

## Unit Introduction



As a public affairs officer you will work with the media to communicate the goals, mission and activities of your command to the people inside and outside the organization. Understanding the "**nature of news**" or what makes an issue newsworthy, will give you insight into journalistic decision-making. Knowing what the media considers newsworthy will allow you to promote issues and events of interest to the media and influence your command's expectations regarding news coverage.

Public affairs officers who understand the unique aspects of the news business stand the best chance of garnering desired news coverage.

## Objectives

- Define news.
- Identify the factors that determine news value.
- Determine which factors of news value exist in a given scenario.

## Unit Overview

In this unit, we will:

- Define news by using the 14 characteristics
- Discuss the 14 characteristics that determine news value
- Relate the characteristics to military situations

## What is News?

The leaders of our country have always held freedom of the press in high regard. It is essential to a democracy and is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. This principle is so embedded in our form of government that the media are considered the Fourth Estate, acting as a check and balance on government.

There are as many definitions of news as there are dictionaries, but let's take a look at a few possibilities:

**"News is based on the 3 Ws: women, wampum and wrongdoing."** (i.e., sex, money and crime.)  
(Stanley Walker, New York Herald Tribune City Editor in 1930s)

**"When a dog bites a man, that is not news because it happen so often. But if a man bites a dog, it's news."** (John B. Bogart, New York Sun, late 1800s)

**"Journalism largely consists of saying 'Lord Jones is dead' to the people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive."** (G.K. Chesterton, English social critic)

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "news" as, "**1 a:** a report of recent events **b:** previously unknown information **2 a:** material reported in a newspaper or news periodical or on a newscast **b:** matter that is newsworthy **3 a:** newscast."

## **What is News?**

Being able to define news is becoming more difficult all the time. In recent years there has been an ever increasing blurring of news and entertainment into what is now known as "infotainment." Merriam-Webster OnLine defines infotainment as "A television program that presents information (as news) in a manner intended to be entertaining." The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines infotainment as "The reporting of news and facts in an entertaining and amusing way rather than providing real information."

Some people might say that shows like "Larry King Live," "Inside Edition" and "Dateline" fall in the category of infotainment, while shows like the "Jim Lehrer News Hour" and "Meet the Press" are more closely aligned with the traditional definition of news. While the term "infotainment" appears to be directed to television, the print and radio media share many of the same attributes as outlined in the definitions above.

The definition of news will vary dependent upon with whom you speak. What is important for you to know are some of the criteria used for determining what makes a given situation newsworthy so you will be more effective at placing your stories in the media. For example, the fact that you had five aircraft land safely at your base is probably not news, however, if one of those five aircraft crashed on landing you will definitely have a news story.

So, what does this mean for you as the PAO? It means that you need to understand how the news media packages and presents news and then use that knowledge to your advantage when promoting your organization or responding to media queries.

## What is News?

Reporters with whom you work at the local, regional or national level have a tremendous influence over public opinion. As a PAO, you can harness the power of the press by:

- Recognizing actions, policies and decisions that may draw media attention and being prepared to respond to them
- Being a credible source of information for reporters
- Anticipating and responding appropriately to media inquiries

When you understand the nature of news, you can provide better support to the media. This, in turn, will improve your relationship with the journalists who help shape the public's view of your organization.

You will have the opportunity to apply your knowledge of the nature of news throughout your career as a PAO. As you gain more experience at recognizing news, you will become more proficient at gaining recognition for your organization and its people.

## Michigan State University Survey

To determine what criteria editors use to determine what stories make news, Michigan State University conducted a survey for the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Newspaper Readership Project. Journalists who responded defined news as having the following characteristics:

- **Consequence:** Educates and informs; is important to our life-style or ability to cope; has a moral or social importance; is "should know" information. **Examples:** *The events of September 11th and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.*
- **Interest:** Is unusual, entertaining, has human interest that arouses emotions or causes people to talk about it. **Examples:** *Conjoined twins undergoing surgery to be separated. How about Scott and Laci Peterson, the death of Princess Diana or a water skiing squirrel?*
- **Timeliness:** Is current or a new angle on events or a new trend. Click [here](#) to view breaking news)
- **Proximity:** Pertains to local issues, trends or events. **Examples:** *Are property taxes, crime, public schools and garbage collection issues in your local community?*
- **Prominence:** Concerns famous people or well-known events; stories that have received extensive media coverage. **Examples:** *How about Michael Jackson, Martha Stewart or the Super Bowl costume malfunction?*

Most major news stories will fit into at least one of these categories. We'll examine each of these characteristics in more detail before examining some additional characteristics.

## Hard News vs. Soft News

Most editors and news directors separate news into two categories: hard news and soft news

**Hard News:** Hard news is factual, often serious and always timely. It breaks the daily routine and it is almost always the top or lead story. Typically, hard news happens by itself e.g. fires, accidents and natural disasters. In most cases hard news is something the public needs to know, because it can have an immediate or near-term effect on their lives. By its very nature, hard news must be published or aired immediately because it perishes quickly and becomes "old news," replaced by other hard news stories.

**Soft News:** Feature and human-interest stories are considered soft news. Soft news lacks the immediacy of hard news. Soft news is news the public does not have an immediate need to know, because it does not have an immediate or near term effect on their lives. Soft news is less perishable than hard news and can often be covered in advance and published or broadcast later with less concern for its timeliness. Often this type of news is referred to as "evergreen."

Examples of soft news could include: a feature on a military hospital; a story about how a soldier came to be a competitor at the PanAm Games, etc.

## **If You Can Answer Yes**

There are some simple questions that can help you determine if a story is newsworthy. If you can answer "yes" to at least one of the following questions, you may have a story worthy of media attention. The more of these factors a story contains, the more likely it is to generate media interest.

- Is the story local or can you develop a local angle?
- Is the information unique or unusual? Is this the first, last, biggest, smallest, oldest, newest of its kind?
- Is the material timely?
- Does the information concern people?
- Does the material generate human interest or humor?

## News review exercise #1

Click on the video control "start" button to the left to view a short video.

Please pick whether this is a soft news story or a hard news.

Soft News  Hard News

Check Answer

## News review exercise #2

Click on the video control "start" button to the left to view a short video.

Please pick whether this is a soft news story or a hard news.

Soft News  Hard News

Check Answer

## The Needed Nine

The "On Deadline" text presents a newsworthiness checklist created by James E. Lukaszewski. His checklist included the following nine elements:

**Surprise:** Stories about things turning out differently than we might expect. These outcomes are not necessarily bad, but most of the time they are. **Examples:** How about President Bush showing up in Baghdad for Thanksgiving dinner or the Boston Red Sox winning the world series?



**Affect:** News has emotional appeal – it affects people. **Example:** News of a routine flat tire on an automobile is not very newsworthy. However, the Columbine High School shooting or the tragic death of a young couple about to be engaged who were killed in a water taxi incident certainly is news.

**Effect:** News is about what the result is – things like death, injury, homelessness, personal harm, etc.

## The Needed Nine

**Secrecy:** News is about whatever you want to hide. The media wants whatever the world is not supposed to know. **Example:** Would the Monica Lewinsky or Enron scandals fall in this category?



**Conflict:** News is usually about conflict arising from various sources: from inside, like whistle blowers and disgruntled employees; from outsiders, like our competitors or competing interests; by organized opposition and/or clashes between people and institutions. **Example:** President Bush vs. Saddam; U.S. vs. Iraq; Enron employees vs. Enron managers.



**Reporter's Interest:** Who knows why a reporter is interested in a particular story? **Example:** Could it be that the reporter has a personal interest or an "ax to grind" on an issue that affects him/her?



## The Needed Nine

**Mistakes:** News is made when business, government or individuals err. Most reporters enjoy stories dealing with errors in fact, poor judgment, inattention, etc. **Example:** How about CBS' Dan Rather report on President Bush and his Air National Guard duty or the space shuttle Columbia accident?



**Editor's Perspective:** News is whatever the editor thinks new is. If an editor believes you have a problem . . . you do have a problem.



**Change:** Newsworthy by definition. **Example:** New field uniforms for the services, new weapon systems, latest pay raise, etc.



## Other Considerations

Your ability to get coverage of an event, such as a service member's involvement in a community relations program, will depend on the news competition of the day. What other events are taking place that warrant coverage? There are other factors that determine whether an issue or event gets coverage. The media will also consider the following:

- Is it a slow news day or are other significant events taking place that might overshadow your story
- Does the story offer good quotes and/or interesting pictures, video and sound
- Do you have a good relationship with the news organization
- Do you have a good track record in offering newsworthy stories

Just because a reporter covers an event it doesn't necessarily translate into coverage. Space or time limitations or the quality of the final story itself help determine whether or not a story will run. Finally, news is whatever an editor or news director decides it is.

## Potential News Stories

As a PAO you should constantly be on the lookout for stories that could be of interest to your local media. Not only do such stories keep your organization in the news in a positive light, but it also provides recognition to those people involved in your story. Some places to look for such stories could include:

- Organizational awards, i.e. Outstanding Unit Award, Presidential Unit Citation, etc.
- Unusual jobs or hobbies, i.e. spelunking, mountain boarding
- Service projects, i.e. Toys for Tots, Special Olympics
- Construction news or large contract awards to local businesses i.e. Local Construction Company Awarded \$10 million Contract to Build a New Headquarters
- Firsts, lasts, newest, oldest, etc. For example - First PAOQC-ADL Class Graduated August 12

## Directing Your Story to the Right Medium

When trying to market a story you need to evaluate the unique attributes of newspapers, magazines, television and radio and make a determination of which medium can best tell your story. For example:

**Radio** – Radio is known as the "alerting" medium. It's a good choice for fast breaking news and information you need to get out quickly. It may also be a good medium for soft news on issues you want to promote. Simply call the radio station and offer them a 10- to 20-second beeper that provides the information you want to release.



**Newspapers** – Newspapers are good for either hard or soft news. If you are working a hard news story be prepared to provide pertinent facts and background information available to you. This could include a news release, images, fact sheets, etc. When working a hard news story you need to be aware of the paper's deadlines and do your best to meet them. Newspapers are also a good choice for soft news. Again, be prepared to provide the appropriate information to tell your story, or even better, entice a reporter to interview your subject or cover your event.



**Television** – If you have a story with strong visual appeal you have a good chance of getting coverage. Depending on the size of your market, a television news story may run 20 to 60 seconds. This means you must get your message out in seven to 20 seconds. In many cases the visuals tell the story on their own.



## Test Your Knowledge

1. Your commander has just informed you that your Reserve/Guard unit has been notified to prepare to deploy for Operation Iraqi Freedom. As you prepare your news release, which of the 14 elements of news would you expect to find in your story?
2. In your own words define hard and soft news.
3. You find out about a policy change at your installation that will impact both the internal and external audience. It would clearly be a hard news story. As a proactive PAO, which of the following steps would you NOT take in this situation?
  - A. Prepare a news release
  - B. Respond to query only
  - C. Gather the facts

## Test Your Knowledge Answers

**1. Your commander has just informed you that your Reserve/Guard unit has been notified to prepare to deploy for Operation Iraqi Freedom. As you prepare your news release, which of the 14 elements of news would you expect to find in your story?**

**Proximity** - It impacts members of their community.

**Consequence** - Should know information - this info changes many of the community's dynamics.

**Interest** - The fact that the unit is deploying to fight a war arouses emotions because of the inherent danger of the mission.

**Timeliness** - It's happening now. They are preparing now.

**Affect** - There's an emotional appeal here - harm's way, families about to be torn apart due to the war, pride because members of THEIR community are fighting for the U.S....

**Change** - The orders change their usual status of being home.

**2. In your own words define hard and soft news.**

Hard news is factual, often serious and always timely. It breaks the daily routine and it is almost always the top or lead story. Soft news lacks the immediacy of hard news. Soft news is news the public does not have an immediate need to know, because it does not have an immediate or near term effect on their lives. Feature and human-interest stories are considered soft news.

How close did you come?

**3. You find out about a policy change at your installation that will impact both the internal and external audience. It would clearly be a hard news story. As a proactive PAO, which of the following steps would you NOT take in this situation?**

- A. Prepare a news release
- B. Respond to query only - This is the correct answer.
- C. Gather the facts

As a PAO, you would gather the facts, prepare the release and make sure that you got the news out to the local media outlets. PAOs must be proactive. Waiting for your local reporter to hear about it and then call you is clearly not proactive.

## **Unit Summary**

Hopefully this discussion of the Nature of News will give you a new perspective as you watch, read or listen to the news. In addition, it should help you better understand the news judgments made each day by editors and news directors.

Now, we encourage you to incorporate those attributes into your thought process when trying to market your stories or when trying to understand why the media is pursuing a particular story. In either situation, the knowledge you gained from this unit will help you be more effective at telling your unit's story.