

Health in the News: Thoughts of a Media Monitor

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The background

I scarcely imagined, when I qualified from library school back in the early 1980s, that I would end up reading newspapers for a living. Nevertheless, this has been my surprising fate.

Librarians have always enjoyed providing what they call "**current awareness services**". In other words: selecting new items from their resources and placing these in view of their readers, who are thus kept up-to-date with new information as it appears.

For a long while ISD Library ran a "cuttings" service - diligently scanning daily newspapers for health-related stories; photocopying them; cutting them up and creating a montage which we placed on various noticeboards throughout our building. The only problem with this approach was that we kept getting asked later to dig out stories ("It was in *The Scotsman* last month" - *no, actually it was in The Herald last year*), and this involved us in a great deal of tedious searching of boxes of photocopies. We needed a technical fix. The World Wide Web provided this.

We now spend a great deal of our time and energy creating the service known as **media monitoring**.

We scan newspapers and their websites, looking for healthcare news. We check the BBC's superb news website, which so often sets the agenda - and even provides the content - for the newspapers' choice of stories. We create two e-mail bulletins a day, grouping news stories under headings according to their subject-matter (**cancer, heart disease**, etc.). We link from our bulletin directly to the web version of a story when this is available. We send our bulletins out to a large list of readers who have asked to be updated in this way. We do this by 10.30 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. on each working day. You can join our mailing list by emailing NSS.isdlibrary@nhs.net. It's free!

[We also break the bulletins up into their individual stories, and publish these on SHOW](#), in a database which can be searched back to 2002.

Why are we doing all this?

- Our aim is to provide our NHS colleagues with a regular, easily digestible news “snack” which ensures they remain well-informed about what is making the news in medicine and healthcare. This is what our [e-mail bulletin](#) does.
- We also aim to create an **online resource** for NHS staff - and indeed anyone with access to the internet - which enables them to search for recent news coverage of a particular story or topic. This is what the [SHOW database](#) does.

We aim to capture the **main stories** in the news. However, we don't try to cover **all** health stories in **all** news sources: our aim is to be representative, not complete. We cover a restricted number of sources, and omit stories we consider to be of minor interest. On the other hand, we are resolutely parochial and tend to highlight Scottish stories above others. ²

What are newspapers doing on the World Wide Web?

Newspaper firms are in the business of selling as many paper copies as they possibly can. This is known as the “ratings war”. Of course, newspapers have many other nobler functions - ensuring free speech, criticising government, adding to the historical record, educating and entertaining readers. But if they don't sell, they die. Why should they expend precious staff resources on creating websites?

They feel they must have a web presence: everyone does. Not to do so would be shameful, embarrassing - the mark of an outdated and moribund technology. They want to reach readers who are exiled all over the world. They see the web as a source of advertising revenue. They want to evolve into a digital-only medium.

All of this remains mere speculation on my part, since I have never known a newspaper website to declare why it exists and what its relationship to its print version is. However, I will offer here some observations on how newspapers go about their online business.

What's in, what's out?

Newspaper websites do **not**, as a rule, contain:

TV, radio, cinema and sports listings; classified ads; family announcements; graphical weather forecasts; different-sized headlines; detailed financial listings; or nearly as many photographs as the print version.

To summarise, newspaper websites predominantly contain textual material, and deal badly with graphics, statistics and small print.

Also, websites vary greatly in their coverage, and may present only a selection of headlines, or offer a comprehensive set of stories, features and editorials.

They differ, too, in their manner of organising their material, but usually adopt an arrangement which reflects standard newspaper sections: UK news, international, politics, business, sport, and so on. Under these headings, the **undifferentiated list** prevails, with long, wearying scrolls of headlines which fail to indicate the importance of the story in the way that headline-size, article-length and page-position do in print.

Future-proofing

Newspapers in the world's great libraries form an enduring, precious and irreplaceable part of the historical record. Indeed, US writer Nicholson Baker has argued persuasively in favour of newsprint over more recent technologies such as microfilm.³

How do newspaper websites shape up as a potential source for future historians? How can you find information which was published in previous issues?

The news is not good.

The media sites which we monitor provide a range of approaches to searching and browsing their past issues. The Daily Mail offers an advanced search, which allows sorting of results by date or relevance, along with search-filters such as News, Sport, Health. The Daily Record provides a Google search, which allows for the use of phrase-searching. The BBC's site, though excellent in content, offers only limited sorting options, and no advanced search.

Among our sources, only The Scotsman titles, with their "Change Date" facility, offer the chance to select and browse specific past issues. The Herald offers a "Browse the Archive" option, in which various pre-selected topics can be displayed, for example C Diff, Beatson, Nicola Sturgeon.

This range of styles justifies our SHOW database, in my view, since we offer a single search across a range of sources and years.

A further problem with many newspaper websites is that links to past stories can become broken, especially when a site is redesigned. This is why we record page numbers when possible. If you have a page reference, then you can ask your local library to organise a photocopy or a scanned version.

ISD in and around the news

Who are we?

ISD produces a vast range of health statistics of high quality, but its authorship of these statistics is often not noted by media sources. The existence of the Scottish Parliament since 1999 and the Freedom of Information law since 2005 have increased the demand on ISD to provide information in response to specific requests. In these cases, media sources seldom cite ISD as the source of the statistics:

"the figures, released through the Scottish Parliament, showed 1606 operations did not go ahead" ([Evening News 16 March 2011](#))

"details obtained ... under freedom of information laws show there have been 13,000 admissions to A&E in the past three years" ([Evening News 5 April 2011](#))

ISD also issues regular updates under its own name. These are announced and described in news releases on our website. Despite this, our identity remains obscure in most media reports. I have selected the 25 most recent articles at the time of writing (mid-May 2011):

anonymous (21)

"primary school children in Scotland are missing out on routine dental checks, a new NHS report has revealed" ([Evening Times 27 April 2011](#))

"rates of tooth decay among young people are at their lowest levels ever, according to the experts" ([Herald 27 April 2011](#))

"figures yesterday also revealed that between 1979 and 2008, there were 5,267 cancers diagnosed" ([Scotsman 30 March 2011](#))

"patients in Scotland face a postcode lottery in accessing treatment quickly, new figures reveal" ([Herald 30 March 2011](#))

"figures out yesterday show Scots are among the most overweight in Europe" ([Daily Record 30 March 2011](#))

"prescriptions for drugs to treat obesity increased by almost a fifth in Scotland last year" ([Scotsman 30 March 2011](#))

"Scotland has one of the lowest life expectancy levels in the EU, according to new figures from the Scottish government" ([BBC News 29 March 2011](#))

"figures released by the Scottish Government showed men in Scotland are now expected to live for 76 years" ([Evening Times 29 March 2011](#))

"the Alcohol Statistics Scotland report, released yesterday, showed how alcohol was 66 per cent more affordable in 2009" ([Evening News 23 February 2011](#))

"a government report revealed Scots are still drinking more than others in the UK" ([Evening Times 23 February 2011](#))

"new figures showed that levels [of delayed discharges] are continuing to rise" ([Scotsman 23 February 2011](#))

"delayed discharges from Scottish hospitals are on the increase, according to new figures" ([Herald 23 February 2011](#))

"official figures show that 83 per cent of children and 69 per cent of adults were signed up by last December" ([Scotsman 23 February 2011](#))

"the latest report, published by NHS Scotland, relates to 2009" ([Herald 23 February 2011](#))

"accident and emergency rooms dealt with 36,000 alcohol-related admissions in 2009, government figures have shown" ([Scotsman 23 February 2011](#))

"accident and emergency rooms dealt with 36,000 alcohol-related admissions in 2009, according to new figures published today" ([Daily Record 22 February 2011](#))

"NHS statistics have revealed that one in 20 Scots die from alcohol-related diseases" ([STV News 22 February 2011](#))

"early deaths from heart disease have decreased by almost 60%, official figures show" ([Daily Record 22 February 2011](#))

"the number of people registered with an NHS dentist has risen to a new high, the Scottish government said" ([BBC News 22 February 2011](#))

"figures revealed 83% of children and 69% of adults were registered by December last year" ([STV News 22 February 2011](#))

"early deaths from heart disease have decreased by almost 60%, according to official figures" ([Evening Times 22 February 2011](#))

named (4)

Information Services Division or, for short, *ISD* or *ISD Scotland* ([Courier 27 April 2011](#), [Scotsman 30 March 2011](#), [Evening News 2 March 2011](#), [Evening News 23 February 2011](#))

facts and figures

Finally, I thought it would be interesting to compile some statistics of ISD stories in the news in the past year.

Between 18 May 2010 and 17 May 2011, there were 179 mentions of ISD information in our media monitoring database on SHOW. The table below shows how often various ISD topics have featured in this period.

ISD stories in Media Monitoring, 18 May 2010 - 17 May 2011

Topic	Number
cancer	33
waiting times	27
prescriptions	13
dental health services	12
alcohol misuse	11
drug misuse	9
mental health	7
complaints	6
delayed discharges	5
breastfeeding	5
surgical mortality / hospital deaths	5
abortion	4
teenage pregnancy	4
obesity	4
heart disease and stroke	4
infectious diseases	4
births	3
sexually transmitted diseases	3
life expectancy	3
ethnic groups	3
childhood immunisation	2
workforce	2
hospital activity	2
infant mortality	2
smoking	2
NHS costs	1
accidents	1
ophthalmic services	1
suicide	1

¹ ISD (Information Services Division) and ISD Library started life in the mid-1970s at the same time as their parent organisation, the Common Services Agency (CSA). The CSA became NHS National Services Scotland (NSS) in 2004 when it moved its Edinburgh headquarters from Trinity to South Gyle.

² We regularly use the following sources -

Daily newspapers -

Courier, Daily Record, Evening Express (Aberdeen), Evening News (Edinburgh), Evening Telegraph (Dundee), Evening Times (Glasgow), Herald, Press and Journal, Scotsman, Scottish Daily Mail.

Sunday newspapers -

Scotland on Sunday, Scottish Mail on Sunday, Sunday Herald, Sunday Times, Sunday Mail.

Web-only sources -

BBC News, Caledonian Mercury, STV News.

We also use other web sources in order to provide a link to a story which appears in a newspaper's print version, but not its web version.

³ Nicholson Baker, Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper. London : Vintage, 2002.