

SIFTING AND ANALYSING ALL TO ANSWER THE SO WHAT? QUESTION

So what? is always the most important question to answer for any journalist – whether you chronicle the latest foot-in-mouth incident from the lofty corridors of power or review a film, play, art exhibition or musical recital.

So what? is what encourages your reader to bother, to go out, buy the newspaper, magazine or to log on to your site or blog to get your opinion. Without this hook to draw the readers in, what's the point?

Whether you freelance and swap between dry annual reports and adjective-heavy press releases, with some journalist writing to keep you sane; or if you work full time for a specific publication – the reasons for writing your stories remain the same. To be meaningful to your reader. This is what really matters and what makes your readers come back the next day, week or month.

In some ways it is easier to be meaningful to the reader when you are sifting, analysing and presenting a piece that explains why the latest rate hike is bad news in practical terms that can immediately be applied to every reader's life.

While a piece of art or a theatrical production can change your life, it's very seldom in a practical way. Instead it is a frame of reference or mind shift that occurs. As intrinsically valuable as reducing your mortgage – but the evidence is often not as visible in quantifiable amounts.

This is one way in which reporting on the arts is a little different – it's what editors refer to as "the soft stuff", the "added value". Terms that are meaningless because it is just as important and the rules of writing about it just as rigorous.

Arts writers chronicle the creative output of the artistic community so that it can be more accessible to the greater community. Exactly the same as a political writer who chronicles the policy output of the political community so it can be more accessible to the greater community.

One thing that does vary for writers is the nature of the reader they write for. That everyman the researchers like to tell you about is usually nobody you know. He or she is much easier to find in the passing comments, snatched conversations and letters that come your way while you work.

A good example of sifting something out as irrelevant is a brilliant updated version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* that was on stage not so long ago. The six actors were clever and funny, they had adapted the 150-year-old musical in a novel way – but for my readers I just couldn't see how I could tell them that this was the life-changing piece of art they should diarise for this week.

This sifting is something all journalists do every day in a thousand ways without even realising it. The longer you work a beat, the more you write for a particular reader, the more intuitively in touch you become with both. This is the old-fashioned notion of putting in the hours and years to become an expert – the 10 000 hours theory put forward by Malcolm Gladwell.

One colleague made the point that all journalists should be able to write about anything, because the skill of the job remains the same – it's only the content that changes. The structure of a story remains

the same whether you are reporting from court or from the front row at the opera. Whatever the story the journalist collects the information, sifts out the unimportant stuff, analyses the rest through the filter of experience and presents a piece of writing that tells the reader something new and meaningful to them.

News reporting allows no latitude for subjective opinion, while arts writing depends on it to a large degree to help the reader with the decoding process. However, that same reporter who tells you the facts of the story on page one often offers his subjective opinion of that story on another page.

This subjectivity doesn't translate into writers inserting themselves into the story. This is something a hack friend of mine laments about the younger generation who think that reporting on celebrities makes them one. While the journalist does get unfettered access to all sorts of lives because of the profession, this is expressly because of the job not because of the person who has it. There's very little point in my writing about a wonderful play I saw, but which was for invited guests only as it fails to answer the ultimate question – so what if I have seen it, why should you care because I am nobody to my reader but a sifter and analyser who writes stories down in a way that the reader likes. As a person divorced from my job I am meaningless to my reader – and it is always for meaning that I strive. Otherwise my days really are numbered.



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