

# Planning your content to alleviate the chaos



## Chris Whitfield

Editor of *Cape Argus*, former editor of *Cape Times*

The random nature of news is obviously a blessing to newspapers and the media generally: the news that makes the biggest impact is almost inevitably that which is unpredictable.

But I sometimes wonder if the chaos out there is not reflected in our newsrooms and newspapers. A glance at some of our publications might suggest a random enough approach to news gathering, selection and display.

Surely this does not serve readers, who are mostly starved of time and generally turn to newspapers for concise and easily digested information on events of the day that either concern them or may be of interest?

Anyway, it was my conviction that readers seek an ordered newspaper – one in which they would routinely know where to turn for, say, local news or international news or opinion or whatever – and I felt this would be best achieved by an ordered news process.

When I was appointed editor of the *Cape Times* in 2001, I was delighted to find then-news editor Colin Howell already had a planning system which he called “the boards”. This was actually one board, a whiteboard, in the conference room and on which the following day’s dummy pages were mapped out. As the day evolved Colin and other department heads would write in their proposed page leads, pictures and so forth.

These would then be discussed and, if

necessary, changed both informally and during the day’s conferences. This process had the great benefit of gradually getting us thinking as one (more or less, I suppose) on our general approach to news.

We also decided to display pages from previous weeks in the conference room with the daily circulation and the comparative sale of the previous year written boldly on top of each. This obviously gave us an indication of how a particular edition had sold, but more importantly it gave us some insights into readers’ likes and dislikes, and some pointers about our journalism.

The mention of HIV/Aids in a front page lead headline would, for example, knock our sale (generally by about 1 500 out of an average of 50 000). This suggested a weariness among readers about the subject and we set out to find different ways to cover a hugely important story (personalising it seemed to help).

We found Capetonians were particularly proud of their city and stories about significant investment or even increased tourism would boost sales. On the other hand the mention of some of our more tawdry politicians – particularly the variety unique to the Western Cape – in front page headlines would hit sales, which presumably contained a different and broader message.

There were many other insights, some of which would come as no surprise to experienced news people but some that were quite startling.

Our photographers were delighted to get confirmation of their long-held view that pictures can sell newspapers. On one quiet news day, aerial photographs of shadowy great white sharks in the water just off the backline at Muizenburg

increased sales by several thousand copies.

Colin and his colleagues in the newsroom then began extracting copies of front pages and grouping those that had sold and those that had not, on different walls.

This suggested to us that certain displays – for example a packaged page one lead and picture – did indeed sell better than others. Headlines that ran above unrelated photographs in a dogleg seemed to turn readers off.

Some of our better posters were put on display (some just for general amusement, but also as a reminder of how they can effectively market the paper).

One objective was the grubby business imperative (increased sales, increased revenue and so forth), but the open process – reporters held their conferences in the room and all staff were invited into any conference they wished to attend – seemed to generate a broader understanding and “buy-in” from staff.

They obviously drew their own conclusions from the evidence around them and came up with their own suggestions, helping to at least suggest a collective approach to a process traditionally seen as the preserve of a select few.

## Results

I think the fact that we were able to grow circulation on the *Cape Times* for many years – with those numbers boldly displayed in the conference room – helped to boost morale. When numbers dipped it served to remind staff that we needed to work together.

There were a few negative lessons, not least being that you can do too much planning. Editors could become so attached to their ideas that breaking news was occasionally in danger of being relegated to secondary importance.

I also found on moving to the *Cape Argus*, with its complicated afternoon newspaper deadlines, that a formal planning process tended to be pushed too early into the production cycle and could stifle spontaneity. The culture of the newspaper is also quite different, so we took that into account when evolving its particular planning process.

# Managing a paper



**Henry Jeffreys**

Editor of *Die Burger*

When I joined *Die Burger* as acting editor for a three-month period, I went around the newsroom chatting to the senior staff who make up the publication's editorial board.

One of my colleagues looked me in the eye and boldly said: “I don't care if the editor is pink, yellow or orange, as long as he (sic) knows what he's doing!” I wondered loudly whether he'd made that statement to any of my predecessors, who happened to all be white males, on their appointments.

To understand the significance of this little story, one has to understand *Die Burger* and why the title of this piece is important.

*Die Burger* is an Afrikaans daily newspaper first published in 1915; the first publication of Naspers, the leading media company in Africa with aspirations to this status in the developing world.

*Die Burger* was published at first to promote and support the causes of Afrikaner nationalism, including the rise of the National Party and eventually apartheid. All of this has changed in the past decade or so.

Now *Die Burger*, like many other SA newspapers, has no choice but to focus on the larger society and particularly the broader Afrikaans-speaking community. Perhaps more than any other paper (*Rapport* comes close), it serves a truly diverse Afrikaans-speaking community: one part Afrikaner white and the other coloured black.

In days gone by *Die Burger* (as did most other mainstream newspapers at the time) published so-called “*Ekstra*” (extra) editions aimed at the coloured

## HOW I SEE IT

## with fractured audiences

readership. At its height, *Die Burger Ekstra* sold more than 30 000 copies daily. This was always a politically expedient and awkward way of serving what was clearly a significant readership.

The *Ekstras* were buried with South Africa's undesirable past and *Die Burger* was confronted with the new challenge of serving the full Afrikaans-speaking community in one newspaper.

The paper's readership today consists roughly of 50% white and 50% coloured. It is bought by roughly 47% white and 43% coloured readers. There is increased coloured readership following the demise of the *Ekstra*.

How does one edit such an animal? Especially if you are at the same time the first coloured editor of a publication inspired by Afrikaner nationalism?

- **First**, you steer clear of party political allegiances and rather judge politics and politicians on the merit or demerit of their actions, against the backdrop of the Constitution (the new ideology?) and what it requires of the high and mighty.
- **Second**, agree with the question my colleague posed right at the beginning of my editorship (I was appointed editor two months after the acting editor stint). You demonstrate that you know what you're doing (even if you're black) and more.
- **Third**, stress the point that journalism and the people come first. Content will be driven by the story and not necessarily by issues of race.
- **Fourth**, gather a team of journalists more or less representative of the demographics of the communities served, but not at the expense of quality. In an environment where skills are in short supply this is difficult but, as we have demonstrated, not impossible. The more representative your staff, the more interesting the journalistic perspective and end-product.

It was therefore important to get the journalists to understand their first pri-

ority was the story. Much work had in fact been done long before my arrival and I just had to push the idea a bit more firmly.

The upside was that the representation of issues and experiences of all communities in the Western and Eastern Cape increased dramatically. The downside was that for some white readers this was at first uncomfortable: we no doubt lost some as a result. We are, however, proud that the core readership seems to appreciate the necessity of the changes and value the insights this brings about the lives of fellow South Africans.

Research indicates our core readers – largely the middle classes – are increasingly similar in how they view and experience life. The editorial mix is designed to speak to them through these similarities. Of course there are differences, but these can generate rich pickings for interesting and insightful journalism.

One of the ways we deal with stories which speak to the reader in his or her local environment is through geographic zoning. Typically we produce five editions a day and more often than not each leads with a different, locally relevant story up front, with more local stories in the main body.

All of this is done within the framework of a comprehensive code of ethics which every journalist joining *Die Burger* must sign and adhere to.

Language remains a challenge. Long-time readers of *Die Burger* were brought up with a strict, standardised form of Afrikaans and many would like this to remain. But Afrikaans has in its own way been liberated and this shows in the way the language is spoken and written across the spectrum of speakers and writers. We are increasingly becoming less tight in language use. A language committee oversees this: not to keep out, but to add to and enrich the vocabulary.

**TAKE A SNAPSHOT MEASUREMENT**

# How male/female are you?

It is generally accepted that if you want women to read your newspaper, or listen to or watch your broadcasts, they must also be represented there. Not as tokens or stereotypes, or to pretty up your pages ... they do not want to be alienated by such treatment. As full participants, warts and all.

The old approach was to have special sections or shows aimed primarily at women – often content that would be seen as trivial by men, who were catered for by “serious” stuff.

This became politically incorrect near the end of the last century. It also often failed to increase audience or attract women-oriented advertising. Another approach was to aim special content at the “high heels, equal paycheck” market.

The principle of reflecting in your media the kind of people you want to

consume it was an issue many “white” media had to tackle around the start of the 1990s: previously, for example, mainstream newspapers carried predominantly white faces, voices and bylines (usually men). With the start of democracy, it became glaringly obvious that not only was this horribly skewed, it would also alienate black people and limit the audience in the long term ... and as South Africa changed, so did the faces and voices in papers and on air (mostly to those of black men).

But it is not just an issue of quantity, it is also one of quality.

Filling your media with young models draped over cars, or female social workers speaking on behalf of abused women, will still alienate a female audience. They want to see and hear women like themselves, women who they aspire to be like



## Snapshot method

**A. First compare quantity:**

ITEM	DETAIL	WOMEN	MEN
How many <b>photographs</b> in	news pages		
	opinion pages		
	sports pages		
How many <b>stories about</b> , in	news pages		
	opinion pages		
	sports pages		
How many <b>individuals quoted</b> in	news pages		
	opinion pages		
	sports pages		
How many <b>bylines/picture credits</b> in	news pages		
	opinion pages		
	sports pages		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>All pages</b>		

in terms of their success in the wider world and women who have more difficult lives but speak for themselves. The whole range. And they want to hear from male social workers.

There are sophisticated ways of surveying how women are responding to your media, which will give you detailed analysis.

But if you are unsure whether you have a problem or not, first take a quick snapshot.

The example here is a simplified one for a newspaper, which you might do for five or ten editions to get a good picture, but it can easily be made more complex or adapted for other media.

Besides the marketing importance, there is the constitutional/legal argument: any sex discrimination by media means that women are not fairly shown

as productive and valued – and this has the wider impact of media on society.

How to create a gender balance in your media is a strategy issue: a complex piece of work that requires both a look at the audience you are aiming at and what sort of content changes it would require. You also need all your staff to understand the issues and agree to tackle them.

But taking a snapshot can be a start. The method can also be adapted to look at other issues: race and age, for example.

Measuring things starts to change them. But it is just a start.

Taking deliberate steps to recall the issue at each news conference makes the change actually happen in the long term. Adding a gender-relevance table to your news diary template helps – but leadership is needed to ensure that people don't skip it.

– Elizabeth Barratt



**USEFUL TOOL**

**B. Then look at the "quality" of the women who are in the paper:**

ITEM	Victims	Criminals	Politicians	Business people	In "caring professions"	Celebrities	Sports	Community leaders	Community members/workers
Photographs									
Stories about									
Quoted									
Bylines*									
<b>TOTAL</b>									

\*(for your staff bylines, note what kind of story they are writing)



# Lessons from tackling tik



**By Ingo Capraro**

Editor of *Son*

**T**o be successful, a campaign must be well managed and closely monitored – with various controls in place to keep you on track.

*Son* has been campaigning against the use of tik in the Western Cape, which is so much worse than any drug that came before. Worse than dagga or mandrax because it is easy to make, cheap and available everywhere. Girls even want to use it, under the impression it will help them stay slim. And the social consequence is that people will do anything to get it, to feed their addiction: in one case a house was taken apart to sell bricks to buy tik.

When deciding on whether to have a campaign, ask why you are thinking of doing this. What do you want to achieve? It may be partly altruistic. *Son* is a community paper, involved in the communities that are hard hit by tik, and this fits in with its ethical code of being for the underdog and the distressed. Also, more than half its readers are women, who bear the brunt of this. But you also hope a campaign will increase your circulation.

Then decide what your concrete aims are. In this case, we wanted to warn our readers and the community about the dire consequences of tik.

Next, you need to convince your staff. Everyone must buy in: news editor, reporters, photographers, subs, promotions. Sell the idea to them, explain what you are going to do, discuss how to approach these stories in an ethical way. For this you need specific and written guidelines for content, a 10 to 12-point briefing for the journalists. For example, we decided never

to mention to readers that tik makes you horny.

The next stage is to decide how to brand the campaign – you need a slogan or motto, and a logo. We chose “Oorlog teen tik” (“War against tik”).

Then decide how long you will do the campaign, when it will start and other timelines.

Once the details and direction are ironed out, it is time to launch. Announce your campaign to your readers – on the front page, with further detailed information inside – and do a widespread poster campaign.

Involve experts – develop partners – to get knowledge as well as content. We contacted rehabilitation counsellors and all the others who work with addiction. From one we got a shocking scan which showed lesions on the brain from tik.

During the campaign, keep in mind the dangers of involving certain people and groups. Do not let the experts or anyone else hijack your campaign or use it to push their own line. You also cannot compromise the paper as a business.

Then involve the community. With your logo, invite them to phone in or

## HANDY HINT

### Campaign checklist

1. What you want to achieve
2. Concrete aims
3. Full staff buy-in
4. Written guidelines
5. Branding: slogan and logo
6. Timelines
7. Launch, including poster campaign
8. Partners
9. Dangers
10. Community
11. Big stories
12. Keep up momentum
13. Measure success
14. Publish campaign successes

## EDITORIAL CAMPAIGNS



send an SMS with their stories and tipoffs. We had people from the community coming to ask how they could help, and so we backed a march which was done under our banner ... and carried the photo on the front page.

Hit the big stories – this is a critical part of the campaign, to have stories with impact. For example, we had a photo of Goodwood prison on the front page, with the headline “Tik jail”.

Once you have the momentum, do

not lose the initiative. At news conference every day I ask what the latest is on the tik front. Keep the issue top of mind for all staff. Lots of crime stories are linked to tik, so we use that angle and put the logo there.

Finally, as you go along, measure your success: circulation gains, SMSes, letters and phone calls received. Tell your staff. Even better, print the success stories from your campaign: in our case, about those who give up tik.

## DEFINITION

## Civic, public or community journalism

The role of a journalist is usually seen as that of a detached bystander who does not act in the drama of public life.

There is an alternative perspective – though some argue it destroys the independence and analytical distance of the media from its subjects.

This approach recognises that media often take a stand on issues – and accordingly positions itself to do this more consistently and overtly.

The terms “civic”, “public” or “community” journalism, bandied about in the United States, have similar enough mean-

ings that they can be used interchangeably. They are used to describe journalism that contributes directly to community problem-solving at a local level.

This journalism does not try to solve problems itself, but engages with and supports the efforts of citizens to solve problems and to play their democratic role in the community. It may involve creating public forums where citizens can discuss a particular problem, calling on citizens to participate, and/or providing information which helps them in this dialogue.

– Elizabeth Barratt

# Finding the ethical high road



## Franz Krüger

Senior lecturer at Wits University's journalism department, author of a book on ethics in SA journalism

Among the battery of high-tech skills and tools the modern editorial leader needs, there is a rather quaint, old-fashioned item: a compass.

It's a moral compass, to be precise. There is sometimes a temptation to see it as an archaic item, of little use in today's increasingly complex media world. What did the drafters of our codes know of modern marketing or the internet, after all?

In fact, though, a compass becomes more important, not less, as we venture further and further into uncharted terrain. It may become harder and harder to read against the unfamiliar landmarks, but that's no reason to throw it away.

It may be useful to remind ourselves of the basic point of ethics: by tying us in to a set of values we share with our audiences, they help us maintain credibility. So even if they lead us to spike a juicy story from time to time, they are in our long-term interests by maintaining the trust of our readers, viewers and listeners.

The core principles of truth-telling, independence, minimising harm and accountability resonate with journalists and audiences as much as they ever did. People may find many – too many – examples of journalists falling short of the ideal, but everyone agrees that the ideals are worth aiming for.

But ethics are not about naïve idealism, they are about hard practice. Applying them is difficult. Does the principle of accuracy require us to correct a story on a website invisibly or in

a way that shows it has been done? How do we maintain independence in the face of ever more inventive techniques by marketers seeking to blur the line between advertising and editorial?

It often starts with a small voice, easy to overlook in the daily clamour. Often it says merely: this feels a little uncomfortable. I'm not sure I'd like my audience to know about it.

Editors need to develop a willingness to listen to that little voice.

Once alerted, editors need a set of hard analytical skills to resolve an ethical issue. These can be developed through training and practice. Tools like the Ethics Roadmap, reproduced here, can help think you through an issue.

Ethical decision-making needs to be deliberate and careful, and it benefits from discussion. Even the most junior member of staff may have useful insights. In South Africa, particularly, we should make use of the range of different per-

## READINGS

### Want to know more?

- Johan Retief. 2002. *Media ethics: a guide to responsible journalism*. Cape Town: OUP
- Franz Krüger. 2004. *Black, white and grey: ethics in SA journalism*. Cape Town: Double Storey
- [www.presscouncil.org.za](http://www.presscouncil.org.za) is the website of the SA Press Council. It includes the SA Press Code, rulings by the Press Ombudsman and other material.
- [www.bccsa.co.za](http://www.bccsa.co.za) is the website of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of SA. It contains the broadcasting code, rulings and other material.
- [www.journalism.co.za/ethics](http://www.journalism.co.za/ethics) contains a collection of codes, case studies and other material.
- [www.sanef.org.za](http://www.sanef.org.za) has a section on ethics codes.



## AS I SEE IT

spectives and views in our newsrooms.

Time, as always, is no friend. Just as many poor headlines are written because of deadline pressure, so poor ethical calls are made when there is not enough time to think and talk. Good editorial leaders develop the ability to pick up problems early enough to allow some time to consider them, and know when it is better to hold a story for further consideration, even at the risk of being scooped.

Ultimately, the most important way for an editor to build ethical practice is by setting a tone that takes these issues seriously. It means ensuring that ethical con-

cerns are always part of the editorial discussion, not a separate issue that is only dealt with if completely unavoidable.

It also involves a willingness to admit mistakes, which good leaders know is a sign of strength, not weakness. Only the insecure are never wrong.

You may feel the old compass is no longer up to it. By all means trade it in for a GPS device – it may be fancier, but it's still a compass at heart. What is important is that you continue to look for the ethical high road.

## USE THIS TOOL

## Ethics Roadmap: 3 steps to resolve a dilemma

Note: This roadmap can be used to work through a particular issue. It is based on a formula developed by US ethicist Louis Day, plus approaches used by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Poynter Institute as well as other sources. Remember that discussion with colleagues will improve your decisions, particularly if those colleagues have different backgrounds to your own.

**Step 1: Define the issue**

- What are the facts of the case?
- What is the question?

**Step 2: Think through the issue:**

- Why am I doing this story? What is the public interest?
- Who is affected and how? What would they want? Are those desires legitimate? (Possible stakeholders include sources, the subject of the story, their families, the news organisation.)
- Which principles are involved? Which of them clash? (Tick the relevant ones, adding your own if necessary, and explain why.)
  - Accuracy
  - Fairness

- Independence
- Duty to inform the public
- Minimising harm
- Avoiding unnecessary offence
- Respecting privacy
- Honesty in relating to the source
- Honouring a promise
- Avoiding deception
- Is race or gender a factor? How?
- Which guidelines and precedents are relevant?

- What are the alternative courses of action? Are there ways I can handle the situation that satisfy various conflicting interests or principles? What advantages and disadvantages are there in each case?

Option 1: .....

Option 2: .....

Option 3: .....

(Add more if necessary)

**Step 3: Decide**

- The best option is: .....
- How will I defend my decision to colleagues, the different stakeholders and to my audience?

– From: *Black, white and grey: ethics in SA journalism*, by Franz Krüger

# Africa news from stringers



**Liesl Louw**

Former Africa editor of Media 24

When planning coverage of the rest of Africa, there are two choices: either rely on wires or foreign journalists, or recruit your own local correspondents.

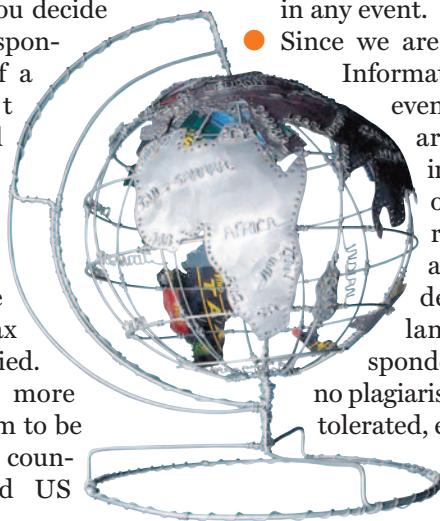
Working with local freelance journalists on the continent can be satisfying, and it is certainly a learning experience.

However there are many pitfalls.

- Finding credible reporters is the most important first step. It is not as difficult as one might imagine since the numerous courses and workshops throughout South Africa (eg IAJ, Highway Africa) provide an excellent source of local journalists across the continent. The rest is word of mouth – it is amazing how fast the message travels that a news organisation is looking for a freelancer in Zambia, Ghana, Uganda or wherever!
- Payments are usually decided by you or your editor. Just make very sure correspondents are aware of bank charges if you decide they should be responsible for these. If a correspondent prefers to be paid in a bank account here (some Zimbabweans might), make sure they realise South African tax will have to be levied. It is actually far more beneficial for them to be paid in their own countries, at a fixed US

dollar rate.

- Though most journalists work in English, if you need your comprehensive coverage of the continent to include places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon or Côte d'Ivoire, the Africa editor will have to be able to read French or employ a translator.
- Having established a network of correspondents, the biggest job is to guide them as to the content you require: the topic and how it should be written. Local journalists often believe agency-type writing is the international standard and will inundate you with short, blank news pieces. They overlook story ideas like the new trend for short skirts in Dakar, the market women protesting in Kampala or the nightlife in Lagos adapting to the power cuts ... and instead give you features based on news releases from Unicef or the World Food programme.
- Since you're not there, it is extremely difficult to find those colourful stories and suggest them. So the editor needs to do a lot of reading – including popular magazines on Africa and websites. If not, your correspondents will end up giving you what you can get from the wires in any event.
- Since we are all working on the Information Highway – and even more so those who are connected at an internet café with little other infrastructure to rely on – plagiarism is a major issue when dealing with freelancers. Warn correspondents beforehand that no plagiarism in any form will be tolerated, explain in detail what this means and then be vigilant.



## HOW WE DO IT

# Using news research strategically



**Izak Minnaar**

Head: SABC news research

Depending on the news organisation you work for, the concept of “news research” may differ vastly.

In some newsrooms this activity is associated with being able to search the paper (hard copy) and digital archives of the publication as well as other news clippings; or in a broadcast environment the ability to access archived raw and packaged video and audio material and scripts.

But in other media organisations news research is an integral part of the content planning and news production process – and a research editor plays a key role in the editorial information management process. A news research unit is typically tasked with:

- Gathering information on future events and emerging news themes to help editors make informed coverage planning decisions.
- Playing an active part in the news assignment process and working closely with editors, reporters and producers to gather material for stories – in a desk and/or field research capacity.
- Fact-checking (including spelling of names, titles and designations!) for subbing and production desks.
- Compiling profiles, timelines, fact sheets, statistics, backgrounders and info graphics for daily publication or broadcast purposes.
- Tracking developments on running stories, often in the form of a news clippings database; adding stories to be followed up to a future events diary.
- Compiling info packs and background research docs for use by

reporters, producers and presenters on big or complicated stories.

- Identifying experts and analysts to broaden the range of voices.
- Acquiring databases with useful information for the newsroom and assisting with interpretation of the data and facilitating access to these and other electronic resources.
- Publishing the output on a news intranet, to be the newsroom’s first port of call for research resources.

The editor can optimise the strategic role of a news research unit in the media organisation by ensuring:

Firstly, that the unit has the capacity – and editorial space – to be proactive by focusing a substantial part of its work on compiling a future events diary, which then determines to a large extent its research priorities. This means the unit can have the information ready by the time assignment and desk editors need it for daily news planning and production. Reactive work should as far as possible be limited to research on breaking stories.

Secondly, by having beat specialisation in the research unit and promoting close co-operation between beat researchers and the relevant desks, the organisation develops in-depth expertise and resources, enhancing its ability to build and retain institutional memory in any number of chosen fields.

Thirdly, by investing in the continuous development of the news intranet as the repository of all material produced by the research unit, over time it will become a rich editorial resource.

Finally, since the nature of the work compels news researchers to become super online searchers, this expertise can be used to spread computer-aided research skills in the newsroom.

These two attributes – an institutional research capacity and reporters whose work is supported by excellent research skills – are crucial contributors to content quality.

# Setting online deadlines



**Rachel Stewart**

Editor: online news,  
TelkomMedia

News on the web is accessible all the time by anyone online. When and how often to update the site, and what stories go on the home page and for how long, are determined by a number of factors, including:

- From where does your traffic emanate? Is it local or is there a lot of international traffic? Most South Africans online (61%) still only access the internet from work.
- What are your peak traffic times? Be ready with a freshly updated page and fast-moving headlines.
- What is your news flow? Radio may be updated hourly; print's main news flow is towards the evening (with a bit in the morning for on-day editions); TV might have early, midday and evening bulletins or 24-hour news with some looping. If

you work with any of these media, take them into account.

For breaking news on the web, run a marquee or ticker tape as soon as your source is corroborated, then put up a short story, and develop it from there.

You need the same checks for accuracy as any media: once it's on the internet it can take on a life of its own. Errors, factual and grammatical, are spotted and made known to you fast and vociferously!

Decide whether the home page should have the newest stories, whatever they are, with the page refreshing dynamically, or if it should carry the top stories of the day, updated as often as possible. Does your target audience want fast updates or in-depth news?

And should you scoop your partner platforms? If the website is linked to a daily newspaper, let alone a weekly, no. In addition to possibly reducing sales, if the story is on the website the competition can get it. The internet could play a teaser role, but you will have to get web-specific copy, good enough to retain eyeballs, in the interim. On the other hand, is your print readership online? Only about 10% of South Africans are. Find out and that will influence your decision.

If the website is linked to radio news, you can compete (internet can be updated faster than radio, unless radio programming is broken into) and co-operate (faster news flow).

With TV bulletins or special current affairs shows, you could launch the video post-broadcast or simultaneously, but use the script a bit earlier. Even better, develop the story further in multimedia, using the depth and breadth available for content on the internet.



## MY EXPERIENCE

# Cartoons and cartoonists



**Jonathan Shapiro**

Cartoonist Zapiro

Cartoons can cover a huge range of issues. Almost anything that is gripping the public mind can be a topic, especially since cartoons often marry two completely disparate issues to say something with a twist. For the leader page, political issues are obviously appropriate and are the most often covered.

Cartoonists can be seen as visual columnists who often show a clear and independent point of view. Advocacy in cartoons can be controversial, when for example attacking religious dogma relating to sex.

Controversy generates debate and letters to the editor. Editors I've worked with have mostly seen this as good for the paper though some are more cautious, being reluctant to offend readers.

I feel that while rude, risqué or extremely hard-hitting cartoons are bound to offend some readers, this is a risk worth taking. Many media analysts argue that the occasional causing of offence is part of the role of cartoons, which are by tradition irreverent. Editors can use the legitimate disclaimer that the cartoonist's views do not necessarily represent the views of the newspaper.

Most cartoonists prefer being given free rein, or close to it. Even rather hands-off editors can suggest a little discretion in a rude cartoon or perhaps the use of a different word in the text. It's better to do this during the preliminary stage of the cartoon than to censor the final drawing. But the editor does have the final say.

The relationship between the edi-

tor and the cartoonist, and whether the editor prefers the cartoons to reflect the paper's editorial positions, will determine how much guidance an editor gives a cartoonist.

Editors these days seem less inclined than in earlier years to hold the cartoonist to the paper's editorial stance. But even cartoonists who have free rein often enjoy discussing issues and angles.

I prefer an editor not to be prescriptive about which subjects to cover, as I enjoy using a lateral-thinking approach which sometimes brings unexpected results. But some cartoonists are happy to be provided with subject matter and direction.

Some editors prefer cartoonists to submit a rough idea or ideas, and the rough stage is the best time for an editor's advice.

Cartoonists tend to be reclusive ... these days even more so, in that few cartoonists still work in the newsroom.

Cartoonists certainly benefit from feedback after publication on how their work has been received at the paper and by readers, especially if some readers' views didn't make it to the letters page.

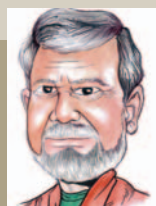
To maintain a strong relationship with a cartoonist, especially one who works outside the newsroom, an editor should prioritise being available by phone or e-mail where possible. And because of other pressures on the editor, it's best to assign another senior staffer as back-up.

If, on legal advice, an editor wants to make a change to a cartoon to avoid a defamation or libel suit, the cartoonist should be kept in the loop. Often a short conversation can lead to a compromise that won't deflate the cartoon.

Cartoonists should also be kept in mind by other staff, and not be informed at the last minute of unusually early deadlines or other changes to routine.



# The truth behind writing leaders



## Gavin Stewart

Writer and former editor of the *Daily Dispatch*

A leader is an argument and a story. The structure of an argument and any other kind of story is much the same.

Both begin with a situation, a problem arises, one or more solutions present themselves, these are evaluated and (only in a story) acted upon.

It goes like this:

Situation → Problem → Solution → Evaluation (→ Action).

But we don't have to tell the story in that order. We can start with any of the parts and arrange the others in whatever way we like. Most leaders begin with the problem then describe the situation from which it arose. Sometimes you will want to start with the solution, then discuss the problem.

The critical parts are a hook at the beginning to keep the reader reading – and a punch at the end to make the effort worth the time.

Some days you will wake up with no

# Issues with blogs and bloggers



## Riaan Wolmarans

Editor of *Mail & Guardian Online*

Free speech is far from simple. This is what the *Mail & Guardian Online's* invitation-only Thought Leader blogging platform has taught me.

When we launched Thought Leader in mid-2007, we had already run a free-for-all online discussion forum service for several years.

Knowing some of the legal and ethical problems that had resulted from unmoderated comments posted on those forums, we realised that Thought Leader would have to be completely moderated. We wanted it to be a website with insightful and stimulating debate, not just mudslinging and insults.

Since then, managing our bloggers

has turned out to be the easy part. In almost a year, we turned away only a handful of blog entries: two for straying from heavy criticism into defamation, and the rest for other reasons.

It's also been easy to convince informed people across society to take part, even for free – journalists, activists and other writers have recognised the value of a blog that is well presented and published under a trustworthy brand like that of the *M&G Online*.

However comment moderation is, in short, a headache.

An example: many of our blogs raise issues of racism, and there is a small group of outspoken “racists” commenting there.

Often they do so in a restrained, well-reasoned manner, but when their comments become too blatantly racist, in our view, we don't approve them – and then this group accuses us of censorship.

On the other hand, some more sensitive contributors and readers have said we should not allow *any* comment by

## AS I SEE IT

opinions. No strong feelings about the world. Nothing new at all.

Reading the newspapers might not help, nor listening to the radio. You will go through all the headlines, hear them repeated on the hour, listen to the same idiots phoning the talk-show hosts and consider all the topics about which you might raise a thought ... and realise you have dealt with them before.

But the leader space has to be filled. If you're really unlucky, two or three leader spaces have to be filled. So you need a notebook to jot down any idea, no matter how strange, which might ever be turned into a leader.

Talking to people and listening to what is worrying them also helps.

The trick is to start writing – the ideas will come as the words flow across the screen. Don't stop until you have the number of words you need for the space you have to fill. Editing is many times easier than creating.

Few leader writers have not, in desperation, paraphrased a leader from another newspaper, or argued with it.

There are none who have not abandoned one idea as a better idea crept out from under it.

By deadline time the task will be accomplished. It always is.

## HOW WE DO IT

people like these.

We have posted extensive comment guidelines saying, among other things, that racist comments or comments that could be interpreted as such won't be accepted. Such guidelines are crucial as they cover our moderation decisions on problematic comments.

But we are still forced to evaluate each and every comment – is it extreme but acceptable, or does it go too far? (This is apart from what are clearly unacceptable comments containing hate speech, defamation and so forth.)

This cumbersome but necessary task also takes up a sizeable chunk of the work day of our online editorial team, who have had to brush up on media law regarding defamation and hate speech.

The *New York Times* has the luxury of full-time comment editors. In South African online newsrooms, this remains on the wish list – for now.



We  
cannot  
make  
good  
news out  
of bad  
practice.



– Edward R. Murrow,  
pioneering US radio  
and TV reporter

# Usefulness of guidelines

Flak hit Snuki Zikalala in 2006 over his black-listing of several sources from appearing on SABC programmes. As SABC news chief, he had told various staffers, at various times, for various reasons, not to use various experts.

There was no actual “list” of names or even any formalised system, according to the Sisulu Commission which inquired into the matter.

What did emerge, instead, was a pattern of arbitrary action. The blacklisting arose from diverse remarks by Zikalala, some of which were construed as general rules even when not intended as such.

The reasons Zikalala gave the commission for excluding people ranged from a commentator who had commented without having first-hand information, another who had once messed up journalistically, and a third who had

made remarks against the “national interest” (which SABC is legislatively required to promote).

As other editors observed, however, in principle every editor has the prerogative to decide whose views get presented and with what authority or status they are credited. The tricky business is over how this is done.

In response to an outcry, Zikalala initiated a formal policy for who counted as an expert. Thus, instead of comments on-the-hop which came across as evidence of erratic and fuzzy micro-management, he saw the value of policy guidelines as a management tool to deal with criteria for who had appropriate commentator status. However, the solution was only half in place.

The belated policy was subsequently declared to be in force. But missing from

## Freebie policies or codes

Editors and journalists are often offered presents which have the potential to jeopardise their editorial integrity and independence – so conduct and ethics codes need to tackle this clearly.

If you take a hard line on this, your policy on freebies may be quite short – like this line in the SABC editorial code:

“We shall not accept gifts, favours, free travel, special treatment or privileges, which may compromise our integrity and any such offer shall be disclosed.”

Similarly, the City Press code has a policy on gifts and freebies which starts like this: “The basic

policy of the City Press is that WE DO NOT ACCEPT ANYTHING FOR FREE. We pay our own way, and we do not accept gifts, freebies, inducements, special offers, tickets, free trips, and so on that are not available to us as ordinary citizens.”

However, for most media this is just a start. The policy is spelt out in detail to avoid any misunderstandings.

**Here is a guide to what could be covered in such a policy:**

1. Overall approach (the policy principles).
2. Gifts – whether all gifts, or just



it was evidence of research into how other public broadcasters identified and presented experts. The policy was also not approved by the board and, more problematically, absent from its genesis was any consultation with the staff – the people who were ultimately supposed to adhere to its guidelines.

In the aftermath, the Sisulu Report was leaked, notwithstanding the SABC board's attempt to keep it confidential. Most of those previously excluded were soon back on SABC programmes and the policy guidelines were not taken further.

What was left, after all this, was an enduring vacuum in clarity over the serious issue of who qualifies to be represented as an expert commentator, and about how the selection of such sources can be elevated above immediate spot

judgements or political concerns.

### Understanding policy

- Policy can be a systemic way to manage organisations.
- Policies can specify rules, or they may just be guidelines – either way, their status should be clear.
- The overall objective of policy is to create shared expectations and understandings, and to guide standard operating procedures.
- Policy also needs to take account of different interests and interpretations, and include ways to resolve these.
- The Sisulu Report described editorial policy as “a sword and a shield” for editors in public broadcasting.
- Policy need not only contain “do not” parameters; it can also enable. For

### MORE INFO

those valued over a certain ceiling, need to be refused or returned, declared or passed on to an editorial pool for annual auctions, prize givings or donations to charity.

3. Complimentary access to events or establishments for the purpose of possible coverage.
4. Free tickets not related to coverage (for example sports events and concerts).
5. CDs, tapes and books for review.
6. Free drinks and meals (hospitality).
7. Car loans and petrol (usually only for motoring journalists).

8. Travel invitations for reviews of holiday destinations.
9. Media flights from governments or corporates.
10. Solicitation of free travel offers (flights and/or accommodation) by an individual.
11. Sponsored conferences.
12. Gifts of stocks and shares.
13. Restaurant reviews.
14. Applicability of the above to freelancers.

The policy is spelt out in detail to avoid any misunderstandings, and to clarify transparency issues such as what should be communicated to an audience with regard to reports emanating from sponsored trips.

– Elizabeth Barratt



instance, a policy on internet use can go further than “no porn” and instead set out principles for advancing digital literacy among staffers (for example, training in how to do advanced internet search).

- Best practice policy draws on basic values and the results of research, and includes the inputs of staffers and sometimes even other stakeholders.
- Best practice should also include a communications programme, and a monitoring and review strategy.
- Too much policy can be a killer, while a margin of chaos can be a generator for creativity. Limit your policy tools to priority areas.

### Sample policy topics

These can include training, freebies, confidential briefings, travel, use of company transport, smoking, corrections and apologies, misrepresentation, representation of children, coverage of race, use of graphic photographs.

You can often find examples of other media houses’ policies online which can feed into new or enrich existing ones.

You can approach policy in various ways, or mix them:

**1** See it as smoothly integrative, ensuring predictability, as a way of developing agreed procedures and avoiding ad hoc decisions.

**2** Recognise that a policy also needs to acknowledge interests, especially among the more vocal sectors whose positions will have to be incorporated or negotiated if they are to be convinced and the policy is to be legitimate.

**3** Treat policy matters in general as a site of politics and the operation of power, establishing who is in charge. There’s often also a dimension that serves as political theatre – with primarily symbolic impact. But don’t stop there – without substance, the policy won’t go very far.

**4** Promote grassroots ownership by encouraging participation in developing policy, not only by being consultative in the formulation of policy but also by being empowering with regard to impact.

**5** Rather opt for a patchy and piecemeal policy regime than excessive bureaucracy.

– *Guy Berger*

## CHECKLIST

### Designing newsroom policy

A ten-point checklist for effective tools:

1. The policy’s rationale should be relevant and clear. It should address:
  - Why this policy, what’s the purpose? (for example to create predictability, to be restrictive or to be enabling?)
  - Whose problem/possibility is addressed? (Key do’s AND don’ts are included.)
  - Which people are the target of the policy?
2. Has a clear definition of what it covers. For example, what exactly is a “confidential briefing” if you want a policy on this? What is the scope – does the policy on freelancing by staff cover their private time?
3. It is upfront about its genesis.
  - Who made the policy, what interests are incorporated, what are the implications for its legitimacy, who has final decision-making power?
4. The policy recognises inputs.
  - What context and values underpin the policy, and any research or consultation that have contributed to it.
5. It is explicit about its status – is it merely guidelines, or is it a set of rules?
6. It is practical – especially regarding capacity, budget and time issues, and simplicity.
7. It is assessable – does it have some visible indicators?
8. It specifies who communicates it and how.
9. It tells who monitors and assesses implementation.
10. It sets out who is responsible for taking corrective action or policy review.

– *Guy Berger*



## VALUE OF THE MARKET

## Weighing up editorial research

**Jos Kuper**

Marketing, media  
and socio-political  
analyst

**W**ho is king: editorial integrity or the market?

The key is that it doesn't have to be either editorial integrity or the market, but rather both/and.

Elements of editorial content or platforms are sacrosanct but listening to the market, being sensitive to its needs, understanding it deeply and responding accordingly, can make an immense difference to the medium's differentiation, circulation and audience success and the degree to which it establishes a close relationship with its market.

Many forms of research can do this, including the somewhat shallow "laundry list" research in which the audience tick off the topics they feel they would enjoy.

Then there is psychographic research, like the FutureFact survey ([www.futurefact.co.za](http://www.futurefact.co.za)) that identifies trends which are shaping different elements of society and the "climate of

change" in which the medium is operating.

This type of research highlights the mindsets of the people you are addressing and the likely scenarios for the country in the future, which are essential for locating your medium within an evolving society.

A survey such as Daily Reader Research (modified from O Globo in Brazil) is expensive but pays dividends (see graphic).

It allows for daily sensitivity to the interests of the market, identifies the kind of front page pictures and stories that appeal to readers, finds "space savers" in the stories or features that are of little interest, and helps to make way for those that will have appeal (see graphic below).

Editors need to ensure the researcher provides information in a way that is accessible, useful and actionable.

It is incumbent on editorial professionals not to be defensive when the research doesn't confirm their views (prejudices?).

Both the researcher and the editor should be on the same side: identifying content that will make the product more successful and bond more readers, listeners or viewers to it on an ongoing and committed basis.

## ACRONYMS

## What are these?

**ABC** = Audit Bureau of Circulations: [www.abccr.cz/ifabc/south\\_africa/south\\_africa.html](http://www.abccr.cz/ifabc/south_africa/south_africa.html)

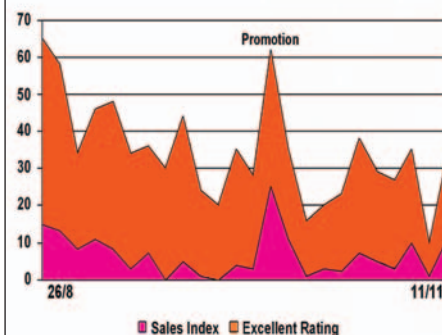
**SAARF** = South African Advertising Research Foundation: [www.saarf.co.za](http://www.saarf.co.za)

**AMPS** = All media and products survey

**RAMS** = Radio listening: Radio audience measurement survey

**TAMS** = TV viewing: Television audience measurement survey

## Excellent content and sales



### **Audience measurement: does it have editorial value?**

Many print journalists are not aware of the difference between circulation and readership measurements and, for example, talk about 500 000 readers when the reality is a 500 000 circulation and 4,7-million readers.

The former refers to ABC figures which provide the number of magazine or newspaper copies sold, and the latter to Amps, which gives the number of readers as well as a range of other information about them. This would include their demographics, some lifestyle and attitudinal information, and their inter-media patterns.

Print circulation figures cannot tell you who is buying the newspaper or magazine, and they are dependent on “sales variables” such as the season, the weather, or the number of public holidays and school holidays that fall within the circulation period under review.

So what is the value of each from an editorial perspective?

Neither is gospel. Neither is a fool-proof measurement. But both undoubtedly have value, provided they are understood correctly.

ABCs come out quarterly these days. Of course there is value in seeing whether your circulation is increasing or decreasing, period on period. Particularly for a new entrant in the market, it is good to

monitor the sales over time. For a more mature product it is good to compare like periods, but even then interpretation of the product’s performance should take into account the conditions listed above.

You need to be aware that circulation and readership figures do not necessarily show a good relationship. Demographic and other factors such as bulk sales to schools will make a difference to the number and type of readers, and the readers-per-copy figure.

For example, a magazine that has a high readers-per-copy figure may be expensive and the kind of publication that is passed around the office for many to read. Or a newspaper aimed at the working class market could reflect the sharing of copies by family members and neighbours.

It is good always to look at the origin of copy readership figures to make a deduction of what percentage are buyers of the original copy.

Similarly the degree of commitment of a reader to a publication is a useful measure, establishing how many copies readers read on a regular basis within a certain time period.

You also need to be aware that readership lags circulation, so that often a declining publication in circulation terms only reflects an Amps decline in readership one or two periods later.

## Follow or lead the audience?

Information about audience preferences raises the question of whether editors should follow or lead the consumers of their products.

While the emphasis can swing one way or the other, the reality is that producing successful media content has to do both.

Give people “only” what they think they want, and risk boring them or losing out to more innovative competitors.

It’s also no fun to simply reinforce the existing tastes and prejudices of the “customers”.

On the other hand, if you ignore where the audience is at, it’s impossible to stimulate and

Amps comes out twice a year, and is an aggregate of the two prior periods of fieldwork.

In the case of the broadcast media, there are Tams and Rams, the former offering daily playback of viewership and the latter playback of listening habits six times a year.

In this way, programme-related material can be assessed by all journalists.

But all require analysis by media research professionals who should be able to provide feedback to editors in a way that allows for an in-depth understanding of audience needs, in order to enable informed editorial programming decisions.

All media research needs to be understood in terms of the sampling limitations of the measuring tool – which is generally constrained by lack of money for big enough samples (this is why Amps uses “rolling data” over the past two fieldwork periods).

However, you don't have to eat a whole pot of soup to know it is salty!

Using the data while understanding its limitations is a good route to follow, so that research can be effectively used by editorial as a strategic tool for ongoing audience understanding and growth.

#### TIP

expose people to new ideas (whether pleasurable or unpalatable).

So, lead and follow. And learn. As “we-media” guru Dan Gillmor points out: in an age of interactivity, there's now a bunch of people “formerly known as the audience”.

– Guy Berger



The press has never been and never should be in business to give the people just what they want.

The editor who does his editing predominantly from market research returns isn't worth a damn.



– William Hornby, former executive editor of the *Denver Post*. (From Doug Underwood. 1995. *When MBAs rule the newsroom*. New York: Columbia University Press)

# Seeing stories as a management tool

“So, I had this news editor Ron once, the bugger made me rewrite a caption four times without once telling me what was wrong with it.

“I used to live in terror of his grumpy manner. He would be at his desk, seated, and would go through my copy in silence. Time would slow to a snail’s pace while I stood in front of him, tense as anything in case my efforts would be rejected again ...

“In the end, I gave up trying to do anything creative and just described what the picture already showed.”

You’ve no doubt heard of “emotional intelligence”: the ability to see and deal with the bottom 80% of the human iceberg. Now there’s “narrative intelligence”, which deals with your capacity to tell or evoke stories. As in the item about Ron, it operates at both the emotional and intellectual levels.

You know all about stories of course, given that the business of your media house is to trade in them. While not every item of your content output is a “story”, in the sense of being about real characters, sequence and plots, it’s likely that a great deal is. Stories in this classic sense are part of why people are attracted to your content.

But here’s the bonus: stories are not just key to your product, they can also be a powerful part of how you manage production – because the nature of an organisation is signalled by the quantity and quality of (oral) stories circulating in it.

People who study this topic remark that while any organisation necessarily relies on impersonal and fact-based analysis to chart its course, the self-same practice does not exactly lend itself to effective communication. That’s where story-telling comes in, by default or by design.

Stories are how people make sense of their realities.

## Story power

The power of stories lies in:

- Stimulating the imagination and creativity

- Creating feeling and empathy
- Triggering action
- Communicating identity
- Spreading knowledge and values.

## How stories work

For people to partake in stories as tellers or as listeners requires that they temporarily position themselves in relation to its discourse. They take up an identity position in order to go with the flow and craft the moral.

What eases this is the extent to which stories resonate with deeper cultural traditions about:

- (a) the role of the narrator, and
- (b) the themes of the narration.

So, stories confirm or disrupt archetypes about what has always happened.

Accordingly, they help people recognise themselves in others. They reconcile people to difficulty and death, and allow them to dream of alternatives.

Telling stories at particular occasions (at funerals, pubs, meals, meetings) is simply part of the human ritual. The classic themes are about heroes and rogues, journeys and homecomings, gender roles, trust broken or exalted, exoticism, natural disaster and the like.

Most of these can be made up or at least embroidered, as poetic licence is given and taken in regard to story-telling in everyday life. It matters only that the tale is memorable and meaningful.

It’s different in a newsroom environment that stresses credibility. Few people here will sacrifice complete accuracy simply for narrative effect on their peers – or at least they’ll communicate clearly when this is happening.

## Good stories

- Are concrete and graphic.
- Not too complicated to follow, but also not always quite logical.
- Rely on conflict, inconsistency, challenge and surprise.
- Operate at the level of the particular, but have more general significance.
- Generate other stories in the mind of a listener.

### How to stimulate stories

They will happen for better or for worse, so work with that reality while also remembering that stories cannot be controlled.

You just have to try and contribute to those that reflect a vibrant and purposeful organisation:

- Actively listen to the stories that are in play.
- Ask questions.
- Share your own stories and encourage others to share theirs.
- Invite colleagues to tell one another's stories.
- Use stories of others as cues for additional narratives to flow.

### Narrative literacy

Some stories are more appropriate in particular contexts and for certain purposes.

As story teller or story prompter, this means that when you tell a story, it should be matched to the narratives of the audience and correctly anticipate their reaction.

Be mindful of the body language of “the teller” and “the told”.

Vocabulary is obviously important, and so is sequence. Allegories and metaphors can play a rich part.

### Themes

Different types of stories that are especially significant, from an editorial management point of view, are those that deal with:

- Heroic achievements and failures (emphasising quest, obstacles, justice, outcomes)
- Disruptive developments (dealing in cases of discomfort, recalcitrance, lack of resolution)
- Nostalgia (innocence, tradition, culture, legacy)
- Professional discourse (extolling editorial independence, for instance)
- Humour (about fools, victims)
- Rites of passage (generations: childhood, youth, old age).

Expert Steve Denning observes that stories can combine various components. His recipe is to highlight a negative angle to get attention, a positive dimension to kindle desire, and a neutral side that expresses the best way forward. Think about what story you want to tell, and what you want to achieve.

**Caution:** Although interpreting the world in terms of stories has value, sometimes complexities don't make for good yarns and they oughtn't to be squeezed into the format.

– Guy Berger

#### MORE INFO

## Narrative journalism

- Voice, atmospheric detail, building characters, false climaxes, dialogue, flashbacks, internal monologue, sequencing, structure, sourcing and tone ... the theory of writing non-fiction stories for television, radio or print is challenging, but provides many possibilities for self-learning to improve how you tell stories.
- The **Nieman Narrative Digest** is a rich resource on narrative journalism,

mostly for print: it includes story examples, short and long-form narratives, resources, books and bookmarks, glossary, essays on craft and conference presentations. See [www.nieman.harvard.edu/narrative/digest/index.html](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/narrative/digest/index.html)

- **Writing for story, by Jon Franklin** (Plume, 1994) gives a step-by-step guide to creating narratives: its subtitle is “Craft secrets of dramatic nonfiction by a two-time Pulitzer prize winner”.



# Sound leadership



**Gaye Davis**

Primedia's Group  
parliamentary  
correspondent

**M**anaging news for radio takes specialised understanding – especially when you compare it to print.

Right now, because you are reading this, I have your undivided attention. That's a rare luxury for a radio journalist. For most people, radio is something you listen to while doing something else – driving the car, cleaning your house, or doing your job.

So the big challenge for the radio journalist is to get the story across in spite of all the other demands on the listener's attention: kids squabbling on the back seat, the whine of the vacuum cleaner, or the clatter and chatter of the office.



With radio, listeners can't go back to the first few paragraphs to find out what the story's about. They need to understand what you're telling them the first time round.

You don't have much time to do this. On talk radio, news stories run for up to 35 seconds. On music stations, 25 seconds is all the time you have. That's just a few sentences in which to tell the story. Every word has to count.

How you start is crucial. You want to grab the listener's attention. If you imagine you're telling a friend what just happened, it will help you boil the story down to its essence.

Keep your language simple and sentences short. A good rule is one idea per sentence. Long sentences will have you gasping for breath and the listener left behind.

Radio is about what's happening now, what's just happened, or about to happen. So we write in the present tense and use the active, rather than the passive, voice.

News bulletins run throughout the day. You're not going to get the whole story out in a single report, but you can tell it all by taking the story forward in successive bulletins, changing the angle each time.

Often, the best news reports are written around the sound the reporter has gathered at the scene. The wails of crying children or the sound of hammers on metal provide a powerful image as shack dwellers rebuild after a devastating fire.

Writing for radio is a different beast to writing for print. But the need to get good writing – crisp and precise – is still paramount.

*(Davis reports for 702 Talk Radio, 567 Cape Talk, Highveld 94.7 and 94.5 Kfm)*