

What is news

Here we consider what makes one thing worth reporting, while another thing is not. We offer a test for news which can work in all societies. We consider what makes some news stories stronger than others. Finally, we look at how news comes to journalists, and the areas of life where we most often find it.

Life appears to be a shapeless jumble of events, falling over each other, elbowing and jostling each other.

Journalists each day structure this chaos, so that the public receives it sorted out and neatly packaged into stories, the same day on radio, television or online and the next day in newspapers.

It will have been evaluated. The biggest news will be given first in the bulletin or on Page One of the paper, in detail lesser news will be given in less detail later in the bulletin or on an inside page and the rubbish will have been thrown away. How do journalists decide what is news and what is not? How do they distinguish between a big news story and a small one? The answer is that they do it in exactly the same way as everybody else. Everybody makes those same judgments whenever they decide to talk about one event rather than another.

For example, which do you think is more interesting: old man young bride

(A) A girl going to primary school, to high school, or to university

(B) A man aged 25 marrying a girl aged 20, or a man aged 55 marrying a girl aged 15

(C) A car killing a chicken, a pig or a child

Every one of these events might be news for the community in which it happens, but some are more newsworthy than others. You very likely answered that the most interesting things were a girl going to university, a man aged 55 marrying a girl aged 15, and a car killing a child. If your answer was different, though, it does not necessarily mean that you were wrong. The same event can have different levels of interest in different societies, and will be talked about in different ways. If a farm wall has collapsed, killing a cow and a pig, which is more important? Clearly, the answer will vary from one society to another, depending upon the relative importance of cows and pigs.

For this reason, the content of the news can be different in different societies. The way in which the news is judged, though, is the same everywhere.

Criteria of news

The criteria by which news is judged are:

Is it new

Is it unusual

Is it interesting or significant

Is it about people

These elements make up what we call the "news value" of information. The stronger the elements are, the higher the news value.

Is it new

If it is not new, it cannot be news. The assassination of Mrs Gandhi is unusual, interesting, significant and about people, but it cannot possibly be reported in tomorrow's papers, because it is not new. If some facts about that assassination became known for the first time, however, that would be news. The assassination would not be new,

but the information would be.

Events which happened days or even weeks earlier can still be news, as long as they have not been reported before.

If you are telling a story for the first time, it is new to your readers or listeners and therefore it can be news.

News of the death of Mao Tse-tung, for instance, was not released to the world by the Chinese government for several days when they did release it, however, it was still very definitely news.

Is it unusual

Things are happening all the time, but not all of them are news, even when they are new. A man wakes up, eats breakfast and goes to work on a bus it has only just happened, but nobody wants to read about it because it is not unusual. Ordinary and everyday things do not make news.

Of course, if that same man was 90 years old and was still catching the bus to work every day, it would be unusual!

The classic definition of news

This definition, though, is not universal. If dogs are eaten in your society (at feasts, for instance) then it will not be news when a man bites a dog—so long as it has been cooked.

What is usual in one society may be unusual in another. Again, we will expect the content of the news to vary from society to society. In every society, though, whatever is unusual is likely to be news.

Is it interesting

Events which are new and unusual may still not be of general interest. Scientists may report that an insect has just been found living on a plant which it did not previously inhabit. The discovery is new, and the event is unusual, but it is unlikely to interest anybody other than a specialist or enthusiast.

In a specialist publication this could be big news, but in a general news broadcast or paper it would merit at most a few words.

Is it significant

However, if that same insect was one which had a huge appetite, and which had previously lived on and eaten bush grass and if the new plant on which it had been found was rice, then the story becomes news, because it is significant.

People may not be interested in bugs, but they are interested in food. If this insect is now threatening their crops, it becomes a matter of concern to them. It is news because it is significant.

Similarly, if a peasant farmer says that the Roman Catholic Church should ordain women priests, that is not news. If an archbishop says it, it is news, because what he says on the subject is significant. It is the views of people such as the archbishop which help to form the policy of the Church.

Once again, what is interesting or significant in one society may not be interesting or significant in another. The content of the news may be different, therefore, in different societies, but the way it is identified will be the same.

Is it about people

Most news is automatically about people, because it is the things people do to change the world which makes news.

However, news can also be made by non-human sources, such as a cyclone, a bush fire, a drought, a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. It is when reporting these stories that it is important to make sure that the story is centred on people. The cyclone would not matter if it blew itself out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, away from any inhabited islands the fire could burn for as long as it likes in bush where nobody lives the Sahara Desert has a

near-permanent drought, but in most of it nobody is there to rely on rains a volcanic eruption or an earthquake which damages nobody's property and injures nobody is really not news.

All these natural disasters only become news when they affect people's lives. Every story can be told in terms of people. Always start by asking yourself the question "How does this affect my readers, Whenever you have a story which tells of how something has happened which affects both people and property, always put the people first

RIGHT:

More than 100 people were left homeless after Cyclone Victor struck Suva yesterday. **WRONG:**

Seventeen houses were flattened when Cyclone Victor struck Suva yesterday.

How strong a story

A story which is new, unusual, interesting, significant and about people is going to be a very good story indeed. One way of deciding the strength of a story is to check how many of those five criteria it meets.

There are other factors, though, which make stories strong or weak:

Closeness

The same event happening in two different places can have two quite different news values. A coup d'état in your own country is as big a story as you can ever have (although you will probably not be at liberty to report it as you would wish. A coup in the country next door is still a big story, because it may affect the stability of your own country.

However, a coup in a small country in another continent is unlikely to merit more than a few paragraphs.

The appeal of local news is that your readers or listeners might know the people or place involved.

Remember, though, that the word "local" means different things to different people. If you broadcast to a wide area or sell your newspaper in many different towns, you must realise that a small story which interests readers in one place, because it is local, may not be of any interest to readers elsewhere.

Personal impact

The average reader, listener or viewer may be a parent, a person wanting a good education for the children, dreaming of buying a car, looking forward to going home on leave, anticipating the next big community feast or festival. You will need to have a very clear understanding of what your own readers or listeners are like. So stories about bride-price or dowries, children, land disputes, new schools, cheaper or dearer fares, or whatever else is important and may affect your average reader, will have personal impact. People can identify with stories about other people like themselves. So those stories with which many people can identify are stronger than those which only apply to a few.

How do we get news

A lot of news will come to you as a journalist without any real effort on your part. Government handouts, Ministers speeches and announcements of new developments come into the newsroom after being processed by press officers or public relations officers.

Passing on such information, as long as it is genuinely interesting and informative, is an important function of the media, to provide society with the hard facts of what is happening in the country. It is part of your job as a journalist to sort out what is interesting and informative from the millions of boring words which may be sent to you. There is also news which journalists find for themselves and reveal to the public. This need not be a subject which somebody wants to be kept secret. Many people have a story to tell but do not know how to write a media release. It is part of

your job as a journalist to find these people and report their stories.

There are also some stories which people want to keep secret but which the public ought to know about. When you hear about such a situation, it is your duty to investigate fairly but fearlessly.

Where does news come from

Now we know what makes news. The following are the main areas of life in which we expect frequently to find news stories. For each category below, think of at least one event or situation which could make a news story in your own society.

Conflicts: This category includes wars, strikes, revolutions, secessionist groups, tribal and clan fights, elections and the power battles of politics.

Disaster and tragedy: This may include air crashes, train crashes, ships sinking, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or human tragedies like children falling down deep wells from which they cannot be rescued.

Progress and development: Development is always news in a developing country. The report should be always of how the changes affect people's lives, for better or for worse. New ideas or progress in one area may stimulate ideas in another. Development stories may include education, the development of new technology, improvement of farming techniques, road building and irrigation schemes. Citizens of more developed countries may also appreciate stories about developments in things which affect their lives or well-being, such as medical breakthroughs, new technologies or initiatives to make transport easier, quicker or cheaper.

Crime: Any crime can be news, whether it is a road traffic offence, break and enter, corruption, forgery, rape or murder –but more serious crimes or unusual crimes generally make bigger news stories.

Money: These stories include fortunes made and lost, school fees, taxes, the Budget, food prices, wage rises, economic crises and compensation claims.

It is not only large sums of money which make news the little girl who gives her only ten cents to a huge fund-raising event is more interesting than the businessman who gives \$100.

The underdog: This is one of the great themes of literature and drama (David and Goliath, the Hare and the Tortoise, Cinderella). (One traditional role of the journalist is to defend the rights of the little person – the soldier against the unjust officer, the innocent man against false charges, the poor against exploitation.

Religion: There are two types of religious news story. First, there are events involving people's religious lives, such as the building of a new church or a pilgrimage. Second, there are statements by religious leaders on moral and spiritual affairs, such as contraception or salvation. It is important for the journalist to be aware of the relative numerical strengths of Christianity, Islam and other religions – including traditional local beliefs – in his or her country. The importance of a statement by a religious leader in your society depends both upon the news value of what he has to say and upon the size of his following.

Famous people: Prominent men and women make news. What people in the public eye do, the lives they lead and what they look like, are all of interest. It is especially newsworthy when they fall from power, lose their money or are involved in scandal.

Health: Many people are concerned with their health, so they are interested in stories about traditional remedies, medical research, diseases, hospitals and clinics, drugs, diet and exercise.

Weather: The weather may affect the daily routine of people and is of interest when it behaves unusually, with exceptionally high or low temperatures, or exceptionally high or low rainfall.

Food and drink: The rich person plans feasts, the poor person wants enough to eat and drink. Shortages and gluts, crop diseases and harvest sizes, prices of food in the market or the launch of a new brand of beer—these all make news.

Entertainment: Stories about music, dance, theatre, cinema and carving keep us informed of developments in the arts, who is doing what, who is performing where, and what it is worth going to see or hear.

Sport: Many people participate in sport and many others are spectators. They all want to know sports results, news of sportsmen and sportswomen and their achievements.

Human interest: There are often unusual and interesting aspects of other people's lives which are not particularly significant to society as a whole. Stories about these are called human interest stories. Examples might be a child going abroad for surgery a pilot recovering from injuries received in an air crash and determined to fly again or a man with a collection of a million picture postcards.

News and entertainment

Most people agree that the purpose of the news media—newspapers, magazines, radio and television—is to inform, to educate and to entertain. However, the purpose of the news itself is to inform and to educate your readers, listeners or viewers.

The entertainment can come from other areas—music and drama programs on radio cartoons and crossword puzzles in newspapers. It is not the job of news to entertain.

This does not mean that news should be dull. If a news event has an element of humour, you should always try to write the story in a way to amuse your readers or listeners.

Nevertheless, the news should only be reported if it is real news. Do not report non-news as if it was news only because the story is entertaining.

As you gain more experience, you may be able to write things which are purely entertaining—such as a humorous look at current events. This is not news, however, and should not be presented as if it was.

Make it clear to your readers or listeners what is news and what is not.

TO SUMMARISE:

To decide what you should report, you must sort out news from non-news. To do this, ask yourself the following questions about anything you think may be news:

Is it new

Is it unusual

Is it interesting

Is it significant

Is it about people

To decide how to report it, ask yourself the following question:

How does this affect my readers' listeners or viewers' lives

If it is not new or unusual, if it is not interesting or significant, and if it will not affect your readers or listeners lives, then it is not news. Do not publish it or broadcast it as news.