

Unit 1: Analysing TV News

These learning materials comprise several short tasks with key questions and resources focusing on analysing TV news.

The materials are available in downloadable PDF or in Word files that you can tailor to your own requirements. The tasks are suitable for a range of attainment levels, and teachers are advised to select the material most appropriate for their students.

Introduction

ACTIVITIES

1. What is a story?
2. What makes a story newsworthy?
3. News as genre

General information about these lesson ideas:

Aims and Learning Outcomes

What students can expect to learn and achieve.

Assessment

Ways in which tasks might be assessed, either formally or informally.

Curriculum Context

How the materials relate to the requirements of GCSE, AS/A2 Level and BTEC qualifications in Media Studies as well as the Programme of Study for Citizenship and English Language at Key Stage 4.

Introduction

These activities are designed to help students understand and analyse TV news. In this unit learners will need to refer to a pre-recorded Channel 4 News bulletin in some detail. Record, or ask learners to record, a particular evening's bulletin. You may also like to make available newspapers for additional research.

Invite students to discuss the following questions together as an introductory activity. The aim should be to come up with a set of agreed whole-class answers/definitions. As this and other sessions develop, the group may wish to review the responses they make now.

What does it take to turn a rumour into news? Consider how the source of a rumour might make it more convincing and ways in which a rumour might become more convincing, hardening into a real piece of news?

Ask your students to imagine how a rumour that the parents of a Year 7 pupil in your school had won the lottery might become a hard fact? Consider three ways in which this tale might be substantiated and how reliable these sources of information actually are.

Worksheet 1.1 is designed to support GCSE students, but the questions might stand alone for AS/A2 students. The worksheet introduces ideas of truth and verification, but also offers opportunities for discussion of broader issues including fleshing out a news story and a preliminary consideration of news values. The fact that a member of the media covers the story, it seems, does not of course guarantee that it is true.

ACTIVITY 1: What is a story?

"What is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations."

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (1865)

Alice's question is an important one, something that applies not just to books but also to the stories they contain. When making news, you aim to tell stories that are well constructed and interesting. Stories must be newsworthy too, and that is something that we will look at in this course.

For now – what makes a story interesting?

1.1 Get your students to consider a work of fiction – a film or a book they have seen or read recently – and then explain what made it interesting to them.

Divide up the following questions so that groups consider them separately and then feed back. They could also be discussed one at a time by the whole class. There are no 'correct' answers to these questions, the important thing is to try to go beyond what students mean by 'interesting' and 'boring' and begin to tease out the 'ingredients' that compelling/entertaining stories share. If students are stuck trying to think in general terms, use examples from books and films to illustrate what might be meant by interesting characters and incidents, before thinking why they are compelling.

1. Is it important that it contains interesting characters? Why? And what makes a character interesting?
2. Is it important to include a person that can be identified or empathised with, or are people that are strange or act for odd reasons more interesting?
3. Is it important that the character is living through or has lived through an interesting time or experience? Why? What makes an experience or an incident 'interesting'?
4. Is it important that the story is happening now?
5. Is it important that the story contains plenty of incidents – a variety of scenes and happenings? Why?
6. What sort of ending occurs in a 'good' story? Do you think stories should have happy endings or should they leave you wanting more, with lots of unanswered questions?

Narrative structure

1.2 Television news programmes are made up of lots of stories. Yes - they are based on real happenings in the world, real events, meetings, arguments, conflicts, compromises and agreements – but they have to be packaged and shown to us in a way that is intelligible. They must be shaped so that they can be followed and understood. This shaping involves news programme makers creating interesting and logical narratives.

Most stories on a news bulletin have a simple structure - even those that include several elements including a film report and an interview.

They have an **Introduction**. This will usually answer some of the five key news questions:

Who is involved?
When did it happen?
What has happened?
Where did it happen?
Why did it happen?

It might even raise the question of how it happened. Of course, if the introduction answers these questions in too much detail, there would be little point continuing with the story, so the introduction may leave some of these questions unanswered and also may well pose several **Questions** or describe significant **Problems** that needs exploring.

Sometimes an introduction will be a bit more sophisticated, telling us the answers to the WHO and WHERE questions, but leaving it up to the main report to answer the rest – WHY? HOW? WHAT?

Then there is the **main body** of the report in which the answers to some or all of these questions are provided and **elaborated**. Part of this elaboration will be contained in the visual images that provide the evidence that the story is genuine.

Then there is the **conclusion**. Here the story is brought to a close and loose ends are tied up. Of course, not all conclusions can be neat – the conclusion may point out that a problem remains to be solved sometime in the future.

1.3 Worksheet 1.2 contains the script from an actual Channel 4 News broadcast. It concluded the evening bulletin on Saturday 10 September 2005, ending the show with an upbeat Katrina-related tale, just as the bulletin had begun with location reports from New Orleans that were much more dismal.

Invite students to identify how the story is structured and the kinds of questions it asks and where it answers them. In doing so the aim is to develop their sense of story structure so that they feel more confident constructing their own stories.

- To extend the exercise ask students to suggest why this story was placed at the end of the programme.
- Can they spot how the story was given a harder edge at times and how it could have been a lot more sentimental and 'soft'? How?
- Identify how the images and the voice over script fit together - how sometimes space is allowed for the soundtrack speeches and songs to be heard so that the voice over can comment on what has been said or sung.

Invite students to spot how the writers use rhetoric to make the story more interesting:

- "Another cause, another concert" – dramatic, alliterative start makes the report sound as if, despite all the sentiment and show biz glamour, Channel 4 News is maintaining its distance.
- "In an echo of the post-9/11 Telethon..." – suggestion of past experience and research, gives context.
- "Unexpected serenade..." - the script does not explain everything: the images will supply the full 'picture'; Jack Nicholson, known to be a ladies' man, is shown singing down the telephone to a possible contributor.
- "Bashed the President..." - use of more casual language in keeping with Channel 4's more relaxed style?
- "...they'll be happy." - what is the impact of this rather flat sign off at the end?

This is followed by **Worksheet 1.3**, designed to be used to analyse the Channel 4 News stories, Waveland, included on the site.

The table that accompanies the Waveland story is divided into four columns. At Key Stage 4, students might be advised to stick to the main 'narrative' activity – filling in column three with their views of the function of each of the 11 segments that make up the story. At the teacher's discretion, the analysis of the report may invite dipping into the questions in the fourth column and at the end of the table. These touch on some other key issues concerning representation; the conventions of TV news and also the differing impacts a story can have depending on the audience. These are issues that will be developed elsewhere in this unit and also unit 3.

In going through a story in considerable detail, students will gain invaluable insights concerning story structure and the relationship between script and image. Newscasters make meanings and guide the viewers' interpretation. This is certainly happening in the Rugman story about Waveland, where we are frequently told how to interpret someone's behaviour or judge a scene in the reporter's voice over.

The broader narrative

1.4 The Waveland 'package' is an extremely useful case study with which to pinpoint good news storytelling. It has a beginning, middle and a very dark end. It has heroes and victims - the man sweeping his porch after the storm has removed his entire home is both victim and hero at the same time. It has a potential 'bad guy' in the shape of an

inarticulate George Bush expressing a few platitudes about taking action (what question does the class feel he was answering?) and a whopping 'agent of change' in the shape of the storm surge that turned Waveland into matchwood. It also highlights the reporter as narrator – our guide to the devastated and dangerous post-apocalyptic streets.

However, students also need to recognise that an individual story like this Waveland piece is only a part of two broader narrative jigsaws. The first is the 'story' that is the whole news bulletin itself. The second is the narrative created by the TV schedule, in which the news is, so say some critics, just a part of an evening's entertainment.

In order to tackle these larger narrative elements, students will need to watch a pre-recorded news bulletin.

1. The bulletin narrative

Just as books contain periods of excitement and description, humorous passages and darker ones, so an overall news bulletin has a narrative shape created by the various stories in concert. Each story will have its own tone or pulse, born of the events themselves and the skills of the different reporters and technicians involved in their construction. Clearly, coverage of an EU Finance Ministers' meeting in Manchester may have a very different impact compared to one in which a reporter is seen following troops around a drowned city searching for stranded victims and looters.

Using a simple graph showing an x-axis for the progress of the stories and the bulletin over the time of its broadcast, and a y-axis showing a variety of moods - excitement; happiness; worry; lightness; amusement - ask students to work out the changing tone or impact of the news bulletin they have recorded. This is a highly subjective exercise – what is a depressing or dull story to one person may be fascinating to the next, but the main thing is to convey how the tempo and feel of an entire bulletin gives it a distinct overall story shape. This can be done individually or as a whole class working with common knowledge of a single bulletin.

Can students detect how the producers have organised the stories to provide areas of light and dark or something exciting before or after a much more complicated and demanding piece?

How does the programme keep the watcher hooked? What stories are kept in reserve and hinted at to ensure that viewers do not desert the show during the commercial break or breaks?

What is the impact of the return to the studio after each 'package' to that evening's presenter, there to thank the reporter in the field or perhaps cross-examine someone in the studio about what has just been shown? Does this sense of 'coming home' inject a key mood change throughout the programme?

What is the impact of such domestic, familiar and safe elements such as the sport or the weather report, coming as they do near the end of the show?

What is the impact of the advertising break(s)?

2. The schedule narrative

The news is a key part of the public service element of television stations' broadcasting licenses. It is something they have to provide, thought of as being among the main 'quality' element of most channels' output. They are not allowed to be sponsored (and therefore controlled editorially by commercial interests). But where news is placed in the schedule also has a narrative effect – putting the world's disasters, politicians and policies, wars and peace negotiations alongside everything else more usually described as entertainment. And, many argue, news is not distinct, but a part of that diet of entertainment – packaging information in compelling and professional ways so it is easily understood and brings the world into our homes. But when does the camera's presence become intrusive rather than investigative, or our watching switch from curiosity and sympathy to voyeurism?

What kinds of programmes come before and after the Channel 4 News? In what way does the news help to build an audience for the evening schedule? Does it promote forthcoming programmes in the breaks?

Does the fact that a news programme, however difficult or sad its contents, is followed by a whole evening of other programmes change its impact? Does the fact that whatever happens in the world (apart from a nuclear war or other apocalypse), Jon Snow and his team will be there at the same time – 7.00pm - with the same signature tune have an impact on the overall narrative of the programme or the smaller story narratives it contains?

Are there programmes that should not follow the news? "Toga Celebrity Golf" for example or "Pets Win Prizes"?

ACTIVITY 2: What makes a story newsworthy?

"Sex, sensation, pets, heroism."

Donald Zec – author and Daily Mirror journalist for 40 years

"Hard news really is hard. It sticks not in the craw, but in the mind. It has an almost physical effect, causing fear, interest, laughter or shock."

Andrew Marr – *My Trade – A Short History of British Journalism* (Macmillan 2004)

"Bad news sells best. Good news is no news."

Charles Tatum (Kirk Douglas) in *Ace In the Hole* (director: Billy Wilder – 1951)

To what extent do students agree or disagree with the quotations above. Invite them to rank them in the order they feel reflects their value, as a critique of news on TV and in newspapers. Do they feel the Zec quotation is helpful as a way of understanding the Waveland news report? Is it unfair to say that it was only broadcast because it contained some of these core elements?

Discussion

What is news? It is the obvious question to ask any journalist and it's the one to use when evaluating the content of a news TV broadcast or newspaper's contents. And yet on most days, reporters are not dealing with attacks on the Twin Towers, or Hurricane Katrina (obvious hard news stories), but having to weigh a whole host of stories from political press conferences to sightings of white sharks off the Dorset coast, trying to decide which to include and in what order.

2.1 Invite students to write down a list of news stories they have heard in recent days. These can be general areas of the world that are currently in the news rather than specific stories. Compare notes. Include a list compiled by the teacher.

What makes these stories newsworthy? Why did they appear on national TV news broadcasts and in national newspapers? If there is a significant gap between the stories suggested ask why this difference exists.

News values

Throughout the day the programme editor in the Channel 4 newsroom constantly shuffles stories she or he feel deserve to be featured. A typical day begins with a new editor preparing 'story slugs' – bullet-point summaries of key events derived from newspapers and radio, and information from ITN or the news agencies such as Reuters. Rejigging often goes up to the very last minute as programmes are screened. Presenters are often forced

to ad lib lines about breaking stories during the programme based on what they have been told through their earpiece link to the news gallery where the technicians and programme producers sit.

2.2 Journalists are sometimes a bit resistant to the idea that there are clearly defined rules governing what makes a story newsworthy. Explore the site to see what the journalists in the newsroom feel news values are or how they know a story is good or not.

There have been a number of attempts to classify the factors that most news stories contain.

Worksheet 1.4 contains a table featuring a number of these factors. It invites students to identify the likely definitions – a way of getting them actively involved in becoming familiar with these terms.

Worksheet 1.5 contains a blank grid, which could be used to analyse either the day's newspapers or the previous night's Channel 4 News bulletin recorded for this lesson. Students could catalogue a Channel 4 News bulletin as homework. Ideally they will all prepare the same bulletin, but that is not essential. Also, ask students to make a note of the advertising in the breaks – this will be useful in unit 3 when consideration is made of the Channel 4 News audience.

Remind students that news stories often contain several of the key news values. For example, Hurricane Katrina's devastation was both a surprise and yet predictable. Its arrival had been tracked for over a week and there were plenty of articles highlighting the danger that New Orleans faced if its levees broke, dating back three years and more. In a sense the story of Katrina quickly became a search for an answer to the question why. Why, if the danger was known, was more not done to prevent it?

2:3 Does it matter that there may be an undeclared set of principles governing the selection of stories for broadcast or inclusion in a newspaper? Invite the students to look again at the table of news values and their definitions. From the following list, which stories might not make it onto Channel 4 News?

- A story about a disaster in which hundreds of people are killed in floods in Bangladesh – no British or European people are involved.
- A story about a protest march by indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest, supported by Brazilian NGOs, against illegal logging and land clearance for cattle farming.
- A story in which the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition pose for photographs at the start of a chess championship being held for a national charity.
- A story about US military operations against drug lords in Colombia. The footage is limited and the bulletin is already carrying a large item about the US operations in the northern Iraq town of Tel Afar.
- A story about one council's attempt to boost literacy by encouraging people to read on their holidays, with two attractive students giving out library books to holidaymakers on the local beaches.
- A story about the discovery of a deep water coral reef off the Dorset coast. A bulletin the previous week carried a similar story about another coral reef discovery in Scotland.
- A comment by a member of the BNP criticising news coverage of the General Election as biased.
- Week three of a campaign to stop the deportation of an alleged illegal immigrant, whose supporters claim that if he is sent home, he will be tortured. The story was first covered when he took refuge in the church where he is still claiming sanctuary.

- A story leaked about secret operations by MI5 in its search for the instigators of the recent London bombing campaign.
- A story involving a prominent environmental group staging a major protest against cargo ships carrying waste. Protestors are chaining themselves to the hulls of the boats they are targeting while others buzz them in fast-moving motor boats. The film footage is the charity's own as the event was planned with strict secrecy.
- A story suggesting that David Beckham has been swapping intimate text messages with an as yet unnamed woman - a second Rebecca Loos?
- Footage from the Berlin Film Festival, which has just given a prize to an Iranian film about Kurdish children who gather up live ammunition and landmines in order to make a living.
- Scenes shot by hooded animal protestors shown breaking into a laboratory and damaging scientific equipment and releasing animals.

Watch interviews on the site and try to find out whether or not the following factors might affect what goes out as part of the news:

- It is a quiet news day, say at the start of the holiday season.
- The most senior editor has a strong influence on what goes out and has certain 'bees in his or her bonnet' – hating animal and environment stories, perhaps.
- There are insufficient pictures.
- There are images but they have been supplied as part of an EPK – electronic press kit – supplied by a PR firm or by a campaigning organisation.
- There has been a big campaign by politicians suggesting that journalists in their efforts to emphasise conflict in Parliament, choose never to show the more positive or collaborative work that goes on in Westminster.
- A prominent advertiser on the station has threatened to remove their advertising if a story damaging to them features on the news.
- A story has broken in the morning and been a big feature of all that day's bulletins and radio coverage. There don't appear to be any new angles.
- There is no spokesperson prepared to discuss the story.
- The embargo on a story has been broken. For example, a rival journalist has jumped the gun by a week, reporting the findings of a big research project in advance of the embargo – the official date after which the story was intended to become public knowledge.

What other unofficial currents or undertows might cause stories to sink or swim?

ACTIVITY 3: News as Genre

3:1 All members of the class could watch a sequence of millisecond 'grabs' from a series of programmes and know precisely what kind of TV programme they are watching. How is this possible?

A lifetime of TV exposure means we are able to spot the key conventions that distinguish one kind of programme from another, and tell news programmes from quiz shows, soap operas from quality police dramas in an instant.

For this activity please refer to **Worksheet 1.6**.

It borrows its approach from the old I Spy books that encouraged people to capture their observations of the world around them. As well as getting students to examine a Channel 4 broadcast in some detail, there is space provided for them to reflect on the impact of each of the conventions they have spotted.

Students could try to tackle the whole set or they could be asked to work on one or other 'convention' group and then feed back findings to the class.

The makers of any news bulletin might hope that viewers derive certain generic conclusions from what they are seeing, even if they are not examining every facet of the show in detail, as students will in this exercise.

Some 'impacts' of stories are as follows:

1. The news is a high status programme on any network. Typically, news programmes will try to appear **authoritative, unbiased and unflustered**. Even when protestors invaded the BBC newsroom back in the 1980s to take a stand against government policies they saw as discriminatory, and chained themselves to cameras, the presenters carried on as calmly as possible.
2. The programme is live – so is meant to be **'alive'** to what is happening even as the newscast is made. It has the potential to go wrong on air, but it can respond to the world around it in real time. So as well as being professional, it also has the capacity to be **spontaneous**.
3. At the same time, the news is made using the sorts of **camera angles and editing conventions** that will be familiar to viewers of realistic films and documentaries. The repertoire of shots, the relationship of voice-over to images, the sound and picture editing - all contribute to the news appearing highly **'transparent'**, a supposed 'window on the world'. Channel 4 News will often use quite artful camera angles and effects.
4. The news relies heavily on **computer graphics** to explain stories, present figures or represent statistics. These are a clear sign of the news programme's **educational role**, but also carry suggestions of the programme's **sophistication and clarity**. The graphics can also introduce a degree of **fun** into more serious stories.
5. It is a contentious point, and one we will be explore in more depth in unit 3, but many argue that the news, in being **non-sensational** and by virtue of its familiar **form**, is **reassuring** even as it reports on terrible happenings in the world. A key element of this must be the **restraint** that governs the footage we see and the warnings that precede unpleasant sights or even the use of flash photography. Also contributing to the general air of reassurance are the following: be-suited avuncular, RP-speaking presenters reading from auto-cues; hi-tech studio settings; polite and professional forms of address even during difficult interviews; a familiar pattern of interviews and location reports and of stories of varying degrees of hardness (seriousness), usually declining in seriousness as the programme nears its conclusion.
6. **Balance**. Channel 4 News has a reputation for being to the left of centre in its politics, covering aspects of social policy in a depth and with a prominence that the BBC and ITV1 news broadcasts cannot attempt. There is a requirement on any news channel to give those it criticises space to answer any allegations. This sense of **fair play** is crucial in maintaining a programme's **credibility**.
7. Channel 4 News is backed up by a website that seeks to be as **interactive** as it can. Aspects of this interactivity are key to the programme gaining and holding its audience. For example, visitors can subscribe to SNOWMAIL and receive a bulletin from each day's presenter prior to the main evening broadcast explaining some of the sources and hassles that have contributed to the programme's creation.

8. As a key part of Channel 4's output, the show will be heavily **branded**.
9. As a visual medium, television news has to be **visually interesting**.

In the 1990s the comedian Chris Morris produced a satirical programme called *The Day Today* that poked fun at the conventions of television news. Among its targets were:

1. Absurdly inflated and elaborate opening credits.
2. Trivialising mechanisms for packaging up the news - idiotic graphics and sets.
3. Insulting male presenters and glamorous female presenters, happy to flirt with their male co-anchors.
4. Clichéd stories that occur again and again.

Around the same time, in a separate programme, the journalist Alison Pearson accused the news of lurching too far into the realm of 'entertainment'. "The media are busy blurring the line between information and entertainment, but TV's offence is the greater because 80% of Britons get most of their news from television," she said. Among her targets were:

- TV news studios that resemble the sets of James Bond villains.
- Over-familiar anchors.
- Cosy chats between anchors and reporters.
- Immensely young presenters, appointed as much for their good looks as their journalistic flair.
- Grandiose corporate identities that dominate shows.
- The way style can triumph over content, for example with reports from outside Parliament when nothing much is happening but an announcement is imminent.
- Increasing presence of 'human interest stories' instead of harder news.

What do students think about these sorts of trends? Do they feel that news broadcasting in the UK is in a healthy state?

Aims and Learning Outcomes

At the end of this unit students will have:

- discussed, questioned and determined the difference between news and rumour.
- explored the elements that make a story interesting and seen how news stories are narratives.
- deconstructed a news story in detail – identifying the function of its various elements and beginning to explore ideas of 'interpretation', audience and representation. There are also opportunities to examine the sub-text of a story both in terms of its cultural context and its more immediate political stance.
- looked in detail at news values and teased out their definitions relating them to stories they have seen or are in newspapers to hand.
- explored the idea of news as a genre, identifying and attempting to explain the function of some of the key ingredients that make such broadcasts recognisable.

Assessment

The unit has the potential to provide students with knowledge to make sophisticated independent 'readings' of subsequent TV news bulletins. The ideal way to assess this might be to ask students to write up an analysis of a bulletin. Detailed work on a Channel 4 News bulletin will enable students to undertake comparative work – teasing out the differences between this and other channels' news output.

Worksheets summary

- Worksheet 1.1: Lottery Winner. Explores the difference between truth and rumour.
- Worksheet 1.2: Concert of Katrina. Explores the structure of a news story.

- Worksheet 1.3: Waveland. Detailed deconstruction of a news story on this site.
- Worksheet 1.4: Defining news values.
- Worksheet 1.5: Relating news values to actual stories.
- Worksheet 1.6: News as genre – deconstructing a news programme.

Curriculum Context

These materials can be used with students of Media Studies at GCSE and AS/A2 level as well as for teaching the National Curriculum Programme of Study for Citizenship and English at Key Stage 4 and media elements of the People and Society curriculum at 5-14 (Scottish).

The activities require students to reflect on the construction and characteristics of TV news broadcasts (Citizenship 1g). It is also an opportunity, by studying specific news stories for students to fulfil the need to consider current affairs (2a). Structured small group discussion is used to afford students the opportunity to justify their opinions orally (Citizenship 2b).

Discussion of the competing demands of the TV audience and journalistic good practice allows students to take part in exploratory discussion (Citizenship 2c).

The Waveland exercise encourages students to reflect on their reactions to the victims of a disaster, evaluating the extent of their empathy – a key Citizenship skill. In studying the different ways individuals and groups might be represented in news stories, students will be able to identify the perspectives offered on individuals, communities and society at large (English EN2 1d, 1e). Students will be taught to appreciate how meaning is conveyed in a short news bulletin (English EN2 5a) as well as the ways in which the audience of TV journalism responds to the media (English EN2 5d).

Work in this unit will enable students of Media Studies to become more familiar with issues of representation and news values. The activities suggested engage with debate about the wider social and moral context in which media texts are produced, supporting GCSE and AS/A2 Assessment Objectives in the following ways:

OCR GCSE Media Studies AO5: Media Messages and Values
AQA GCSE Media Studies AO1b, AO2b
WJEC GCSE Media Studies AO1
OCR AS Level Media Studies AO3: Representation
AQA AS/A2 Level Media Studies AO2, AO3i
WJEC AS/A2 Level Media Studies AO1i, AO2ii
BTEC Level 4 Certificate in Media: Professional Context for Digital Video Editing

The unit can also be used in Scottish Qualifications Authority Intermediate 2 and Higher Media Studies courses: Media Analysis (Non-Fiction).