

# 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 ask to join our mailing-list](#). 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.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 massively in their coverage, from “a small handful of headlines” ([Courier](#)) to “a near-comprehensive set of stories, features and editorials” ([Scotsman](#)).

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 and article-length and position do in print ([Daily Record](#), [Press and Journal](#)). There are some honourable exceptions to this rule ([Scotsman](#)).

### Future-proofing

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

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. At the deluxe end of the scale there is the [BBC news: health](#), which offers an advanced search of its content back to November 1997. More modest provision is made by for example the [Daily Record](#), which allows only a simple search of the past five days’ stories. Some sites are browsable by date, others are not.

This range of styles justifies our SHOW database, in my view, since we offer a single search across a range of sources and years. I am not saying our own search engine is perfect: it is not, and it badly needs to be improved. <sup>4</sup> And of course, some links to past stories will become broken, which is why we record page numbers when possible: here the great libraries come back into the picture, with their carefully preserved print versions. They will provide photocopies, for a fee, to registered libraries.

## ISD in and around the news

### (1) 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, published by Health Minister Andy Kerr in a written parliamentary answer ... " ([Scotsman](#))

"The figures, obtained through Freedom of Information legislation, showed that one-quarter of cases ... " ([Scotsman](#))

ISD also issues regular updates under its own name. These are announced and described in news releases on our [website](#). Even then, our identity remains obscure in media reports. I have selected the 25 most recent articles at the time of writing (mid April 2007):

#### **anonymous (23)**

- the number having smear tests fell by more than 5% ... ([Herald](#))
- figures revealed yesterday ... ([Scotsman](#))
- new figures show a 16 per cent increase ... ([Scotsman](#))
- targets ... are not being met, figures show ([Daily Record](#))
- official statistics for 2006 showed ... ([Scotsman](#))
- new figures ... according to NHS Scotland ([Herald](#))
- NHS statistics show roughly 4% of the country's smokers ... ([Press and Journal](#))
- figures revealed more than 46,000 people tried to quit ... ([Scotsman](#))
- figures released on the first anniversary of the ban ... ([Daily Record](#)) -
- figures obtained by The Scotsman show ... ([Scotsman](#))
- the latest cancer waiting-time figures ... ([Scotsman](#))
- statistics obtained by a north-east MSP ... ([Press and Journal](#))
- fewer people in the Lothians are dying from strokes ... according to new figures ([Evening News](#))
- patients ... have been removed from official waiting lists. ([Evening News](#))
- the latest statistics for NHS Scotland hospitals ... ([BBC News](#))
- figures show the Executive has met its ... waiting time target ([Evening Times](#))
- cancer patients ... are still waiting ... figures revealed yesterday ([Scotsman](#))
- patients were removed from official waiting list figures ... ([Herald](#))
- figures obtained by North East Tory MSP ... ([Press and Journal](#))
- figures revealed by the Scottish Conservatives ... ([Scotsman](#))

- figures released ... in response to a question by SNP Dundee East MSP ([Press and Journal](#))
- almost a quarter of [babies in Scotland] are delivered by Caesarean section ([Scotsman](#))
- birth episodes at the three Glasgow hospitals were officially measured at 11,858 ([Herald](#))

## **named (2)**

*Information Services Division* or, for short, *ISD* or *ISD Scotland* ([BBC](#), [Glasgow Evening Times](#))

Since the launch of the redesigned ISD website last year, we have maintained a page on the site called "**ISD in the News**". This page serves to monitor the use of ISD information in the media, and to point readers to the specific sources of the information on the site. The page's address is -

<http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/4322.html>

## **(2) facts and figures**

Finally, I thought it would be interesting to compile some statistics of ISD stories in the news since 2002.

At the end of April 2007, our SHOW database of media monitoring contained just over 29,500 stories since February 2002. Of these, 503 (or 1.7%) reported ISD information or activities. Therefore, of an average of around 470 stories a month, around 8 relate to ISD in some way.

The table below shows how often various ISD topics have appeared in the past five years.

ISD stories in Media Monitoring, February 2002 to April 2007

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
waiting times	<b>98</b>	<b>19</b>
cancer, incl.	<b>53</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>cervical screening</i>	13	3
<i>breast screening</i>	5	1
delayed discharges ("bed-blocking")	<b>39</b>	<b>8</b>
childhood immunisation (esp. MMR vaccine)	<b>35</b>	<b>7</b>
workforce	<b>34</b>	<b>7</b>
drug misuse	<b>22</b>	<b>4</b>
heart disease and stroke	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>
data collection / research	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>
complaints	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>
alcohol misuse	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>
dental health services	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>
births	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>
surgical mortality	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>
abortion	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>
information technology	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>
general practice	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>
NHS costs	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>
prescriptions	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>
teenage pregnancy	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>
hospital activity	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>
obesity	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>
breastfeeding	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
accidents	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
fireworks injuries	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
mental health	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
sexually transmitted diseases	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
occupational health and safety	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
infant mortality	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
infectious diseases	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
junior doctors' hours	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
smoking	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
ophthalmic services	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole number)

## ENDNOTES

### 1. Organisational background

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. The sources

We use the following sources -

#### *Daily newspapers -*

Scotsman, Herald, Courier, Press and Journal, Daily Record, Edinburgh Evening News, Glasgow Evening Times.

#### *Sunday newspapers -*

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

#### *Online news -*

BBC news: health

### 3. Bibliographic note

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

### 4. Notes on the SHOW database

The public version of the database will only display the most recent 100 stories in response to any search. So if you search for the term "surgical mortality", you will find 30-odd stories dating back to 11 February 2002. If on the other hand you use a very general term such as "cancer", a full 100 stories will be displayed, but these will date from only a month or two ago.

As administrators, we are able to search a full version of the database. This provides us with all hits, but is very slow.

We are currently working with SHOW to improve the database.