Elements of news

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ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE
39 NEWTON ROAD, SINGAPORE 1130, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

ELEMENTS OF NEWS

There is no scientific formula for recognising or judging the value of news because news-the gathering of it, the writing of it, and the reading of it-contains a "human" characteristic. It is perilously subject to the whims, fancies and caprices of the human mind.

The criteria listed below are rough gauges of what interest people and while they are not precise, they make guessing at news selection a little more systematic.

The 10 criteria listed here represent the essence of what a reporter should look for in talking with a news source.

Timeliness

Something that happened last night is more newsworthy than something occurring three weeks ago. News must be "new." When you read or hear it, it should be for the first time. New revelations of old, hitherto-unknown events can be news, however, as for example, the discovery of a sunken 18th century galleon. The discovery is the news, not the sinking 200 years before.

Prominence

More news value is placed on better-known people or institutions in the news. People are simply more interested in celebrities than in average citizens. A minor car crash is a bigger news story if a DJ is one of the drivers, bigger still if the President is in the car.

Consequence

The impact of a news event on the public is one of the key elements in judging news values. A story of tax reform affects every taxpayer therefore it has high news value. Often a reporter must seek to learn the consequences of any act. If a spate of hoax fire alarms are being made, what are the consequences? They may be serious if fire-fighting equipment is out on a false run when a real fire occurs.

Proximity

The nearer the event, the greater its news value. Although some news has national or international importance, most newspapers thrive on news close to home. On balance, tomorrow's forecast for thunder in your area has more news value than a typhoon threat 5,000 miles away, simply because it makes a difference to your readers.

Change

If the reporter can point out that a certain condition or activity represents change, then the item carries more news value. People pay more attention when it is clear that things are not the same anymore. The change might be more potential than actual, but it remains no less important. People may be cheered or threatened by impending change but they want to know about it. Sometimes lack of change can be news. The change may be subtle, a trend such as increasing crime rates, higher cost of living, or increased unemployment. Sometimes it takes an alert reporter to spot trends: women are wearing their hair shorter this season, or more and more men are growing beards. Sometimes it takes an unfortunate incident to call attention to change: increasing traffic hazards near a school are evident only after a schoolchild is run over and killed.

Action

The concept of people *doing* things is always more dramatic and therefore more newsworthy than people merely thinking things or expressing opinions. Take the problem of increasing traffic hazards, for example. News value of parents being vaguely dissatisfied with traffic control near the school is marginal. It's more interesting if they take some kind of action like submitting petitions to the police. The more dramatic or violent the action, the greater the news value. The most extreme would be physical violence: murder, assault, or more bloodletting ranging from riots to war.

Concreteness

The tangible always take precedence over the abstract on the scale of news values. That's why the existence of the dead child - killed on the busy highway near the school—has more public impact than vague commentary about how dangerous that street may be to children. Similarly, the reporter who "shows" (by concrete and specific examples) will have stories of higher news potential than the reporter who merely "tells."

Personality or human interest

People are naturally curious about other people, particularly those who are celebrated or somehow different. In large measure this may be because readers identify, positively or negatively, with other people and with any interpersonal relationships that they may have (friendships, rivalries, romances, sex liaisons, partnerships, and so forth). Quirks, idiosyncrasies, fantasies, secret desires—all of these attract high readership, particularly if the person involved is prominent.

Rarity

Like a precious metal, the more infrequently a certain kind of incident occurs, the more news value it contains. This is the classic "man bites dog" dictum. It is a simple human characteristic that if you see a 100-member marching band with 99 wearing green uniforms and one in yellow, in your eye is caught by the yellow. You're curious. Why is he different?

Conflict

Sometimes the conflict is inherent in the situation as, for example, a confrontation between participants and the organiser of a baby show. Just as often, however, it is the reporter who recognizes that at least two sides exist in most situations, and he seeks to present the other side. The existence of conflict or controversy implies that an issue remains unsettled, thus it is interesting and significant because it contains both consequence and the threat/promise of change.

The reporter typically finds few news events containing only one of the above criteria. Mostly a combination occurs.