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THE MAIN PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF RADIO NEWS WRITING

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Abstract

Radio broadcast journalism has certain principles and techniques which are always to be taken into consideration when writing a script. News writing for radio is based on some rigors meant to assure that the public will receive the information properly. First of all, radio news must be concise, clear, and accurate. The information should be meticulously verified and transmitted only when the radio journalist has a confirmation beyond any doubt. The script must answer to the most important journalistic questions (the so-called Five W's: who, what, when, where, and why), and it is mandatory to be structured in a manner that helps the presenter draw and maintain the attention of the listeners for as long as possible. The text of the news must be easy to be read and easy to be understood. It is meant to be comprehended only by listening, so the editor should comply with the rules that guarantee an impeccable reception of the message transmitted.
Key words: radio, broadcast, journalism, news, writing, techniques, principles

Writing for radio broadcasts is not as easy as some might think. Especially when one deals with radio news writing, because there is a significant difference between the conversational discourse and the broadcast journalism/news discourse. The tone is different, and also the vocabulary used and the structure of the phrase. A radio journalist must always have in mind the

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fact that the text is meant to be received only by listening. There is no graphic/visual support, there is no way of immediately revisiting the text. So the journalist should be a hundred percent sure that the message transmitted will be flawlessly comprehended by most if not all the audience of the radio station. That implies a set of rules, rigors and principles which very often are different than those applied in the written press. The radio journalists must be aware of the fact that they write texts to be listened to, not to be read, therefore they should construct the news in order to create certain mental images.

An essential principle for journalism, in general, and for broadcast journalism, in particular, is the accuracy. It is the cornerstone of news writing, because on the accuracy of the facts described relies all the other elements of the journalistic product delivered. A serious radio station can't afford transmitting incomplete or loosely verified information, not to mention fake news. The reputation is of vital importance for media institutions, it is a trademark that must be preserved at any costs. The good reputation is gained in time and with persistent efforts, but it can be lost in a moment. It is hard to gain, and harder to regain. That is why it is mandatory for news editors to verify and re-verify the information acquired. To verify the information from three sources, as the manuals and guidelines advise us to always do: "The hallmark of journalism as a writing art - either print or broadcast - is the accurate presentation of facts. Your finished product must correspond accurately with the facts of the story. In the field you will follow every possible lead to get the facts as well as report them" (www.tpub.com/journalist/146.htm).

There must be stressed that, although there are still controversies upon this matter, a journalistic style really exists and it is to be referred to accordingly. Some theoreticians consider that there is also a news-writing style, which is an understandable tendency when taking into consideration the distinctive elements identified in the way news are constructed. One of the most important rules in writing for radio is the concision. It is frequently reminded in the news rooms the expression "Keep it short and simple", or "Keep it short and sweet" (KISS). This

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phrase is extremely evocative and must be applied with religiosity by news editors and anchors, as David Brewer, the reputed journalist and media strategy consultant who founded Media Helping Media, emphasizes: “The script should be written in simple, short sentences. Try to use everyday language and terms your audience will understand. It should not contain any complicated concepts that could confuse and distract. Use everyday language and avoid complex concepts” (www.mediahelpingmedia.org/training-resources/journalism-basics/646-tips-for-writing-radio-news-scripts).

We must highlight here also another golden rule for radio news journalists: clarity. The editors must be careful and focused on the fact that the text is comprehensible and the structure is as simple as possible. Easy to read, easy to understand. Otherwise, the entire journalistic effort is useless: “The vast majority of your audience is focused on basic needs. Their language is simple. If your audience can’t get what you’re saying, all the investigating you’ve done will have been done in vain” (www.mediahelpingmedia.org/training-resources/journalism-basics/646-tips-for-writing-radio-news-scripts)

In order to attract and keep the attention of the audience for as long as possible, the lead or the attack phrase of the news must be short and suggestive. The first paragraph should contain the answers to most of the main journalistic questions, the so-called Five W’s: who, what, when, where, and why. The answer to the rest of them and, in addition, the question “how”, are to be found in the body or the running text of the story. This writing structure is widely known as “the inverted pyramid” (also called summary news lead style, or bottom line up front - BLUF) and it is meant to draw the attention instantly and not allow the listeners lose their interest in the story rendered.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_pyramid_(journalism)

You must grab the attention of the audience by teasing the most interesting part of the news from the very beginning, without neglecting the rest of it and remaining relevant throughout the entire text, as David Brewer underlines: “You are crafting a tease to material that is designed to make people stop and listen. The language should be in the active tense. The most important information must feature in the first few sentences. However, the quality should be consistent throughout, and the script must not tail off at the end” (www.mediahelpingmedia.org/training-resources/journalism-basics/646-tips-for-writing-radio-news-scripts). As Brewer stresses, we must start with a crisp and sharp introduction that pinpoints the main elements of the news, the most valuable information, and only then we can add the contextualization, the background and the analysis that will help our listeners understand the multiple nuances and the correct perspectives of the story depicted.

Ranking the news in the bulletin is also essential. The inverted pyramid technique, used in the manner demonstrated earlier, must be taken into consideration also when we rank the stories about to be included in the bulletin.

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The correct order is from the most important events to those who we feel that, although not as important as the first ones, must be presented to our public. There are some simple tips which can solve this stringent problem of the news editors and presenters. First they must read all the information available, then read once more and organize three lists or categories:

“Important stories which you must use;

Stories which you can use, but which are not so important;

Stories which you cannot use, for any reason.

First look at the stories in category one. Calculate roughly how much news these will give you (if each story will be approximately 40 seconds long and you have four of them, they will take about 2 minutes 40 seconds to read). Now choose enough stories from category two to more than fill the remaining time. Together with your essential category one stories, decide the order in which you want to use them, taking into account their importance, length and pace.

You can combine stories on similar topics, either running them as one story or as two stories linked with words such as <Meanwhile> or <Still on the subject of ...>. A word of caution. Do not combine too many stories, because they will become a shapeless mass and you will lose the impact of separate intros” (www.thenewsmanual.net/Manuals%20Volume%202/volume2_49.htm).

Another fundamental rule for the news writers is that they must be aware of the fact that their own opinions on the story depicted are not meant to be included in the news under any circumstances. The information is presented in a very equidistant manner, the anchor letting the story speak for itself: “Commenting is judging, expressing an opinion. This is not why you’re there. Stick to the facts” (www.24hdansuneredaction.com/en/radio/24-major-radio-principles/). The only opinions allowed in the news are those of the persons involved in the story.

The way of speaking on radio is just as important as the way the information is structured and written. Finding the right tone and speed when reading the news in front of the microphone is essential in order to avoid altering

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the process of transmitting the message. The listeners must be able to comprehend the information provided, and the voice of the anchor, the tonality, the intonation, the phrasing, they all have a key role in radio communication process. The voice is the radio tool that must be used in the right way to describe and suggest: "We speak more slowly on air than in real life, but we need to describe, to tell stories, to create pictures. We need to come off as lively, not as robot. You must find the right style, a simple one, fitting with your character. In just a few words, a reporter can describe an empty place, recently deserted by a crowd – and you will picture it, just as if you were there. Having your own style and on air presence requires perpetual work" (ww.24hdansuneredaction.com/en/radio/24-major-radio-principles/).

The newsreader should find the right reading rate and make the correct calculations and assessments: "Once you know your average reading rate, you can estimate how long it will take to read each story. Of course, you will not want to count all the words in all your stories; this would take too long. It is better to count just the number of lines. First, count how many words there are in 50 lines of your standard news scripts, then divide the total by 50. This will give you the average number of words per line. For example, if there are 600 words in 50 lines of script, the average is 12 words per line. Now you can calculate how long it takes you to read a line of script. For example, if your reading rate is 2 words per second and your script contains an average of 12 words per line, you can read one line in 6 seconds (12 divided by 2). By counting the total number of lines in each story, you can calculate quite accurately how long they will take to read. For example, a story with 8 lines of type will take 48 seconds to read (8 times 6). Mark the time on the bottom right-hand corner of each story" (Stewart & Alexander, 2016, p. 5). In the end, as Peter Stewart and Alexander Ray reveal, we must emphasize the fact that it is not for everyone to succeed in broadcast journalism because of the skills and the talent required, as well as the permanent development of these qualities: "Demanded skills include finding stories, crisp, concise fast writing, packaging together scripts, sound, interviews, pictures,

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maps or graphics, reporting live, reading news, multimedia skills, understanding media law and social media hazards, versioning texts to be seen on mobile devices, knowing the names of people in the news, people about to be news, people who once were news, getting wet, hot, cold, being alert at three in the morning or standing outside a building for hours waiting for a moment that will last seconds. The good news? You will never be bored" (Stewart & Alexander, 2016, p. 5).

The broadcast journalists must constantly train their writing techniques and lose under no circumstances their thirst for information and personal development. They must be alert at any time and aware of the fact that improving their skills means that the information will be transmitted in a more efficient and reliable way: "Writing for broadcasting is not a natural process in which you just write sentences in your usual way. For The Job you will obviously have done a lot of writing and enjoy the power of words. You read lots of news, books, maybe poetry. Sometimes you read something and you can think: I love that sentence and I wish I'd written a sentence like that. And one day, you will" (Stewart & Alexander, 2016, p. 5).

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