

Careful Inquiring - from finding a topic to researching to a news text

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How do I come up with a topic?

Keep eyes and ears open!

If you speak with a lot of people and keep your eyes and ears open – going to the bakery or on busses and trains – chances are big that you will stumble on a topic now and then.



If you have an “area of expertise” you can systematically talk to people who are experts in this area and inquire regularly if there is something newsworthy.

Suggestions from others:

Suggestions from listeners, friends and acquaintances who point out a certain topic,
 Invitations to conferences, events, club meetings, press releases and press conferences
 Commemoration day calendar
 Journals
 Newsletters
 Other media: print media, radio, television
 Internet portals

Own and alternative sources

If you regularly have a programme on a topic area you can build your own information network. First you research all clubs, initiatives, information centres and institutions that are concerned with it. Then you call them and introduce yourself and ask if you could regularly receive press releases or receive the news letter via e-mail. Moreover, personal contacts to potential informants are important.

Researching

1. Question: Is there some truth in it?

Is it correct what you have heard? First you need to become acquainted with the topic because only if you have **background information** you can ask purposefully. Is there published information on the topic already? You look in **archives, the internet, statistics**...

Now you can reach for the phone and as you are well-acquainted with the topic systematically ask questions, inquire into numbers etc. Now there are two possibilities: If the systematic inquiry has the result that what you have heard is incorrect then the research is over and there is no story. If there is really some truth in it then the research continues with the question why this is that way.

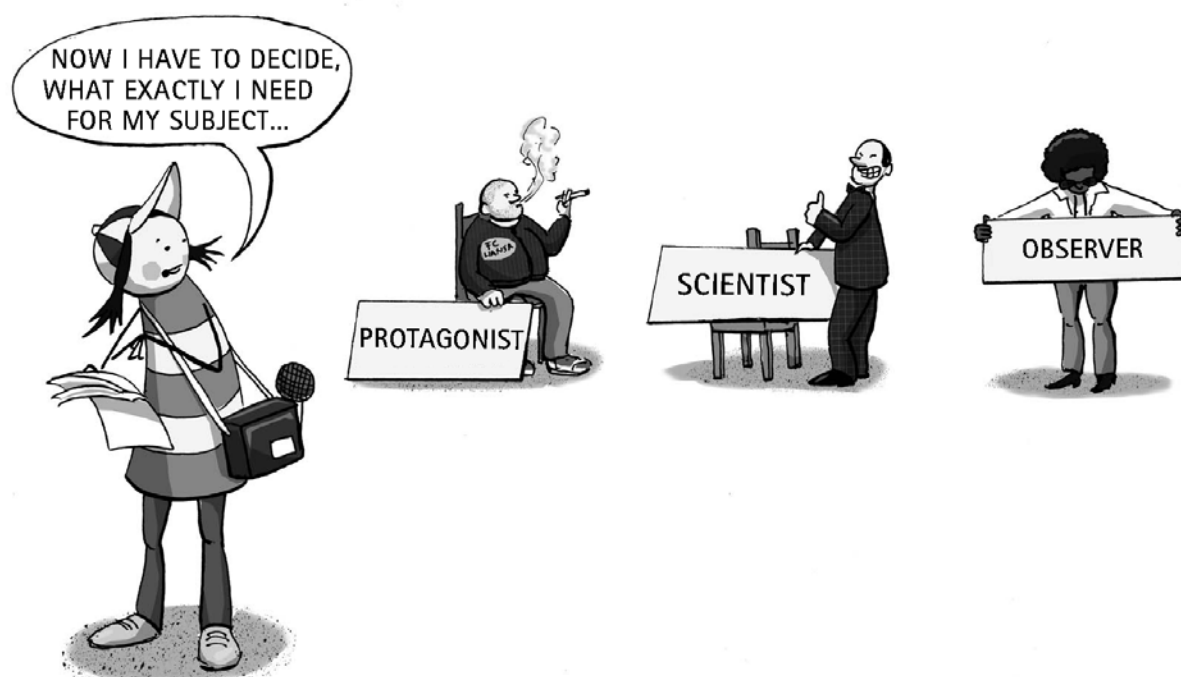
2. Question: What's missing?

Now the aim is to sift through the research material, to choose and to verify if the statements are unambiguous and possible quotes, to decide if you want to write a news text from it or if it should be a contribution with an interview – then interviews follow, e.g. with statisticians who interpret figures, **scientists** who contribute approaches to explain, **people who have been affected** who speak about their experiences.

Researching from the outside in

Research starts with the general and finishes with the special. This means it usually starts from people who are largely neutral and not directly affected and the periphery of those who are affected: specialists, scientists, archives, libraries, databases, independent observers.

From the collected information you can draw conclusions as to the lines of conflict, you know the different stances, perspectives and interests. Only then follow the interviews with the people directly affected with which you can dig deeper into camouflaging statements, confront with the information you have researched and place encrypted answers.



Hearing out the other party

Every problem has at least two sides – and you should always listen to both. Now there are three possibilities:

1. The people who have been affected refuse comment. This is something that you can say in a contribution.
2. The people affected by the situation present it differently yet by all means believably. Then you should present both sides in the contribution – perhaps with quotes from an interview each.
3. The opposing party rebuts the claims completely. We quit working on the contribution and throw everything that has been researched so far into the rubbish bin.

Interaction with the interviewees

If you want to find something out you should treat your interview partner with respect and openness. First you introduce yourself with your name and the radio station that you are researching for and then say what it is all about.

Quotes from the interview should be carefully selected and not be used to ridicule the interviewee. The principles of the “journalistic ethics” are outlined in the German press code. (<http://www.presserat.de/pressekodex.html>)

Resources for research

For yourself to be organised: Personal address book, clearly arranged diary, personal archive on area, reference books (encyclopaedia, figures by the official statistics agency, the centre for education...).



If you would like more background knowledge: libraries, archives, data bases

If you are looking for informants or interview guests:

agencies, authorities, scientists and specialists, e.g. at universities, institutes, people concerned, clubs, initiatives, circle of friends

Communicate via: phone, internet, one-on-one interview

Internet research

Advantages:

Through the internet a lot of information is (at least at present) available for free and for everyone. You can research for databases, encyclopaedias like Wikipedia, background information, organisations, experts etc. on the internet.

Be careful using internet research

- No historical information on the internet. Most information on the internet is not older than itself. Research check absolutely necessary
- Information from the internet needs to be checked against a source outside of the WWW, because often information is relayed on the internet without being verified and reappears in the same way again and again.
- The internet does not portray the reality.
If you do not find a piece of information, person, date or initiative on the internet it does not mean at all that they do not exist. It only means that the club, group, person or locality does not have internet presentation or rather that other websites do not refer to them. In rural areas and within communities, communication often works better on a personal level than via internet.

On the contrary: An organisation that has a good website does not necessarily do a good job, but maybe only a good job in public relations.

Contact via e-mail

If you do not know a person and you want to make sure that you will receive an answer to your e-mail you should call, introduce yourself and then shortly phrase your request. E-mail contact without prior phone contact is suited best for great distances, i.e. to distant countries.

Clear and Brief Providing of Information: News

What is News?

“News is, what’s different” – that is the definition of news in the U.S. Noteworthy is that which is different from the every-day type of things, that which is special.

Interest: to whom is this information of interest? – target group

In journalist classes the rule that is taught reads: “Only information that arouses general interest is newsworthy.” (La Roche, 1999). In contrast to public broadcasting and commercial stations community radios are not obliged to grant the “journalistic primary provisioning” of listeners. They have the great opportunity and freedom to concentrate on the “journalistic extra”. This means there is no obligation to provide the news that are available everywhere, but you can report the other fascinating topics of this world that do not arouse “general interest” but that are interesting for the target group of the programme, even if it should be a small one. For radio programmers in community radios the rule is: “Information that arouses the interest of the listeners in question (target group) is newsworthy.”

Timeliness

Public broadcasting and commercial radio stations work together with news agencies like the German press agency (DPA) or Associated Press (AP). They have a wide network of correspondents all over the world that send messages by the second. Big stations employ a whole staff of news editors that evaluate those messages.

Community radios usually do not have agency information at their disposal, particularly, because they cost a lot of money, but also because there are no editors paid to interpret the news.

Presently, the internet is the fastest media and news services on the internet can update their website within seconds.

Radio programmers of community radios cannot compete with this – but they do not have to because: **a piece of news is up-to-date when it reaches its target group and arouses interest.** Whether something is up-to-date depends on how often you can ask the question: “Any news?” For a weekly periodical programme that is every seven days.

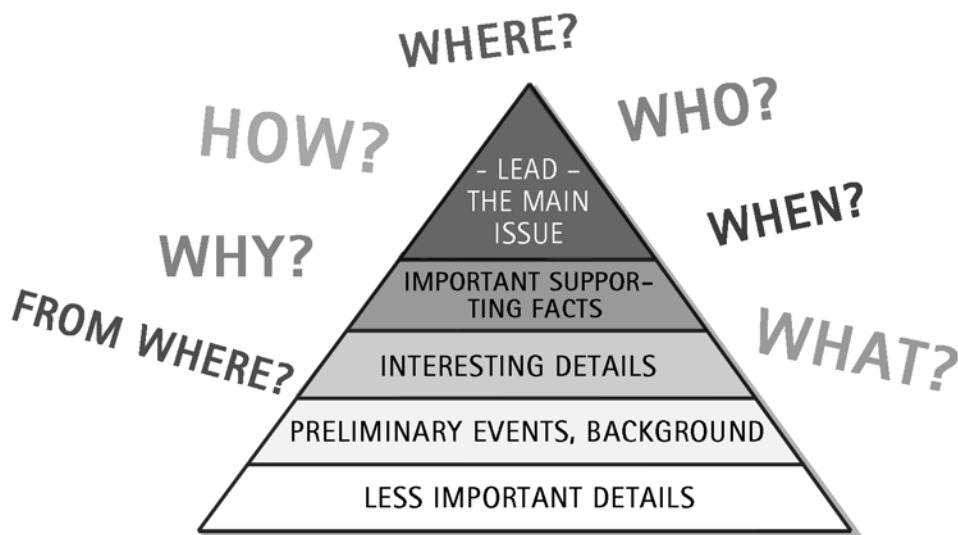
This means you can research news concerning your topic area from the week before – there is often news that did not make it into the “top news” and that are therefore not registered by many listeners. You can update this news by taking them as a point of departure for your own research: How does the changed law affect your area? What do the people concerned say? The perspective that is of interest in the own radio show for most listeners, often does not show up in other media.

How Do You Write a News Text? The Structure

The most important things first

The first sentence decides whether the listeners continue listening. That is why the most important piece of information is located in the first sentence. This so-called Lead-Style always puts what is special first – news never have chronological structure, do not start from the general information and the preliminary events are commonly found towards the end or are missing completely.

All pieces of information that now follow are supplements because the most important thing has already been said in the beginning. Even if only the first sentence would be broadcast it would already be a headline. Because the lead needs to be easy to articulate and comprehensible, it can also consist of two sentences. The number of sentences is not the criteria for the lead but rather that the main point is being stated.



The seven W`s

But what is the main issue of a news item? And what are the less important details? To answer this question the seven W-questions can help:

Who? When? What? Where? How? Why? From where?

And others: What kind of source? How many? So the W-questions can be of help – but they are not a fixed rule type to guarantee the success of a news text.

Length

Not longer than a minute, around 800 characters.

Hard News – Soft News

Hard News texts follow the specific interest of a target group.

In contrast, Soft News texts follow the “human interest”. They are considered the “colourful” type of news on the radio.

How to phrase news comprehensibly

Only speak about that which you have understood yourself

Write descriptively and in an exact way

State Names

Names give identity and can indicate the source of the information. Already during your research you should not be afraid to inquire names, titles, job specifications and everything that could be relevant.

Explain terms and abbreviations

There are some abbreviations that have become so natural that they do not need explaining: EU, NATO, BMW, CNN, BBC

All other abbreviations should not be used without prior introduction.

Example:

*“The Chamber for Industry and Commerce in Frankfurt
(German Industrie- und Handelskammer (IHK)) announced yesterday...”*

Tell the preliminary events and the background

Shortening

Eliminate superfluous detailed information, adorning adjectives and fillers.

“Truth”

Listeners expect journalistic information to be truthful coverage. This means:

The facts have to be correct!

Names have to be reproduced correctly, quotes must not be distorted and information needs to be checked.

This means that you need to have proof for all your information, know the source to be reliable or be an eye witness yourself.

If you are not a hundred percent sure about something you have to point this out to your audience.

3. Integrity

As we already know every problem has at least two sides. It is part of the journalistic duty to take care to research all sides and portray everything completely.



No comment!

Comments and personal judgements should not be mixed up with providing information.

“Objectivity”

Even if facts have been proven and names and quotes have been reproduced correctly, news texts are never objective: They represent your criteria of choice and judgement but without being distorted or mixing up information and opinion. Subjectivity is a fundamental momentum for community radios – they should be obvious and understandable for the listener. Listeners should be able to realise

- why you are making this topic/event news,
- why your are making this particular aspect the main issue.