News Writing

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1 What Makes News?

Some potential news stories are easy to spot, even for a new trainee journalist: a freak storm, an accident, or something happening to a celeb, anyone can see that such stories will hit the headlines. But seeing the news in a more mundane event, and knowing how to write it so that it will grab the reader, takes some experience. The ability to spot a news story or news angle is second nature to experienced journalists. It is hard for them to imagine NOT being able to see what makes a good news story, and sometimes hard for them to imagine that a trainee can't see it. Maybe all students and trainees have to face having their ideas rejected a few times, and also being teased for not spotting a good story, to help them work out what exactly makes news.

One of the most-quoted definitions of news is that of William Randolph Hearst, the press baron who was the model for Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*:

> News is something somebody wants suppressed – all the rest is advertising.

This sounds impressive but actually it is nonsense: no one wanted to suppress stories about the sinking of the *Titanic*, the ascent of Everest, or the 2004 tsunami.

Charles Dana, a nineteenth-century editor of New York's *The Sun,* said:

> News is anything which interests a large part of the community and which has never been brought to their attention.

This is a much better definition, and stresses the two most obvious points: it needs to be something that would interest your readers, and if they already know it, then it is not news. The first of these two criteria pinpoints one of the reasons why it can be hard for beginners to work out what is news: they need to put themselves in their readers' shoes. They need to understand their readers and decide exactly what they are interested in. Whether you are writing for a specialist website or magazine aimed at the hotel trade, a small local paper, or a national news agency, you must picture your average readers and work out what news they will want to read.

It is probably easiest to identify what kind of news is needed in websites and magazines aimed at a particular industry. These used to be known as trade magazines and are now usually called B2B (business to business). Developments in the industry – such as takeovers or mergers of big firms, news involving well-known people in the industry, political developments which might affect the industry are the kinds of stories that will interest readers. Readers want and need to know these things mainly because these events might affect them, their firms, or their jobs. This is one of the classic ways of defining news: how it will affect the reader. Also, partly, readers want to know about the key players (the 'celebs') in that industry – colleagues, former colleagues, or rivals. This is another major definition about news: it has to be about people.

The news for local websites and papers might be a bit harder to analyse. It comes down to events which happen in the area, and events which affect people within it. Local news outlets tend to work to very strict geographical borders: quite a large news event just outside the circulation area will not be covered at all, unless people from that area are affected. Then, the second thing to think about is the **threshold** of the event. It is easy to see that a big dramatic event (families evacuated because of a burst water main) will make a news story, and a very much smaller but quirkier event (pet snake escapes) will also make it into the paper. The in-between stories can be seen as being on a sliding scale: if a lot of potential readers are affected (school closing) it will get in, if few people are (café closing) it might not. Then again, if it was a well-known poetry café, or its owner was a well-known character, it would get in.

Local news outlets tend to have unwritten rules which it will take an inexperienced reporter a while to learn: it may be that car crashes are reported only if someone is killed, for example, or house fires only if the damage is bad enough that the family has to be evacuated. The hyperlocal websites which have sprung up in the last few years have slightly different rules again. Many will run stories that are not very newsworthy at all, so long as they are about people. Some have a policy of trying to include everything that happens locally, however small. It is too early to see how successful these ventures might be: some are doing well, and there is no doubt that 50 or 60 years ago local papers covered local news in great detail, especially with a view to getting 'names in the paper'.

The tradition on local papers then was that people would buy the paper to see their name, even if it was only as runner-up at a whist drive. This might well apply to hyperlocal websites, but a single visit to see one name is not going to contribute much to their possible success.

The news in national newspapers is the hardest to pin down, and there have been several attempts over the years to do so.

The most commonly cited list of news values was drawn up by two Swedish sociologists, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, in 1965 (*Journal of Peace Research*, 2: 64–91). Some of the entries look blindingly obvious, but the list does still cover most stories that get into newspapers and magazines. And if a story does not fit at least some of the criteria on the list, it probably is not news.

I have rearranged their list into three groups: criteria which are **about the event** (the when and where for example); criteria which are **about the nature** of the event, that is, what events themselves make news; and criteria which might be said to be **about the treatment** of the events.

These first two then are simply the facts *about* an event.

Frequency: this is the term usually used, but perhaps 'timescale' would be better. It means that for it to be newsworthy the event must have happened very recently, since the last edition of the publication went to press. So for a monthly magazine it would be within the past month. For a daily, it would generally be the day before. Evening papers are especially keen to have every story, especially in later editions, about something that happened that very day.

One exception is when information becomes available about something that happened a while ago. The best example of this is when Cabinet and other papers are released to the public decades after the events. So we get stories about decisions Churchill made during the 1940s suddenly popping up on the news pages. A strange thing like this is happening as I am revising this chapter: a former student of mine, Chris Ayres, has begun tweeting extracts from his grandfather's diary, written when he was a 21-year-old prisoner of war in Poland in 1940. It is such a peculiar mix of old and new, and it has become very successful.

Threshold: this means the **scale** of the event. The bigger the earthquake, the more Cabinet members sacked, the bigger the tax change, the bigger the story. This point is often referred to (for example, by Sarah Niblock in *Print Journalism: A Critical Introduction:* see Further Reading) as impact. The scale of the event in relation to the publication's readership is also relevant: a late-night pub brawl in which someone was killed would be big news for a local paper, and would possibly get on to local evening television, but would not make the national papers unless there were a strange quirk about it, or a well-known person was involved or was a witness: 'A *Coronation Street* star watched in horror as ...'.

These next eight categories cover what it is **about the nature of an event** that makes it newsworthy.

Unexpectedness: the more unlikely an event is, the more it will be news. This again is pretty obvious, although on its own it doesn't tell us much. I hate bicycles, so it would be very unexpected if I got onto one, but if I did so it wouldn't be news. To be news, an unexpected event has to fit some of the other criteria as well. It is highly unlikely that I would attempt a parachute jump, but if I did, that would probably make the local paper: the event itself is unexpected, but also **rare**.

Elite persons: we would now call them celebrities. This is the one point which is driving the news agenda now much more than it did 40 years ago. *The Times* then would not have covered a new single by David Bowie, but in January 2013 this story made the front page, with a big picture. The only broadsheet or former broadsheet that does not cover this sort of thing is the *Financial Times.* The tabloids are full of stories about the ordinary everyday doings of TV personalities. There are far more of these stories published than there were 40 years ago.

Elite nations: more news stories will be written about political developments in elite nations, particularly the United States, because such developments in these nations affect us all more than similar events in, say, Spain. (This was clear during the recent Iraq war.) But it is also true to say that more human interest stories emanate from elite nations. The debate about gun laws in the US, or the facts about obesity among American children, are both covered more than similar stories would be, say, from Italy. There may be many reasons for this. We already hear about Washington politics because they are important (see above) so we are ready to hear more about American lifestyles. Most Europeans probably know a few American citizens personally, and we feel we know even more of them because we know about film and music stars. Many of us have visited the US on holiday, and there are simply more foreign correspondents reporting what is going on there.

Negativity: bad news makes more interesting stories than good news. In my view this is true only because bad news fits more of the rest of the criteria above, such as unexpectedness. If we all have jobs, earn a reasonable amount of money, have parties from time to time, and go on holiday, then none of that is newsworthy. But if our house burns down it is news. If really good things happen to people unexpectedly (rediscovering a long lost child, finding a Rembrandt in the attic) then that does make big news. So I think bad news seems to get more coverage because it is generally unexpected, and affects people's lives: so it fits the other criteria and is not there just because it is bad.

Continuity: once an event or issue has become a news story it is likely to be covered some more. Some aspects of this are pretty obvious: if there has been a big political event, such as a government defeat in the House of Commons, then there will be more developments in the days that follow, and so these will be reported. There is another point about this though, which is that if one slightly odd event happens and appears in the press, then another similar event will get more coverage. Let's say a small child is attacked by a Jack Russell terrier. If a few days later another Jack Russell attacks a child, the second story will be given more prominence. If this happens a third time there will be big coverage, interviews with animal behaviourists, calls for action in parliament, and so on.

Unambiguity: this means that to get on to the news list the story needs to be easily understood. The theory is that sudden dramatic events are more likely to be covered than a lengthy argument about policy changes. I am not so sure I agree with this. Reporters on nationals, and on B2B (trade) outlets, are experts in their particular specialisms and watch carefully what is going on in that field. Even in a complicated long-running story, they home in on a new announcement, or a leak of a change of plan, and use that as the starting point for a story.

Meaningfulness: this is generally interpreted as meaning that people like to read about people like themselves. I guess this is true, if only because people like ourselves are doing the same things that we are doing. You probably wouldn't get a story in the UK about viewing figures for *Big Brother* in Ghana.

Consonance: this means that a story needs to fit with what the readers expect. I am not too sure about this one either. It seems to me to be almost the opposite of the **unexpectedness** category above. If Kim Kardashian wears a very expensive designer dress, that might get into the news because it is what we expect. But if she wears a very cheap chain store dress, that would make the news as well. It is certainly the case

that readers want – or papers believe that readers want – to be told things which suit their existing prejudices. A paper might run a number of stories which are critical of the European Union because that is what the editors believe their readers want.

The last two criteria seem to me to be about the treatment of the news, rather than the nature of the news itself.

Composition: stories get into the news for all the reasons in this list, but they also get in to give a balance. If a newspaper covers one grisly murder trial in detail, it might cover another one in rather less detail. (*Private Eye* often makes jokes in brackets on the lines of: ['That's enough grisly murders – ed'.]) Most papers like a good, solid, human-interest story on page 3. They might run a dramatic trial story there, but quite often it will be about the new Dr Who, or how much J.K. Rowling earns. This is especially so at the weekend, when there is a feeling that most readers – who are having a relaxing start to their day – want something jolly to read early on in the paper. A grisly murder trial gets pushed further down the news list at the weekend.

Part of this same point is the fact that a story might be published because there is a very good photo (or for a website, a video clip) to go with it. Without this image the story might be spiked. The same is particularly true of television reporting. Stories are used because there is a dramatic bit of film to go with them, and without that the story will be spiked. A good example recently was a story about a young man who was beaten up and had his jaw broken, apparently because he had red hair. The story was used in many news outlets, perhaps mainly because there was CCTV footage of the attack.

Personalisation: this means seeing stories in terms of people. This again seems to me to be a point about how news is covered. Politics is often seen as a clash between individual party leaders rather than between the parties. It was very noticeable during recent fighting in Syria and Afghanistan that much of the coverage focused on stories about individuals. This is often the way news is reported now, and it is very different from the way it was covered 50 years ago. The fact remains, though, that it is the political clash or the conflict itself which is the essence of the news: the personalisation is simply a way of illustrating that story.

Sarah Niblock cites two other criteria which are important but are not included in Galtung and Ruge:

Exclusivity: a newspaper or magazine will give great prominence to a story which it believes that none of its rivals have got. Of course the story will fit several of the other criteria, but its exclusivity will be a major factor in the kind of display it gets, and whether other stories are left out of the paper.

Newspapers go to enormous lengths to make sure that an exclusive story is just that. When *The Times* had to itself the story about Edwina Currie's revelations in her memoir of her affair with John Major, many of the most senior journalists in the office that day were not told about it. Secretly, away from the main news floor, a double-page spread was prepared with extracts from the Currie book and all the details. First editions of newspapers are delivered to all the other newspaper offices in London towards the end of the evening, and other papers would have had time to get something in if they had seen the story in the first edition. So the story was left out of the first edition, and the spread filled with a huge double-page advert, simply slotted in to fill the paper. And what was the ad for? Currys.

Conflict: this is intrinsic in some of the other criteria. It is easy to see in such areas as international relations and politics, but as I shall show, a great deal of news is related to the disagreements and conflicts within a situation, in a row about a football transfer, or a council planning decision.

This brings me to my own theories of news values.

For the first edition of this book I analysed every news story in the British national papers for two days. I repeated this exercise in January 2013 for this second edition.

As before, I excluded all the stories in the business sections, not because they are not newsworthy, but because they form a specialised group of stories and in a way are more like the stories in a B2B publication. For the same reason, I excluded the *Financial Times* entirely, because although it is a national paper, it has elements of a specialised local paper, with very different news values. I also excluded all the sports stories. Again, the sports sections are the equivalent of a local paper or B2B magazine: many stories fit some of the criteria for news selection, but they are mainly there because a specialised audience wants lots of details about past or future sporting events.

I took each story and tried to decide the main reason for its inclusion in the paper. Of course most stories are published for several different reasons, but I tried to work out which appeared to be the main one, to try to identify the categories the stories fitted into.

I ended up with six broad categories:

- Conflict
- Celebrities
- Human interest: relevance to me
- Human interest: ordinary people
- Quirks
- Science/research and discovery

I will take each category in turn.

Conflict

Within this heading I grouped four subheadings, which are all related to conflict and/or drama:

- Actual conflict
- Politics
- Crime
- Natural disasters and accidents

Stories about **politics** formed by far the biggest category. This was different from my analysis in 2005, because then it was just after the London bombings and stories about these and their aftermath were covered in great detail in all the papers. This meant that **actual conflict** formed the biggest group. In January 2013, things were relatively quiet in terms of military fighting or insurgencies.

But there was plenty about **politics**, mostly British, because my analysis coincided with a mid-term statement from the Coalition leaders. As well as this, there were plenty of related stories about various groups, politicians, pressure groups and so on, giving advice to the government about where benefit cuts should fall and how long-term care should be funded – a hot topic at the time. In a democracy, politics is about conflict in its broadest sense: it is a discussion/debate/argument about the best way to organise society, how much tax should be raised, what it should be spent on, what is the best way to improve hospitals or schools. The stories in politics come from those arguments, the **tensions** between two or more possibilities. In a dictatorship there would be far fewer political stories, simply because there would not be that kind of argument between the two or more sides.

Stories about **crime** formed a very big subgroup. Crime stories – whether about original crimes, or the court cases that might follow – are also all about conflict and drama. Violence is obviously conflict, but so is burglary or robbery: the latter is a conflict between the mugger and the mugged for possession of the purse or jewellery. Reports of court cases have several levels of conflict: the conflict in the original crime, and the conflict in the court proceedings itself; the arguments about whether or not the accused actually committed the crime, and about the likely punishment. Minor crime stories are often used because they are quirky:

Driver says he was drunk on mouthwash

Chefs fight over chicken

Raiders tunnelling into jewellery shop end up in KFC

I fitted **natural disasters** into the conflict category as well: these are conflicts between different elements on Earth: between rivers and their banks, or between the Earth and its crust. The most dramatic stories happen of course when large numbers of people become caught up in such conflict. I decided that **accidents** fitted into this category: in its broadest sense an accident is a conflict between two vehicles, or a vehicle and a tree, or a person and a river.

Celebrities

Galtung and Ruge called this category **elite people**, but celebs – or maybe in textspeak, slebs – is certainly what we call them today. It is fascinating to collate every celeb story in all the newspapers to see the huge variety of stories, and, indeed, the inconsequential nature of so many of them. With the conflict and political stories, and to a certain extent the other groupings, many of the papers had the same three or four stories, with perhaps a couple of extra ones which were carried in a couple of the papers. But the list of celeb stories in the tabloids is enormous, and enormously varied. Many of the stories fitted into other categories as well, but I put them in the celeb category if it seemed that the story was there **mainly** because it was about the famous person. For example, I put into the celeb category stories which had elements of conflict, such as court cases, if it seemed that the story would not have got into the paper without the famous name. The tabloids all ran the same main stories, but then they had in many cases completely different

sets of secondary celeb stories, with whole pages devoted to minor stories, in many cases about pretty minor people. This is probably partly because the papers had these stories as exclusives, and indeed the other papers sometimes followed up the same stories later in the week. Analysing the main point of the stories does bring home how tiny some of these are:

Samia Ghadie – I'm single

Alan Bennett denies cowering under Dudley Moore's bed in 1962

And really scraping the barrel:

Manure heap fire at Kate's home village

For these and plenty of others, it is clear that it is **only** the name that makes the news, there is no other newspoint at all in many of them.

The other interesting thing about celeb stories is how many are covered in the broadsheets or former broadsheets. Almost all the papers covered Gerard Depardieu's taking Russian citizenship, after the actor left France in protest against higher taxes. This was of course a political story as well, but it was undoubtedly covered because of his fame. Most papers also covered, as a news story, David Bowie's new recording after a ten-year silence.

The Daily Telegraph in particular uses minor celeb stories when there is a good picture (Julianne Moore goes swimming, Roman Abramovich buys a pony for his daughter), but all the papers do this to a certain extent – a picture of Ronnie Wood and his new wife accompanied stories about Men's Fashion Week.

Human interest: relevance to me

This group covers all the stories that I felt people would read because they had some relevance to their own lives. So news items about taxation, house prices, forecasts of a heatwave, and all the many different health stories fit this category. People are interested in these because they have relevance to their own health, or the price of their house, or the way these things affect family members or friends. The various survey stories were put here, since interest in these stories lies in how people would relate them to their own experience. Most news outlets carried weather stories: there had been flooding, and it had been very mild, but forecasters were predicting a big freeze. A good quirky story was often linked to the weather stories: a lottery winner drove his £100,000 Bentley into a flooded road, it was a write-off, and he went out the next day and bought a new car. Several papers carried a story about beta blockers possibly helping to stave off Alzheimer's disease, and there was a wide range of other stories – some about health, working conditions and family issues:

Quarter of pensioners still working at 65

Girls' better behaviour gets them higher grades

Children's medical reports sought in divorces

Again it is very noticeable that while several papers covered two or three of the main stories, different papers carried several stories which few of the others included.

These 'relevance to me' stories are perhaps the best type to highlight the different target audiences for different news outlets. The *Daily Express* and *The Daily Telegraph* went for a story about the rising cost of station car parking, presumably because both have strong readerships in the home counties and other areas outside big cities. The *Daily Mail*, which covers health issues very thoroughly, had a story about BUPA restricting patients' choice of consultant to keep costs down, while the *Daily Mirror* was the only outlet to choose (based on a survey):

> 20 per cent of us like to go commando on nights out

I also fitted some of the stories about the BBC into this category, including one about children's programming moving to the digital-only CBeebies. The BBC interests us because we are probably all consumers, and because we all pay the licence fee. At this point, unfortunately for the BBC, most of the stories involving it were about crime or possible crime, in the wake of the Jimmy Savile revelations.

Human interest: ordinary people

This group included a huge variety of stories, including Britain's oldest man dying at 110, a jobseeker spending his last savings on a billboard advertising himself, and a young couple who will be the only residents of the island of Skokholm, off the Pembrokeshire coast, where they will work as wildlife wardens.

I used this category for stories that were simply about interesting things happening to people. Again, plenty of these 'ordinary life' stories involved conflict or drama, especially the more tragic ones. With the more jokey ones, there was often some overlap with the next category.

Agencies used to use the term **quirk** for a strange little story which has no significance, is not relevant to any reader's life or experience, and is simply peculiar. It seems to me a perfect word to describe all the off-beat little stories that make it into the papers. The animal stories that papers are fond of including in their nibs (news in brief) columns often fit into this category.

The best quirk during my latest research was a story carried almost everywhere about firefighters with three fire engines going out to rescue a squirrel which could not escape from an island in the middle of a pond in Watford. Other good ones included:

> Roald Dahl's Giant Peach would not fly, say scientists
>
> 17th century sex manual for sale
>
> Addicts caned to help fight addiction

Many outlets, just as the Zoo's publicity people must have hoped, used the annual London Zoo animal count for a lively story with pictures. A good spot by someone gave rise

to a story which was used in several outlets: figures showed that Surrey was the place where the erotic *50 Shades of Grey* was the biggest hit with library borrowers.

The last, rather small category, perhaps overlaps with the quirks a little, since some of the **research, discovery and invention** stories are very offbeat. Several papers ran a story that astronauts going to Mars would have trouble sleeping, and there were several takers for a piece of research which showed that birds can sing two notes at once. The *Daily Mail* carried a story about a new 'coffee table' computer that all the family could play on at the same time, while *The Sun* ran an item about a new fork which warns against eating too fast. This story was picked up all over the place during the following couple of weeks. Archaeological and historical discoveries fit into this category as well, such as:

> Dinosaurs shook their tails at each other, scientists believe

So how do you spot and develop a news story?

When I talk about this to students, we make a big Venn diagram on the board and slot the day's stories into it. There are two side groups, discovery and quirks, which are more or less separate from all the rest. But the vast majority of the stories that appear on the news pages fit into the broad categories of **conflict/drama** and/or **people**. Most stories of course have elements of both (see Figure 1).

So these are the elements you need to look for when you are working out whether you have got a good story, and what exactly that story is:

- Where is the conflict/tension/argument or drama?
- Where are the people?

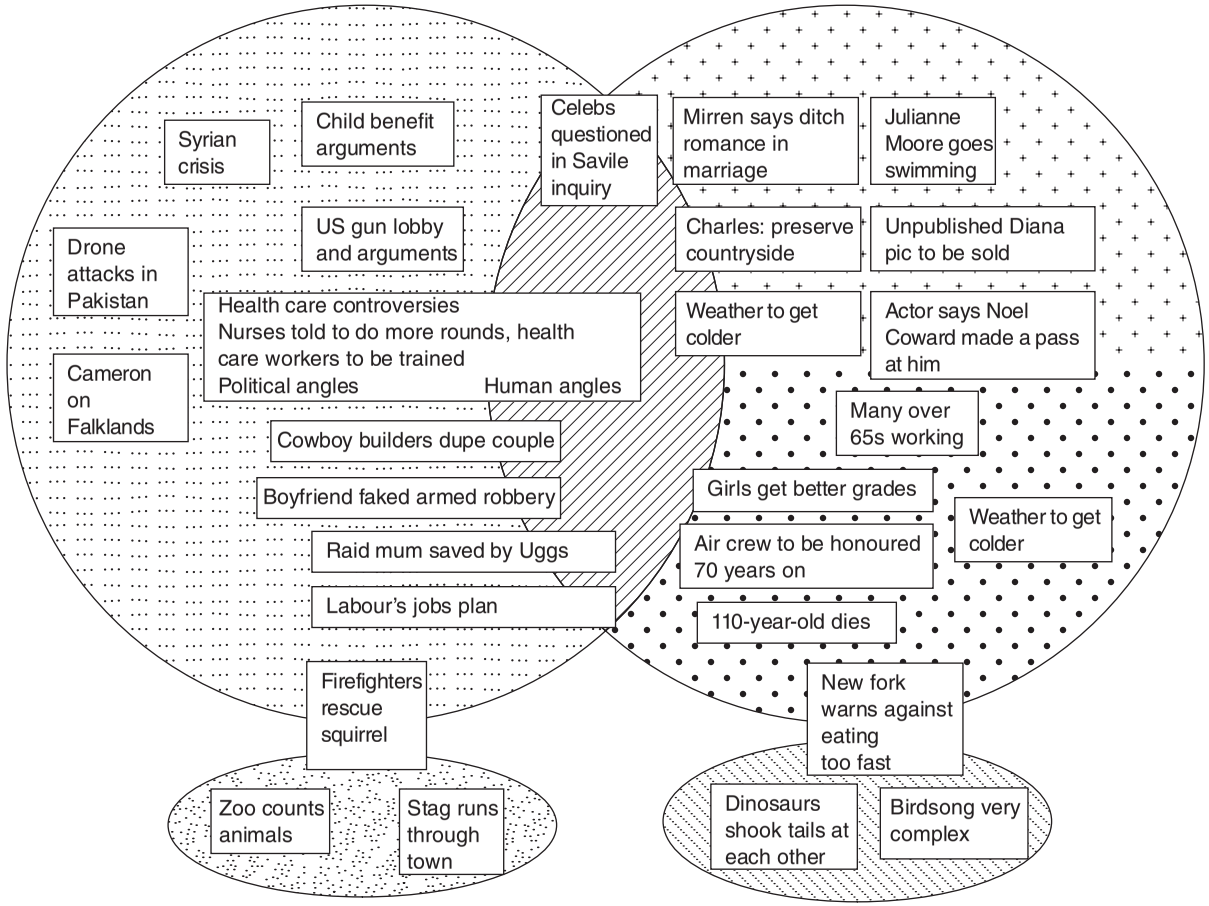
'The people' could be either the people involved, or the people affected, or both.

The best stories will have both conflict and people in them, and that is what a reporter needs to bring out. The very best story of course will include conflict and drama, be about a famous person, relevant to the reader, and have a good picture to go with it. So if Jude Law confronts the government about cutting taxes, while being photographed with a new starlet, we've undoubtedly got a story.

Years ago some friends on a local paper spent some time constructing the perfect headline (the story, unfortunately, has yet to happen):

> Duke's son weeps in helicopter rape court drama

Finally, it is worth noting that the groups of stories we decided early on not to consider (business and sports) do fit into this broad category of conflict. All sports are about conflict and drama – 22 people arguing about which direction a ball should go in, or eight people disputing which of them can get round a track before the others. And business stories in the popular papers are very much about celebs, in the sense that these papers cover Manchester United, Marks & Spencer, and other famous organisations. The business stories in the broadsheets and compacts are often about conflict and drama such as hostile takeovers. Those stories which have less conflict in them often fit into the **relevance to me**, because readers need to know about the doings of firms or markets in which they are investing.



Key to diagram

The big balloon on the left represents all the stories with an element of conflict as the main newspoint. The one on the right represents all the stories which are primarily about people, with celebrities towards the top of the balloon, stories which are relevant to the readers' own lives in the middle, and ordinary people/human interest at the bottom. Then where the two overlap are the stories which are about celebs involved in conflict, and further down, conflict and drama which affect us (often politics) and further down still, conflict and drama involving ordinary people. The small balloon at lower left includes quirks, and the one on the right is science, research and discovery.

FIGURE 1