

## **WHAT IS NEWS**

By Jeanne Abbott

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Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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The 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City.

Slide 4:  
The Boston Marathon bombings.

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The election of U.S. President Barack Obama.

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All of those stories were immediately covered by journalists around the world, and big headlines announced the news online, in print and on broadcast networks everywhere. What made those stories universally important? Editors and producers in cities everywhere recognized these stories as important because they have certain characteristics that are called news values. Journalists apply these news values every day to make judgments about what to report and present to their readers and viewers.

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There are eight common news values: Impact,

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weight,

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timeliness,

Slide 10:  
proximity,

Slide 11:  
prominence,

Slide 12:  
conflict,

Slide 13:  
novelty

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and usefulness. We'll describe each one in turn.

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The first is impact: How many people are affected by what happened and how much they are affected determines impact.

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When an event affects, or threatens to affect, a large number of people, journalists will decide to cover it.

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A widespread disaster, the passage of laws and the results of an election will affect the lives of many people. These news stories are almost universally covered.

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The second is weight: The relative number of people affected by an event or issue, as well as how seriously they are affected, carries weight.

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More weight is given to coverage of an accident where people are killed rather than injured. More weight is given to coverage of a disaster when hundreds are in jeopardy rather than just a few. More weight is given to a major sports event like the Super Bowl when millions are paying attention rather than a preliminary game with relatively less interest.

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The third is timeliness: Journalists know that the public is most eager to learn immediately about information they do not already know.

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This is why covering events accurately but quickly is one of their goals.

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News that happened today is more worthy than news that happened a week ago, especially when sources of news are so abundant on the internet.

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The next news value is proximity: The closer an event or issue is to home, the more newsworthy it becomes. Readers and viewers pay more attention when something happens in their community, because they have more personal connections.

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Journalists will often follow up a national story, such as a health epidemic or a national bank crisis, by looking for examples closer to home.

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The next value is prominence: There is a natural curiosity about people who are well-known. Government and business leaders, sports and entertainment personalities and media celebrities become the subjects of news much more often than ordinary people.

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When prominent individuals appear at a routine event, their presence may even turn a small story into a bigger story.

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Another news value is conflict: Wars, elections and sports events are newsworthy because they involve two or more parties or teams opposing one another. This clash, whether in a game, a battle or a debate, creates dramatic tension, and the public wants to see how it resolves.

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Even a conflict within one person, say someone struggling to succeed despite a serious hardship, can be newsworthy.

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Conflict that brings up different points of view about an issue can also serve the public good.

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The next is novelty: People are intrigued by original, unusual or unexpected subjects. Something quirky or peculiar, such as the discovery of an odd animal or relic, fits this category.

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It also includes occurrences that may be humorous or slightly ridiculous, such as the man who set his car on fire so it wouldn't be towed. Editors tend to be quite careful about verifying this kind of story, however.

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The final news value is usefulness: Information the public needs to navigate the world safely, efficiently, economically, tolerantly and humanely has become a widely accepted news value. Some journalists call this stewardship. Investigative reporting, or uncovering abuse and corruption, would fall into this category. It also includes reports about the weather, health care, consumer prices, calendars and meeting agendas, as well as good deeds.

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That means a story about a disaster that just happened (timeliness) close to home (proximity) where hundreds are affected (impact), many lives are lost (weight) and there are various opinions about the government's response (conflict) is likely to be given the most time and space early or high in a news report.

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Similarly, this story would get top play on a sports page or in a sportscast: A football game (conflict) today (timeliness) among two state universities (proximity) where the quarterbacks are getting attention from professional franchises (prominence) and the result will earn one team a berth in a national championship (impact).

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News values differ from news principles. News principles can be found in the codes of journalism that govern ethical behavior, rather than on the list of values that guide news decisions.

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News principles include accuracy, fairness, independence, verification, sensitivity, inclusiveness, relevance and serving the public good.

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These principles are extremely important to the profession of journalism, and must be learned and applied, but they are separate from the criteria we have just covered to explain how editors and producers compile their daily reports.