Elements of News

What makes news, news? Why is it important for you, as a public affairs officer, to know what news is?

The ability to recognize whether something has news value, or what is newsworthy, makes a giant difference in the successful accomplishment of your job because you are often the sole person on the staff whose job it is to monitor news and its impact on your command.

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 consider 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.
Characteristics

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.

What is news? 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 W’s: 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 happens 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.”

The bottom line is the definition of news will vary depending upon with whom you speak. It is important for you to know what criteria are used for determining a given situation as newsworthy so you can effectively place 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 package and present news and then use that knowledge to your advantage when promoting your organization or responding to media queries.

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 elements 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 elements 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.

The Big Five

For our purposes we are going to define news as having the following characteristics. We’ll call these the BIG FIVE. They are consequence, interest, timeliness, proximity and prominence.

1. **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 bombings at the Boston Marathon, shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary, Sequestration, and the war in Afghanistan.

2. **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 the Amanda Knox court case, the death of Margaret Thatcher or a water skiing squirrel?

3. **Timeliness**: Is current; is a new angle on events or a new trend. *Example:* What about a story regarding a change in tax law about the time we’re all trying to get our taxes done?

4. **Proximity**: Pertains to local issues, trends or events. *Examples:* Are property taxes, crime, public schools and garbage collection issues in your local community?
Characteristics (continued)

What about a family from your community who lost a loved one in the Japan Tsunami?

5. **Prominence**: Concerns famous people or well-known events; stories that have received extensive media coverage. **Examples**: How about Beyonce, Bill Gates or the Penn State sex-abuse scandal?

The five definitions above refer to the characteristics of news. Let’s look at understanding news, which can help you determine news value.
Understanding News

In recent years there has been an increased blurring of news and entertainment into what is now known as "infotainment," a hybrid of news and entertainment, designed to hold viewers longer. 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 on TV, the Internet, etc., of news and facts in an entertaining and amusing way rather than providing real information.”

What you need to know is what makes a given situation newsworthy so you will be more effective at placing your stories in the media. Most editors and news directors separate news into two different categories: hard news and soft news. What is the difference between the two?

Hard News vs. 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. Typically, hard news happens by itself, for example, fires, accidents and natural disasters. 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. It is news the public needs to know.

Feature and human-interest stories are considered soft news. Soft news lacks the immediacy of hard news. Soft news 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 Olympic Games, etc. Soft news placement requires more effort than what is required for hard news because it involves trying to interest media outlets in timeless material that can inform, educate, or entertain readers or viewers (Howard & Mathews, p. 28).

Newsworthiness

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?

The Needed Nine

The “On Deadline” text presents a newsworthiness checklist created by James E. Lukaszewski, a management consultant in communications. His checklist included the following nine elements:

1. Surprise – things that turned out differently than what was planned or we might expect. These outcomes are not necessarily bad, but most of the time they are. Examples: How about a U.S. president showing up in Kabul for Thanksgiving dinner or a “Cinderella” team winning the NCAA Basketball Tournament?

2. Affect – News has an emotional appeal– it affects people. Example: News of a routine flat tire on an automobile is not very newsworthy. However, a family made homeless because of the economic downturn or the Newtown shootings have great emotional appeal.

3. Effect – News is what the result is – things like death, injury, etc.

4. Secrecy – News is about information someone wants to hide. The media wants whatever the world is not supposed to know.

5. Conflict – News is usually about conflict arising from one or more of four sources: from insiders, like whistle blowers and disgruntled employees; from outsiders, like competitors or competing interests; by organized opposition; and/or by unprepared spokespersons. Think U.S. military versus insurgents in Afghanistan. How about opposition to a BRAC decision that is going to close your installation? Or something as simple as sports.

6. Reporter’s interest – Who knows why a reporter is interested in a particular story? Could it be that the...
Understanding News (continued)

reporter has a personal interest or an “ax to grind” on an issue that affects him/her?  
**Example:** reporter’s nephew works in the plant that just burned down, or perhaps the reporter covered a unit at war and built a special, close relationship with that unit, and thus has a personal interest in it.

7. **Mistakes** – News is made when business, government or individuals err. Most reporters enjoy stories dealing with errors in fact, poor judgment, inattention, etc.  
**Example:** the near failure of big institutions like the insurer AIG, because of financial mismanagement, or a tank that inadvertently fires a round and hits a local church.

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

9. **Editor’s perspective** – News is whatever the editor thinks is news. If an editor believes you have a problem ... you do have a problem.
Relating News Characteristics to Military Situations

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? Other factors can 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 - If something happens on your base, always consider its potential news impact. Others in your command may overplay or underplay an event’s importance. Your job in supporting a unit commander is to present your best professional, objective assessment of events in the context of a command’s mission. It’s up to you to advise the commander and command personnel and to be prepared with appropriate responses to potentially newsworthy events.

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 and displayed in a positive light, but it also provides recognition to those people involved in your story. Some places to look for such stories include:

- Organizational awards – If your command received an award for the best retention, is it possible that the community beyond the base gates contributed to their job satisfaction? You can write the story that way. There are few towns that wouldn’t like to take credit for something good.
- Unusual jobs/hobbies – Is there a medic/corpsman by day and a blacksmith by night among your command members? How about a civil war enthusiast, complete with uniforms and scheduled reenactments?

Other potential news stories might be about:

- A service project
- Visiting dignitaries
- First or last of anything
- Human interest

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.

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. Write a variety of items (spots, community updates…) in different lengths to submit. Call the radio station and see about a short, “drive time” interview to promote events such as air shows, open houses, etc.

Newspapers – Newspapers are good for either hard or soft news. Many papers have military sections or a military “beat.” Talk to the person who is assigned to the military beat. A beat is an area that a reporter covers on a regular basis. Some of the standard beats are police, government and education. E-mail or fax the story, but always follow up with a phone call. 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.
Relating News Characteristics to Military Situations (continued)

Magazines – Preparing content for a magazine requires some research on how your article should be written to fit their format. Your extra effort may make the difference in whether or not the article is selected to run.

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. Also, submit information for local cable access character generator pages and ask to be on the local (cable, public access) talk show to get out information on your event.

Newsletters – Newsletters usually have a small staff. Talk to them. Follow up after the story is sent.

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Conclusion

As a public affairs officer, one of your missions is to work with the media to communicate the goals, mission and activities of your command to the people inside and outside the organization. Hopefully this discussion of the elements 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.
References and Additional Resources
