

1 News and how to find it

News is what someone decides to publish as news

‘His fingers sped like an express train on his portable typewriter, clattering away the news in paragraphs.’ Thus, in *Reporting Politics in Nigeria* (2008), Dayo Duyile describes Alhaji Lateef Teniola, his one-time news editor at the *Nigerian Tribune*. What was this ‘news’ that Teniola was clattering away? News might be defined as what someone somewhere – in a newspaper, on the air, on the internet – decides to publish as news. But is it still a useful concept? Kevin Marsh, editor of the BBC College of Journalism, has proclaimed the death of the news story (see ‘The Future of Journalism’, BBC College, 2009). The killer is the internet which has erased the distinction between news and information.

However, people who publish information on current issues and events still need to decide what to publish and what not to. News remains a handy word for what they publish. And ‘story’ remains a handy word for that piece of news which a journalist is covering.

News is not necessarily new

News is not necessarily new, in the just-happened sense. As Marsh points out, almost any information, however old, is new to someone. (A new task for journalists is to connect people to information on the internet that they would want to know but might have missed.) At a press day in Cambridge, Professor Robert Mair explained how, two or three years before, he had arranged injections of grout into the ground below the Big Ben tower to keep it upright while the vast Westminster underground station was excavated beside it. A page editor at the *Financial Times* rejected the story as old. But the *Evening Standard* published a double page about it. The story was new to *Standard* readers.

Editors or other publishers can publish just about any information they wish. However, they want to engage their public and to identify its wants and

2 Practical Newspaper Reporting

needs. They can easily see which stories online are looked at the most. Sport occupies more space because it engages so many people. *25 pages of sport*, the *Western Mail* announced proudly (16 03 09).

Celebrity news also scores: while the digg and reddit websites, where readers select and vote for the stories, suggest an appetite, too, for weird pictures and weak jokes, with the occasional flash of idealism – a reddit posting urged twitterers to tweet as from Tehran (17 06 09), thereby taking the heat off local twitterers demonstrating against President Ahmadinejad's re-election.

Editors face a choice between being guided by the ever-changing currents of the clickstream and seeking to establish a news policy which builds up a loyal audience. The *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*, with their distinctive editorial attitudes, have built up large audiences online in the United States.

Web readers like attitude. BBC man James Painter writes in *Counter-Hegemonic News* (Reuters Institute, 2008): 'There is a growing view that opinionated news is becoming more popular than fair, balanced and neutral news, especially among the young.' But, as Painter also points out, news with an agenda, particularly a government's agenda, can be unfair.

News must interest readers, fit the paper's news framework

No editor, not even a website publisher, can publish everything. Editors must therefore create a framework for their publications' news judgments. News which comes within this framework will be published. News outside it won't. So a magazine about carpets will concentrate on carpets. A local paper will concentrate on local people. News publications' frameworks of news judgment are usually divided into compartments. Some sections are for sport, others for news from a particular area, or for national news, foreign news, the arts or lifestyle. 'Lifestyle' – homes, hobbies and fashions – attracts people even if they have little interest in the community they live in.

How do gatekeepers decide what to publish?

Editors are gatekeepers, deciding what will and what will not be published. They usually have other gatekeepers to help them. Their decisions are influenced by professional and social assumptions. They need to be in tune with their readers. In the early years of *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, in the 1960s, gatekeepers from Britain were not well suited to the African audience they wanted to attract (*Birth of a Nation*, by Gerard Loughran, Tauris 2010). Here are some points that gatekeepers may consider:

Is it an event?

The media primarily report what has happened, is happening or will happen. Michael Schudson, an American professor of journalism, wrote in *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Polity Press, 2009):

That is what serves democracy: the irresistible drive of journalists to focus on events, including those that powerful forces cannot anticipate and often cannot manage.

But non-events can also be news. *The London Paper* (11 11 08) reported that the Stephen Lawrence Centre in south-east London had not reopened, nine months after vandals smashed its windows.

Does it concern a conflict?

One of the earliest known news stories describes in pictures an Egyptian victory and the fate of defeated Hittites. Conflict, whether armed, political, social, religious, local or on the sportsfield, is news. Conflict and controversy excite people. Schudson (2009) sees as part of the press's necessary unlovability its love of conflict and dissent.

When did it happen?

Reports to hand when work on an edition begins are likelier to be used than those sent in late, though editors will strive to include big last-minute news. (Online, however, news unfolds continuously.)

Is it unexpected, unusual?

Dog bites man is not news, we are told. Man bites dog *is* news.

Is it big?

A bomb that kills 80 people in Iraq is news. A bomb that kills one person may be ignored. The more bombs go off, the bigger the bomb needed to create a bang in the media. (Conversely, a small bomb in Israel will make headlines if it is the first for a year.)

Mike Amos, a *Northern Echo* columnist, got a tip that Sheila Clarke, in the Teesdale village of Gainford, had been the oldest Englishwoman to go abroad on Voluntary Service Overseas. She was then 65. Mike found two other elderly Gainford women with much to tell. One had become a Buddhist and an expert in interpreting handwriting. The stories of three made a better column than a story of just one.

Is it about people?

Western media and readers see news in personal terms. They see political debate as a battle of personalities rather than ideas. Health news almost always concentrates on particular patients. Many news stories are about celebrities – people whom other people want to know about. The pressure of the clickstream favours news about people and celebrities.

Who's involved?

Dog bites man is not news. But, in a local paper, *Dog bites mayor* is news. So was *Former French President Chirac hospitalized after mauling by his*

4 Practical Newspaper Reporting

clinically depressed poodle (Mail online, 21 01 09). News depends on who's involved.

When gunmen ambushed the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in March 2009, British media praised the British match referee, Chris Broad, who shielded a wounded colleague. They scarcely noticed the coach driver who stayed in his seat and drove the Sri Lankans to safety.

Relatives, associates, even animals of well-known people can make news. So can the sufferings and successes of children and the elderly. Former TV newscaster Anna Ford complained (BJR, September 2007):

‘So often the concentration was on a paedophile, a dead girl or two, some sort of traumatic, overdeveloped event about a child ... I think the crunch came when Bruce Forsyth's wife's dog was missing at a time when a lot of other things were going on. And I said: ‘Is this really one of the 12 most important things happening today?’

Does it stir feelings?

Anna Ford did not think Mrs Forsyth losing her dog was news. But animal stories rouse emotions. Many women would sympathize with Mrs Forsyth. Stories about children rouse emotions similarly.

Discussions on television usually generate heat rather than light. But the speakers' anger attracts viewers. Radio listeners around the world love phoners-in who say outrageous things. Tony Blair remarked in a Reuters Institute speech (12 06 07): ‘Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked’.

Is it entertaining?

Celebrities, children and animals are also news because their exploits and mishaps are entertaining.

Swiss newspapers savour humorous news. A political festival, with free food and the Steppin' Stompers, clashes with a major football match (*Baseler Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 05 08). A sense of humour can make news more readable.

Is someone coming or going?

New appointments to important jobs are news. So are the departures – and deaths – of prominent or intriguing people. News has been defined as learning someone died who you never knew was alive.

Was it hidden?

After years in which the details of the Al-Yamamah aircraft deal between Britain and Saudi Arabia were kept secret, it was news when Guardian journalists discovered these details could include big payments to a prince.

The *Daily Mail* discovered a forgotten jungle in Cornwall (27 11 08). Newsnight (BBC2, 25 11 08) exposed overcrowded Iraqi jails like Black Holes of Calcutta.

Is it important?

Elections are news because they are important. They can change the government or control of the local council. Importance does not necessarily get news into the media or command the attention of the clickstream. Really important news demotes or drives out smaller news. In *Reporting Politics in Nigeria* (2008), journalism educator Dayo Duyile tells how he wrote a lead story for the *Nigerian Tribune* about a village murder. This was displaced by another story he wrote, on a national pay rise. Then the president of Nigeria's near-neighbour, Togo, was murdered. The village killing and the pay rise were both relegated to the back page.

Is it dangerous?

We read and listen to news to learn about the dangers that might affect us: terrorism, teenagers, taxes, tempests.

Are there any pictures?

Pictures are central to newspaper layout and vital to TV. Coverage of the final days and aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 was restricted by the army's success in keeping reporters and photographers away.

Where is it?

Geography is important, even for publications that cover the world. All the world news is on the BBC website but only some of it appears on TV news. British journalists assess overseas countries ruthlessly. The United States comes top for foreign news value – American stories are often presented as if they were British. The *Daily Mail* front page (28 08 09) reported: *This girl of 11 was snatched off the street 18 years ago. Yesterday she reappeared.* You had to turn to page 5 to discover it happened in California. Europe scores because of the UK's membership of the European Community – but Europe is considered a bit dull. The Middle East and Pakistan score because they pose terrorist threats and British troops are in Afghanistan. Suffering in once-British-ruled Palestine fosters guilt.

Being in the news has given Darfur, Congo and Zimbabwe a start on other parts of Africa. China and India are gaining news value, because of their trading and working links with Britain and their importance in the world economy. Other areas of the world get little notice in the British media unless they suffer a major disaster or hide some scandal. African journalists complain that British media see Africa in terms of Aids, famine and war.

Media geography is different abroad. *El Pais* (Spain) features the Middle East and Latin America. Al Jazeera TV's English service tries to see the news from the perspective of poorer people in poorer countries. It publishes less American and European news than CNN and BBC World (see James Painter, *Counter-Hegemonic News*, Reuters Institute, 2008).

Is it easy to grasp?

News media – written and read or heard in a hurry – prefer the simple to the complicated. They want cures to be cures and they want them available

6 Practical Newspaper Reporting

from the health service straight away. They like clear contrasts between good and evil, heroes and terrorists. 'Modern journalism doesn't do complicated,' wrote Andrew Gilligan of the *Evening Standard* (Press Gazette, 18 01 08).

In truth, the world and its rights and wrongs are not as simple as journalists can make them appear. It is a great skill to explore the complexities of the real world and make them easy for busy people to grasp.

Does it relate to the news agenda?

A wide range of media commonly have the same news agenda, concentrating on a limited group of major stories. Having decided to invest in covering such a story – the disappearance of three-year-old Madeleine McCann in Portugal in 2007, for instance – the media do not easily let it go.

The agenda depends on or relates principally to:

- major events – fighting, disasters, sports, demonstrations, parades, epidemics
- celebrity – national and local
- news flagged up by newsmakers – politicians, councils, bloggers, sports clubs, TV presenters
- media tradition. Crime has long been a media standby
- history, both recent (terrorism, global warming, the 2007–9 recession) and more distant (anniversaries). World-war anniversaries get a special flogging because of the wars' importance to British self-image
- jobs
- services – health, schools, transport, fuel, food supply
- expert reports
- local relevance, for local media
- above all, television and its cousin, the internet.

TV has a triple effect. What happens on TV can be news, even for a local paper since local people will have seen it. Secondly, TV pictures can make events bigger news. Thirdly, TV creates and nurtures celebrities. Jade Goody, whose early death from cancer in 2009 received saturation coverage in the media, owed her celebrity to two TV reality shows.

Good news and bad news

The media are accused of concentrating on bad news. This is inevitable if people look to the media for information about dangerous events. Dangerous events are bad news. However, good news is published, too: new jobs as well as disappearing jobs; medical discoveries and sporting victories; stories of

people who have done wonderful things at home and abroad. Readers are hungry for what is modern and optimistic.

A journalist who writes or broadcasts a good-news story takes a risk that everything is as it seems. In practice, the medical breakthrough may not be. The imaginative scheme may fail. Even truly good news can have a short life. William Graham, a talented Jamaican sculptor who made mannequins for shop windows, could not be found in his workshop in a London railway arch six months after the *Financial Times* published a profile of him. Burglars had put him back on the dole.

Hard news and soft news

Journalists have been taught that there should be a reason why news is published now, not tomorrow or next week. The media receive hard news, of important events which just took place, for example, Usain Bolt wins the 2008 Olympic 100 metres. They also receive soft news, for example, Usain Bolt prepares for the 2012 Olympics, a story which could be published any day up to 2012.

Hard news drives out soft, in print and on air, but not necessarily online where both can be published together. The clickstream likes soft news, about celebrities, animals, children. Soft news tells people what life is about and how people live it. It gets used because it is entertaining or a touch bizarre – *Cloudy days help the memory* (*Telegraph* and *Mail*, 18 04 09); *Health officials provide chip shops with salt-saving shakers* (*MEN*, 19 03 09). *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* entertain readers with minor news that is hard to credit, for instance: *A TV mogul who set up a station to show Muslims as peaceful has been charged with beheading his wife* (*The Daily Mirror*, 17 02 09); *'A mayor raked in £18,000 as a benefits cheat* (*The Sun*, 6 02 09).

Media accept a responsibility to keep their audiences in touch with important situations even though they are neither hard news nor entertaining. Channel 4's *Unreported World* scours the planet for such situations.

Finding news News services

You can find news worldwide on the websites of the BBC, CNN and Google News and of national newspapers. You can receive news alerts direct to your computer from the BBC and other agencies. Google provides an RSS reader, gathering the latest from websites of your choice.

Former BBC political correspondent Nicholas Jones showed in his blog – www.nicholasjones.org.uk – how newspapers used their websites to be first with the news in May/June 2009. Daily at 9pm, before the TV news, *The Daily Telegraph* website published a taster of its next disclosures about MPs' expenses. *The Guardian* website disclosed at 12 noon on June 3, the eve of local and European elections, the Hotmail plot to rally MPs to oust Gordon Brown. Ex-minister Hazel Blears, who left the government on the eve of polling, apologized for this in a video interview on the website of the *Manchester Evening News*.

Again, you can get news from the websites of news agencies – the Press Association (for UK news), Reuter and the Associated Press – if your paper subscribes to them and gives you an access code. On a split screen, you can use your mouse to drag highlighted passages from the agencies into your work. News websites rely heavily on agency news.

Other news on the internet

John Darwin reappeared in 2007, five years after disappearing in a canoe off Seaton Carew, Hartlepool. Nearly everyone had thought him dead, including – it seemed – his wife Anne who was in Panama. Then a reader of *The Daily Mirror* typed John, Anne and Panama into Google Images. Up came a picture of John and Anne in Panama the year before. So Anne had known all along that John was alive. The Darwin affair shows how the internet can help find a story, or a new twist to an old one.

A blogger, Guido Fawkes, disclosed on the internet the smears about Conservative leaders and MPs supplied by Downing Street aide Damian McBride for a Labour blog (12 04 09). Stories can crop up anywhere on the net. Court documents about Électricité de France spying on Greenpeace were unearthed by an investigative website Mediapart (FT, 21 04 09). An *Evening Standard* placard in London in April 2009 read *Queen's G20 gibe a hit on YouTube* – the YouTube site often runs replays of significant news incidents. The same month, an awkwardly smiling Prime Minister Gordon Brown used YouTube to announce a plan to reform MPs' expenses.

There is news on the social networks – Facebook, MySpace, Bebo. A police officer resigned after posting on Facebook a sardonic comment on the death of Ian Tomlinson at a London protest (BBC, 30 04 09).

The easiest networking site to search is that of the microblogging service, Twitter. Go to <http://search.twitter.com> and you will see links to 'trending topics', the most popular current stories. Or you can type into Twitter's search panel a subject or celebrity of your choice. Relevant tweets will appear on the screen. Most may be banal. But you may find usable comments. If you are pursuing a moving story, Twitter could be first with the next piece of news. Tweets are limited to 140 characters, so people write them quickly, providing what could be the first tip of an incident. Twitter made headlines when gunmen attacked Mumbai hotels in November 2008. People trapped in rooms sent out tweets. Twitter can provide leads on local as well as international stories. When Darlington Football Club went into administration in March 2009, <http://twitter.com/saveDFC> told you what was going on.

The BBC has received striking pictures from the public – of the South-East Asian tsunami tidal wave in 2005, of the Buncefield oil depot fire in 2005, of Sheffield floods in 2007. It has desks checking and handling user-generated news. Pictures, in particular, need checks on where and when they were taken. An appeal for pictures of floods can bring in pictures from previous years.

Comments and recommendations drive web activity. On a slack news day, you could google the name of a local hotel and select – from Google's list of

recommended pages – one on www.tripadvisor.co.uk. Tripadvisor collects reviews from hotel visitors, ranging from very good to terrible. It also publishes what the reviewers say. Ask the hotel for a response. Has it dealt with any complaints in the reviews?

www.reviewcentre.com publishes restaurant reviews by county, and even by town. On the basis of the reviews, it gives restaurants a thumbs up or a thumbs down. You could try a meal at a thumbs-downed restaurant and see what you think.

Calls and contacts

Journalists find news by calling regularly on informants and contacts – the police, fire stations, football and sports clubs, members of parliament, councils, companies, ministers of religion, friends in pubs and clubs. Every paper or broadcasting station needs to identify people on whom it can call regularly to check what has happened or is about to happen.

The diary

The office diary, listing courts, council meetings and other forthcoming news events, is central to news gathering. The diary can help to ensure that stories which recur or run on for several days continue to be covered. However, competing media have similar diaries with similar entries. Off-diary news is valuable because competitors may not have it.

News from public relations

Tourism Queensland's contest to fill the best job in the world – caretaker of an attractive island – generated media coverage worth \$100 million from an outlay of \$1.2 million (FT, 28 08 09).

Public relations has established itself as a major channel for news. It serves not only commerce and government. Charities, too, turn to PR people to put their case. According to Liz Lewis Jones, director of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, over 30,000 PR people deal with the media. That's not counting press officers for government and other organizations. A third of them are in the CIPR, which has a strict code of ethics. They organize events and initiatives. They send handouts and e-mails. Like Tourism Queensland, they play the internet. They make the work of their clients plain for reporters and the public. Their task is to help their clients sell their wares and pills and points of view, not necessarily to provide objective, dispassionate reporting. They recruit the celebrated and the sick to say what the client wants said. Former Reuterman Daniel Simpson writes: *Reporters lack the time they need to find stories, so they rely on pre-packaged content from the PR industry* (BJR, September 2009).

Don't put handouts straight in the paper or online. Ask a few questions.

News from the mail

Many letters and publications arrive in media offices. They make announcements. They draw attention to forthcoming events. Newsletters contain news which may be of interest to a wider circle than their readership. Letters to an editor raise issues and comment on situations. Letters in the *Ilford Recorder* (23 03 06) protested at the threat to Ilford's oldest building from rubbish and the new flats being built next door. Council minutes are a mine of information. In the 1960s and 1970s they recorded the shady construction deals which were to become the scandal of the day.

Don't assume that every news story submitted by a member of the public needs to be rewritten. If it reads well as it stands, leave it alone. Making changes risks introducing errors.

Your own newspaper or service

You need to know what your colleagues are reporting. Your paper may contain leads for new stories. Scan the advertisements, including the small advertisements. *Belfast Telegraph* columnist Lindy McDowell spotted a page advertising 60 bankruptcies, a sign of the local cost of the credit crunch (6 05 09).

In October 2008, lawyers advertised in eight newspapers for people who might have skin problems because of gas emitted by a drying agent in Chinese-made leather sofas.

Other publications

Look at national and local newspapers and magazines; listen to broadcasts. They, too, can give you leads.

Someone watching BBC 1's University Challenge 2009 was sharp enough to realize that Gail Trimble of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, was the outstanding competitor. This led to several news stories about her, and a controversy over whether she was too clever by half. Controversy also followed broadcaster Ray Gasling's account of smothering his gravely ill partner (BBC1, 15.02.10).

National media often publish stories of local interest or import. BBC4 (24 11 08) featured Peters, a Huddersfield department store. A church minister on Songs of Praise had been ill-treated as an illegitimate child in a Spanish orphanage and then brought to Britain by a man from North Shields. Persimmon, Britain's biggest housebuilder, suspended new projects (*The Independent*, 25 04 08). Was it building in your local area?

The Big Issue (21 01 08) published an advertisement seeking a man last seen two years earlier selling his paintings in Churchill Square, Brighton. He was being sought by a woman who gave two phone numbers, one of them in Belgium. Here was an intriguing story for a Brighton newspaper. Readers will recall seeing the artist and his pictures. What did they show? How long

had he been around? What was the Belgian connection? The idea for an FT Magazine feature about Morocco's leading TV hast seems to have come from a book (9.02.10).

Brief reports on television leave obvious questions unanswered. At the end of 2007, the Russian government threatened not to send an art exhibition to Britain, because of possible legal claims. Who might have a claim? (It turned out that the collections of two merchants were nationalized soon after the Russian Revolution. Heirs had tried to get them back.)

Many stories are framed by assumptions worth questioning. We must cut carbon emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. Who said so? What is the expected result? Why not 75 per cent or 85 per cent? At what cost to a householder in comfort and/or cash?

The news behind the news

Many routine news engagements give clues to other stories, anything from a chatty paragraph for a gossip column to a major scoop. Major announcements may be made during media visits to industrial plants. Sports reporting thrives on what goes on and off the pitch or the track.

In 1986 the BBC gave the media a preview of a TV series entitled *The Monocled Mutineer*, about a mutiny by British soldiers at Étaples, France, during the First World War. The historical adviser for the series thought it presented fiction misleadingly as fact. He did not believe that the monocled mutineer shown leading the mutiny was actually at Étaples at the time.

Follow up what you see and hear

If you walked down Wanstead High Street, north-east London, at the end of August 2009, you would have seen that a travel agent's shop had suddenly been cleared out. A note on the door protested that holidaymakers had been stranded. Then, at the beginning of September, the shop reopened. What was going on? It made a lead story for the Wanstead *Guardian*.

What and who you notice in your daily life can be news. Potatoes have jumped in price. The windows of a bar are blanked out with newspaper. A prominent modern church has disappeared. Monica, a Romanian gypsy, sells *The Big Issue* outside the Somerfield store in all weathers. Who is she? Why is she here? Does she make any money? Couldn't she do something more rewarding? (In 2008, Romanians had a right to live in Britain but not take jobs outside a limited range.) A leaflet is handed out at Whipps Cross Hospital, North-East London in September 2009, saying that consultants are contactable and the hospital can be e-mailed about appointments. Both these facts are important to patients. A blood testing centre at Wanstead Hospital sports a notice saying that only 50 people will be bled that day. Others, beyond the 50, come and leave. But some stay put. They insist on their blood samples being taken – after all, the session is scheduled to continue a further 90 minutes,

and they have taken time off work. If this happens other days, what has gone wrong with local blood testing? Philip Stephens of the *Financial Times* was incensed by the hassle he endured at Heathrow Airport. He wrote about it. Many other people were incensed as well, forcing the government and the British Airports Authority to react.

Casual conversation can offer a clue to an unusual story. A friend remarked that Germans dominated solar-power sales overseas. It turned out that a new, low-wage industry making solar panels had sprouted in a dying industrial area south of Berlin.

Mike Morrissey, a freelance who has been sending a dozen stories a week to the *Darlington and Stockton Times* from the seaside town of Saltburn, recalls four local scoops. They drew attention to news important for local people that could have gone unnoticed:

1. In December 2007 he found buried in a lengthy council document the news that houses might be built on hitherto undeveloped coastal land between Saltburn and the neighbouring settlement, Marske. When the *D&S Times* reported this, 60 Saltburn people crammed into the parish council meeting room to protest.
2. A local activist told him in summer 2008 that a community bobby was being transferred out of Saltburn. After this was reported, 1000 people signed petitions and the chief constable rescinded the transfer.
3. He followed up a claim by a speaker at a public meeting that a ward at Brotton Hospital (near Saltburn) had been closed.
4. He heard that, without public announcement, a Brotton golf club in financial trouble had been bought by a local landowner. The purchase saved 50 jobs.

Questions

1. How does your publication define news?
2. What does it particularly concentrate on?
3. What stories would it not publish?
4. What themes or campaigns is it pursuing?
5. What does it not cover which you would like it to cover?
6. In what ways do you agree or disagree with your publication's choice of news?
7. Answer these questions for a TV news service.