

Ten days when the news overlooked ordinary Danes

During ten days in May 2024, only 13 ordinary Danes managed to be quoted and featured in the top stories¹ on DR and TV2, when the news sites were checked at a random time each day.

Four students, three parents and children, a farmer, an elderly patient, a horse owner and a young consultant were included in nearly 200 articles.

In contrast, the US—and particularly Donald Trump's hush-hush trial—dominated the news landscape with 18 articles, overshadowing the presence of ordinary Danes. Sport was also a priority, with one in ten articles focusing on football, handball, tennis or motor sports.

Overlooking ordinary Danes in the top stories TV2 and DR instead chose to feature a politician. Almost one in three (68) top news stories featured a politician, with the story either being about politics, or a politician being quoted.

Of course, the media must cover Trump, sport, and politics, but to what extent? A review of top news stories over ten days suggests that TV2 and DR, on those days, rarely prioritized giving ordinary Danes a voice. Instead, there was a large amount of news about Israel, Ukraine, the US, sports stars, actors, and politicians. But these stories are more remote from the daily lives of Danes.

A review of the top news stories over ten days suggests that TV2 and DR gave little priority to giving ordinary Danes a voice during these days. On the other hand, there was plenty of news about Israel, Ukraine, the USA, sports stars, actors and politicians. But this news is more distant from the daily lives of Danes.

This has consequences when people feel that news is something distant instead of something close. In many countries, news avoidance is a growing problem. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2023, one in three people avoid news to a greater or lesser extent. One of the reasons is that people do not feel that news is written for them and covers their lives, according to the book *Avoiding the News*².

Better criterion for newsworthiness based on philosophy and psychology

The low level of news coverage related to people's daily lives on DR and TV2 suggests a deeper underlying issue. Something is wrong with the way of thinking and the criteria that are currently used to select news.

¹ Review of articles on DR.dk and tv2.dk in the period 22-05-2024 to 31-05-2024. Each day, the top ten articles on the news site were reviewed at a random time (the news stream at the top is not included). In total, 197 top articles were categorized. Three articles were discarded as they were repeated over several days.

² *Avoiding the News, Reluctant Audiences for Journalism*, Toff, Benjamin, Palmer, Ruth, Kleis Nielsen, Rasmus.

I will come back to this criticism in more detail. For now, however, I also want to find out what criteria for newsworthiness are needed to make people feel more strongly that news hits what is important in their lives.

However, I will not base the formulation of new criteria for newsworthiness on my own gut feeling and experience from 20 years as a news journalist. On the other hand, psychology, religion and philosophy have several suggestions about what people find meaningful. These disciplines offer valuable perspectives on what fundamentally interests humans. By drawing upon these insights, we can develop criteria that guide media outlets in selecting content that truly resonates with the core of human relevance.

Proposed criteria for newsworthiness based on psychology, religion, and philosophy:

- Change
- Surprise
- Timing
- Consequences (for the individual and the community)
- Struggle (overcoming)
- Social connectedness

In this essay, I will draw upon insights from psychology, religion, and philosophy to argue why these proposed news criteria are more robust and meaningful than the traditional criteria for newsworthiness. (significance, identification, sensation, timeliness and conflict).

Journalism covers a wide range of genres, so the proposed criteria are specifically tailored to news journalism, excluding portraits, reviews, and other genres that fall outside the news genre.

Who should the press cover? The individual and the community

In the opening section, I highlighted the need for new approaches to news selection to ensure better representation³ of ordinary people and their lives in the media. So, the first question might be: who should the press choose to report on?

With over eight billion people in the world, as estimated by the UN, there is no shortage of lives to tell. However, with over eight billion potential sources, journalists must constantly make choices about who is most important to interview.

³ Shazia Majid's analysis of 3,959 articles in Verdens Gang (VG) and Aftenposten demonstrates the skewed coverage of sources, highlighting the underrepresentation of ethnic minority women.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/norway> A separate study from the University of Gothenburg has shown that women are generally underrepresented in the news media.

<https://news.cision.com/goteborgs-universitet/r/the-news-media-in-the-world-will-reach-gender-equality-in-70-years,c3241149>

A crucial consideration is whether the story is private and only of interest to myself or a few others, such as my cat waking me up at 4:15 AM and catching a mouse, or whether the story is of interest to a broader community.

The press often has a one-sided focus on what is important to the individual, while failing to adequately cover what is important to the community. This was a central point raised in my discussions with Søren Pihlkjær Hjortshøj, Medical Director at Aalborg University Hospital, Kim Brixen, Medical Director at Odense University Hospital, and Jens Friis Bach, Medical Director at Gødstrup Regional Hospital, and Hanne Rolighed Christensen, Former Chief Physician at Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospital and Member of the Danish Medicines Council.

As a fellow at Constructive Institute, I researched how the press could improve coverage of the ethical dilemmas facing society and the healthcare sector when developing new medicines and treatments. The medical directors pointed out that the press focus was frequently skewed.

- For example, a news story might say that Per or Poul can't get a cancer treatment that costs a million kroner. Without treatment the prognosis is poor. It's easy to describe a decision not providing the new medicine as inhumane. But the press often forget that the money could be used elsewhere in the healthcare system and do better for other patients. It is frustrating when only one side of the prioritization is told.

Hanne Rolighed Christensen, who was a chief physician at Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospital and a member of the Medical Council, had the same experience.

She tells how the press reported about a young woman with breast cancer who could not get the desired treatment in Denmark and was not allowed to go to an expensive hospital in Germany.

- But I know that the drug has too little effect for the price. I understand that the press is reporting on one case, but the consequence of her getting the drug is that 300 others will have the right to get it too. It will cost millions of kroners and affect others in the health care system. Identification is a powerful ingredient in storytelling, but it cannot stand alone, she says.

This criticism stems from the press's reliance on identification as a key criterion for newsworthiness. Mogens Meilby⁴, the originator of the classic criteria for newsworthiness, explains that identification can be achieved through personification, bringing people into the story.

This emphasis on individuals and protagonists is a pervasive feature of news reporting.

During my review of ten days of top news on DR and TV2⁵, I found that roughly one in four articles (48 out of nearly 200) focused on individual stories. However, it was often unclear whether these stories were anomalies or if they reflected broader trends.

⁴ Meilby, Mogens, *Journalistikkens Grundtrin*

⁵ A review was conducted of articles on DR.dk and TV2.dk during the period from May 22, 2024, to May 31, 2024. Each day, the ten articles at the top of the news site were reviewed at a random time (excluding the news stream at the top). In total, 197 top articles were categorized. Three articles were excluded as they appeared on multiple days.

For example, one news story covered a 21-year-old who was arrested after driving several meters with a police officer's arm trapped in his car window⁶.

Another TV2 story highlighted Abinaja Jeyapalan⁷, a top student who achieved a remarkable GPA of 12.1 and chose to pursue a teaching career instead of a field that demands such high grades. This story didn't address whether 99.99% of top students typically obtain for high-demand professions, leaving us to wonder if Jeyapalan's decision was an exception?

While identification can be a powerful tool for engaging audiences, it is crucial to recognize its potential drawbacks. By focusing solely on individual stories, news coverage risks overlooking the broader context and complexities of the issues at hand.

When medical directors make decisions, they must take a holistic view, prioritizing what is most important for the majority. Much of the ethics in health economics⁸ is grounded in egalitarianism, which emphasizes equal access to healthcare services regardless of economic and social status. The ethical framework is also shaped by the philosophical direction of utilitarianism, which suggests choosing actions that produce the best outcomes for the most people.

In fact, it may even be unethical to spend too much money on a few patients if the money could be better spent on others. Professor Richard Sullivan made this point when he criticized David Cameron's Cancer Drug Fund for being a waste of money in *The Guardian*.⁹

- You cannot prioritize cancer patients over all other serious illnesses. These patients deserve medication just as expensive as cancer patients.

While traditional ethical frameworks¹⁰ often emphasize the individual in relation to society, the news media's focus on identification tends to narrow the lens to the individual's perspective. This essay argues for a broader approach to news selection, one that reflects the interconnectedness of individuals and communities.

Presenting news is also choosing a worldview

News selection is not merely a matter of reporting events; it is also a reflection of the media's worldview.

Every single moment, billions upon billions of events occur. Somewhere on earth, at this very moment there will be an accident, a disaster, a crime, a scandal, an argument, and a conflict. But in this moment, there will also be people rejoicing, succeeding in life, inventing and solving the challenges that lie ahead.

⁶ Peter Svith Skou-Hansen, TV2.dk, May 23, 2024: <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/krimi/2024-05-23-21-aarig-anholdt-koerte-med-betjent-haengende-i-bilen>

⁷ Natasja Fie Danielsen, TV2.dk, May 21, 2024: <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2024-05-21-superstudent-fik-et-snit-paa-121-og-nu-kommer-hun-med-opfordring-til-andre-unge>

⁸ Principles in health economics and policy, Olsen, Jan Abel, chapter 4 Equality and fairness

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/10/cancer-drugs-fund-waste-of-nhs-cash-david-cameron>

¹⁰ Peter Singer, *A Companion to Ethics*: This book explores various ethical frameworks, including Christian ethics, Jewish ethics, Kantian ethics, deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, among others. Most ethical frameworks focus on the individual in relation to the community, with a few exceptions like egoism.

There are so many events happenings all the time that a media cannot possibly cover everything but must select.

Steffen Jensen, a former well known Danish TV2 correspondent, expressed his regret over the channel's disproportionate coverage of conflict-ridden stories in the Middle East.

- People end up believing that the Middle East is just one big conflict zone, and that there is nothing positive, beautiful, human, tolerant, or anything else. Which is not true. At worst, I have given people a distorted view of the Middle East, Steffen Jensen told Zetland¹¹.

During the Danish cartoon crisis, Steffen Jensen covered violence and demonstrations in front of Danish embassies. Along the way, many locals apologized and distanced themselves from the violent demonstrations. However, TV2 never ran that story. In Zetland Jensen highlighted that the nuances of the coverage were lacking.

Many people are tired of the news focused on conflict and 36 percent of people avoid news sometimes or all the time. One reason is that news often negatively affects their mood, according to the Digital News Report 2023¹² from the Reuters Institute, where people in 46 countries around the world were asked about their media consumption.

In Denmark, DR's media research also points to problems with people skipping news, citing a 30-year-old woman who says:

- News is often negative. I try not to be too affected by it. I try to keep out what doesn't directly concern me. Because I can't do anything about it – it just makes my life bad¹³.

News selection has an impact on the audience's perception of the world. Psychology lecturer Hans Henrik Knoop at Aarhus University¹⁴ draws a parallel between physical and mental nourishment:

- Just as you can argue that you physically become what you eat, you can also argue that you mentally become what you focus your attention on.

As media, we can be conscious of the imprint or not think about it, but whether we are conscious or not, stories will leave an imprint.

My hope is to establish criterion for newsworthiness that more accurately reflect what is significant in people's lives – and it's not just the negative and dramatic stories.

¹¹ Mosbech, Hakon, Rosengren, Emil, Stjernejournalister fortryder det verdensbillede, som de har skabt. I værste fald har jeg givet folk en vrangforestilling, Zetland, 27. oktober 2023

¹² <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>

¹³ <https://www.dr.dk/om-dr/fakta-om-dr/medieforskning/medieudviklingen/2022/fri-os-fra-nyhederne>

¹⁴ Hans Henrik Knoop: "You Are Your Attention: How the Media's Negative Focus Affects Public Sentiment"

Reassessing Newsworthiness: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach

In the realm of news reporting, the concept of newsworthiness has traditionally been guided by the so-called classical criteria for newsworthiness, formulated by Mogens Meilby¹⁵ and Kaj Asmussen between 1976 and 1989. These criteria, encompassing significance, identification, sensation, timeliness, and conflict have become the cornerstone for understanding what constitutes news.

For decades, they have shaped the understanding of newsworthiness not only in Denmark but also in many other countries¹⁶. However, the classical news criteria face several challenges, including their inherent subjectivity and lack of clarity. Take, for instance, the criterion of significance. In 1976, Einar Østgaard added the criterion of significance, as noted by lecturer Martin Vestergaard from DMJX in his article¹⁷ "The News Criteria Were Meant to Ensure Better Journalism—This is How They Came to Be."

Significance was seen as "a requirement or encouragement for journalism students to write about the conditions in East Africa rather than a poodle mistakenly castrated. The ambition was that students should not just produce news based on a gut feeling, as was the industry practice. They should think carefully and report about something important and significant."

While significance aims to steer journalists towards covering matters of importance, the absence of a clear definition makes it up to an individual interpretation what is significance? This subjectivity undermines the effectiveness of the criterion, as it fails to provide a consistent basis for news selection. Who decides what is significant when the definition of significance is lacking?

Both psychology and philosophy offer clear insights into what is significant in human life. Therefore, it is possible to more accurately explain why some stories are valid and interesting news and others are not.

But why is it crucial to find better criterion for newsworthiness? There are several reasons. First, unclear criteria for newsworthiness can make it difficult for editorial teams to agree on what constitutes a great news story. It becomes challenging to provide constructive feedback on journalistic products if the definition of high-quality news is vague.

Secondly, it's problematic if journalists adhere to news criteria that steer journalism in the wrong direction, leading to news that many users do not want to engage with. For many years, the traditional criteria for newsworthiness have shaped editorial understanding, as generations of journalists have been trained according to these criteria¹⁸. However, when they fail, the result can be a distorted and skewed journalism that does not depict reality, contributing to news avoidance.

¹⁵ In 1976, the criteria of significance, identification, sensation, and timeliness were introduced in the compendium *Elementær Dagbladsjournalistik* (Elementary Newspaper Journalism). In 1989, the criterion of conflict was added in Mogens Meilby's book *Idé og Research* (Idea and Research).

¹⁶ Examples of Where the Criteria Are Mentioned: <https://dansksiderne.dk/index.php?id=3466> ;

¹⁷ Martin Vestergaard: News Criteria Were Meant to Ensure Better Journalism—This is How They Came to Be

¹⁸ Many of the Danish news criteria can be found on the English side of Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_values They can be found on many websites, including the University of Nebraska: <https://www.unomaha.edu/office-of-strategic-marketing-and-communications/public-relations/what-is-newsworthy.php>

Change: Newsworthiness and Time

One of the fundamental criteria for a story to be considered newsworthy is that some form of change must have occurred. An editor will naturally ask: "What is new (i.e., what is the change)?" to assess whether the story should be published. Change is crucial to any news story.

It's usually not news that the same thing is happening today that happened yesterday. There has to be some kind of change. There must be something new.

Interestingly, change is not explicitly mentioned in the traditional criteria for newsworthiness. Instead, sensation is. In his book " *In Journalism Basics: From Idea to Article*¹⁹," Mogens Meilby, even address sensation as the most important criteria for newsworthiness. Sensation is defined as the unusual and surprising.

However, sensation is limited and insufficient as a criterion for selecting news. A sensation is a very significant change that occurs infrequently. If sensations happened all the time, they would no longer be sensations. But there are many other, less extreme degrees of change that still qualify as news.

Therefore, change is a better criterion for newsworthiness than sensation because change is far more prevalent in news stories.

Moreover, using sensation as a benchmark can, in the worst case, lead to a skewed and unrealistic representation of the world. If journalism consistently seeks out news about the unusual and sensational, users may get the misconception that the unusual, abnormal, and sensational is the norm.

Evolutionary psychology explains our inherent alertness with sudden environmental shifts. These abrupt changes, often perceived as potential threats, trigger our attention and vigilance, as they may hold implications for our survival.

As psychology lecturer Hans Henrik Knoop at Aarhus University aptly points out:

- Throughout most of human history, we have lived as hunter-gatherers on the East African savannah. Faced with daily threats of hunger, thirst, hostile attacks, predator encounters, and incurable diseases, our attentional preferences, stress responses, defensive fight-flight-freeze reaction patterns, and the rest of our fundamental biopsychology have evolved in life-threatening environments²⁰.

In contrast, changes that occur slowly are harder to register as news because the threat is not perceived as imminent.

In *Factfulness*²¹, Rosling & Rosling show how people often misunderstand the world, and that the world is better than we think.

¹⁹ Meilby, Mogens. *Journalistikkens Grundtrin – fra Idé til historie*

²⁰ Knoop, Hans Henrik, *Du er din opmærksomhed: hvordan mediernes negative fokus påvirker folkestemningen*

²¹ Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*

For example, surveys conducted by the independent Swedish organization Gapminder²² show that people are generally uninformed and have an overly negative view of the world. This applies to key issues such as global warming, extreme poverty, international conflict, and economic development.

Psychologists attribute this negative bias²³ to our tendency to perceive the world in a simplified, negative light as a defense mechanism against potential threats. Additionally, the media's focus on quick, dramatic events often leads to the neglect of significant, positive changes that unfold gradually over time.

Belgian psychologist and political scientist Luc Reyckler's research on media coverage of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa further underscores this issue²⁴. He found that media attention primarily focuses on immediate events, leaving little room for exploring the historical context and how conflicts unfold over time.

Introducing "*change*" as a criterion for newsworthiness emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to news coverage. While sudden, dramatic events undoubtedly warrant attention, the media must also recognize the significance of gradual, long-term changes.

As the book "Factfulness" states, every current event has a historical context. By neglecting this context, we lose the perspective needed to understand the change. While a particular issue may appear dire in the present, it could still represent significant progress compared to the past.

In conclusion, the media plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the world. When news coverage solely focuses on immediate events, it risks becoming a collection of disconnected moments, devoid of context and historical understanding. This approach fails to provide a comprehensive narrative, leaving audiences with a fragmented and often misleading impression of reality.

By examining changes both in the short and long term, journalism can avoid becoming a series of isolated, context-free moments. Instead, the news gains perspective, helping users better understand how life and the world are evolving.

²² <https://www.gapminder.org/>

²³ Baumeister, Roy, Bad is stronger than Good

²⁴ Reyckler, Luc, Time peace, the essential role of time in conflict and peace processes

News from DR and TV2 regarding:	Number of articles (N)	Procent
Only the present	71	36%
The present and past	53	27%
The present and future	21	11%
The present, past and future	50	26%
The future	1	1%

The table above illustrates how the ten days of top stories on both TV2 and DR²⁵ cover the present, past, and future. Approximately one-third of the articles are focused on the present without reference to past or future events, while one-fourth of the articles encompass both backgrounds, the present, and the future.

Surprise: Newsworthiness for the Senses

Change is an ever-present phenomenon, yet not every change qualifies as news. Consider the following:

- This morning when I woke up, it was dark. Now, in the mid-morning, it's bright.
- As I sat down to write, I noticed no animals in the garden. Now, two blackbirds have landed in the tree by the driveway.

Neither the arrival of the blackbirds nor the transition to mid-morning holds any newsworthiness, despite the evident change. Why is that?

One explanation lies in our expectations. We anticipate that morning is followed by mid-morning, and it's quite normal for blackbirds to visit Danish gardens. Psychologically, our brains operate on autopilot²⁶ for a significant portion of the time. Based on past experiences, the brain forms constant expectations about what will happen next, as noted in New Scientist²⁷.

Our brains possess a remarkable ability to operate on autopilot, enabling us to perform routine tasks without conscious effort. This "autopilot" mode, known as the Default Mode Network (DMN), is responsible for a range of functions, including anticipating and predicting upcoming events.

When something aligns with our expectations, like the arrival of blackbirds in our garden, the DMN quickly processes it as a mundane detail.

²⁵ Review of articles on DR.dk and tv2.dk from 22-05-2024 to 31-05-2024. Methodology: Ten top articles from each website were reviewed on each day (the news feed itself was not reviewed). Stating present, past and future for an articles is based on individual judgment.

²⁶ Hanneke E. M. den Ouden, How prediction errors shape perception, attention, and motivation. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2012-01, Vol.3, p.548-548. One of the points made in the article is that the brain constantly makes predictions in order to reduce surprise and better respond to the world.

²⁷ Hamzelou, Jessica. Your autopilot mode is real – now we know how the brain does it. *New Scientist*, 23. October 2017

However, when the unexpected occurs, our brains perk up, taking notice of the anomaly. For instance, if four eagles were to land in our garden, the DMN would be triggered into high alert, recognizing this as an intriguing and potentially newsworthy event.

The brain is stimulated²⁸ by new surprising stimuli. This may be one of the explanations why we feel more alive when we travel to exotic places, eat exciting food or attend concerts. Surprise and the unexpected are ingredients in all major news stories, as Galtung and Ruge²⁹ conclude.

When the expected happens in news stories we can get bored.

Timing – Newsworthiness is also a battle for attention

In traditional criterion timeliness or "actuality" is often regarded as a defining factor of newsworthiness. Mogens Meilby defines timeliness in his book "Journalistikkens grundtrin":

- For a news story to be topical means that it is of particular interest to readers right now. This may be because the event has just happened. Or it may be because the news is or is likely to become a widespread topic of conversation, or that it is about something that the reader is currently dealing with in his daily life.

At first glance, the argument that journalists should cover what has just happened, what's current and what's new may sound perfectly valid. But on closer inspection, the argument that things are inherently interesting just because they have just happened is flawed.

Simply because an event has just transpired does not automatically make it newsworthy. The landing of blackbirds in our garden, for example, is not inherently newsworthy, despite its recent occurrence. Similarly, a man quietly crossing the street holds no newsworthiness.

Billions of events happen every second, yet only a few qualify as news. This is because news stories require more than just happening right now. My critical eye on timeliness is because many media outlets base their news strategy around being able to be live, go in breaking news and report on the present.

However, a narrow focus on timeliness as a benchmark for news does not make any sense. It's also important to maintain a focus on content if we should take in account what we know from psychology.

Our brains possess a remarkable ability to filter and prioritize information that happens right now, a process known as selective³⁰ attention. Amidst the constant barrage of stimuli, our brains employ a selective filter, allowing only the most relevant and salient information to pass through.

²⁸ Modirshanechi, Alireza med flere. Surprise and novelty in the brain, *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, volume 82

²⁹ Galtung, Johan and Ruge, Mari Holmboe (1965): "The Structure of Foreign News," *Journal of Peace Research*. In the article, the researchers also identify criteria for what makes something newsworthy. Here, the surprising and unexpected are also mentioned as criteria.

³⁰ Friedenberg and Silverman, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Study of Mind*. The book reviews various models of how the brain filters and sorts the information that gets through. Treisman's attenuation model suggests that some words pass through the filter more easily, while the Deutsch-Norman memory selection model states that whether information gets through also depends on its content.

This filtering mechanism is influenced by both the perceived relevance and inherent interest of the information. For instance, a man might struggle to hear his wife's repeated requests but perk up when she mentions the word "divorce." So, content and message are essential to catch our attention

While timeliness can indeed make a story newsworthy, it is not the sole determinant. A truly captivating news story must also possess substance, providing depth, context, and significance.

Sometimes that story might be breaking news, but it can also be investigative journalism or for example long-form narratives.

Mogens Meilby³¹ also mentions this fact and gives the example that it was a big front-page news when it was revealed 38 years later that Prime Minister H.C. Hansen had authorized the storage of US nuclear weapons in Greenland in 1957. This long forgotten and hidden event, when brought to light, became a major news story due to its historical significance and implications.

However, timeliness cannot be entirely disregarded.

As humans, we are wired through millions of years to seek information that helps us avoid danger and make informed decisions³². Knowing about a fire, a nearby accident, or an approaching storm allows us to take precautionary measures. Delays in reporting such events can deprive individuals of the opportunity to react and protect themselves.

From a democratic point of view, it is also important that people know about important decisions and debates in time. The Enlightenment philosophers³³ defended freedom of speech, but what is the point of speaking out if a decision has already been made?

In a democratic society, timely access to information about decisions and debates is essential for informed participation and public engagement.

In the world of news, timing is a much better criteria for newsworthiness than just timeliness. Just like in football, where a perfectly timed pass to a well-positioned Lionel Messi can result in a stunning goal, the timing of a news story can determine its impact.

Imagine the same pass, but with Messi out of position and no one to receive it. Instead of a goal, it's a missed opportunity.

Similarly, a news story can gain traction if it's released at the right time, or it can fade into oblivion if the timing is wrong. When a snowstorm hits, stories about the storm are in high demand. However, publishing an investigative piece on the same day would be poor timing, as everyone's attention is focused on the storm.

³¹ Meilby, Mogens, *Journalistikkens Grundtrin*

³² Knoop, Hans Henrik, *Du er din opmærksomhed: hvordan mediernes negative fokus påvirker folkestemningen*

³³ <https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/oplysningstiden>

In today's media landscape stories are constantly competing³⁴ to get attention. Editors face a constant challenge in selecting which stories to publish and when. They must decide which stories are relevant and timely, and which can wait.

Often, timely stories must be published here and now, but only if it has immediate relevance to the audience. In other cases, editors may decide to publish investigative pieces if they are more relevant to the audience.

Timing is a crucial factor in determining the right stories to publish each day.

Summary

There are three criteria of newsworthiness closely related to time and how to gain attention:

Change

News is about what's new, different and changed. Journalism should focus on changes, allowing users to see the bigger picture and understand trends. Sudden changes are more noticeable, but journalists should also pay attention to gradual developments.

Surprise

To capture our interest, news must be surprising. The unexpected grabs our attention, but once we've been introduced to a story or topic, our interest can linger even as the surprising elements diminish. If the news cycle becomes predictable, interest in a topic gradually fades.

Timing

Just because a story is current and happening now doesn't automatically make it a good one. Instead, timing is crucial. Timing is about delivering the right story at the right moment. The same story can succeed if the timing is right and fail if the timing is poor. Timing is also an important discipline when it comes to prioritizing the myriads of stories and events that are happening. Which stories can wait and which are best to break right now?

³⁴ Østgaard, Einar (1967): *News for Sale*, Aschehoug, Oslo. Einar Østergaard argues that news is constantly competing with each other for the user's attention. In this competition, timing also becomes a crucial factor.

What Content resonate with Audiences?

While the criteria of newsworthiness: change, surprise, and timing are essential for capturing attention, they don't address the content itself. The news criteria I'll introduce focus specifically on the content that makes news stories resonate with audiences.

For a news story to engage, there must be something at stake. No one wants to waste time on trivial stories. Mogens Meilby describes that a news story must also be significant in his book *Journalistikkens Grundtrin: Fra Ide til Artikel*. According to Meilby, significance is introduced as a news criterion because the press has a special responsibility as the fourth estate. Therefore, the press must inform about matters of great societal importance.

In this way, the press takes on a kind of educational parental role for the public, informing them about what is important in society. Meilby does not further define what constitutes significant societal importance but refers to the Finnish researcher Kaarle Nordenstreng³⁵, who defines news as:

"An information unit that helps change people's worldview in a more realistic direction."

It is a significant flaw that significance is not better defined, and it is unclear when something holds societal importance.

Both psychology and philosophy, however, offer insights into what is essential in human life. Thus, psychology and philosophy can also provide guidance on what content a news story should have to become fundamentally interesting.

The Psychological Perspective on Significance

In psychology, human needs play a central role in determining what's significant. Abraham Maslow's³⁶ hierarchy of needs, a well-known psychological theory, outlines the different levels of human needs.

At the base of the pyramid are basic physiological needs, essential for survival, such as food, water, sleep, rest, warmth, and sex. Once these basic needs are met, the next level focuses on safety and security needs, including security, stability, order, structure, and boundaries to avoid chaos and aggression.

Next come social needs, encompassing the desire for belonging, love, friendship, and care. Higher up the pyramid lie esteem needs, such as self-esteem, recognition, status, and a sense of accomplishment. Finally, at the top of the pyramid are self-actualization needs, the desire to fulfill one's potential and achieve personal growth.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum also emphasizes that humans have specific needs³⁷ essential for a life worth living. She lists several requirements for human thriving and development.

³⁵ Vestergaard, Martin, Nyhedskriterierne skulle sikre bedre journalistik — sådan blev de til

³⁶ Maslow, A.H. (1943). "A Theory of Human Motivation". In *Psychological Review*

³⁷ Nussbaum, Martha, *Creating Human Capabilities*. Martha Nussbaum sets criteria for a dignified life because she believes it is essential to understand how the world in the best way help the poor and vulnerable.

These include the opportunity to live a long, healthy, and dignified life, the ability to experience and express emotions, meaningful social relationships, control over one's environment, and the ability to live in a society and collaborate on common goals.

Throughout history, psychologists and philosophers have proposed various theories about human needs. According to Friedrich Nietzsche³⁸, the driving force of life is the will to power.

There are numerous theories about human needs and motivations, so how can journalists make a conclusion about the matter?

A new criterion for newsworthiness is that a story must have consequences for human life to be interesting.

By consequences, I mean that the story involves people who are angry, scared, anxious, or struggling because their needs are not being met. Alternatively, the story can involve people experiencing flow, energy, and satisfaction because their needs are being fulfilled.

A significant part of human life, emotions, and motivation revolves around needs that are sometimes fulfilled and sometimes are not.

Although it may sound theoretical, many news stories already focus on these consequences.

For example, when DR in January 2024³⁹ reported about hundreds of motorists trapped in their cars for up to 24 hours in the cold and darkness of a snowstorm. This story is compelling and relatable because it deals with basic psychological needs that are not being met: the lack of food, water, warmth, security, and social contact while trapped in a car during a snowstorm.

Or consider the TV2 news story about Caroline Wozniacki being limited by an injury before the Australian Open⁴⁰. This story resonates with us because it involves the need for recognition and self-actualization, needs that Wozniacki struggles to meet because a sports injury prevents her from playing tennis.

³⁸ https://denstordanske.lex.dk/Friedrich_Nietzsche

³⁹ Friis Elkær, Sarah og Nielsen, Flemming, Bilister har psykologiske reaktioner efter overnatning på E45, 9. januar 2024.

⁴⁰ Ritzau, Skade har begrænset Wozniacki før Australia Open, 9. januar 2024.

Philosophical Perspectives on the Meaning of Life

While psychological theories focus on human needs, philosophy offers broader perspectives on the meaning of life that align with these psychological concepts.

Hedonism⁴¹ focuses on pursuing happiness, satisfaction, and avoiding suffering as central to a meaningful life. Utilitarianism⁴² assesses the consequences of actions, with a good deed being one that maximizes overall welfare.

Eudaimonism⁴³ frames it differently, suggesting that true happiness stems from personal growth, meaning, and fulfillment. Humans strive to realize their full potential, values, and goals.

These philosophical perspectives share common ground with psychological theories in highlighting the importance of fulfilling human needs for a meaningful life.

Consequences: A Key Criterion for Newsworthiness

Combining psychological and philosophical perspectives, we can conclude that news stories should have significant consequences for the people or issues they cover.

- **Negative consequences:** These include unmet needs (physical, safety, social, ego, and self-actualization), associated negative emotions, suffering, pain, failures, and losses.
- **Positive consequences:** These include fulfilled needs, positive emotions, happiness, satisfaction, joy, successes, and goal achievement.

Not all events with consequences are equally newsworthy.

The broader the impact, the more compelling the news story, echoing the utilitarian⁴⁴ principle of maximizing overall happiness and satisfaction.

A news story becomes more newsworthy when it has substantial consequences for many people. Even if the individual impact is relatively minor, the collective impact on a significant population can elevate the story's newsworthiness.

⁴¹ Den Store Danske, <https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/hedonisme>

⁴² J.J.C Smart, 1973, side 4. "Act utilitarianism" is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends solely on the goodness or badness of the consequences it produces overall, that is, its effect on the well-being of all people (or perhaps sentient beings).

⁴³ Lykke påvirker vores gener. Videnskab.dk, 11. december 2013

⁴⁴ <https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/utilitarisme>

To effectively evaluate the newsworthiness of a story, it's crucial to consider both its individual and societal consequences:

1. **Individual** consequences: The story's relevance to individuals allows readers to connect with the narrative and understand the personal consequences.
2. **Societal** consequences: The story's broader implications for groups, communities, and society make it more relevant to a wider audience.

By examining both aspects, journalists can determine whether the story represents an isolated issue affecting a few individuals or a broader problem with widespread impact.

Journalism prefers consequences that are clear and immediate⁴⁵ than those in a distant future. If a story has no consequences for anyone, it is rarely considered good news.

What are the issues with conflict as a criterion for newsworthiness?

While consequences as a criterion for newsworthiness capture both the highs and lows of life, conflict as a criterion, introduced by Mogens Meilby in 1989, present only challenges.

Meilby was inspired from the journalistic tradition in the US when he introduced this criterion into the Danish context. He justifies its inclusion by stating:

- Just as the struggle between good and evil plays a significant role in fairy tales, fiction, and movies, conflict between people is essential in many news stories. Conflict contains a dramatic element that arouses curiosity, offers the opportunity to take sides, and identify with one party. In journalistic jargon, a story may even have a villain and a victim.

Meilby elaborates that conflicts exist in sports, disagreements, in the job market, and various other spheres. He quotes former professor of political science H.P. Clausen, stating that conflict is fundamental to the functioning of democracy, serving to resolve disputes between societal groups and individual interests. Thus, "conflict is an inevitable and natural factor in a democratic process, and the interesting aspect lies not in the conflict itself, but in how it is resolved⁴⁶.

While conflict is often seen as a driving force in human history and psychology, its prominence as a news criterion is problematic. This article argues that conflict is a poor indicator of newsworthiness, leading to a distorted and incomplete representation of reality.

⁴⁵ Rosling & Rosling, *Factfulness*, one of the points in the book is that people focus so much on the moment and the dangers of the here and now that they lose perspective.

⁴⁶ Vestergaard, Martin, *Nyhedskriterierne skulle sikre bedre journalistik — sådan blev de til*

The Psychological Argument Against Conflict as a Criterion for Newsworthiness

It seems that conflict could be a good criterion for newsworthiness considering psychological factors.

In evolutionary terms, Charles Darwin⁴⁷ points out that throughout history, humans have been in constant competition with each other for food, mates, territory to move up the hierarchy⁴⁸.

This rivalry inevitably leads to conflict. When men and women are attracted to the same partners, conflict and drama arise⁴⁹. When multiple employees dream and fight for promotion, conflict arises. And when we want, will and dream of something different, there are conflicts again.

Nietzsche⁵⁰ describes it as a key condition of life that people have the will to power and the struggle for power must inevitably lead to conflict.

Roy Baumeister⁵¹ is one of the psychologists who have shown how the human brain pays special attention to conflict and magnifies the negative to avoid potential threats and dangers.

- All species of mammals are addicted to prioritizing negative experiences over positive ones, because negative emotions have been essential for survival throughout the 200 million years of mammals on Earth," writes Hans Henrik Knoob⁵², Associate Professor of Psychology at Aarhus University and President of the European Network for Positive Psychology.

Therefore, it's not surprising that news articles about conflict can get a lot of readers, because people are aware of dangers and threats to improve their ability to survive.

Many people seek help from psychologists for everything from conflict resolution, conflict prevention and conflict mediation, and psychology also considers how people have been affected by conflict and subsequently developed stress, PTSD or perhaps anxiety.

In so many aspects of psychology, conflict is at the center, so why is it not a solid criterion for newsworthiness?

The problem is when journalists use conflict as a one-sided benchmark for what makes a good story.

The journalist therefore seeks out sources that disagree and weeds out those that don't fuel the conflict. The reporter seeks to maintain the conflict and find everything that supports the existence of a conflict, because a conflict is a good story.

⁴⁷ Charles Darwin outlines evolution in *Origin of Species*, depicting the struggle for survival. Later, evolutionary psychology further developed the ideas.

⁴⁸ Buss, David M, *The handbook of evolutionary psychology 2016*, part 2 survival

⁴⁹ Buss, D.M. (1995). *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*

⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche describes how the will to power is essential in human life and we struggle for power. https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/Friedrich_Nietzsche

⁵¹ Baumeister, Roy, *Bad is Stronger than Good*, 2001

⁵² Knoob, Hans Henrik, *You are your attention: how the media's negative focus affects the public mood*

This approach goes against what psychology also tells you about human beings.

Although conflicts are a big part of life, the fundamental idea in psychology is also what we do with the conflicts and perhaps resolve them, learn from them or deal with them.

When people are reading self-help books and psychological literature on everything from love to management coaching or conflict transformation, it's also to find helpful advice and solutions so they can achieve a better life.

Being in constant conflict can be vulnerable for humans. As evolutionary psychology⁵³ points out, humans are better able to survive in groups because they are better able to protect themselves in a group. Entering conflicts is dangerous, so you end up leaving the group and having to manage on your own.

Similarly, social psychology⁵⁴ focuses on how people engage in groups. If you conflict too much with members of the group, there is a risk of being labelled as someone who may be unreliable and unpredictable. The potential for conflict is that you could be perceived and categorized in a way that is damaging to your reputation. At its worst, conflict can also mean that you end up outside the group and stigmatized. This is vulnerable and can lead to anger, inferiority and loneliness, for example.

While conflicts can be necessary, people rarely want to be in constant conflict, but also seek compromises, solutions and to get closer to each other again.

It seems odd that in the classic criteria for newsworthiness, conflict is only a measure of a good story whereas there is no criterion for solutions.

It appears psychologically misguided. Because both evolutionary and social psychology show that constant conflict and being outside the group can be harmful to humans.

Billions of people don't only believe in conflict

Billions of people have moulded their core beliefs around religion. That is why it is also interesting to see what role conflict plays there.

The three largest religions, Christianity, Islam⁵⁵ and Hinduism⁵⁶, recognise in several texts that life can be painful and full of conflict. Yet here too, there is a dream of a better life, whether it's heaven, salvation, making peace with oneself and one's God or being reborn to a higher stage.

The major religions point out that there is more to life than pain, more to sorrow, more to despair and more to conflict - although the path to a better life can be different.

In these religions, there is something better, bigger, higher to believe in.

⁵³ Buss, David M, The handbook of evolutionary psychology 2016, part 2 survival

⁵⁴ Blacwell Handbook of Social Psychology, chapter 12: Psychological Consequences of Devalued Identities, part 1 and 3

⁵⁵ Tønnsen, Aminah, Det islamiske menneskesyn er mangfoldigt, Kristeligt Dagblad, 22. august 2005

⁵⁶ <https://www.religion.dk/hinduisme>

As The Apostle Paul says in Second Corinthians:

"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love".

In journalism, however, the greatest of these is conflict!

In the classical criteria for newsworthiness, there is no such thing as faith, hope or love. The criterion of conflict focuses and perpetuates the problems, but in its simplicity, the criterion is simply too simple. It is both misunderstood psychologically and too narrow in terms of what people believe in philosophically and religiously.

If we consider what billions of people believe, a broader and better criterion for newsworthiness than conflict is needed here too.

[Struggle: A criterion for newsworthiness showing what people have at stake](#)

Obviously, media needs to cover conflict. Highlighting problems, uncovering and exposing and improving the world in the process is part of journalism's DNA.

But what could be an alternative criterion for newsworthiness than conflict?

Referring to philosophical schools of thought such as hedonism, utilitarianism and eudonism, they emphasize that human goals in life are to seek pleasure, happiness, fulfilment, achieve one's potential and succeed.

In contrast, in psychology, Maslow believes that people have strong instincts and drives where the goal for people is to fulfil various needs, while the psychology of existence⁵⁷ also points to how people get a better grip on life by working systematically with personal meaningful goals.

We never reach our goals definitively. Life is constantly changing.

We all struggle and strive to fulfil our needs, achieve joy, happiness and satisfaction.

There are times when we reach our goals. Other times when we fail.

At various times we become sad, depressed, anxious and resigned when facing life's adversities. And other times we are elated, happy, optimistic and hopeful when we experience glimpses or longer periods when life is with us.

Adversity and success are a basic human experience, but behind it all there is a wish, dream, hope and longing for a better life and just having a good time.

This is exactly what I want to capture with introducing struggle as a criterion for newsworthiness.

⁵⁷ Berthelsen, Preben. Psychology of existence, a good grip on life. One of the main points of the book is how people are constantly setting goals and the book has a system for getting a better grip on life by systematically working with goals. The focus in the psychology of existence on the fact that people are constantly facing goals fits well with the novelty criterion of effort.

I define struggle as the effort that people put in to improve their lives.

Struggling has different phases. Indeed, it's a movement where people try, struggle, endeavor and even fight to move on with their lives. The idea is to move from A to B.

During the process, there may be conflicts, but there can also be solutions. Sometimes there are struggles, but also help.

You may have victories where goals and dreams are achieved, but also setbacks and defeats.

The struggle or overcoming remains as a basic human condition. It covers a larger part of human life than conflict.

Johnny was like a zombie on fentanyl

This may sound like a theoretical discussion, but whether the focus is on conflict or struggle and overcoming can have a big impact on journalism.

This is demonstrated best with a few examples.

For instance, TV2⁵⁸ reported on major problems with fentanyl in the US, which in 2022 claimed the lives of 73,654 Americans. In one article, TV2 looks at how the drug has spread to Denmark and talks to Johnny Steffensen, who has taken fentanyl and gone in and out of a zombie-like state.

In the article "I went through hell and out the other side, says Dane on zombie drug", we hear about Johnny Steffensen's abuse with fentanyl. Namely, what he did "to kill himself", how he overdosed, how he was a junkie zombie when he should have taken care of his son.

Not until the last line is there a hint of hope:

- I've been through hell and come out the other side. So, I do know the way to get clean, he says.

And that's the end of the article.

Except for the last line, almost the entire article is about Johnny Steffensen's problems and addiction. This falls in line with news criteria such as identification and conflict. But it misses the mark when psychology and philosophy tell us that people are constantly trying to overcome their challenges and struggle to have better lives.

An interesting question would be, how did Johnny Steffensen manage to get through hell and out the other side? How did he succeed, what did he have to overcome along the way? The fundamental problem with the conflict as a criterion for newsworthiness is that it freezes the current situation, locks in the conflict and fails to address the central question: How can life get better?

⁵⁸ Pallishøj, Signe, Jeg kom igennem helvede og ud på den anden side, siger dansker om zombiestof, tv2.dk, 17. november 2023

The story of Muna's struggle to get out of loneliness

I would argue that struggle and overcoming as a criterion for newsworthiness makes more interesting stories from a human perspective than when the focus is strictly on conflict.

Berlingske, a Danish newspaper for example, covered the challenge of loneliness among young people in the article: *Thousands of young women are lonely: Muna Barrow found the solution in a surprising place*⁵⁹.

This article describes how Muna Barrow has been lonely and how thousands are in the same situation. In other words, many of the same things that fall under the criterion of conflict. But it doesn't stop there. To the contrary, it tells how Muna Barrow has used a feature on Tinder to find friends.

As a result, it is also a story about an endeavor for a better life and a struggle out of loneliness. I think this struggle and overcoming loneliness is much more interesting than if the article had just labelled Muna Barrow as lonely. If the media has a narrow focus on conflict, it can, at worst, lead to people being portrayed in a frozen conflict where they are passive and victimized.

The upside of changing the focus to "struggle and overcoming" is that media will focus more on portraying cases that are taking action and being active in order to get a better life. This can be a source of inspiration and lead to hope and empowerment.

Empowering is exactly what young people suggested as a criterion for newsworthiness for Generation Z⁶⁰. That was the message from 70 young people from the International Peoples College at the WANIFRA 2024 Conference for News Leaders in Copenhagen.

The young people wanted focus on empowering because they sought news that gave them courage and tools to act based on information. Simultaneously, young people wanted news to be educational and help them understand relevant topics.

Young people's desire for news to be empowering and educative aligns perfectly with struggle as a criterion for newsworthiness.

Is identification a criterion for newsworthiness?

When we experience the relevance of journalism, we recognize that we can identify with the protagonists or the issue at hand.

We can share their excitement, problems, endeavors, pain or joy.

So why ask the question: Is identification a valid criterion for newsworthiness, as Mogens Meilby and Kaj Asmussen argue it is?

⁵⁹ Heiredal, Therese Thru, Tusindvis af unge kvinder er ensomme: Muna Barrow fandt løsningen et overraskende sted, 17. november 2023, Berlingske

⁶⁰ The Copenhagen Criteria: Gen Z identify and update 7 news values that matter. <https://wan-ifra.org/2024/05/the-copenhagen-criteria-gen-z-identify-the-news-values-that-matter/>

I have presented my first objection earlier. The point is that identification can sometimes put so much of the spotlight on a single individual, but with no consideration of whether it is relevant to the community.

As importantly, identification is perhaps a good criterion for good storytelling rather than a selection criterion for what makes a good news story.

If the writers and journalists are skillful at describing people, then we can identify with them. But if the description is inferior and inadequate, we understand them inadequately.

So, whether we can identify with people depends on how well they are being described.

Another objection to having identification as a criterion for newsworthiness is that in some ways it can seem unnecessary. The criteria **consequences** and **struggle** that I propose concern central aspects of human life.

Once journalism describes how a story has consequences and how people try to overcome their problems to bettering their lives, there is a high likelihood that we will identify with people.

Because we realize that struggling and striving towards a better life is key. We also recognise this from our own lives, where we experience the human consequences of not having our needs met, of being a success and a failure.

I do believe that identification is a key word for successful storytelling.

Yet there is something fundamentally mistaken with identification as a criterion for newsworthiness, because identification does not distinguish between whether something is of purely private interest or of broad public interest.

I easily identify with my friends feeling work overload, being stressed or sick, or my teenage children wondering about boyfriends, friends and partying.

But neither of these are news. It requires something more than just identification to become news. It needs to be of public interest and not just a matter of private interest.

Social connectedness- a newsworthiness criterion for people we care about

So, what does it take for a news story to be of public interest?

Key is the degree to which users are connected to the people the news is about.

This will take some explaining.

First of all, it's important to realize that we as humans are born social.

Associate Professor of Psychology Hans Henrik Knoop at Aarhus University puts it this way.

- Social connectedness is a crucial background dimension for everything worth doing in life. If you ask people what love is, very few will give a clear answer, but almost everyone agrees that life is empty without love. If you ask parents of children starting school, over 90 per cent say that social well-being is more important than academics⁶¹.

We are linked together in communities, and others outside of myself are crucial to how I cope and thrive through life.

The Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup beautifully describes how people are intertwined:

- The individual never has anything to do with another human being without holding something of their life in his hand.

Some humans are so close to us that we strongly feel that our lives are connected. Like parents, we are affected if our children are unhappy, and we rejoice when they succeed. And in love, we are also affected if our partner is sad, depressed, sick or happy and joyful.

When the news becomes huge and is in the public interest, it is precisely because many people can connect to the news.

This is strongest if the news is about someone we are connected to, such as our loved ones or of course ourselves⁶². According to evolutionary psychology⁶³, loved ones are central to us because people close to us can impact our lives the most. An infant is dependent on its mother and father, and in evolutionary terms, humans ensure the survival of their genes by protecting children and family.

While we pay particular attention to news that affects those closest to us, as humans we are socially connected to each other in many ways in social groups. We are bound to our neighbors, to the local town, to teachers at the children's school, to mates at the football club, to those who share the same interest or are perhaps in the same place in life, etc.

⁶¹ Knoop, Hans Henrik, Du er din opmærksomhed: hvordan mediernes negative fokus påvirker folkestemningen

⁶² Galtung, Johan and Ruge, Mari Holmboe (1965): "The Structure of Foreign News", Journal of Peace Research, no. 1 p. 64-91, 1965, Oslo. The idea that a criterion for news should be close and familiar is also found in the news criteria of Galtung and Ruge.

⁶³ Buss, David M, The handbook of evolutionary psychology 2016

In social psychology⁶⁴, we as humans constantly divide people into those who are inside our group and those outside. Outsiders can also be interesting to follow because we might be jealous, looking down on them (like the TV programs about young mothers) or up to them when people are successful and wish we can do and be like them. Taking an interest in the lives of others can bring several emotions into play, such as fascination, disgust, inspiration and attraction.

News seldom affects everybody, but it regularly happens that so many people feel connected to a news story that it becomes almost universal.

Take, for example, weather stories such as snowstorms, hurricanes and heatwaves that directly affect everyone who experiences them.

At a more abstract level, we are also attracted to news about how we relate to each other. Ethics and norms in a society act as a rulebook for how we should treat other people and how we can expect to be treated in a society⁶⁵. Consequently, ethics and norms regulate how we relate to each other.

An obvious example would be the Danish law on consent, where you had to make sure that there was consent for sex. If not, you could be convicted of assault. Understandably, the law led to a big debate about consent and how it should happen in practice before intercourse.

Feeling connected to others can be weak or strong. One of the reasons why news stories attract a lot of readers is that, overall, many people feel connected to them.

Summarizing

These criteria relate in many ways to the content of the news and who we care about most.

Consequences

News needs to affect someone or something to be interesting. Consequences are about impacting the needs that people have. If the needs are not met, there may be suffering, pain or failure. Or perhaps the consequences can be positive, where needs are met, and people experience fulfilment or joy? A good news story is very much about consequences, positive or negative. News is more interesting when it affects many people rather than a few. When many people are affected, the overall impact and the life impact of the news is greater. It is important to look at the impact on the individual, but also on the group and the community.

Struggle (overcoming)

A central feature of life is that people are constantly struggling to overcome obstacles in order to improve their lives. Overcoming is a movement in which people try, struggle, strive and even strain to get on with life. In the struggle, there may be conflicts, hopes, dreams and goals. By describing this struggle, journalism covers a basic condition of life.

⁶⁴ Blacwell, Handbook of Social Psychology. Social psychology shows how we divide people into groups, including ingroup and outgroup. We are interested in how the groups to which we are attached are doing.

⁶⁵ Singer, Peter. A companion to ethics. The book reviews ethical directions. The chapter on Christianity, Judaism and Muslim ethics shows that ethics is largely about how the individual should relate to the community.

Social connectedness

To capture the public's interest, people need to feel socially connected to the people the news is about. As human beings, we are connected to each other. We are most likely to care about news that affects us or those with whom we are most closely connected. As human beings, we belong to social groups and there are several psychological reasons why we are interested in both in-group and out-group members. At the same time, we are interested in news about ethics, morality, good and evil, because these are the rules of how we are socially connected.

How can the new criteria for newsworthiness be used in practice?

My hope with the new criterion for newsworthiness (change-surprise-time-consequences-struggle - social connectedness) is that they will be much more in tune with how psychology and philosophy see life.

The criteria can be used to select the stories to be published. At the same time, editors can use the criteria in the daily dialogue in the newsroom to critique stories. Are the stories published in line with what we know people are interested in psychologically and philosophically?

Here is an overview of the criteria:

Change	Change is about what's new and different in the short and long term.
Surprising	Surprise grabs attention, but be careful that surprise doesn't just become special and unusual.
Timing	Timing is about telling the right story at the right time.
Consequences	Consequences can be negative, such as unmet needs, suffering or pain. Consequences can also have a positive impact on life, leading to the fulfilment of needs, happiness, satisfaction and joy.
Overcoming	Mennesker overvinder sig selv og anstrenger sig for at forbedre livet. Overvindelse er en konstant bevægelse, hvor folk forsøger, kæmper, prøver, drømmer for at komme videre med livet.
Social connectedness	People overcome and strive to improve their lives. Overcoming is a constant movement where people try, struggle, strive, dream to move forward with life. We are most interested in news when we feel that we are socially connected to in the news, or when it affects how we are connected to each other such as moral, ethics, laws and rules.

Here are some basic questions that can be asked for each criterion and used to identify what a good story is or to spot if a news story has any shortcomings.

Questions about consequences

Consequences and impact are a key concept when it comes to finding out if a media outlet is reaching its target audience. For example, media can track who their sources are and who the story is impacting.

By tracking almost 200⁶⁶ top stories on TV2 and DR over ten days, I found that only 13 ordinary Danes were quoted when the news sites were checked at a random time each day. Tracking stories by gender, age, industry, education level and so on can also give an indication of whether the media have blind spots and large groups of the population that they very rarely cover.

Consequences can also be broken down by whether the consequences are for the individual or for the community and group.

	To a small extent	To some extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Consequences has an impact for an individual?				
Consequences has and impact for the community and group?				
Are the consequences evident?				

If most stories are about individual cases, but without mentioning the extent of the problem, there is a risk that the image presented by the media will be detached and not reflect reality. On the other hand, if most stories in the media are about statistics and large populations, but without specific individuals, it can be difficult to identify with the story.

At the WANIFRA 2024 conference, 70 young students also suggested that the criteria for newsworthiness⁶⁷ for Generation Z is that stories should be human, but also touching the consequences for many people.

So, it's important to look at consequences for the individual as well as for the larger group.

- Another focus is to look at whether the consequences are clear, presumed, feared, or happened?
- Are the consequences based on feelings or facts?
- Are uncertainties and doubts communicated in an objective way?

⁶⁶ Analysis of 197 top news stories on DR and TV2 in the period 22-05-2024 to 31-05-2024

⁶⁷ The students suggested educational, empowering, G-local, human, impactful, objective and timely as criterion for newsworthiness. <https://wan-ifra.org/2024/05/the-copenhagen-criteria-gen-z-identify-the-news-values-that-matter/>

Questions about change

To understand whether the news is about something that's getting worse or better, it's important to look at trends and changes. For example, if the media only reports on crimes and accidents that are happening in the present, people may be left with the impression that there is an incredible amount of crime and accidents going on. The reality of the statistics, however, may be that the numbers have decreased.

Of course, the media can't report changes in every single news story, but the question is, does it happen often or rarely? Some of the questions journalists and editors can ask about change are:

- How much does the story show that there has been change and something new?
- What is the change in the short term?
- and in the longer term?
- Will looking at the news in relation to something that happened in the past give the story more perspective? What is the right time period to focus on?

Questions about Social Connectedness

Basically, social connectedness is about how many people can be interested in and connected to a story. It can be a close connection, where the story or topic revolves around people or events that are close by. It can be a more distant connection, where the people or events in the story are far away. Finally, it can be a more abstract connection, where the story is simply about norms, rules, ethics, and attitudes that are of personal interest.

It may sound fluffy, but media and editors can use connectedness considerations to see if they are engaging people in the media's target audience. If people feel too remotely connected to news that's happening far away from them, they risk avoiding the news⁶⁸.

Using this chart over a period gives you a good sense of the mix of news coverage and whether there is a need to focus differently.

	To a small extent	To some extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Are people closely connected to history because it revolves around people or events that are close to them?				
Are people more distantly connected to history because it revolves around people or events that are far away?				
Are people connected on a more abstract level because it's about norms, rules, ethics, etc. that makes a ruleset for how we live together?				

⁶⁸ Avoiding the News, Reluctant Audiences for Journalism, Toff, Benjamin, Palmer, Ruth, Kleis Nielsen, Rasmus.

Questions about Struggle

The criterion **struggle** can be used to focus on what is at stake for the people involved in news stories.

- How is it evident that the story is important to people because they are struggling, overcoming, striving, dreaming, hoping for something better?
- Is there progress or regression in trying to do better in life?
- How can the reporter show the human struggle, and can it be used as a dramatic element in the story how human are trying to overcome to better life?

Questions about Surprise

The criterion **surprise** can be used to see if the news is too boring, predictable, and simply tells us something we already know. However, too much emphasis on surprise can tip the balance so that the media report the unusual and the surprising.

- What is surprising about the story?
- Is it something that is not expected?
- Is there something so unusual that it's appropriate to point out that reality and the norm are completely different?

Questions about Timing

Timing is about whether the story is coming out at the right time. Timing can be hard to define, but it's about hitting the moment when the news will be noticed and not overlooked because there are many other important things going on.

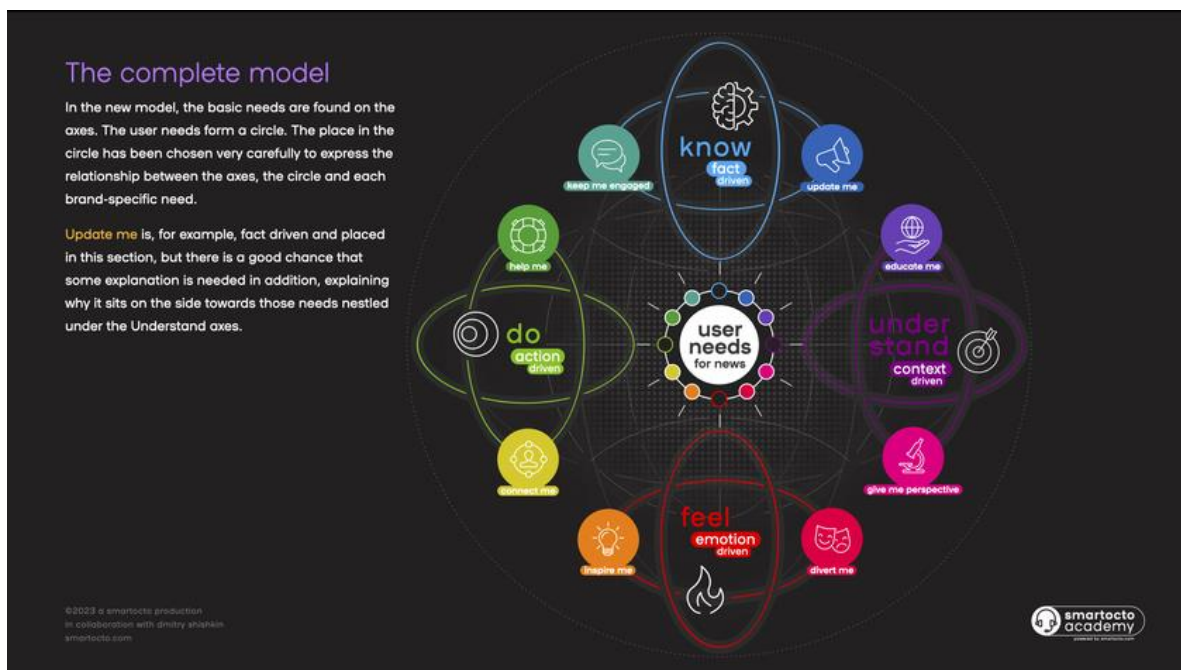
- When will the impact of the story be greatest when it's published?
- Can the timing of the story be improved?

New criterion for newsworthiness can add value to user needs

In recent years, more and more media have started to target news according to user needs. User needs are generated based on in-depth interviews and questionnaires with users.

For some media, user needs are becoming more important, or at least as important, as the classic criteria for newsworthiness. It is therefore interesting to look at whether the new criteria for newsworthiness can create a higher value for media that are using user needs already.

The BBC has been far ahead with its user needs model and has inspired several media.



In BBC's user needs model 2⁶⁹, they conclude that users need understanding. In other words:

- Give me the perspective
- Teach me

Users also need to know and want to know:

- Be updated
- Stay on top of what's trending

Users also want to emotionally connect to news. The need is:

- Inspire me
- Entertain me

⁶⁹ BBC World Service, Userneed model version 2, <https://smartocto.com/research/userneeds/>

Finally, there may be a need to act, which can be seen in these needs:

- Connect me to others
- Entertain me

The Danish newspaper Politiken has also analyzed the needs of its users to write in a more targeted way.

According to Politiken's analysis, users have these needs:

- Inform me
- Fascinate me
- Explain to me
- Guide me
- Show me human life
- Show me the opinions
- Entertain me

There is some overlap between the newsworthiness criterion introduced in this article and user needs, and then there is not.

The main difference is that the media have found user needs by analyzing and surveying their own users. The advantage should be that they get as close to their own users as possible.

The new criteria for newsworthiness, on the other hand, are based on psychology with a philosophical approach. This provides a broader understanding and explanation of what people value and look for in news that is more universal. Thus, I argue that these newsworthiness criteria can provide some deeper explanations than user needs can.

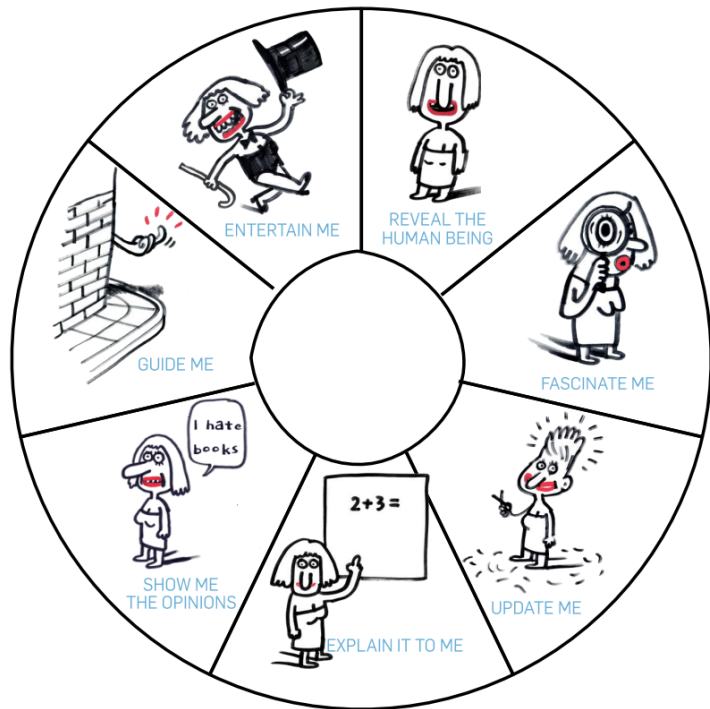
For example, both the BBC and Politiken state in their user needs that users want to be up to date. But they do not explain what it means to be up to date.

In this case, the criterion change specifies that it is interesting that something has changed and changed.

Similarly, Politiken states that it is a user need that the media report on human life, but what this means is not defined. Here, the consequences criterion says that to report on human life, the journalist must have an eye for what consequences the news has for human needs, both positive and negative. It is also important to consider the consequences for the individual and the community. To tell the story successfully, it's also worth zooming in on where people are at risk, where they are struggling and overcoming to improve their lives.

User needs

Update me
Fascinate me
Explain it to me
Guide me
Reveal the human being
Show me the opinions
Entertain me



In other areas, the user needs of Politiken and BBC are more direct when it comes to specifying ways of communicating to guide, teach, explain, and help.

Conversely, the criterion for newsworthiness timing also indicates that the timing of a story's publication is crucial.

So, there are differences between the BBC and Politiken user needs and the criteria I purposed for newsworthiness. Though this is not a discussion about whether to use user needs or the criteria for newsworthiness. They are complementary.

The new criterion for newsworthiness provides a broader and deeper understanding of the issues by drawing on philosophical and psychological insights.

Differences between user needs and the new criterion for newsworthiness

BBC user needs	Politiken User Needs	Userneeds compared to the new criteria for newsworthiness
Update me	Update me	Changes are the key to focus on when it comes to what's new. Userneeds does not state that.
Stay on top of what's trending		Not included.
Inspire me	Fascinate me	Inspiration, fascination and surprising are closely related. There is not much difference between user needs and the new criteria for newsworthiness.
Teach me	Explain it to me	User needs are about how to communicate. That is not the main goal for the new criteria for newsworthiness.
	Guide me	Guide me can be the focus for a reporter. The new criteria for newsworthiness address how people are struggling, trying to overcome obstacles to better their life. In the process, they may need guidance, but struggle and overcoming provides a deeper understanding of what's at stake.
	Show me human life	Politiken's user need: show me human life does not provide guidance on how. Here, the criteria consequences point out to focus on consequences and impact for the human life. That means looking how human needs are affected.
	Show me the opinion	Politiken's user needs "show me the opinion" revolve around communication and to target the reader of the newspaper who are very interested in debate. The criterion Social Connectedness says that people are also interested in ethics, norms, rules and opinions as it defines under which circumstances we live together.
Entertain me	Entertain me mig	Not included directly, but the criteria surprising sounds familiar to entertain me.
Connect me to others		Connect me to others and the criterion social connectedness are somewhat similar.
Give me perspective		When focusing both on the consequences for the individual and the group there is a great chance to have perspective. The same will happen when journalist not only focus on the present, but also the change and the background story.
		Timing
		Consequences
		Struggle (overcoming)

Conclusion: Better selection of news stories can affect the audience

As the BBC, Politiken and other media outlets look at user needs these days, it's about better reflecting what people are looking for.

People have multiple needs in news coverage that go beyond conflict and sensationalism.

In the book 'The Plague' by Albert Camus, one of the founding fathers of existentialism, he describes how Oran in Algiers was hit by the plague and the inhabitants were quarantined for almost a year. At first, people were interested in how the press reported the daily death toll. Later, citizens became exhausted and tired and looked to the media to find out when the death toll peaked and when a cure for the plague was found.

The news needs not only conflict, but also hope.

In life, of course, we must deal with what hurts.

But the way the media describe misfortune, pain and conflict can also be designed to evoke less negative emotion and hopelessness.

In a study at the University of Essex⁷⁰, researchers had participants read news stories about terrorism. One group was shown only the horror of what had happened, while the other group was also shown images of human goodness and kindness. It could be the helpful taxi driver who drove people away from the scene for free, or a boy holding a sign offering hugs after a terrorist attack.

The researchers found that when the group was exposed to terror and then kindness, their experience of terror was alleviated. Not only did they not feel as sad and stressed as the group who saw only terror, but the kindness and goodness of others was encouraging and inspiring.

Similar results were found when testing people's reactions to news of pedophilia, murder, and bullying, where one group was also made aware of good deeds, while another group was shown only misery.

Therefore, researchers Kathryn Buchanan and Gillian M. Sandstrom suggest that journalists focus on human kindness and goodness to improve people's well-being.

I hope that the new criteria for newsworthiness can inspire the media to leave a more nuanced, realistic, objective and hopeful impression of the world in people's minds than if journalists only pursued drama, sensation and conflict.

For there are nuances in looking at news not just as disconnected moments, but in looking at change and what is new.

⁷⁰ Buchanan, Kathryn, Sandstrom, Gillian M, Buffering the effects of bad news: Exposure to others kindness alleviates the aversive effects of viewing others acts of immorality, published 17 may, 2023

There is also nuance in looking at consequences, and consequences not just for the individual in the news story, but for the group and the community.

And there is hope in how people strive and constantly struggle and try to overcome problems to better life. However, the criterion for newsworthiness is not just an idealistic dream. The criteria are based on what people search and live for philosophically and psychologically.

It would be strange if they didn't seek the same sort of content in the news.

Special thanks to

Constructive Institute and Novo Foundation

And thank you for the stimulating conversations and inspiration along the way:

- Hans Henrik Knoob, Associate Professor of Psychology at Aarhus University and President of the European Network for Positive Psychology.
- Martin Vestergaard, Associate Professor at DMJX
- Anja Ranfelt, psychologist and my partner
- Morten Dige, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Aarhus University
- Preben Bertelsen, Professor of Social and Personality Psychology, Department of Psychology, Aarhus University
- Kasper Bro Larsen, Professor, Department of Culture and Society, Old and New Testament

About reviewing news articles

Review of articles on DR.dk and tv2.dk in the period 22-05-2024 to 31-05-2024. Each day, the top ten articles on the news site were reviewed at a random time (the news stream at the top is not included). A total of 197 top articles were categorized. Three articles were discarded because they were repeated over several days.

This is my rating of each article, so another person may come to a slightly different result on individual articles. A larger study is needed to determine if these tendencies hold true over a longer period.

Follow this link to see which articles were rated.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1H3a6JlnKvGO7wez9R9doKVitlmNBr_mo/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=106101518976761847215&rtpof=true&sd=true