

# **STOP THE PRESSES, I WANT TO GET ON : PROMOTING WILDLIFE AND WILDLIFE CARE IN THE MEDIA**

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### **Introduction**

All those who have involvement with wildlife – whether they be carers, scientists or people who merely support conservation projects – have a valuable resource at their disposal that can be used to promote their cause. It is a resource with genuine value – news value.

News value is part of the lexicon of the media industry but in truth, if asked, journalists always struggle to define what news actually is.

After a half century in the newspaper and broadcasting industry I can't possibly tell you what news is, and how one story can have a greater value and impact than another.

It all depends, I suppose, on the publication and the target market of readers, listeners or viewers.

There is one constant, though, in the forever changing nature of what constitutes news, even in the age of social media which is challenging how we perceive news, its deadlines and the way it is delivered. That is animal stories have remarkable news values, and are always featured on news platforms, whether they be newspaper, radio and television or the internet and social media.

In fact not a week goes by when I do not see an animal or wildlife story in the press, and to my delight they often feature the great wildlife passion of my life, that of birds.

I single out birds at this point, because they are our contact point with nature. We see them every day, hear them and everyone has a bird story to tell, even if they might not be particularly interested in our feathered friends.

Birds, in fact, have been the subject of a column I have written for the Mercury in Hobart for more than 13 years and I never run out of material and, judging by my post and emails, I never run out of readers.

But I don't want to dwell on specialist columns, whether they be about birds, wildlife in general or even pets. What really interests me is the power of wildlife to generate news with value for media businesses.

In my first week in journalism, all those years ago in 1964 on the Woking News and Mail in the English county of Surrey, I remember a story about a breeding pair of rare falcons – hobbies or little falcons – holding up construction of a vital pipeline designed to deliver gas to homes in the part of southern England where I lived.

There were political stories that week, court cases and sex scandals involving members of the clergy but it was the hobby story that generated most interest, and most comments on the newspaper's letters page, long before the days of emails and twitter.

Why should this be so? It was just a bird, after all, building a nest that got in the way of progress, one of possibly hundreds of thousands of nests in the spring and summer of 1964, in rural Surrey. Why should anyone care, especially as the gas supply promised a cheap and efficient way of heating homes in the cruel English winter, no more hard work of lugging around coal, and cleaning up the resultant ash?

But the way the story was written struck a chord with readers. It outlined a saga of two birds travelling all the way from Africa to choose a nesting site in a bucolic corner of Surrey on the fringe of London, only to encounter an obstacle at the end of the epic journey. And it had a happy ending.

The hobby traditionally nested in the heath lands of southern England, hunting swallows and other small birds. These sandy health lands had never been converted to farmland because the soil was too poor, but now they were being given over to housing development on the fringes of a booming London. And the hobby faced extinction as a breeding bird.

The tone of the report – pointing out that at a time of a housing shortage in Britain, a pair of hobbies migrating from Africa also needed a home – made the story extra interesting. People displaced from London by the bombing during the Second World War – as my parents had been – could empathise with the hobby plight. The story had news value, and at least this pair of hobbies now had a fighting chance. What was equally important was the fact readers were won over to support the pipeline delay.

There was another aspect to the story, that of anthropomorphism, something frowned on by the authors of scientific literature but often an essential element of this curious thing we call news – but I will get to that later.

I may have an interest in wildlife but during my career I never set out to be an environmental reporter. I wanted to keep bird-watching, in particular, as a pastime, an escape from the grind of daily journalism.

My interest in natural history, however, has often led to me to stories that I have not been able to cover myself and these have been directed to other members of staff on the publications on which I have worked. Even though I am retired now from day to day involvement with the Mercury I still send them stories that I pick up involving wildlife. And they are always grateful for them. The great thing about a wildlife story is that it does not have to be “sold”, like so much of the news pumped out by public relations companies. Birds and animals sell themselves, especially if there are pictures to go with the stories.

For many years I considered putting my knowledge of news gathering down on paper, to explain to people involved in wildlife rehabilitation and conservation how to promote their efforts.

By chance about a year ago I received a phone call from a researcher doing just this. The call came from Gill Ainsworth, a PhD Candidate at James Cook University in far-north Queensland doing a thesis on what she termed “the social values of Australian threatened birds”.

I laid out this notion of “news value” to her, and how the public was always interested in bird and animal stories. I also said that selling the message was extremely important because it publicised not only the fact species were endangered, but the efforts being made to reverse this spiral to extinction.

Many of these efforts are funded by government and it was important to show taxpayers exactly where their money was being spent. It was also important to show politicians that the readers of newspapers and listeners and viewers were interested in saving birds, animals and reptiles – to say nothing of whole habitats and environments – and they would regard such funds directed at these efforts to be money well spent. The politicians, in turn, to impress voters, would support funding for endangered species. There might even be votes in conservation.

I tend to sit on the sidelines when it comes to direct involvement in conservation or even animal rescue, preferring to write about it than to become actively involved beyond bird-watching and taking part in surveys of birds.

Over the years, though, I have assisted Craig Webb, the owner of the Raptor and Wildlife Refuge of Tasmania at Kettering in the south.

The rehabilitation of injured wedge-tailed and sea eagles has been the driving force behind the refuge and occasionally Craig has sought my advice on promoting these to television stations and newspapers. It has not been a hard sell.

My advice to Craig has always been to draw up a press release giving all the relevant details about the event to take place, or the event that has occurred, if that is the case.

In fact I once drew up a specimen release which he could use time and again, just changing specific details of the media opportunity in question.

The danger in contacting the press is in giving scant information – namely just time and place – in the expectation they will fill in the detail, via a reporter and photographer.

This might have happened in the old days but with limited resources in the modern age of declining newspaper circulations, newspapers especially prefer to do most of their reporting over the telephone, which enables a reporter to cover far more stories per day.

The well-crafted press release rich in detail, and quotes, aids this process and makes it more likely the event will be covered, especially if photographs can be supplied.

When I mention well-written and informative press releases I am not merely referring to newspapers. Although information from a press release can simply be cut and pasted into a newspaper story, such information can also be vital to television reporters writing their scripts, and television cameramen lining up shots.

Those who might have studied journalism will be aware of the basic structure of a news report, something known in the trade as the Five Ws.

Who is it about?

What happened?

When did it take place?

Where did it take place?

Why did it happen?

Some authors add an H, a sixth question asking How did it happen? though "how" can also be covered by "what", "where", or "when".

Each question should have a factual answer – facts being necessary for a report to be considered complete. Importantly, none of these questions can be answered with a simple yes or no.

The Five Ws also serve to put the potential story into some form of logical, chronological order. There is nothing worse for a reporter than to have to make sense of a jumble of facts.

I might add that this last observation applies equally to the writers of letters to newspapers. In this case, though, the letters page editor is often confronted by the problem of trying to decipher what the letter writer is actually trying to say.

Returning to the Five Ws, and the added H (How did it happen?), I like to introduce an H of my own to the equation.

This refers to the “hook” of the story, designed to grab the reader’s attention. The hook, or angle, forms the basis of what journalists call the intro, as in introduction. Journalists of the old school will always tell you that when you have got the intro right, the rest of the story falls into place.

In the case of an eagle release by Craig Webb’s Raptor and Wildlife Refuge, it would be easy to start a press release by merely saying that “Craig Webb is about to release an eagle he has cared for, from Bruny Island on Friday. He can be contacted at the Raptor and Wildlife Refuge.”

But a full press release would be much stronger than this, providing an angle which the newspaper can use, or not, and some much-needed quotes.

The angle would establish why this event is special. Is it the first? Or is it the latest in a series. Either way it would have news impact if it was spelled out. As in ....

In his lone battle to save the wedge-tailed eagle from extinction a man with a passion for the endangered raptors will release his first rehabilitated bird this Friday.

Bird of prey expert Craig Webb has devoted his life to seeing the magnificent eagle – the biggest in Australia – fly free in Tasmania skies.

After answering the first W – who – the press release would go on to answer the other four, amended of course to take into account something that may not have happened yet

Another vital aspect of the press release is to supply full contact details: mobile numbers, land-line numbers, and email. Contact is vital, because media time is short and precious. If contacts can't be reached quickly reporters with perhaps several stories to write will merely move on to another, and may not find the time get back to the one they started first.

The beauty of a finely-crafted, easy to understand press release with scientific jargon already translated into laymen's terms is that it can be used across all media platforms.

And if it conforms to the old newspaper journalist's maxim of being able to be cut from the bottom it can be tailored for an outlet in which space or brevity is at a premium.

A really good press release, covering the crux of the matter in the first few paragraphs, or even sentences, before being beefed out with quotes and finer detail can be run as is in publications ranging from broadsheet newspapers, to the tabloid press, to magazines, television and radio. And let's not forget the internet and social media. Perhaps when we talk of press releases in the modern age, will should compose an "intro" that would sit well on twitter.

Old-style newspapers, the breakfast shows on television, twitter.....  
where's this leading us?

The media in all its forms has a voracious appetite. News may be difficult to define but it has one quality that cannot be denied. To talk in clichés, it is perishable, it has a very short shelf-life, in 24 hours it

will be past its sell-by date, unless of course angles and hooks can be found to give it fresh legs.

So the news media, 24/7 is always on the look-out for fresh news.

On slow news days, in newsrooms old and new, the cry will go out for fresh stories, soft stories if hard news is not available. Soft stories usually refer to human and animal interest yarns that may have a slightly longer shelf life and can be held for a rainy day.

Ironically, the animal story can have another value in the newsroom, in times of really hard news like a natural disaster – a catastrophic bushfire, for example – or perhaps a terrorist attack.

Sometimes the human tragedy is so awful, pictures so graphic, that news organisations shy away from using them. So animals may be used to tell the story, perhaps pets searching for their owners in time of earthquakes, or owners searching for animals after a bushfire.

It is the picture of a koala being given a drink by a fire fighter during the Black Saturday horror in Victoria a few years back that stands out from that event, as strongly as the photograph of the family sheltering under a pier during the latest bushfires in Dunalley in Tasmania last year.

The picture of the koala, sold by *The Herald Sun*, raised half a million dollars for bushfire relief, a mere \$6,000 going to establish a burns unit at a wildlife refuge.

I won't comment on that ... I merely want to make the point that animals and birds, either cuddly or in distress are news.

And so it is important for all wildlife groups, whether they be in conservation or animal care, to realise that this “news value” can be a source of revenue to provide much-needed funds, whether directly or indirectly.



I've mentioned the basic structure of a news story but other factors come into play to give the story added impact.

Journalists not only talk of intros, angles and hooks, they also set out to "shape" stories for a particular market or audience.

For a story in a heavyweight broadsheet, say the Times of London or the New York Times, the author might avoid anthropomorphism – something frowned on by the scientific community, as I have said – but it works well in the popular press.

I am happy to say I have been photographed with Lulu and Dave the wombats, both road kill orphans who I am told have now been released successfully in the wilds of Tasmania.

Shaping stories can also apply to shaping quotes, something political spin-doctors do all the time to give statements by politicians added impact and, more importantly, to provide sound bites for television and radio.

A snappy quote can also be used in a tabloid newspaper headline.

One must be careful, though, I not to exaggerate or bend facts. I once interviewed a scientist doing research into nesting cavities for birds. I'm not a scientist and in my enthusiasm to promote the conservation of old-growth trees which, of course, contain the most cavities, I perhaps overstepped the mark.

I took the liberty of polishing some of her more arcane quotes and when I sent a draft version of the story to her, the quotes came back with a red line through them and the comment: "This might be true but I didn't say it!"

Anthropomorphism or not, polished quotes or not.....get the message out there. If you have an orphaned wombat being released, tell the press about it. Get pictures of it in the press and in the press release state that your organisation is self-funded, and operates only through the devotion of volunteers.

Appeal directly for donations, and volunteer recruits. It's amazing how a picture of an animal in the press can have people not only reaching into their pockets and signing up to join various wildlife or wildlife-care organisations, but writing to the press and social media about the plight of our birds and animals. And just as importantly, it might get politicians sitting up at election time in the realisation that there might be votes in William the wedgie, or Peter the Potoroo.

**Don Knowler** has been a journalist for nearly 50 years, working at various times for the award-winning Independent newspaper in Britain and the BBC. He has also been a foreign correspondent, reporting from southern Africa and the United States.

In semi-retirement, he now works part-time as a sub-editor for *The Mercury* in Hobart, and also writes a column for the newspaper on his great passion in life: bird-watching.

He is the author of two books on bird-watching. Don wrote the first, *The Falconer of Central Park*, while working as a correspondent in New York in the 1980s, covering the United Nations. The second book, *Dancing on the Edge of the World*, was written after he settled with his family in Tasmania in 2001.

