

INTRODUCTION TO NEWS

It must have been a very frustrated journalist who defined news as “Whatever the editor says is news”.

Though nowadays even newspaper owners, their children and marketing managers, besides the editors, decide what is news and needs to be published, the actual term has various definitions and has undergone changes over the years with the advent of new, and faster, methods of dissemination (distribution) of news, adding new dimensions to the term.

News was once defined as reportage of any happening anywhere in the world, the first account of history or a description of the ‘unusual’ — as in ‘when dog bites man it is not news. When man bites dog it is news’.

However a modern definition of news takes it beyond the realms of a mere report of an event or distributing information to include everything that interests people.

News now is defined as a concise, factual and accurate report or account of an incident, decision or idea that is new, timely, interesting and impacts large number of people.

News is disseminated through various media like newspaper, television, radio, magazine and the internet. A newspaper is the oldest medium of dissemination of news.

The definition of news given above includes some important ingredients that constitute and enhance news. A news item should give the 5Ws and an H. Who, What, Why, Where, When and How are important ingredients of news.

First and foremost, news has to be NEW. Old incidents don’t make news until and unless they give a new perspective, idea or fact. News also has to be TIMELY. News reaching the reader, viewer or listener late is no news. It loses its relevance to the reader.

Besides containing all information, news should be FACTUAL. If a piece of writing is not factual, it is not news. It is fiction. Rumours are meant for passing among friends and not on the broadsheet.

News also has to be ACCURATE. Discrepancies and mistakes reduce the value of news. Inaccurate presentation of facts will not only mislead the reader but will also put him off and he will not read your news item in future. If the mistakes are repeated day in and day out, the reader/listener/viewer will not believe in whatever is reported by the journalist and newspaper and they will lose their reputation. Such mistakes can also harm the reputation of the persons mentioned in the news item and can land the scribe or the newspaper into legal problems.

Besides defining news, these ingredients also differentiate news from feature or a story. They also help in judging the value of a news item and deciding which of the many news items before you is most important, second most important and so on. There are other parameters like proximity, magnitude; uniqueness (oddity) and human interest that help decide the importance of news.

A news event is more important to your readers if it takes place at a place in your city or comparatively nearer to your city, has an impact on large number of people or is unique and very interesting.

HARD AND SOFT NEWS

Depending on news value and urgency of delivery, news stories are divided into two categories: hard news and soft news.

If a news item is not 'hot' it is not hard news. Hard news generally refers to up-to-the-minute information and events that are time-bound and give the 5 Ws and H straight. Politics, war, economics and crime are considered hard news while arts, entertainment and lifestyles are soft news. But increasingly, the dividing line is blurring. With newer and faster mediums of news dissemination coming up everyday, the difference between hard and soft news is not so distinct and newspapers are forced to give a 'soft' treatment and lot of details to hard news items because radio and television have already put out that news. In such cases, giving the info as straight hard news is useless for the readers as they already are aware of the incident and obviously would be interested to know newer developments or different side angles to it.

One difference between hard and soft news is the tone of presentation. A hard news story is always urgent and takes a factual approach: WHAT happened? WHO was involved? WHERE and WHEN it happened? WHY it happened? HOW did it happen? These questions take precedence over other things related to the news.

In contrast, a soft news story tries to entertain or advise the reader. You may have come across newspaper or TV stories that promise "news you can use". Examples might be tips on what to look for when buying a new computer or what should you do if your car breaks down in the middle of the road. Features, profiles, interviews, columns and trend stories are some of the soft news stories that you see in your daily newspaper.

Though soft news is mostly not time-bound, some genre of features like news features have to be published connected to a hard news item and therefore have a shelf-life after which they are useless as the readers interest wanes because of onslaught of newer happenings (new hard news material from the subsequent days).

Knowing the difference between hard and soft news helps a reporter develop a sense of how to present the news and what sort of stories different news media tend to publish or broadcast. It is also necessary for a reporter to judge what should be given as hard news and what as soft. Such a judgment comes through experience.

Newspapers now present a mixture of hard and soft news as they have to cater to the interests of different readers. A newspaper nowadays also has to entertain besides giving news ... the newspapers are not expected to provide 'infotainment' — inform and entertain the readers daily.

Soft news is one good way to entertain readers.