as plane and rail crashes, terrorist attacks and so on
- of human interest – elderly pensioner leaves care home for mansion after winning the lottery or brave toddler undergoes heart and lung transplant would fall into this category
- topical – contains a ‘today’ line
- informative – informs the reader of something new
- unexpected – lightning strikes York Minster, fire breaks out at Windsor Castle, death of the Princess of Wales and so on
- something that deals with a subject that is currently in vogue – such as road rage, hospital bugs
- a local or national disgrace – town councillor spotted in brothel, MP in drugs scandal, say
- of general interest – that is, interesting to the widest possible audience
- something that involves celebrity – the Beckham’s private lives, Liam Gallagher’s love life, a soap star’s collagen lip injections and similar

- geographically appropriate to the receiver – stories from Aberdeen, Derby and Reigate are of less interest to readers in Yorkshire, for instance, than those from Harrogate, Leeds and Wakefield
- dramatic – life-saving rescues, medical breakthroughs and so on feature here
- campaigning – examples here would be save our schools, don't close our cottage hospital
- superlative – man grows tallest sunflower in Britain, I've got the first ever ... longest ... smallest ... and other such stories
- sexy – *Big Brother* housemate caught in secret romp with Page 3 girl, for example
- seasonal – it's nearly Christmas so let's look at the odds of snow or it's Easter, so let's do something about chocolate or it's summer – is there a drought?
- amazing – 110-year-old great-grandfather still swims 20 lengths every day in local pool, woman, aged 100, still working as a volunteer at the soup kitchen she joined as a 17-year-old, psychiatric nurse writes bestseller and so on
- an anniversary – for example, the world's first test tube baby is 25 today or it's exactly five years since the prime minister came to power
- Quiet – there's not much happening, so we'll use that story about the dead donkey.

Sometimes, says Chris Page, there is an almost cyclical element to news:

There are staple seasonal stories, such as Christmas drink driving, summer holiday safety warnings, school exams and league table, that come around year in and year out. But we can't keep reproducing the same story and hope that readers won't notice. We need to keep them fresh by introducing new spins, highlighting a new perspective that suggests to readers a new way of seeing an issue or event, rather than relying on tired old formats.

WHO DECIDES?

Who decides what is news? That's easy – the journalist. Most journalists have – or should have – a clear idea of what makes a news story and, therefore, it makes sense that the decision as to whether or not to follow up a news story is left to those who are expert at it – that includes the editor, news editor and reporter. Having said that, it is worth bearing in

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mind that much depends on the journalist's perception of his or her audience's interests and/or the editor's priorities at any given time.

HOW DOES THE JOURNALIST KNOW?

Some journalists have a 'nose' for news or a 'news sense' and instinctively know what makes a good story. Others have to learn it. As a rule, members of the public do not have this innate sense or feel for news. Nor do they have the benefit of journalism training. A colleague recounts the number of times she has been assailed by members of the public who are determined that what they have to say is 'important news', but it turns out to be something that, although of interest to them personally, will not hold any appeal for a wider audience. It may be that their 'news' has the following flaws.

- It is something that happened a long time ago and so is out of date. News is never about history unless you are putting a 'today' line on a historical event – for instance, 'Papers kept secret for 50 years have been released today and they cast light on ...'.
- It is something that occurs regularly and often. The fact that Mrs Helen Smith has risen every weekday morning for the last nine years to take the Number 92 bus to town where she works in a bank is not news. However, if Mrs Smith was taken hostage, along with all the other passengers on the Number 92 bus, That would be news).
- It is plain boring.

A NOSE FOR NEWS

To reinforce the above point, this same colleague has on several occasions spent time with interviewees who, only as she is about to leave, mention in passing something that has happened or is about to happen to them along the lines of, 'Oh, I don't suppose you'd be interested but ...'. When our colleague shows renewed interest, the response is often, 'Oh. I *never* thought you'd want to hear about that ...'.

Do not worry if, as a journalism student or trainee journalist, you do not have an instinctive 'nose' for news. Those who do have such instincts are lucky. Those who do not must work at it. One colleague, who teaches part time on a postgraduate journalism diploma course, regularly meets new students who believe that a story is not news if it does not interest them or bores them. She tells them that if it meets the general definition of news, they must develop an interest in it – no matter how briefly. If they cannot become interested in the story they are researching and writing, then their

copy will not be interesting to the reader either. In fact, they might not even bother to write a story that, given treatment by another journalist, could make a page lead.

Journalists must learn to recognise the news value of people, events and situations that might otherwise be missed, obscured or simply overlooked by the general public and/or lend interest, meaning and explanation to what can sometimes be dull, tedious and complicated. A nose for news is important, but, having sniffed out a story, a good journalist needs to be able to write it in a way that grabs a reader's attention and, most importantly, holds it.

This is one of the joys of journalism for Adam Wolstenholme:

There is such pleasure to be had in assembling facts and putting them in an attractive, coherent form. I love the whole process of transforming potentially dull material into something highly readable. Glamorous subject matter is no guarantee of a good read. Just look at how boring some profiles of Hollywood stars can be compared to the sort of fascinating stories that can sometimes be drawn from the lives of ordinary folk.

Exercise

Rank the following stories in order of their news value for a large circulation evening newspaper in Yorkshire.

- 1 A backbench Conservative MP is calling for the resignation of the Labour prime minister.
- 2 Billions of gallons of water are being lost because of leaking pipes in Sheffield.
- 3 Sam Bryant, aged 82, was saved by his pet hamster when his Southampton home caught fire two weeks ago.
- 4 A vote is being taken tonight on plans for a Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Assembly.
- 5 A former Big Brother house mate is opening a supermarket in Leeds tomorrow.
- 6 A light aircraft has crashed in a field in Kent. The pilot and his passenger escaped uninjured.
- 7 The Prince of Wales is opening a new art gallery in Newcastle today.
- 8 Three people have been killed in a street gunfight in Iraq.
- 9 A form of plastic used to make garden furniture could cause cancer
- 10 A Romanian footballer is being signed to play for Leeds United and the club is buying him for a snip.
- 11 The Secretary of State responsible for housing says more homes are to be built on green belt land in the Yorkshire Dales.
- 12 The Prime Minister is to unveil a statue in the House of Commons next year.

(Answers are given at the end of the book.)