

# Writing for the Media

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# 1 Understanding What Makes News

## In this chapter, you will learn

- How news is defined
- The values that are applied to deciding what is news
- The various categories of news
- The make-up of a typical newspaper
- How audiences are served by the newspaper

**A**T NOON, THE NEWS EDITOR OF A MAJOR DAILY NEWSPAPER SCANS THE PLAN for the day's coverage, thinking quickly about how the next day's front page and major sections are to develop. What follow-up and breaking stories look likely to be completed with enough new information before tonight's deadline? He or she watches the major national, regional, and local television channels to get an idea of what other media are covering, and to see whether there are interesting stories worth a more detailed follow-through by one of his or her reporters. Along with senior members of the news team, he must decide what will go into the newspaper and how it will be treated—that is, how detailed it will be, which angles will be covered, what photographs or illustrations will go with it, and so on. This is the first stage of creating news copy.

This section takes you through the process of deciding what's news, how to plan to cover and report it, and how this relates to those who ultimately consume it—readers or 'users' of media.

## WHAT IS NEWS?

News reaches us from all directions and in many forms. There is a ticker running across the television screen as we watch our favourite evening show; the evening news bulletin follows soon after; there is a flash on the cellphone screen if you are one of those who have subscribed to updates by SMS; and then there is the daily newspaper that lands outside your door. When someone calls you to tell you that a common friend is engaged, you might say ‘that is news’. But that is certainly not going to be something that makes the morning paper—unless of course your friend is a celebrity or a person of some influence and power.

There are so many interesting events happening in our communities, in our cities and towns, and in the larger world. Yet a very small percentage gets reported in the media. So what exactly does it take for the media to pay attention to something? What is it that makes one event worthy of being written about or photographed while another is ignored? What does it take for a reporter or an editor to sit up and take notice, and then spend time on covering something?

The trite old saying is that when a man bites a dog, it is news. Conversely, when a dog bites a man, it is commonplace, in other words, it is not news. That gives us a clue to just one of the many qualities that an editor looks for in an event before he or she decides that it merits coverage. An event has to be unusual, out of the everyday, to catch attention. But that is not in itself enough—we can see that the newspaper and television carry a much wider range of stories relating to politics, sports, environment, and socio-economic issues, among others.

*Take a look at these headlines from a daily newspaper. How do you think the news editor makes these choices from all the hundreds and thousands of events that occur in a day? Why are these choices made?*

- Reliance Gas to cost \$25 a barrel
- Three officials transferred from double murder case
- J&K officials want Amarnath Yatra cut short
- AP state government adopts CBSE English medium syllabus in government schools
- Test cricket no longer exciting, says Ponting

## NEWS VALUES AND PRIORITIES

Decisions about news are governed by a set of priorities that have evolved over time. These priorities are based on what editors think people should know, in order to function as members of society, as citizens of a democracy (in democratic nations), and as participants in community life. These priorities are also influenced by what editors think people want to know, and what engages and interests them. Fifty or more years ago, news was governed very much by what was considered ‘the public interest’, within the conception of a broad-based engagement in matters of state and of civic life. That has changed considerably—as any 70-year-old will tell you, ‘newspapers are not what they used to be.’

Even if the types of stories that make the front page or the main headlines have changed over time, this has more to do with changing audience demands and market trends than with any essential shift in how news is decided. Fifty years ago, if national politics was what filled much of a daily newspaper, it was because the presumption was that readers wanted to read about national events. During the years of liberalization, in the mid 1980s, much of the news was about new technologies entering India, about new economic policies and how they would impact industrial and commercial growth. As the youth market boomed in the 1990s, newspapers began gearing their stories to the interests of this new, younger reader who was interested in fashion, lifestyle, music, and movies.

Within this framework of reader interest and taste, there are certain values that underpin all news selection—and these values operate in tandem with perceived audience demand or interest and the inherent characteristics of the medium. As consumers of the mass media, you probably have an idea of what these are. Let us take a look at some of the more important ‘news values’.

### Timeliness

We all know that if something happened the previous week or month, it is not news. It certainly would not make the front-page headlines. News is something that just happened, that no one else knew about, that makes you stop and wonder for a moment, ‘I did not know that!’ Each medium—depending on its periodicity or frequency of transmission—has a different definition of timeliness. For the immediacy of television news, even something that happened in the morning is not considered news. For a newspaper, all

events on a given day could be considered as fulfilling the value of timeliness, but for the electronic medium, timeliness is now. An event that happened a while ago may come into the news again because of new developments, or because something relating to it has occurred. Consider this lead:

### Editors Guild condemns attack

NEW DELHI: The Editors Guild of India on Thursday condemned the attack on the residence of Kumar Ketkar, Editor of Marathi daily *Loksatta*, by activists of a little-known outfit. It demanded stringent action against those involved. Activists of the Shivsangram Sangathan attacked

Mr Ketkar's residence for an editorial critical of the Maharashtra government's decision to erect a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji off Marine Drive in Mumbai at a cost of Rs 100 crore.

(Source: *The Hindu*, 7 June 2008)

The statement is newsworthy because it is a timely response to another event that has taken place. A statement by the Editors Guild may not have received much attention at another time; it is juxtaposed with a more sensational, conflict-ridden event, which makes it timely. Some events and issues are timely because they happen on fixed days every year. For example, on earth day, there is 'timely' coverage of environmental issues, and on world health day several stories focus on health. During the last week of February, just before the union budget is presented, you will find a number of stories that discuss the economy and its impact on various spheres of life. Such issues become timely—and therefore newsworthy—because of the upcoming budget.

### Proximity

We pay attention to what happens around us, and to things we feel a certain closeness to, even if they are happening far away. Proximity—or nearness—is of two kinds. Geographic proximity has to do with events and issues that happen in our backyards, in our communities, our villages, towns, and cities. If a building in our neighbourhood catches fire, the news may be splashed in the city page of our local newspaper, but a similar fire in a city hundreds of kilometres away may not receive coverage—especially if there has been no loss of life. Our attention is caught by the familiar, the known, and we are keen observers of what goes on around us, because we believe it affects us more than most events that happen in distant locations. The local newspaper, therefore, will focus on events and issues that are close to the hearts and minds—and bodies—of the communities they cater to.



This story that ties together two locations—Andhra Pradesh and the UAE—is of interest to a local audience because it involves people from the region, and brings to attention an issue that is likely to affect the readership base.

### Relief for Gulf suicide victims' kin

HYDERABAD, JUNE 12: Altogether 29 people who returned from United Arab Emirates committed suicide after falling in debt traps. Most of them ended their lives after failing to handle the pressure exerted by private moneylenders demanding repayment of loans. Sources said the state government has confirmed the death figures. According to reports furnished by the collectors and district magistrates, the highest number of suicides have been recorded in Nizamabad district with 17 people killing themselves followed by Karimnagar (8), Adilabad (3), and Medak (1).

(Source: *The Deccan Chronicle*,  
12 June 2008)

The second kind of proximity is called psychological proximity. We are interested in others like us, in things that we identify with, even if they are not located—in terms of physical distance—in our neighbourhoods. So when there is a disaster halfway around the world, our interest is sparked just a little more when there are casualties from India, more so from our own cities and towns. When a young Indian woman is found murdered in a London apartment, it may merit no more than a few paragraphs in a suburban London paper, but finds mention on the front page of some of the Indian dailies that serve the region the young woman belongs to. The following story about Indian workers in the USA finds space in a national newspaper because of such a link.

### Indian workers in US suspend hunger strike

WASHINGTON: A group of Indian workers seeking action against a US company for alleged exploitation have suspended their hunger strike after 29 days with a rally in front of the US Justice Department.

(Source: *The Times of India*,  
12 June 2008)

READ, THINK,  
AND  
DISCUSS

Look through the local newspaper and estimate the number of stories that originate locally. You can tell by the dateline—the information at the start of the article that mentions the city where the story originated. Try to identify stories that have geographic and psychological proximity.

An editor's definition of proximity depends on the primary market the newspaper or periodical serves. If it is a national newspaper, then events across the country are covered, whereas if it is a regional or city newspaper, then it



the person holds high office, has celebrity status, or is closely connected to someone famous. Reporters routinely cover the activities of the rich, the famous, and the powerful in all fields, from politics and business to entertainment and sports.

Sometimes, the focus on prominent personalities can go a bit too far, with reporters trying all sorts of ways and means to get the dirt on celebrities. This has had rather unpleasant consequences, often impinging on privacy and personal relationships. The term ‘paparazzi’, used to describe photographers who stalk celebrities, has a rather unsavoury connotation, conjuring as it does images of aggressive camera-carrying peeping toms who will stop at nothing to get a sensational shot of a public figure. The term *paparazzi* perhaps acquired a new shade of grey following Princess Diana’s death in a car crash, while, allegedly, her car was being chased by aggressive photographers. Rock stars and movie actors are routinely chased by photographers with high-power zoom lenses and exclusive shots of private lives are sold to high bidders in the media. While photographers are certainly seen to be a more pushy bunch, writers who use similar strategies to get the most sensational titbit are not far behind. Some editors may argue that this is the kind of story readers want, that after all, journalists’ duty is to feed their audience’s interests. And that is another ethical dilemma that we shall take up later in this book.

Prominence is not only about film stars and rock idols. Politicians too make news, as do others who acquire fame or notoriety for any reason. A politician’s son found unconscious after using drugs makes the front page, as does the son of a business tycoon who runs over a homeless person with his luxury car. Similar incidents may find no more than a small paragraph buried in an inside page if ordinary citizens are involved.

The media is, however, also in the business of creating celebrities. While the print media is less a part of celebrity creation than television, there is a certain amount of cross promotion that happens—sometimes unwittingly—across different media. So when a private individual achieves fame by winning a high-stakes television game show, it is reported in the newspaper and perhaps gains a cover story in a magazine.

READ, THINK, AND DISCUSS Look through the newspaper and see how many stories you find about ‘ordinary’ people versus those about celebrities of different kinds. Do you think the stories would have been featured if the value of prominence were absent?

## Conflict

War, crime, disaster, communal tension, caste vendetta . . . sound familiar? No, not the night-time television soap operas, but your daily ration of news! People love a good story, and if it has plenty of conflict in it, so much the better. At one time, conventional wisdom that guided selection of news for television was ‘if it bleeds, it leads.’ While newspapers may be just a little better than that, we do see a fair share of conflict showcased on the front page and in section fronts. If the conflict involves public personalities and has a local angle, why is there no question of its news value?

The following story combines two elements that capture the attention of Indian readers—cricket and conflict.

### Furious PCB chief seeks clarification from team manager

KARACHI: Livid after India thumped Pakistan in the ongoing tri-series in Bangladesh, cricket board chief Nasim Ashraf has shot off an e-mail to team manager Talat Ali seeking an immediate explanation on issues including team selection, Shoaib Malik’s captaincy, and the role played by Australian coach Geoff Lawson.  
(Source: *The Times of India*, 14 May 2008)

Conflict is one of the most important values in news. It is often used to peg a story that might escape reader interest. An otherwise boring story might be spiced up by a little controversial angle, for instance, a story on the rise in petrol prices is made more interesting by couching it within the framework of a fierce political battle against the policy. The war in the Middle East might be about hard economic issues, but the story that makes the front pages is one of soldiers dying and families suffering. Now, once we have the reader’s interest, it becomes easier to deliver the mundane details that actually make the story. Of course, this type of framing can go a bit too far, and actually distort stories. We shall explore in later chapters how this technique of ‘framing’ stories, or highlighting certain aspects of them over others, can have positive and negative consequences on how a story is understood.

A large number of news stories are essentially about tensions and conflicts—between the people and the government, between rival factions of political parties, between upper and lower castes, between local and migrant populations, and between industry and agricultural interests. In any democracy, there are conflicting and competing interests, and it is the media’s job to sift through all these and report those that are most relevant to its readership or viewership at any given time.

## Human Interest

We all like to read about the young girl who did exceptionally well in the high school examination despite her disability, or about the little Pakistani girl who came to India for a complicated heart surgery, or the million different things that make us a society of human beings—idiosyncratic, individualistic, and sometimes, even heroic. We like to read about achievements and failures, the unusual coincidences that sometimes lead to memorable moments in life, and about how ordinary people deal with extraordinary situations.

### In debt, dad sells daughter, 13, for 35k

CHANDIGARH: Mohan Lal could not repay a debt of Rs 35,000. So he sold off his 13-year-old daughter.

Thankfully for the aghast teenager, though, her elder sister got a whiff of the deal and rushed to her rescue. The police, too, acted swiftly on the complaint and rounded up Mohan Lal, a Yamunanagar

resident, on Thursday. The man to whom the girl had been sold in marriage was also arrested under the Child Marriage Act, as were the father and mother who bitterly complained that they had paid a lot of money for the child.

(Source: *The Times of India*,  
13 June 2008)

In this story, the human interest lies not only in the sale of the child to overcome a desperate situation, but also in the courage and quick thinking of the older daughter.

These stories focus on the human element behind events that talk about the people factor in business, or sports, or any facet of life, in a manner that goes beyond the ‘hard facts’. The feature supplements are full of such stories, and even when there is a major news event there is often likely to be a human interest angle to it. Each year, at the end of February, stories on the budget abound—serious, analytical pieces that look at the economy, growth in various sectors, impact on prices, the politics of the budget, and so on. But there are also pieces on how the budget will impact a small general merchant in a corner of your town, or pieces describing the last-minute rush at the finance ministry to beat the budget session deadline. These stories put a human face on the issue and interpret the numbers in terms of how they affect people in a real, everyday sense. That is what human interest is—finding the angle in a story that touches people, makes them laugh, cry, wonder, and think. For many of us, a serious or heavy issue only makes sense when we are able to see how it impacts common people.

Human interest is a value that was at one time not often found on the front page, restricted as that was to ‘hard news’ (a term that will be defined

in more detail later in this chapter) about politics and the economy. This has changed in recent years, and with changing reader tastes, editors are placing the 'warm fuzzy' stories on page one as well, and sometimes carrying companion human interest pieces to supplement the serious issue-based stories.

### Relevance/Usefulness

Increasingly, people want news they can use, news that helps them cope with the complexities of daily life and living. News about a hike in petrol prices, sales tax on products, changes in bus and train schedules, the introduction of new public services, or traffic restrictions—these are all important pieces of information that affect the way people make plans.

People read the newspaper in order to keep up with happenings around the world, in their neighbourhood, and in their country. But they also read the newspaper to keep track of important changes in their environment that might have an impact on their own routines and plans. And then there are changes in government policies and procedures that affect us in different ways, such as the availability of essential commodities, the process to follow to apply for a passport, the rules about housing and construction, the increase or decrease in loan interest rates, the implementation of a pay revision, and so on.

### DU on air for admissions

NEW DELHI: The next time you switch on your radio near Delhi University, get ready to be greeted by admission details. The university, in a bid to make its admission process more wide-ranging, has roped in the DU community radio for disseminating information. The radio, available on 90.4 frequency on the FM bandwidth, can be accessed anywhere in a radius of 10 km around the North Campus. (Source: *The Times of India*, 14 May 2008)

This article about university admissions is sure to be of interest to all young people and families getting ready for the academic year.

Such news usually has different degrees of relevance for different sections of the audience, so it is placed and used accordingly in a newspaper. Useful local news is placed on the local pages, while national news of relevance would appear on those pages that are common to all editions of a newspaper across locations. What is relevant to one group of readers may not be relevant to another, but at any given time, there is a group of readers who will benefit from the news.

The weather forecast would fall into this category. It is highly local in content and caters to a limited geographic area. A farmer may decide on

when to sow his new crop based on the prediction for rain in his area, or a family may decide whether or not to go out on a picnic based on the chances of rain.

There is so much information around that people are highly selective about what they choose to spend time and attention on. While they can do without news of conflicts in far-off countries or power play in the capital of the country, they do need to know about developments that have an impact on their day-to-day lives, such as school reopenings, protests and bandhs, strikes and closures.

READ, THINK, AND DISCUSS Look through an issue of your favourite local paper and mark all the stories that fall into this category of 'news you can use'. What does this tell you about the audience of this paper?

### Impact

Very closely aligned with 'usefulness' is the news value of impact. While usefulness has to do with practical value, impact is more about the psychological, social, cultural, or economic effect that an event or a development might have on the audience. The much-cited budget, for instance, is an event of national impact. It may have limited interest and no perceptible utility for people who are not economic decision-makers, but nevertheless it has an impact on everyone.

People are affected by a rise in prices, as they are interested in anything that will signal a price drop, like in the following story.

#### 10% drop in demand could ease power bill

MUMBAI: Early monsoon may have led to slippery roads in Mumbai, but it has also driven down the constantly rising demand for electricity. Even in the rest of Maharashtra, the power situation is improving as load-shedding levels have fallen to a new low in the past week. Power companies are happy as their expenditure on procuring electricity from outside to meet the shortfall has become negligible.

(Source: *The Times of India*,  
13 June 2008)

Editors, therefore, pay attention to events that have a direct or indirect impact on their audience, and ensure that they provide enough coverage of them. While some events are clearly impactful because they are also 'big' in terms of the number of people who are affected or the geographical reach, but other events have a more subtle impact on lives, and it is the analytical and far-sighted journalist who is able to discern these and write about them in a manner that makes sense to the reader. Environmental journalism, for instance, often is about analysing the long-term consequences of our actions,



and showing how decisions made today could have a major impact on the future. A lot of special interest stories, in science, health, and development, are about impact.

### Unusualness/Oddity

‘Man bites dog’ is certainly news because it is odd, unusual, out of the ordinary. Things that excite our curiosity—sometimes to an extreme—tend to make news. Siamese twins who are to undergo surgery for separation makes news, as does the ‘miracle’ of a Ganesha idol consuming milk. Like human interest, anything that makes us sit up and take notice, merits perhaps a photographer’s click and a writer’s quick note is newsworthy. All of us like a good story, and the more curious it is, the more attention we pay to it. The following story makes news because it highlights the unexpected—a different class of women walking the ramp.

#### Toilet cleaners to walk NY ramp

NEW DELHI: A year ago, Vimla Atwal eked a living by cleaning outdoor pits used as toilets in a village. Next month, she will sashay down a New York catwalk with top Indian models.

Atwal, and 29 other female toilet cleaners who now have other jobs thanks

to a rehabilitation programme run by a local firm, will participate in a series of events by the UN to mark the International Year of Sanitation.

(Source: *The Times of India*,  
13 June 2008)

Unusualness is a value that is found more often in features and soft news than in hard news. So, a feature on the diet of astronauts aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* interests us because of the unusual nature of the supplies they take along, as also the clothes they wear. We like to find out about the pursuits of the rich and famous because their lives are very different from the ordinary, and their homes, cars, and even pets offer a picture that fascinates many.

### Magnitude

Some events are just so big that we do not need to wonder why they make news. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and tsunami, and terrorist attacks are all events that affect the lives of so many people, and in such fundamental ways, that they cannot be ignored.

While these events directly affect the lives of hundreds and sometimes, thousands of people, their consequences are felt by many more thousands



## Cities from Beijing to Bangkok shaken in huge Chinese quake

*Earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale felt across major cities in eastern Asia*

HONG KONG: Over 17,000 people were killed or injured in a monstrous earthquake that rocked large parts of China and was felt across a swathe of Asia on Monday. The 7.8 magnitude earthquake, with its epicentre near Chengdu in southwestern

Sichuan province, struck at 2.30 pm (12 noon IST), and levelled entire counties in the province. It was felt as far away as Beijing and Shanghai and even in Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand.

(Source: *DNA-Daily News & Analysis*, 12 May 2008)

around the globe. In terms of humanitarian responses to such tragedies, help and support comes from all over the world, and it is important for information to reach all those who can help. Dispersed families need information on how their loved ones may have been affected by such events, and sometimes the mass media is the only source. Magnitude usually supercedes every other news value, because generally the news events exhibit almost every other news value.

The news values listed here are rarely found in isolation. Most stories will contain more than one news value, highlighted to different degrees depending on the readership of the publication.

READ, THINK, AND DISCUSS Look through the newspaper and try to identify the news values in the main stories on each page, beginning with page one. Which values occur most frequently? Which values occur in combination?

## CHANGING VALUES OF NEWS

The basic values of news have remained the same over decades; what has changed is the way in which editors prioritize these values, both within a story, which affects how it is written, and across the newspaper, which affects layout and design. Cross-media competition has also brought in some changes. With the increasing penetration of television, and the multiplicity of news channels available, newspapers are no longer the main source of information across India. This has forced newspapers to rethink the way they present news and the kind of news they carry. Values such as timeliness are interpreted differently, as most of the news in the morning paper has already been aired on the night news on television, and is always available, monitored 24×7, on the Internet. So while there is still an emphasis on timeliness, the story must be 'framed' a little differently in order to keep the interest of readers who are likely to have already heard the news.

Although people have multiple sources of news these days, newspapers continue to be popular from the way they cover news. While the same values may hold today as they did 20 or 30 years ago, their relative importance and the way in which they are interpreted have changed considerably. For instance, notions of proximity have undergone a sea change with people moving residence across the country and even across the world, but retaining a sense of connection with their home town or home state. So there are pockets of media that cater to this diasporic population, with editors ensuring that they include stories that keep this 'non-resident' group in contact with their roots. Often Indians living in the USA look for their home town newspapers on the Internet and scour the local papers for mention of happenings in India. Newspapers in American towns with a large Indian population realize this and make an attempt to cater to these readers with occasional coverage of Indian politics and culture.

On the other hand, today there is also more news about the immediate neighbourhood in the city daily than there ever was in the past. Large city newspapers publish zonal supplements that cater to narrow geographic areas, highlighting concerns of people who live in these areas, from civic amenities to schools to shopping, and profiling achievers on a local scale. *The Hindu*, for instance, has a weekly supplement called *Downtown* that is specific to different zones in each city.

In other words, changing reader needs and readership patterns have led to a change in the way news is defined. Editors are much more sensitive to the demands of readers now than they were say, four decades ago when news editors assumed that they knew what the reader 'ought to be reading'. Some journalists and media watchers argue that responsible journalism is about covering the serious, large-impact stories about politics, economics, and social issues, no matter what readers 'want' to read. Most newspapers, therefore, try to balance what they consider 'real' journalism with reader-driven content.

READ, THINK,  
AND  
DISCUSS Most public libraries have access to old issues of newspapers, sometimes preserved on microfilm. Take a look at newspapers from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the last few years. From just looking at the front pages, what can you tell about the primary news values applied to the selection of news? Can you discern a change over time?

News values are not decided in isolation, and they are never the only determining factor for selection of a story, though idealistic reporters and editors may want it otherwise. A newspaper's content may be decided largely

on the basis of journalistic values, but the decision is moderated by factors such as editorial policy (the broad principles or philosophy followed by the newspaper management and editorial board), the 'market' or audience it serves, and a variety of other commercial and political constraints that may be visible or invisible. Many scholars have studied and written about the functioning of the press in a democracy, and how a variety of factors limit editorial decision-making. However, editors and reporters for the most part still go by the principle that news is about telling the truth in a way people understand, and about serving readers' interests in a sensible and fair manner, applying the news values outlined here.

## TYPES OF NEWS AND NEWS STORIES

As a reader of newspapers and magazines you will also have noticed that there is a wide variety in the kinds of articles carried. Some are long, some short, some based entirely on facts while others have a bit of conjecture, description, and analysis thrown in, while yet others are purely subjective opinion. Such variety is the essence of a newspaper. Of course, all news stories are based in fact; that is why journalistic writing is different from fiction. But within that, there are as many genres of journalistic writing as there are genres of fiction.

*Hard news* or *straight news* is the kind of news that is found on the front page. Most stories in the main section of the newspaper are hard news. They are based on a tight set of facts, follow a fairly straightforward structure, and have no analysis or interpretation apart from what might be provided in the form of quotes from people who have been interviewed by the reporter. Such stories are usually written in the classic inverted pyramid style, which will be described later in the book. The emphasis is on what happened, how it happened, who was affected, and when and where it happened. Hard news stories are usually about serious topics that have an impact on people's lives, about politics and economic issues, for instance.

*Soft news*, on the other hand, is about issues that perhaps are not as crucial to the life of a democracy, and soft news stories are dealt with in a lighter manner. Editors tend to label as 'soft' areas such as entertainment, lifestyle, food, fashion, travel, and leisure. These issues too can be dealt with in a serious manner, of course, and based on hard facts, but there is a perception in the news business that such topics are not part of the main news spectrum

and therefore, do not necessitate the same level of scrutiny and detail that applies to the more serious topics listed above.

Stories that require greater depth and length, with more room for description, analysis, and interpretation are presented as *features*. These are usually found in special sections, or on inside pages, and they often carry illustrative elements as well—photographs, tables, charts, and graphics. Practically any topic that requires such treatment can be written in the form of a feature, and sometimes specific aspects of a hard news story are elucidated in an accompanying feature article. Some newspapers include feature supplements that provide the space and the layout for more creative treatment of topics. Feature writing can be quite challenging, but it also offers the scope for a writer to experiment with style and form, and explore a given idea in more detail than is possible in a straight news story. Features can be about both serious and ‘soft’ issues.

While journalism is generally considered to be about facts and analysis based on objective assessment of information, there are certain spaces within the newspaper where people can express their opinions on issues and events. Of course, such opinions are based on fact, and the best-argued opinions are in fact built on carefully presented evidence, but there is an allowance for subjectivity. Opinions are expressed in the *editorial* (the space devoted to the newspaper’s ‘voice’ on issues of current importance), in invited columns, and in reviews.

Through the newspaper you will also find other types of writing, such as

- *Briefs* which are very brief summaries of happenings, sometimes appearing as a list of items along one side of the front page.
- *Brights* which are short humorous or light-hearted pieces sometimes carried along with photographs.
- *Sidebar* which is an item that accompanies a feature or a news story and elucidates some aspect of the story, such as a timeline or a list of milestones, or even a short interview or profile.
- *Infographic* which is an item that combines text and numbers in an illustrative, informative manner.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF A NEWSPAPER

If you leaf through a newspaper or a magazine, you will see that stories vary in length, style, approach, and even in the way they are presented visually,

that is, the illustrations and typography used. This is because every subject demands a different kind of treatment, both in terms of writing and layout. Generally, the content of the newspaper can be classified in terms of the subject matter, the positioning (the location of an article within the body of the publication), and the style. We know that there are, broadly, two kinds of content in a newspaper—editorial and advertising. Editorial content is what is generated by the newsroom staff and contributing writers. It constitutes the bulk of the paper and is the ‘raison d’être’ of the publication. Advertising is matter that conveys commercial information, and the space taken by advertisements is paid for by the company whose product or service is being sold.

The portion of the newspaper that is taken up by news and editorial matter is called the ‘news hole’ and is usually expressed in column inches—the number of inches in length multiplied by the number of columns taken up by text. The distribution of the news hole across different types of editorial content is broadly fixed, and each editorial department has the responsibility to fill that allocated space, with adjustments being made depending on what happens in the ‘news universe’ on a particular day. For instance, if a major news event such as a disaster or an election takes place, then additional space may be taken from other editorial departments, cutting down on other stories that may not be as important.

The news hole is usually organized according to subject areas as well as geographic zones. For instance, most national-level political and economic news goes on the front page and a few additional pages close to the front of the paper. Then there are pages devoted to city/town, state/region, world, business/finance, and sports. In addition, on different days of the week there may be sections such as health/fitness, science/technology, culture, environment, etc. These may either have their own pull-out sections or be assigned pages within the main body of the newspaper.

READ, THINK,  
AND  
DISCUSS

Look at some different newspapers published in your city or town and see how the ‘news hole’ is split up. Do you think this is a logical organization? Why do you think this is so? How does this reflect newspaper reading patterns?

This type of subject-oriented organization of a newspaper is called *internal zoning* or *vertical zoning*. It helps readers go directly to the part of the newspaper they are interested in, without having to search through the whole paper for items of their specific interest. Large newspapers may actually

have separate sections of several pages each, devoted to each 'zone' of reader interest.

Some newspapers also have several different editions, each with slightly different content. These editions are for different geographical regions. If you look at the front page of any daily newspaper in the country, below the title is a line that indicates which edition this paper comes from. It will also usually list the different locations that the paper is printed at. *The Hindu*, for instance, publishes 10 different editions, from different cities across south India, as well as New Delhi and Mumbai. Each edition will have different local news sections, so the pages for the city, state, and region will be different. This type of differentiation is known as *horizontal zoning* or *geographic zoning*, and serves to cater to the interests of readers in different parts of the country or region.

### **Readers—Part of an Audience or a Market?**

The reason why newspapers have evolved the type of differentiation described above is to better serve readers and also to provide advertisers with more targeted reach. It is important to recognize that editors and writers have a very different way of thinking about the people they cater to from that of advertisers. The editorial department of a newspaper will talk about its audience or its readers, while the marketing and advertising department will talk about the same group as a market. In the editorial viewpoint, the audience is made up of people who pick up the newspaper to gain information and an understanding of what is going on in the world around them.

Advertising forms an important part of a newspaper's content, not only because it is a source of revenue for the paper, but also because without this revenue, a newspaper can never pay for itself. The cost of producing a newspaper is much more than the income that is derived through its sales, so advertising—selling the space in the paper to companies and organizations to promote their products and services—becomes essential to offer the newspaper at a price that readers can afford to pay. Just as television channels need to raise TRPs (television rating points) of viewing content to sell airtime to advertisers, newspapers need to boost readership with attractive content in order to sell newsprint space. From the advertising viewpoint, the market is made up of consumers who are likely to buy products and services. Obviously, readers are both users of information and buyers of products and services. Whether the newspaper decides to make one more important than the other is the key question that determines editorial policy.

READ, THINK, AND DISCUSS Audience or market? What is the difference between these two conceptions of the people who read or buy a newspaper? Look through a daily newspaper and estimate the percentage of space taken by advertisements versus editorial content. Is there a relationship between the advertisements for consumer products and the kind of articles and the general mix of content? Is 'good' content the same as 'attractive' content?

## HOW THE PRINT MEDIA WORKS

What ultimately gets published in a daily newspaper or a newsmagazine depends on several complex interrelationships. The news hole—how much space is available for news—depends on the amount of advertising allowed by policy or practice in the paper. The prioritization of stories depends on the nature of readership. The placement and treatment of topics depends on the readership patterns as well as editorial judgement of reader preferences. The length of stories depends on layout, competing content, reader preferences, and advertising. While an individual journalist may not have much influence over how a story is ultimately used in the newspaper, it helps to know the journey of a story from origin to destination. Understanding issues of positioning and placement that moderate editorial decision-making can help a writer structure a story in a manner that is more likely to be carried without too much alteration.

### News Flow

Stories in a newspaper come from a variety of sources. Some stories come through news agencies. A news agency has correspondents in several places who turn in stories on a regular basis. These are distributed to newspapers which pay for the service. News agency feeds allow newspapers that do not have the resources and reach to place their own reporters in distant locations, to access news from a wider geographic area. News agency material is therefore not exclusive. Several newspapers around the world may subscribe to the same agency's services. Some of the big news agencies are the Associated Press, Thomson Reuters, and Agence France Press, all of which create, package, and sell news and feature stories in bulk to other news outlets including newspapers, magazines, television stations, and so on. There are also a number of independent or alternative news agencies that offer a different perspective that is in contrast, sometimes, to the corporate-owned news producers.



Agency copy (which is what news text is usually called) may be edited and combined with other material or with a staff reporter's work to create the final story. The story is edited for length and style and then placed on the page. The senior editors usually take decisions about which stories to carry on page one and on the other main pages and direct the section editors (who take care of the internal zones) to fit the copy accordingly. The copy editors write headlines and choose photographs or other art to go with the story, and work with the design and layout team to 'make' the page. In this process, they may also create additional material, such as text boxes, lists, and other items that might be used as sidebars, if required. Reporters have little to do with the output once they turn in a story. Decisions about editing a story for length, adding visuals, and supporting boxes, are often not part of their work. In smaller newspapers, there may be more consultation between the writer, editor, and layout people, but in large, departmentalized newspapers, the functions are quite separate.

So what can reporters do, knowing all this? Well, when writing a story, the reporters would do well to be aware of what other stories are being used, what is the likely position of their story, and how long it would need to be. This can help reporters plan the story within the various constraints, so that it is not cut or altered too drastically to fit the space, or combined with elements that in their view do not go with it.

## **THE NATURE OF THE NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY IN A MULTIMEDIA WORLD**

When the Internet hit the scene, many predicted the death of the daily newspaper. It has been some years hence, and the newspaper industry still seems robust. No doubt newspapers have changed considerably in the last two decades, both in style and content, and anyone who has been in the newsroom for more than two decades will tell you how much things have changed in the workspace too. There is a lot more multitasking among editorial staff. The tight compartmentalization that used to exist between hard news and the features desk has given way to a more open space where a reporter or writer can write across genres, do both serious and light pieces, and long and short ones. The copy desk (those who edit, write headlines and captions, coordinate layout) at one time dealt only with text but now



works closely with the layout artists to plan page layouts and illustrations as well. This is partly because of computer technology, which allows text, photos, and graphics to be shared across the same platform and integrated seamlessly.

Most large newspapers also have a significant presence on the Web, with online editions that are more than just electronic replicas of the print version. The extended space on the Web allows newspapers to offer more content, integrate other media into their stories (such as audio tracks and video footage), and have discussion groups and other interactive spaces. Often the same group of reporters and writers also provide content for the online edition, requiring a familiarity with this medium as well. Essentially, writing for the Web is no different from writing for print; it is only the organization of information that differs, calling for a modular and sectioned approach to a piece of text. What it means for the reporter is that a story can be made as detailed and multifaceted as possible, and even if the print version of the paper can carry only a truncated, 500-word piece, the additional details can become part of the Web version.

Newspapers are also influenced by the immediacy and imagery of television news. The increasing emphasis on colour and visual appeal in newspapers is a direct outcome of an increasing ‘visuality’ in the general media culture. People watch more television, they respond better to pictures, so the less text there is, the better. So stories are shorter, with more pictures, and pages are laid out to appeal to ‘watchers’ rather than readers.

Such an environment does pose a challenge to those who are in newspaper journalism because they enjoy writing. Of course, writing is at the heart of good print journalism, but most assignments are likely to be short ones, demanding brevity, clarity, and the ability to say a lot in a few pithy sentences—all the while paying attention to news values, reader interests, and the dynamics of the editorial decision-making process.

## SUMMARY

- Selection of news is based on some commonly held values that are applied to judge newsworthiness.
- The most common attributes of news are timeliness, proximity, prominence, conflict, human interest, magnitude, impact, usefulness, and unusualness.

- Changing readership patterns and reader needs have led to a change in the way news is defined.
  - Editors must balance readers' interests and larger social interests in deciding the content for a newspaper.
  - Hard news is news that is based on facts, told in a straightforward manner, while soft news deals with less important issues such as fashion, entertainment, travel, lifestyle, etc.
  - Features provide for more descriptive, analytical, and interpretive writing and are generally longer than straight news stories.
  - Readers can be seen as part of a newspaper reading audience and as a market that will buy goods and services.
  - The space available for news after advertisements are placed is called the news hole.
  - Vertical and horizontal zoning are ways in which editors cater to different reader interests.
  - Newspapers have adapted their look and style in response to a reading public that is used to television and the Internet and wants short pieces complemented by visuals.
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## KEY TERMS

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**Audience** is the target group to which a publication is addressed, or the people who are interested in the content of a news periodical.

**Briefs and brights** are short summaries of happenings, sometimes just tidbits that entertain or inform readers in a very pithy manner.

**Editorials** reflect the publication's opinion on an issue or event.

**Features** usually are more in-depth accounts that allow for description, analysis, and interpretation, focusing on one aspect or angle of an issue.

**Hard news** is news that is based on fact, usually serious stories that have to do with political, economic, or social issues, or other events that have a direct impact on people's lives.

**Horizontal/geographic zoning** refers to the manner in which publications target readers in different geographic zones with region-specific editions.

**Infographic** is an item that combines text and numbers in an illustrative, informative manner.

**Internal/vertical zoning** refers to the organization of a newspaper into sections related to different subjects.

**Market** is a group of people who are interested in or who buy a certain product.

**News flow** is the manner in which information is generated, processed, and finally reaches readers.

**News hole** is the portion of the newspaper or magazine that is taken up by news and editorial content.

**News values** are certain guiding principles by which editors make decisions about what to include and exclude in a daily paper. These are timeliness, proximity, prominence, human interest, relevance/usefulness, impact, unusualness/oddity, and magnitude.

**Sidebar** is an item that accompanies a news story or feature and elucidates some aspect of the story.

**Soft news** includes stories about lighter issues that may not have a serious impact on people's lives, such as entertainment, lifestyle, humour, and human interest.

**Straight news** includes stories that involve direct presentation of facts, without analysis or interpretation.

### CONCEPT REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do editors take decisions about news? What are the defining factors that determine that a piece of information is newsworthy?
2. What are news values? Define the different news values with examples of each.
3. What is the difference between hard and soft news?
4. In the past two decades, the definitions of news have changed considerably. What changes in society and culture have led to these changes?
5. What are the different types of stories that you find in a typical newspaper?
6. How does a newspaper cater to different interests within its readership? What is the process of defining an audience both by interest and location?
7. Should an editor think about readers as part of an audience or a market? What are the implications of the two approaches?
8. What changes have taken place in the newspaper industry in response to the changes in the media landscape?

### EXERCISES

1. In the following stories, identify the primary news value.
  - a. The cold war between the two top dogs in the Shiv Sena heated up after one of them made a disparaging remark at a recent public meeting.
  - b. CBSE results delayed by one week due to major computer breakdown.
  - c. 500 people feared dead or seriously injured in train accident near Kolkata.

- d. Five-year-old boy climbs out of 60-foot well four hours after falling in.
  - e. Housing rental rates in the city have shot up by 20 per cent in the past six months, says a study by a local urban development research centre.
  - f. Prime Minister to undergo heart transplant surgery.
  - g. Indian scholar wins prestigious mathematics prize from European Association.
  - h. Actress found dead in her tenth-floor apartment under suspicious circumstances.
  - i. Hundreds of dalit workers ambushed the chief minister's convoy as it left the assembly yesterday.
2. Using a recent issue of a daily newspaper that you read regularly, identify examples of the following kinds of stories: features, hard news, soft news, opinion. What is the relative proportion of space given to each?
  3. Look at two different newspapers published in your region. Describe how each paper caters to the different vertical audiences of its readership.
  4. Given the following set of facts, which aspects do you think you would highlight for (a) a local audience, (b) a national audience, (c) university students? Which news values would you apply to each audience and why?

Calcutta–Kolkata, Bangalore–Bengaluru, Madras–Chennai, Bombay–Mumbai . . . what is in a name, they say, but each time we talk of a change, the hue and cry does not seem to end. We all thought the name game in Mumbai had finally come to rest. But no, there is a fresh issue that crops up each time an institution has been found 'uncompliant'! Yesterday the Mayor of Mumbai issued an 'ultimatum' to the Chairman of the Bajaj Foundation and Intach directing them to change the name of the Bombay School of Art and the associated art gallery to Mumbai School of Art. Students at the University are divided on the issue. Some feel that there is an essential character to the name that is lost with the change. Others feel the local identity needs to be emphasized with the name change. Intach has been silent so far on the issue.

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