

Writing For Media

Week 4

Developing a News Story

Deciding Which Stories to Develop

- Some local news event—a train derailment, a major fire, a court trial, a hunt for a serial killer—may be worth developing into several stories.
- Others—the naming of a bank president, a minor fire, the closing of a business—are worth only one.

Story's Impact

- A story is developed from day to day when reporters and their editors feel that it is newsworthy; that is, the event itself, its aftermath or the news it generates has a continuing impact on an audience.

- Of course, the fact that reporters stop covering a story does not mean that the story stops developing.
- It simply means that there is room each day for only so many stories, and judgments about their newsworthiness or human interest determine which ones are continued and which ones are dropped.

Other Factors Influencing Coverage

- Prejudices of Reporters and Editors
- Size of the Market
- Pressure for Exclusivity
- What the Competition is Doing
- What Other Stories Are Developing

Covering Developing Stories

Phases of a Developing Story

Whenever a major news event occurs, all the daily media strive to keep their audiences as up-to-date as possible. A story can be developed for hours or for months, and is usually covered in four stages:

- *Phase 1*: The story first breaks. Journalists rush to the scene to report the news as it is happening, or they work the phones to put together an initial breaking story. Their primary function is to tell audiences *what* happened, *when*, *where* and to *whom*. Reporters will usually write **mainbars**, primary stories that report the **breaking news**, and **sidebars**, supplementary stories that explain the news or report the human element.

Mainbar: main story in a group of articles about the same topic in a single edition of a newspaper.

Breaking news: news that is available for publication and that reporters try to cover as quickly as possible.

Sidebar: story that runs with a mainbar. A sidebar isolates a person, place or thing usually mentioned in a mainbar and further explains it.

Second-day story: Follow-up story written after the breaking news has been reported.

- *Phase 2:* Journalists try to explain the *why* and *how* of the story, but they also continue to report late-breaking developments, such as clean-up operations or a final casualty count. This means that the story is likely to remain front-page news. **Second-day stories**, which report the latest news as well as summarise the earlier news, and sidebars are written to put the news into perspective for an audience.
- *Phase 3:* The story is no longer front-page news, unless something unusual happens to warrant front-page treatment, but reporters are still covering it full time. They look for something fresh, but also continue to humanise the story. Follow-ups and features may be written for days afterwards.

- *Phase 4:* Few reporters are working on the story full time any longer, but there may be a few pursuing specific angles. Reporters still make routine checks. Weeks or months later, there may be a major development as officials release their findings or investigative reports come up with something. The story could become front-page news again.

Whenever reporters cover a developing story, their primary consideration is their deadline. They can stretch their coverage as much as possible, but deadlines must be met.

Checklist for Developing Stories

- Report the latest news first*
- Report the original breaking news high in any follow-ups*
- Go to the scene*
- Always strive to put a face on the tragedy: the person not the statistic!*
- Advance each follow-up: must search for new developments*
- Find as many sources as possible: strive for objectivity and reliability of information*
- Get colour: must reflect human element.*
- Handle continuing deadline pressure*

- ❑ *Talk to as many people as possible:* and then quote
- ❑ *Remember that teamwork counts:* you may need the help from other reporters, some of which may report for rival newsroom or press.
- ❑ *Consider all possible angles:* look beyond the obvious
- ❑ *Use already developed sources whenever possible:* people report to reporters they know.
- ❑ *Coordinate with photos, graphics and online:* works stronger as a multimedia package.