

Understanding news values

An information sheet for scientists and other researchers

Understanding newsworthiness and news values

Journalists select topics and write news stories on the basis of particular criteria or values that have come to characterise newsworthiness. Such news values typically include:

- **Unexpectedness:** being unusual, strange, rare, unexpected, surprising
- **Impact:** being important to many people; having (the potential for) significant effects, consequences, implications
- **Superlativeness:** being of high intensity, large scale or scope (the biggest, fastest, etc)
- **Eliteness:** being of high status, fame, celebrity – for example, people, countries, institutions
- **Proximity:** being geographically or culturally near the news organisation’s target audience
- **Timeliness:** being timely in some way (in relation to the publication date) – for example, current right now, recent, seasonal, ongoing, about to happen, new or ‘a first’
- **Positivity:** positive news (feel-good stories, scientific breakthroughs, benefits)
- **Negativity:** bad news (controversial, conflict-laden, risks, set-backs, etc)
- **Personalisation:** having a personal or ‘human’ face, involving ‘ordinary’ people rather than elites

News values influence how a story is written

News stories tend to be written so that they demonstrate these news values, for example by highlighting the unexpected aspects of research news in the headline or in the first paragraph:

- *Chocolate cake breakfast could help you lose weight*
- *Researchers at Granada University in Spain have found that beer can help the body rehydrate better after a workout than water or Gatorade.*
- *Logically it may be assumed that the more children a mother has, the more stressed out she will be, but a new study has revealed that this is not the case.*

These three examples come from news stories that were widely shared on social media and suggest that ‘unexpected research news’ is an important subcategory of viral news. It is not just unexpectedness that can be used to present a topic/issue as ‘newsworthy’ – the other news values can also be established through skillful writing. Satisfying more than one news value can increase the newsworthiness of a story.

Potential consequences and how to prevent them

A potential consequence of the need to satisfy news values can be that journalists foreground particular aspects of the research (for example, its importance, consequences, controversial nature) to ensure that a ‘newsworthy’ story is published that will appeal to their target audience. As a scientist/researcher and with the help of your media office, you can limit any exaggerations by presenting your study in a well-written press release so that it satisfies these criteria but does not misrepresent your research. Check the media release carefully, as it may be used uncritically by news organisations.

In addition:

- Think carefully about the timeline of your press release (Timeliness) and the country of publication (Proximity).
- Understand the journalist, the news organisation, and their audience.
- Read news items that have been published about your area of expertise.
- Consult more extensive guidelines for scientists – many are available online (for example, <http://sciencemediasavvy.org/>).