Chapter 2

**Hard News and Soft News**

In the last chapter, we talked about the general qualities journalists generally agree make a story worthy of being covered.

Before we start to learn how to write a basic news story, we need to pause to consider an important distinction that professional journalists make between two kinds of news — “hard news” and “soft news.”

As the old joke says, there are two kinds of people: people who divide things into groups of two and people who don’t. In all newsrooms, there are two kinds of news: hard news and soft news. This is part of the way almost all professional journalists have come to view the world — by inclination and training. If you are to understand the culture of the people who report the news — either because you want to understand how stories become news or because you'd like to work in journalism — you need to understand this distinction.

Hard news stories are accounts of events that have just happened or are about to happen. For example, crimes, fires, meetings, court testimony, speeches, protest rallies, acts of war, traffic accidents and elections are all typical topics of hard news stories. Hard news stories that have developed overnight or on the same day are often referred to by journalists as “breaking news.”

Hard news stories emphasize facts, not opinion or analysis. So while hard news stories may contain “colour” — that is, highly descriptive passages using colourful language — the emphasis is on the bare, known, provable facts.

Hard news is an account of what's happened (or is about to), why it happened, who was affected.

Soft news, on the other hand, doesn’t depend nearly as much on the time element. Soft news places less emphasis on the facts — though it would be a terrible mistake to suggest that soft news must not have a factual foundation. Many journalists define soft news as news that entertains as it informs, with more emphasis on human interest, novelty and colourful writing and less of facts and events that have just happened.

Soft news has less immediacy than hard news. Writers of soft news often aim for the reader’s emotions, not his or her intellect.

Often a reporter has a little more leeway when writing soft news stories — he or she can write a little longer, use more dramatic language, reach for a laugh, maybe even let a little opinion creep into the story. Longer soft news stories are often called “features” or “feature stories.” (In the United Kingdom and Australia, these types of stories are sometimes called “take-outs.”) Profiles of famous people, descriptions of new diets and...
social trends, how-to features that teach how to knit a sweater or build a fence, accounts to trips to exotic resorts are all typical examples of soft news stories.

Is soft news unimportant? Not really. But it’s not news that happened overnight. The best soft news stories are based on hard facts, and are derived from hard news. Many soft news stories contain more information and research than the hard news stories they were based on. Editors often encourage writers to tie their soft news stories to current hard news — in the language of the news business, this is known as finding a “news hook” or a “news angle.”

Sometimes too, soft news is written about some aspect of a hard news story. When you read that a tsunami has killed thousands around the Indian Ocean, that’s hard news. When you read about the personal stories of a team of rescuers digging out tsunami victims, that’s soft news.

Sad to say, the soft news category is also an excuse for a lot of really bad writing. Still, done well, even news so soft that it’s tied to no event or matter of significance can have merit. If a piece on how to tie a bowtie can make a reader chuckle — or laugh out loud — its writer has succeeded.

Summary

- Journalists typically distinguish between two kinds of news — “hard news” and “soft news.”

- Hard news stories are accounts of events that have just happened or are about to happen.

- Soft news has less immediacy than hard news — writers of soft news often aim for readers’ emotions, not their intellect.

- The best soft-news stories are based on hard facts.