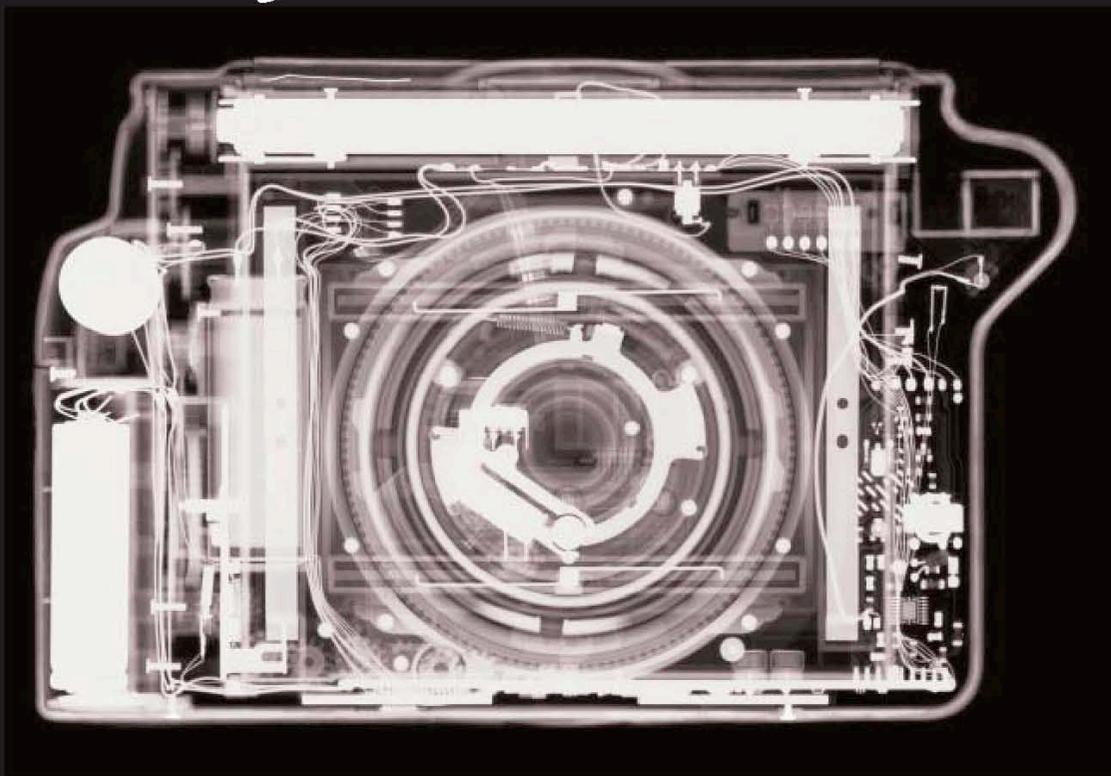


An Introduction to Journalism



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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the last century the job of a journalist was quite simple to define: it was someone – usually male – who earned their living by writing for a newspaper or periodical. No formal qualifications were required and many people agreed with the description of legendary newspaperman of the time H.L. Mencken that journalism was ‘a craft to be mastered in four days and abandoned at the first sign of a better job’ (Delano, 2000: 262).

Since then the job itself has diversified to cover radio, television and online, and as its popularity as a career has grown, its status has changed from a craft to a profession, with a subsequent change in entry requirements. In 1965 only 6 per cent of journalists entering local evening newspapers held a degree. Five years later the first postgraduate qualification in journalism in the UK began at University College, Cardiff. By the mid-1990s, two-thirds of journalists had a university education (Delano, 2000: 267), and in 2004 there were 658 courses on offer at universities in the UK covering every aspect of the profession (UCAS).

Many of the changes in journalism have come about because of changes in technology, from the invention of the telegraph to satellite links that connect different continents at the flick of a switch. The emphasis in the 21st century is on immediacy with live radio and television reports, Internet chats with world leaders, and news flashes delivered to mobile phones. Technological changes have also required changes in the working practices of journalists who are now expected to be multitasked. Newspaper journalists must also provide material for the online edition of their paper, while broadcast journalists are increasingly expected to supply material for radio, television and online services. But despite these changes, the fundamentals of journalism remain the same: to report events that affect society in an accurate and balanced way so that some understanding of the world we live in can be gained.

The aim of this book is to try to show how journalists in newspapers, radio, television and online do their job, not only by explaining the process but also by hearing from those who do it on a daily basis. Of course, whole libraries are devoted to every aspect of journalism, and this text is not exhaustive, but an introduction to the techniques used and skills required to be a journalist. It is designed for those who have an interest in the production of news but who have

little or no knowledge of the process. Through the interviews with practitioners in each chapter, it is also hoped that even those already embarked on a career in journalism will find some useful tips.

News is a multi-million pound business, but for all that, it tends to be taken for granted by the consumers of newspapers, radio, television and the Internet. In many ways it is the ultimate consumer product – out of date almost as soon as it is reported, with a constant demand for the ‘latest’ story. But despite the proliferation of news outlets over the past decade, the range of stories covered by mainstream media is surprisingly similar. For this reason Chapter 1 examines news as a commodity, showing where news comes from, and how it is selected and used by different media. The chapter ends with an analysis of the news from a particular day to illustrate the similarities and differences between media.

But no matter which medium news is produced for, the basic approach to researching it is similar, and this is explored in Chapter 2. This chapter examines various news sources in detail and shows how reporters verify sources. Turning to localised research, the chapter discusses local publications, press releases, PR agencies, local PR officers, councillors, local organisations, the police and other emergency services, community media, and how to accrue a network of personal contacts. Further comment and analysis are provided by working journalists from both radio and TV media.

Having identified and sourced a story, the next job is to write it, and Chapter 3 outlines the basics of writing a story starting from the intro – the first paragraph of a news story – through to the type of language that should be used. It also looks at story construction and how student journalists should approach different types of story, including sport and features. It investigates the different ways of writing for newspapers, radio, television and the Internet.

The interview is a key tool for any journalist and Chapter 4 explores the interview and its place in newspaper and broadcast journalism. The chapter explains what steps should be taken in order to conduct a successful interview, from finding the right interviewees to formulating effective questions. It outlines in detail how an interview is best conducted for different media, concentrating on the technical and practical aspects as well as the journalist’s own skills of interacting with an interviewee.

Chapter 5 then takes a look at the skills needed to be a broadcast journalist – from finding the best location for an interview, to recording and editing a news package. This is not a technical manual, but it outlines what needs to be considered at each step of developing a story for broadcast. The chapter ends with an account of the work of an online journalist that shows how the skills of print and broadcast are combined.

Journalists are necessarily constrained by the law, which is designed to protect both those being reported on and journalists themselves. For this reason the next two chapters look at the law and journalism. Chapter 6 provides an introduction to the English legal system, and considers a range of legal sources. It introduces the reader to the difference between civil and criminal law, outlines

the court structure, and provides a useful list of key legal personnel. In Chapter 7 there is an examination of the range of legal provisions that influence and constrain journalists. A single chapter cannot provide a detailed consideration of the provisions, but by summarising key areas, it supplies a useful snapshot of the subject. The chapter includes an introduction to the laws relating to privacy, reporting elections, protecting sources and copyright. It also explores the complex areas of contempt and defamation law in more detail.

Having provided an introduction to the court system and what can and cannot be reported, the text then in Chapter 8 examines court reporting. This chapter focuses on the basics of what you must have in your story and what you should do before going to court for the first time. It looks at the ways you should approach Magistrates' Court, Crown Court, inquests and tribunals. It investigates the different ways courts are covered by newspaper, radio, television and online journalists.

An equally important source of news for journalists is Government, and Chapter 9 looks at the changing shape of local government from the environment department to the main parts and roles of the local government system. It outlines what sort of stories should be looked for and how to get them. It investigates how to get the best out of councillors and council officers, plus how to bust the jargon and avoid political bias. It also has an extensive section on how regional journalists should aim to cover Westminster.

The day-to-day activities of working journalists are determined by laws, regulations and the practicalities associated with producing news and attracting an audience. However, the nature of the work also raises a number of moral and ethical considerations with which the journalist must grapple. The final chapter considers the role of regulation, with particular attention given to the conduct of journalists and journalism content. The chapter considers different regulatory bodies and the rationales that support such regulation, and the complex interplay between law, regulation and ethics through the exploration of a number of moral dilemmas that working journalists may face on a regular basis.

The final sections of the book provide a Glossary of Legal Terms followed by a Glossary of Journalism Terms, which it is hoped will prove useful to those new to these areas.

1

WHAT IS NEWS?

'The news' is an integral part of life in the 21st century. Once a discrete category available only in certain formats at certain times, news is now available around the clock on radio, television, the Internet, sent via text to your phone, as well as in its traditional paper form. What is surprising is that despite the proliferation of news outlets, and the advances in technology that have altered the way it is gathered, processed and received, the product itself has barely changed since the emergence of a mass circulation popular press in the second half of the 19th century. Then, as now, different news outlets catered to different audiences and so gave greater or lesser prominence to different types of stories all under the heading of 'the news'. And then, as now, cultural commentators criticised journalism for debasing cultural standards as 'politics and opinion began to be supplemented, if not replaced, with material of a "human note", crime, sexual violence and human oddities' (Williams, 1998: 51).

A single definition for the news is problematic because so many different factors influence its selection and production. There are also many different approaches to analysing news selection whereby each views the news from a different theoretical perspective.¹ This chapter examines news as a product and discusses organisational influences on its production. It then examines how news is used by different media, and within each medium how it is used to target specific audiences.

Technology has played a major part in the way news is gathered and disseminated. Advances in printing technology towards the end of the 19th century allowed for cheaper newspapers to be produced; better systems of roads and rail allowed for mass circulation; and the invention of the telegraph opened the area able to be reported upon and the style in which it was written (cf. Allan, 1999; Williams, 1998). More recent technological advances have made communication across the world faster and easier, and for that reason the impact of technology on news, and global influences on news, will also be discussed. The

chapter ends with an examination of the news taken from newspapers, radio and television, which illustrates how and why different media use the news.

SELECTING THE NEWS

At its simplest, the news is the reporting of events to an audience, but as Stuart Hall comments, ‘Of the millions of events which occur every day in the world, only a tiny proportion ever become visible as “potential news stories”’: and of this proportion only a small fraction are actually produced as the day’s news in the news media’ (Hall, 1981: 234).

Given that almost any event has the potential to be news – from a local mugging to a terrorist attack – it might be surprising that on any given day, the majority of stories reported in one news outlet are also covered by every other outlet, albeit to a greater or lesser extent, as the analysis at the end of this chapter shows. Journalistic myth would have us believe that this is because all journalists have an instinctive ‘nose for news’ that alerts them to newsworthy stories. However, an analysis of what actually becomes the news shows that there are certain factors that consistently influence whether or not an event is deemed newsworthy. This is not to suggest that every news story will have all, or even any, of these factors, or that journalists consciously select stories on this basis. However, research, most notably by Galtung and Ruge (1981), indicates that the following characteristics are consistently evident in most news stories.

- **Relevance:** For an event to be reported, it must be seen to affect, however indirectly, the lives of the audience. This accounts for one of the biggest differences between national and local news: a mugging in Manchester would most likely go unreported outside that area, unless it were linked to a series of attacks around the country.
- **Timeliness:** Stories tend to stress what is happening now rather than reflect past events. Events that take place at times when they can be easily monitored are favoured, hence the tendency for press conferences to take place at times that allow it to be reported in the main broadcast news bulletins, and in time for the next day’s national newspapers.
- **Simplification:** Stories that can be told in straightforward, unambiguous terms that are easy to understand. This is particularly important for broadcast news bulletins, which are constrained by time limitations.
- **Predictability:** Stories that deal with events known about in advance like anniversaries, the release of the latest unemployment figures, or state occasions (diary jobs).
- **Unexpectedness:** Something that is unusual or rarely happens, for example when Mars became visible from earth by the naked eye in the summer of 2003 for the first time in almost 700 years.

- **Continuity:** Stories where the initial event has repercussions that affect people. These are stories when there is seen to be a need for regular updates, as in the coverage of major court stories, or, notably, the war in Iraq in 2003.
- **Composition:** News editors like to provide a range of different types of stories: serious political news as well as lighter, human interest stories.
- **Elite people:** A woman caught shop-lifting is unlikely to make the news. But if she is a well-known Hollywood star, the story is covered across the globe.
- **Elite nations:** Events in ‘first world’ countries, especially the USA and Europe, are favoured over those in developing nations.
- **Negativity:** ‘Bad news’ is generally deemed more interesting than ‘good news’, so stories about disasters, crime and scandal feature highly.

What eventually ends up as the news is further influenced by the way the news is gathered. Ultimately the news is a business and as such it is highly organised. The detailed structure of a news organisation may vary from one outlet to another, but to a large extent every news organisation uses the same sources to get the news. Editors cannot rely on events just happening in order to fill their paper or bulletin, so the vast majority of stories are not spontaneous but planned. As Paul Manning points out, ‘The production of news each day, each week or on a rolling 24-hour basis, involves the routine gathering and assembling of certain constituent elements which are then fashioned to construct or fabricate an account of the particular news event’ (Manning, 2001: 50). In other words, in order to satisfy the increasing demand for news, reporters tend to access similar sources that traditionally provide material.

This can be problematic, as Gay Tuchman (1975) has shown. She coined the phrase ‘the news net’ to describe the way news outlets organise their news gathering using reporters, freelancers (‘stringers’) and wire services (for example, Associated Press or Reuters) to create a ‘news blanket’ that will cover all potential news stories. However, in practice there is a huge amount of duplication. Stringers might tip off a newsroom that a celebrity is planning a remote Highland wedding, but it is likely the news organisation will then send their own staff to cover the event in order to make it ‘their’ story, and also because it is cheaper to send staff than to pay a freelance. Similarly, the wire services may cover an anti-war demonstration in London, but news organisations will send their own staff to develop a local angle on it. The resulting story would then combine the broader wire service coverage, for example reaction to the demonstration from abroad or from official Government spokesmen, with more specific reporting about families from their area and their experience of the demonstration. In this way, says Tuchman, ‘Instead of blanketing the world by their joint efforts, the news media and the news services leave the same sort of holes justified by a professionally shared notion of news judgement’ (1978: 295).

Rebekah Wade, the editor of the *Sun*, has defined journalism as ‘an ability to meet the challenge of filling space’,² and to be able to do that, journalists have

to order the world and make it manageable. What is interesting to note is how the ‘ordering’ of the world links to the characteristics researchers have identified as common to most news stories, as discussed above.

One of the primary ways of organising news gathering is on a geographical basis, thereby making sure that stories are ‘relevant’ to particular audiences. National news media tend to cover stories within the UK, and often only within a particular area of the UK. Unless a big story breaks, like September 11th or the Bali bombing, international news is provided by freelancers based abroad, the wire services and, for larger organisations, foreign correspondents. Similarly, local and regional media have clearly defined geographical areas with news from outside the area provided from elsewhere.

The news media are further organised on the basis of specific ‘territories’ that regularly provide stories, like government (both local and national), courts, the police and other emergency services. These news beats tend to be covered by specialist correspondents who build up a range of contacts who will readily speak to them, and sometimes provide stories to be followed up. Larger news organisations have further specialisations in areas like industrial relations, health, education and the environment. As Manning points out, the popularity of various specialist areas tends to reflect the wider political and economic environment: ‘For example, during the last decade the fortunes of British financial, health and education correspondents have all prospered, while the labour and industrial beat enjoyed a “golden age” during the 1960s and 1970s but is now in almost terminal decline’ (Manning, 2001: 74).

Areas that have specialist correspondents are those that regularly provide stories, and often they are running stories that require ‘continuity’. This could be the passage of a controversial bill through Parliament, a high-profile court case, or the hunt for a missing teenager. By covering these stories with specialists who have not only built up a lot of knowledge about a particular area, but also have a range of contacts they can use, news media are able to convey the story more readily.

A further way that the news is organised is on the basis of topic. At its simplest this could be a division between news and sport, although, particularly in newspapers, there are often further divisions that provide ‘variety’ in the kind of stories covered. For example, many newspapers have a features department that does not deal with day-to-day news, but produces stories of general human interest from articles about school truancy, to reports on environmentally friendly homes. Further divisions can include business and financial news, fashion and lifestyle, and celebrity or entertainment news.

Of course, any newsroom’s main source of stories should be its own staff. This is particularly true for regional and local newsrooms, where the staff live in the area that they are reporting about. Staff should be alert to the potential for any event to become a story, from noticing an unexpected school closure that turns out to have been caused by the discovery of dangerous wiring in the building, to hearing in the newsagents that local shops are closing because of the

level of vandalism. Everyone is a potential contact for a reporter, and it is just as important for a general reporter to cultivate contacts as it is for the specialist who gets tipped off about Government corruption. These are the kind of stories that might easily slip through the news net, and to some extent it is the job of a reporter to make sure they get covered.

But with the best will in the world, it would be difficult to fill every newspaper and news bulletin with wholly original stories, and this is where the more routine aspects of reporting take over. These include newsroom diaries, press releases, the emergency services and other sources of news detailed in Chapter 2. But the stories chosen by news organisations are also influenced by the particular deadlines and requirements of each medium, as the following examination of newspapers, radio, television and online explores.

NEWSPAPERS

The majority of a daily newspaper's content is prepared in advance of the day's edition, with only the front page and a few inside pages filled as close to the deadline as possible. Newspapers cannot compete with electronic media in speed, so their approach has to be to find something different to tempt people to buy them. National tabloids tend to rely on brash headlines and large, dramatic pictures to hook their readers. They are written in simple and direct language to appeal to as wide a readership as possible, and beyond the front page, they tend to focus on human interest stories with a lot of celebrity gossip and show business news. By contrast, the front pages of broadsheets still tend to be dominated by 'serious' news from major institutions, although increasingly even more staid papers like the *Daily Telegraph* have a lighter item somewhere on the front page, and front page pictures are more prominent than in the past.

However, the definition of a tabloid may be changing. In September 2003 the broadsheet the *Independent* launched a tabloid or 'compact' version of its paper in the London area, designed to appeal to commuters who found the broadsheet format difficult to handle. While the move to tabloid format was widely regarded as a last-ditch attempt to boost the paper's ailing circulation, it proved such a success that the tabloid edition went national four months later. By March 2004 the paper's circulation showed a 15 per cent increase, and two months later in May 2004 the paper went completely tabloid, ending two decades as a broadsheet newspaper.

Even before the increase in sales was established, *The Times* retaliated and launched its tabloid version in November 2003 in the London area, extending its availability over the country over the next four months. Newspaper analysts had a mixed reaction to the changes, with most fearing that the compact format would mean less in-depth reporting of serious news. The *Independent* carried all its broadsheet material in the tabloid version, but as analyst Roy Greenslade noted, this was not true for the *Times*, with many broadsheet versions of stories either truncated or omitted:

A detailed study comparing the broadsheet and compact editions reveals a pattern in which the editorial content of the former is vastly superior to that of the latter ... scores of stories were far shorter in the tabloid. Many stories were cut back to news-in-briefs. (*Guardian*, January 19 2004)

But despite a less positive reaction to the compact *Times* than to that of the *Independent* (which won the national Newspaper of the Year award at the British Press Awards in March 2004), the *Times* suddenly stopped production of its 216-year-old broadsheet at the end of October 2004. Although other broadsheets currently have no plans to go tabloid, the changes could mean that tabloid newspapers in the future are defined purely by their format rather than their content.

The move by the *Independent* and the *Times* to tabloid can be viewed as the latest reaction to a general decline in newspaper sales since the mid-1950s. Over the years, various tactics have been used in an attempt to reverse the trend. These range from changing the editorial stance, as the *Mirror* did for a short time post September 11th, to price-cutting wars, and even giving them away free to try to tempt a new readership to buy them in the future.

Newspapers, like all media except the BBC, depend on advertising for their survival. They use their content to attract a readership which is then 'sold' to advertisers, and this has had an effect on their content, as papers strive to target specific sections of society. The *Guardian*, for example, has a different supplement every day aimed at different professions, while the *Daily Mirror* in part attributed its return to sales over the 2 million mark in August 2003 to the introduction of a Saturday supplement, 'We Love Telly'.³ As Linda Christmas comments:

The feature content of all national daily and Sunday newspapers has increased in the last 15 years – much of it has been devoted to areas which attract advertising, like leisure activities and supplements listing what's on and where to go, plus health and fitness. There has also been a huge increase in human interest stories, tales of triumph over tragedy, and advice on how to handle relationships. (Christmas, 1997: 3)

The regional press is following a similar trend with local evening papers typically bulked out by supplements on property, motoring and sport on different days of the week. Despite this, regional dailies and evening papers are struggling to maintain their readers, although local weekly newspaper sales are increasing.

An examination of three national newspapers from November 13 2003 reveals how different newspapers use the news to appeal to different readerships. The *Sun* is the UK's biggest-selling daily newspaper, registering a circulation of 3,363,612 for August 2004 (source: Audit Bureau of Circulation). The paper has a populist approach to news, and tends to attract more male than female readers, not just because of its trademark 'page three girl', but also because it has very good sports coverage. In the first year of Rebekah Wade becoming editor in January 2003 with a promise to 'inject more fun into the *Sun*',⁴ the paper increased its show business and television coverage, launched attacks on asylum seekers urging readers to 'read this and get angry',⁵ and, in

what could be seen as an attempt to woo more women readers, launched a campaign to highlight the victims of domestic abuse.

The *Daily Mail*, with a circulation of 2,310,532 for the same month, is the *Sun*'s nearest rival in terms of circulation, but it targets quite a different market. It regards itself as a 'quality tabloid', and its editor Paul Dacre says the secret of its success is knowing its audience. 'I think some newspapers and a lot of the radio and television media are now run by liberal, politically correct consensors who just talk to each other and forget that in the real world there are people who feel differently' (*Guardian*, July 7 2003). However, newspaper analyst Roy Greenslade says that under Paul Dacre, the paper has become a 'middle class bible', since by 'playing to the fears and narrow-mindedness of its audience, it magnifies their xenophobia and hypochondria, panders to their envy and, despite its vaunted image as a paper sympathetic to women, disparages feminism' (*Media Guardian*, September 2 2002).

The *Guardian*, with a circulation of 338,323 for the same month, is at the opposite end of the political spectrum from the *Daily Mail*. A serious broadsheet newspaper, it is unique among British newspapers because it is owned by The Scott Trust, rather than a media tycoon or shareholders. It describes itself thus: 'Free from the influence of a proprietor, shareholders or any political allegiance, the *Guardian* is able to report on news stories unhindered and conduct serious investigative reporting in the public interest. The paper consistently breaks stories and sets the news agenda' (*Education Guardian*, April 29 2003). Among national broadsheet newspapers, it has a high proportion of 18–24-year-old readers, particularly students, and this may contribute to its reputation as a haven for ineffectual left-wing liberals.

On the day being examined, the Soham murder trial⁶ dominated the news. Both tabloid papers devoted the whole of their front page to the latest in the trial. The *Sun* featured the headline 'The Panic' above pictures of the anguished faces of the mothers of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Inside the paper devoted six pages to the court case, going into detail about what each witness had said the previous day. The *Daily Mail* took a slightly different focus on the court case, with its front page featuring pictures of Ian Huntley, who was accused, and later found guilty, of the girls' murders, and Holly Wells's father Kevin. Between the photographs is the headline, which is a quote from Ian Huntley to Mr Wells: 'I am so sorry I didn't realise she was your daughter'. The story is continued on page two of the paper, with further coverage of the court case on four more pages. In contrast to the tabloid papers, the *Guardian* relegates the story to 300 words in the bottom right-hand corner of the front page. Its story, headlined 'Huntley comforted by Holly's father, court told', takes a similar line to the *Daily Mail*'s front page, but has no accompanying pictures. Inside the paper a half page is devoted to the previous day's court hearing.

That all the papers cover the trial of Ian Huntley is no surprise: the story had dominated the news ever since the two ten-year-old girls went missing in August 2002, to their bodies being found two weeks later, the murder investigation, and the

subsequent arrest and trial of Ian Huntley and his girlfriend Maxine Carr. Neither is it surprising that each paper provided the same information, given that it all derived from the court case at the Old Bailey. But the way that each paper deals with the story shows the different market each targets.

By focusing on the anguish the mothers felt when they realised their daughters were missing, the *Sun* is appealing to the parents of every young child to empathise with them. The angle taken by the *Daily Mail*, however, tends to demonise Huntley (at this point still not found guilty), by portraying him as a callous hypocrite offering his condolences to the father of the girl he had murdered. By devoting just 300 words on the front page to the Soham trial, the *Guardian* acknowledges the importance of the story but places it within a global context. Its main front-page story was headlined ‘We could lose this situation’ and featured a picture of the devastation caused by suicide bombers in Nassiriya in Iraq, where 18 Italian soldiers had been killed the previous day. The other front-page story is about a £100,000 settlement being made by the Metropolitan Police Force to a police officer alleging racial discrimination in an employment tribunal. Neither of the tabloid papers ran this story, while the story of the suicide bombing was given half a page, with no pictures, on page 2 of the *Daily Mail*, and two columns, with two pictures, on page 22 of the *Sun*.

In order to get a clearer picture of the content of the newspapers under examination, their content has been broken down into various categories in Table 1.1. ‘Celebrity reports’ are those that are only there because they feature a celebrity. ‘Business news’ and ‘Women’s pages’ are those tagged that way in the paper. ‘Features’ are stories that are topical but not news. ‘Comment/columnist’ pages are opinion pieces, not including celebrity or television topics. As can be seen, the broadsheet *Guardian* has the highest news content, with the *Sun* and the *Mail* roughly the same. Within that category, the only foreign news in the tabloid papers was a report on the Nassiriya bombing featured on the *Guardian*’s front page, although the *Sun* gave a page to a report about orang-utans being used for boxing matches in Thailand. The *Guardian*, however, had five pages of international news. It should also be noted that although the *Guardian* has no features, women’s pages or television in its main paper, all these categories are covered in its tabloid supplement ‘G2’, and on a Thursday it also has a ‘Life’ supplement which covers medical, science and environmental issues.

The *Mail* has the highest content of women’s pages, and this reflects the fact that it has the highest number of female readers among national newspapers. Despite this, it regularly runs features that attack women, and in the issue examined there was a two-page feature about Britain’s first female Law Lord, Dame Brenda Hale, headlined ‘The Marriage Wrecker’. It detailed the ‘controversial’ views of Dame Brenda, as well as revealing how she had remarried nine days after her divorce.

Predictably, the *Sun* has the most celebrity and television news with just over 15 per cent of the paper devoted to those topics, compared to just over 7 per cent in the *Mail*.