**What is News?**

The answer to the question “What is news?” may seem obvious.  News is what is new; it’s what’s happening.  Look it up in the dictionary, and you’ll find *news* described as “a report of recent events or previously unknown information.”  But most of the things that happen in the world every day don’t find their way into the newspaper or onto the air in a newscast.

So what makes a story newsworthy enough to be published or broadcast?  The real answer is, it depends on a variety of factors.  Generally speaking, news is information that is of broad interest to the intended audience, so what’s big news in Buenos Aires may not be news at all in Baku.  Journalists decide what news to cover based on many of the following “news values”:

***Timeliness***

Did something happen recently or did we just learn about it?  If so, that could make it newsworthy.  The meaning of “recently” varies depending on the medium, of course.  For a weekly news magazine, anything that happened since the previous edition the week before may be considered timely.  For a 24-hour cable news channel, the timeliest news may be “breaking news,” or something that is happening this very minute and can be covered by a reporter live at the scene.

***Impact***

Are many people affected or just a few?  Contamination in the water system that serves your town’s 20,000 people has impact because it affects your audience directly.  A report that 10 children were killed from drinking polluted water at a summer camp in a distant city has impact too, because the audience is likely to have a strong emotional response to the story.  The fact that a worker cut a utility line is not big news, unless it happens to cause a blackout across the city that lasts for several hours.

***Proximity***

Did something happen close to home, or did it involve people from here?  A plane crash in Chad will make headlines in N'Djamena, but it’s unlikely to be front-page news in Chile unless the plane was carrying Chilean passengers.

***Controversy***

Are people in disagreement about this?  It’s human nature to be interested in stories that involve conflict, tension, or public debate.  People like to take sides, and see whose position will prevail.  Conflict doesn’t always entail pitting one person’s views against another.  Stories about doctors battling disease or citizens opposing an unjust law also involve conflict.

***Prominence***

Is a well-known person involved?  Ordinary activities or mishaps can become news if they involve a prominent person like a prime minister or a film star.  That plane crash in Chad would make headlines around the world if one of the passengers were a famous rock musician.

***Currency***

Are people here talking about this?  A government meeting about bus safety might not draw much attention, unless it happens to be scheduled soon after a terrible bus accident.  An incident at a football match may be in the news for several days because it’s the main topic of conversation in town.

***Oddity***

Is what happened unusual?  As the saying goes, “If a dog bites a man, that is not news. But if a man bites a dog, it's news!”  The extraordinary and the unexpected appeal to our natural human curiosity.

What makes news also depends on the makeup of the intended audience, not just where they live but who they are.  Different groups of people have different lifestyles and concerns, which make them interested in different types of news.  A radio news program targeted at younger listeners might include stories about music or sports stars that would not be featured in a business newspaper aimed at older, wealthier readers.  A weekly magazine that covers medical news would report on the testing of an experimental drug because the doctors who read the publication presumably would be interested.  But unless the drug is believed to cure a well-known disease, most general-interest local newspapers would ignore the story.  The exception might be the newspaper in the community where the research is being conducted.

News organizations see their work as a public service, so news is made up of information that people need to know in order to go about their daily lives and to be productive citizens in a democracy.  But most news organizations also are businesses that have to make a profit to survive, so the news also includes items that will draw an audience: stories people may want to know about just because they’re interesting.  Those two characteristics need not be in conflict.  Some of the best stories on any given day, in fact, are both important *and* interesting.  But it’s fairly common for news organizations to divide stories into two basic categories: hard news and soft news, also called features.

***Types of News***

**Hard news** is essentially the news of the day.  It’s what you see on the front page of the newspaper or the top of the Web page, and what you hear at the start of a broadcast news report.  For example, war, politics, business, and crime are frequent hard news topics.  A strike announced today by the city’s bus drivers that leaves thousands of commuters unable to get to work is hard news.  It’s timely, controversial, and has a wide impact close to home.  The community needs the information right away, because it affects people’s daily lives.

By contrast, a story about a world-famous athlete who grew up in an orphanage would fit the definition of **soft news**.  It’s a **human-interest** story involving a prominent person and it’s an unusual story that people likely would discuss with their friends.  But there’s no compelling reason why it has to be published or broadcast on any particular day.  By definition, that makes it a **feature story**.  Many newspapers and online-news sites have separate feature sections for stories about lifestyles, home and family, the arts, and entertainment.  Larger newspapers even may have weekly sections for specific kinds of features on food, health, education, and so forth.

Topic isn’t the only thing that separates hard news from features.  In most cases, hard news and soft news are written differently.  Hard news stories generally are written so that the audience gets the most important information as quickly as possible.  Feature writers often begin with an anecdote or example designed primarily to draw the audience’s interest, so the story may take longer to get to the central point.

Some stories blend these two approaches.  Stories that are not time-sensitive but that focus on significant issues are often called “news features.”  A story about one community’s struggle to deal with AIDS, for example, is a news feature.  A story about a new treatment option for AIDS patients would be hard news.  News features are an effective way to explore trends or complex social problems by telling individual human stories about how people experience them.

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