

How to be a **JOURNALIST** in the 21st century



**An OER textbook for students
and independent journalists**

By Andre Gouws and North-West University
(Potchefstroom campus) students

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Lastly, thank you, to you, the readers, for exploring this textbook. It is aimed at anyone with an interest in journalism. My hope is that this textbook will be a guide to anyone who works with news, whether about events in your town, the latest beauty products or national politics, whether about travel or crime, to be responsible, ethical, trustworthy journalists. The world will be a better place if we all do our bit to ensure that we are careful when distributing information.

This book is a work in progress, please do let us know if you see any mistakes or if you would like to see any updates. Contact details are on page 155.

1. Journalism in the 21st century

When we talk about journalists, we tend to think of people working as professional journalists, photographers, or broadcasters at traditional mass media outlets (also called legacy media). These outlets include newspapers (now often published online), radio stations and television channels. However, since the late 20th century, when access to the internet became widespread, people have been practising journalism in many other ways – ordinary citizens now occasionally do some of the things that journalists used to do, sometimes not even realising that they are doing journalistic work. The purpose of this open textbook is to provide a general introduction to journalism in the 21st century to both journalism students and *anyone* who, perhaps unknowingly, create their own types of journalism. These new types of journalists include bloggers, entrepreneurial journalists, social media users, newsletter writers, and YouTube and TikTok creators, among others. In the digital era, journalism skills are valuable skills to anyone who creates or distributes news or information. Journalism skills include an understanding of news, the context of the media, legal and ethical issues around creating and distributing all types of content, and practical skills. This textbook contains ideas to help prospective independent journalists with journalistic entrepreneurship. Scholars agree that journalism can be defined very broadly today (Deuze, 2018, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020). It is no longer something that only trained journalists do. Knowing and understanding journalism will help everyone to tell better stories; to perhaps earn an independent income; and, importantly, to do it an ethical and compassionate way.

1.1 The role of journalism in the digital era

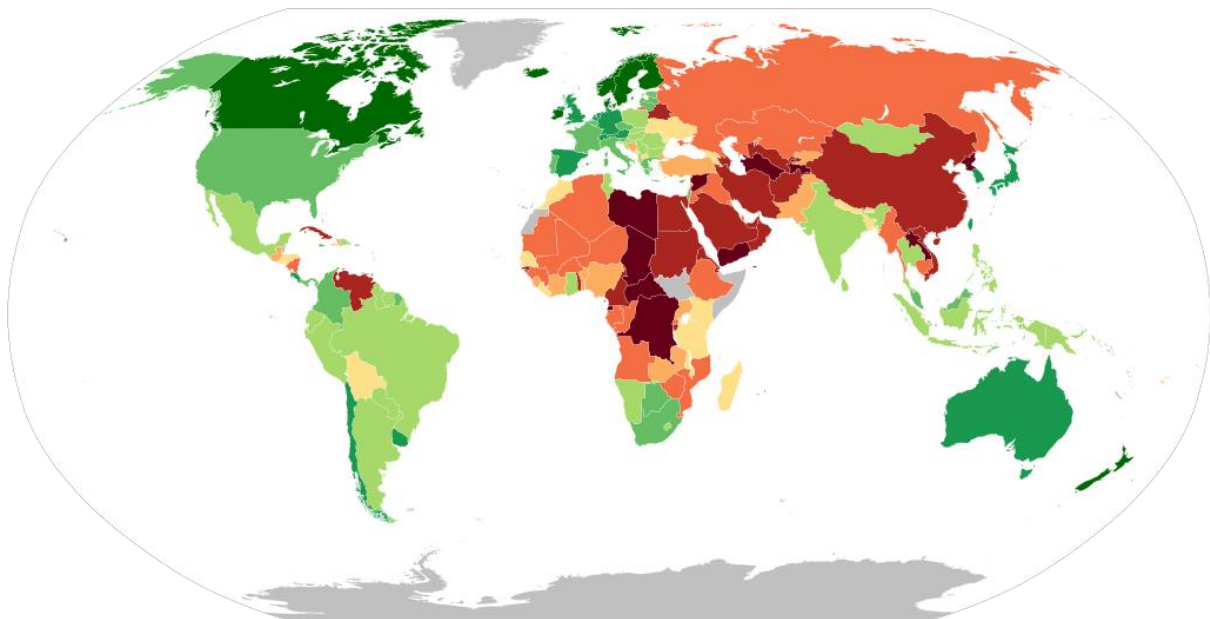
The generally accepted view of the role of journalism in democratic societies is that it should hold people in power to account (i.e., watch over those who have power) and help democracy function (Mellado *et al.*, 2020; Picard, 2014; Zelizer, 2013). This view of journalism has become so ingrained in academic and popular thinking that many journalists at legacy media like to think that they are the only real journalists and are the only ones who have the knowledge and skills to be real journalists (Picard, 2014; Swart *et al.*, 2022). This is what academics call the liberal perspective. Journalists often justify their work from the liberal perspective as necessary to maintain democracy (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005), which is mostly true in democratic societies. This is called journalism's watchdog role.

Journalists can do more than play watchdog roles, however. Many countries are not democracies and still have journalists; many individuals now have their own news platforms online on which they distribute news that interests specific communities; news is not only about politics but can also be about ordinary daily life and interesting events (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).

Some scholars also argue that the mass media should play a social upliftment, transformational and nation-building role in postcolonial societies such as South Africa (Rodny-Gumede, 2018; Skjerdal, 2012). South Africa has a strong media sector and is one of the countries in the world with a free and independent press and a well-functioning democracy, as can be seen in the two maps below. But, according to The Economist Democracy Index for 2020, almost half (44.9%) of the countries in the world, where half the world's population live (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021), are non-democratic societies. They live under other forms of government.

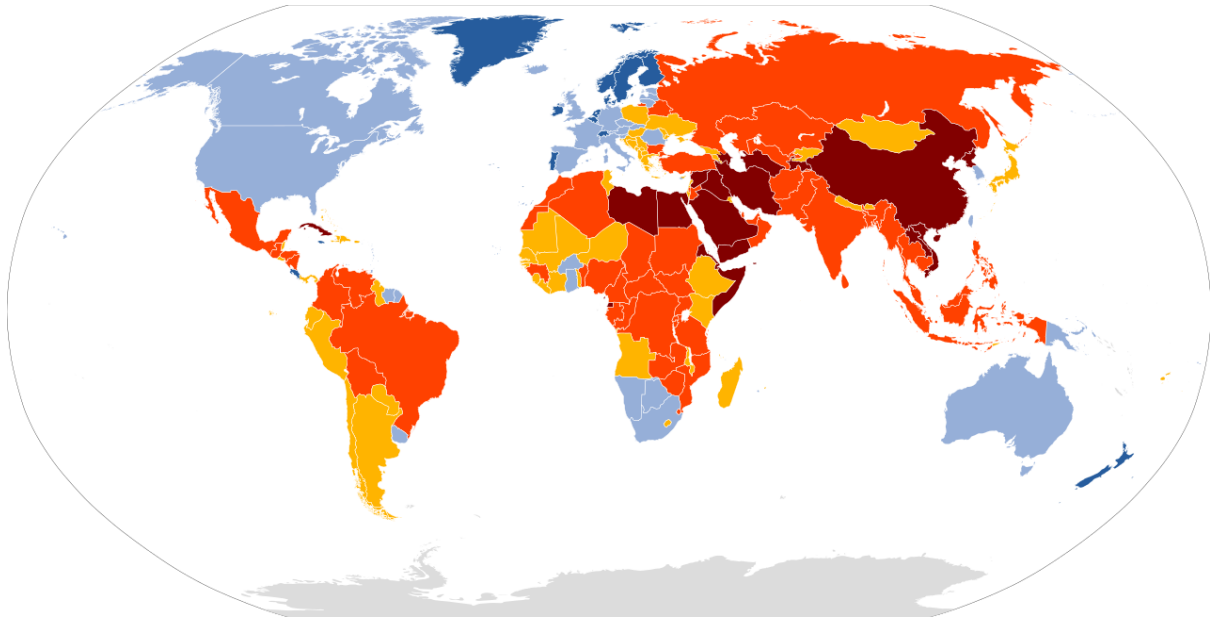
Even those countries have newspapers, news websites, TV stations, and radio stations with journalists working there. South African journalists are lucky to live in a country where journalism and democracy are healthy; but even in South Africa, independent journalists have explored other ways to tell more stories to a wider audience. Some argue that the legacy media in South Africa serve only certain sectors of society. Press freedom in South Africa does not mean that all important stories in the country are being told, because media owners often have their own news agendas.

The world's democratic and non-democratic societies



Countries marked in dark and light green are full or flawed democracies. Countries marked in red or orange are not democracies. Map: By JackintheBox – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=99565223>

Press freedom worldwide



Countries marked in dark or light blue have very good or satisfactory press freedom situations. All the other countries have problems around press freedom.

Map: By Karte: NordNordWest, Lizenz: Creative Commons by-sa-3.0 de, CC BY-SA 3.0 de,
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According to [Journalists without Borders](#), there is real press freedom in only 53 of 180 countries surveyed by them in 2022 (see the map above). South Africa is one of them, ranked 37th in the world. In the other countries, there are problems related to censorship, self-censorship, media independence, infrastructure, or abuse. But even so, every society in the world has some kind of journalism. Wherever you live, you want to know what is going on in the wider world around you.

REFLECT ON THIS: Are people working as journalists for state media in non-democratic countries, where they may face restrictions on what they report, not really journalists? They cannot help democracy function if they live in non-democratic countries. Do they play other roles in society?

It is also true that, in the 21st century, there are now many new ways of communication; everyone with access to the internet is able to broadcast or publish information and also play a role in informing people in their country (or around the world), influencing politicians, effecting change in their country. Even in countries with censorship and restrictions on the media, some people use social media to influence political change. Just think of the #Rhodesmustfall campaign, #Feesmustfall, #Thisflag in Zimbabwe, and the Arab Spring, among many others.

The idea that ordinary people can now be journalists has changed how many academics think of the mass media, and it has changed the definition of who can be a journalist. Therefore, many researchers have explored new ways of doing journalism (Deuze, 2019), for example, by looking at independent journalists in small communities, or online. Residents sometimes take over the functions of local journalists by using social media (Nygren, 2019; Oremus, 2021); even TikTok influencers create journalistic content. One example of many is [Philip DeFranco](#) from the United States (US) who presents a daily 15-minute news broadcast and has 1.2 million followers (Malone, 2021) on TikTok. There are even theatre productions that some see as journalism (Adams, 2020). The new ways of doing journalism have helped broaden the scope and reach of journalism. More stories about the world and its many different communities are now being told by more people and reach a wider audience.

This is important in a country like South Africa, where the debate about what the media and journalists should do is complicated because of the colonial history of the media in the country. There are calls for decolonising the mass media and decolonising the teaching of journalism. Decolonisation does not mean that we should burn books written by white colonisers (Muldoon, 2019); it means that we should question what is being taught, whether it is still relevant, look at what is prescribed (for example, more texts by women and black writers), and create a curriculum that is relevant to all members of society by updating outdated content and adding new information. This is not just a question for South Africa but something that universities globally struggle with. For example, the debate about decolonising the curriculum is also happening in England, Australia, Canada, and Kenya (Lokhun, 2020).

The news media in South Africa have not really changed in what they see as their primary roles, namely protecting democracy, informing people, serving as a public forum for debate and discussion, and acting as watchdog (Rodny-Gumede, 2018). But there are other journalism traditions in Africa. These include journalism for social change, communal journalism (a type of journalism that is more compassionate and emphasises the importance of the community), and oral journalism (Skjerdal, 2012). In postcolonial societies like South Africa and most other African countries, many journalists already take their role of helping to transform society seriously despite the colonial ownership history of many media houses (Rodny-Gumede, 2018). In South Africa, there is a view among some academics that journalism in South Africa developed in colonial times and that mass media bosses are still powerful elites who have certain views that influence the news produced by their mass media outlets (Rodny-Gumede, 2018). Therefore, there are already (and have, in fact, always been) many alternative media forms in South Africa.

It is not unusual that some South Africans are searching for other ways to tell stories that matter. Historically, there has always been a form of oral journalism. In South Africa, long before printed newspapers arrived, African people relied on oral traditions to hear the news and get information.

Some researchers regard oral storytelling and other oral traditions as a type of journalism that existed long before colonialism arrived. These oral journalists informed the community, built social cohesion, and created spaces for conversation (a type of public sphere, as will be discussed below). Skjerdal (2012) sees oral traditions in Africa as a form of communication that fulfilled journalistic roles.

In the modern era, one could perhaps think of social media as a space where people tell stories in their own voices, a rebirth of a longstanding tradition. There are also other alternative media forms that have come to the fore in South Africa – attempts by marginalised or excluded people to have a say in what is happening in the country and what is important to them.

There are some news websites in South Africa (such as [GroundUp](#) and [New Frame](#)) that focus exclusively on giving marginalised people a voice. Ordinary people also make the public aware of issues in their communities or at their universities by using social media, YouTube, or websites. Many suburbs now have community WhatsApp groups where residents share news and information about what is happening in the area. In some neighbouring countries, such as Zimbabwe, the story is a bit different yet similar. There, most of the mass media is state-owned and only tell the government's viewpoints. Even there, people have found other ways to tell the news as they experience it in their daily lives, such as on social media or through independent news websites like [newzimbabwe.com](#), and [Nehanda Radio](#), an internet radio station. The era of the internet made it possible for ordinary people to challenge the monopoly of legacy media – whether state-owned or the legacy of colonial times – and to take control of the stories about their lives, their news, and the information that is important to them in ways that have not been possible before.

Legacy media still serve an important role as the **fourth estate**. Media Texthack Group (2014), writing in [Media Studies 101](#), say that in liberal democracies (which would include South Africa, where democracy is very strong), a key tenet of democracy is the separation of powers into the various independent branches of government, usually in the form of the legislature that makes the laws, a judiciary that interprets and applies the law, and an executive that carries out the administration and operations of governing (the first three estates), and journalism that watches over all three these branches. Because of its function as a watchdog that monitors the running of the nation by exposing excesses and corruption and holding those in power accountable, the media is regarded as the **fourth estate**, supplementing the three branches of government by providing checks and balances. The media becomes a voice of the people to those in government.

However, because journalists and the mass media are seen as representatives of the public, some ask whether there is a wide enough range of opinion in the media to represent the public's interests. As the media became increasingly commercial, there are also questions about the quality of the news and information, which may be compromised when the media focus more on entertainment to keep their audiences' attention.

There are many news websites who now publish very entertaining stories to attract views and clicks. Where citizens now feel that the media do not represent their views anymore, they simply raise their own voices online, often on social media. During the widespread protests and looting after the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma in South Africa in July 2021, citizens and instigators used social media to plan and orchestrate the protests and looting, but also to comment on and act against the unrest to protect their communities. This is a clear example of citizens expressing their voices in public without relying on the media to represent them, in effect becoming journalists themselves. According to Carlson and Lewis (2019), the boundaries of journalism are no longer fixed. This means it is no longer clear who is a journalist and who is not. People who were once seen as the “only” journalists are now joined by other people who do some of the work that journalists do.

If anyone can be a journalist, there are, of course, also dangers. Unskilled and uneducated journalists can easily spread disinformation or incorrect information, without even knowing it. Therefore, to be a good journalist, in whatever way you define being a journalist, you still need some theoretical knowledge of what journalism is and does, critical thinking skills (Picard, 2014) to evaluate information, practical skills to do it well, and an understanding of the ethics of journalism.

This textbook, therefore, aims to provide anyone who would like to practise journalism with the basic tools to be responsible, trustworthy, ethical journalists in whichever way they choose. This textbook further aims to provide a simple but sufficiently complete introduction to journalism. This textbook shows you what journalism is, what journalists should do, how to be a journalist in practical ways, how to make difficult ethical decisions, and how to develop critical-thinking skills.

Summary: As you read through this textbook, remember that references to journalism or journalists in this textbook mean both traditional ways of being a journalist, such as working for a newspaper or a TV station, and all the new ways of being a journalist, such as running your own YouTube or TikTok channel, or writing a regular newsletter with news content. You have now been provided with a general introduction to journalism. The next chapter discusses the development of mass media and journalism’s role in society.

2. The mass media and mass communication

The concepts of *mass media* and *mass communication* are often used interchangeably but have somewhat different meanings. *Mass media* refer to the *method* that we use to send messages to large audiences. Mass media rely on technology; therefore, the *method* refers to the technological process of transmitting messages. For example, you need a printing press to communicate through printed stories in a newspaper (this is an example of printed mass media); a radio tower to communicate through a radio signal (an example of broadcast mass media); or social media platforms on the internet to communicate through online content (an example of online mass media). In all these examples, a *sender* creates messages (in other words, *communication*) and sends these messages to large audiences, who are the *receivers*. We call sending or distributing messages to large audiences *mass communication*. Mass communication refers to the sending of information, from one person or institution to many people. In this chapter,¹ we briefly look at the role of mass media in society, and we also explore the history of mass media in South Africa.

2.1 The public sphere

To understand the role and place of the mass media in society, we need to understand the concept of the *public sphere*. According to Media Texthack Group (2014), the German scholar Jürgen Habermas' original definition of a public sphere is that it is a domain (or place, but not a real place – more like an imagined place) of social life where public opinion can be formed (see Habermas, 1991, p. 398). This means it is a space where people share ideas, form opinions and sometimes influence other people and the government on what the important issues in a society are and what people think of these issues. Habermas said that the public sphere should be open to all citizens and that the public sphere exists in every conversation in which individuals come together to form a public, in other words, a group of people. The public sphere should ideally be a space where people come together freely to express their opinions. The public sphere in the 21st century includes social media and other internet platforms (De Blasio *et al.*, 2020; Ndzinisa *et al.*, 2021; Sakariassen, 2021). We can see that people express opinions and form ideas in online spaces. Sometimes, these ideas are so strong that they lead to real movements that bring about social change, such as the #Rhodesmustfall movement, which led to the removal of colonial statues from some universities.

¹ This chapter is loosely based on and adapted from two open-source works: *Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2016, by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, which was adapted from an original work in 2013 by a publisher who requested that it does not be named. Available at: <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/> [June 30, 2021], CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 and from Media Texthack Group. 2014; and also *Media Studies 101 – A Creative Commons Textbook*. Available at: <https://mediatexthack.wordpress.com/> [June 30, 2021], CC BY. Content from these two sources has been updated and contextualised for South African students.

Public opinion formed in the public sphere can also influence the state and how the government rules. A public sphere is seen as a basic requirement to mediate between state and society, and in an ideal situation (in democratic societies), the public sphere allows citizens to exercise democratic control of state activities.

Habermas' liberal model of a public sphere is a *normative* claim. This means that it is describing an idealised public sphere – how things *should* ideally be. Things are not always like that. Habermas himself admitted that the participation of women and the inclusion of minorities are not guaranteed by his model. His initial model relied on the circumstances of bourgeois (middle class) society in the early 19th century, when life was very different and women and minorities had far fewer rights. The idea of a public sphere has, however, persisted and changed over the years. It is still an important concept to understand the role of journalism in society. The mass media (journalists) have always claimed the role of representing the public in the public sphere – being the public's voice. Mass media created platforms through their newspapers and radio and television stations for discussion and for forming public opinion in a society. In the internet era, this has changed; there are many researchers who now say that the public sphere has grown and spread to the internet (Friedland *et al.*, 2014; Lima Quintanilha, 2018; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016), including to social media platforms. These researchers argue that ordinary people can now form their own opinion and express it freely without the need for the mass media. This means ordinary people, while they do not necessarily think of it in this way, play a public sphere role because they can also influence public debate and help form opinions in a society. For example, if a newspaper keeps publishing stories about a corrupt mayor, eventually this might lead to further investigation, and the mayor might be arrested. But nowadays, anyone can do that – if a community keeps talking about a corrupt mayor on a Facebook group and some people start providing real evidence, then that Facebook group is doing what newspapers used to do: they are creating a space for public debate to change something that is wrong.

The public sphere is a theoretically complicated concept, and there is no need to delve into this too deeply in this textbook (you will find many articles about the public sphere if you search online), but by understanding that, in a simplified way, the public sphere is an imagined space where debate takes place and opinions are formed, and sometimes these debates influence how the government rules a country, you will understand how, in the 21st century, both the mass media and ordinary people on social media represent the voices of the public in society. Many ordinary people express opinions and debate issues, from social media to podcasts to YouTube channels. Newspapers, radio, and TV are no longer the only ones who control the public debate.

2.2 Technology and mass media

Thanks to technology, mass media can exist, although news and information have always been spread – just think of oral tradition of news in Africa, or the town caller in medieval times in Europe. News was always spread somehow. But what makes mass media messages unique are that they require technology or a “third party” to facilitate the connection, and the connection is from one sender to many people. The word “mass” in *mass communication* means it is communication to many people, which makes it different from one-to-one communication when you just talk to one person or a small group. Mass communication involves transmitting messages to many people through print or electronic media; some people are the **senders** and some the **receivers**. When you are talking to someone about a movie you just watched, it is called **interpersonal communication** (one-to-one communication). When you watch a rugby match or the news on television or on YouTube, which is aimed at many viewers, it is called **mass communication** (many-to-many communication). It is clear that social media or a blog, just like newspapers or the radio, are also examples of mass communication: a sender can use a social media platform to send messages to a mass audience – all people who read the message.

Technology changes rapidly. It took 175 000 years for writing to become established, and about another 1 000 years for printing to develop. Audio-visual media (radio, television, and movies) became popular within just a few decades, and digital media grew even faster (Poe, 2011). It is incredible to think that the world’s first web page [was only published in 1991](#) and, by now, digital media have penetrated all aspects of our lives – from voice-activated speakers to artificial intelligence on our mobile phones.

The next sections describe the history of mass media – where it came from and how it has developed and changed over the years.

2.3 Books – the beginning of printed mass media

Printing techniques [first developed in China](#), well before Europe. The Chinese also developed moveable type long before Gutenberg, who printed the Bible in the mid-1450s and who is often credited as the world’s first book publisher. Bi Sheng (990–1051) developed moveable type using clay. The oldest known printed document is the *Diamond Sutra* (from the year 868), printed using woodblock techniques in China (Hong Kong Heritage Museum, n.d.). The first mass-produced book, printed with moveable type, was also in China, namely the *Nung Sue*, a Chinese manual on agriculture that was printed in 1297. Also keep in mind that the Romans already put up written information in public for citizens to read in 59 BCE.

However, Gutenberg’s refinement of the moveable press system made it easier for books to be mass produced. The moveable-type system used in China was heavy and cumbersome, while Gutenberg’s system was somewhat more user-friendly.

The broader population could now increasingly read by themselves because mass-produced books were less expensive and more accessible to ordinary people. The era of mass media had begun and with it the era of knowledge, spreading to ordinary people, not just the privileged few. Of course, books were not evenly distributed, because at that time, many people could not read or write. However, cheaper, shorter materials were printed that included content that catered more to the “common” person. These early publications were similar to tabloids in that they were sold as news items but featured stories about miracles, monsters, and other sensational or fantastical events. These publications quickly grew into what we would recognise today as newspapers and magazines.

As more people learnt to read and books became more easily available, people were able to learn more about the wider world, farther than their own local areas. Before this, people relied on storytellers, clergy, teachers, or other leaders for information. In this way, people could have been exposed to only a few sources of information throughout their lives and the information conveyed by these sources could have been limited and distorted.

In South Africa, publishing started in 1796, when the first document was printed by Johan Ritter, called *Almanach voor't jaar 1796* (Calendar for the year 1796). Book publishing itself was mostly linked to the development of newspaper printing in the country (Le Roux, 2012) and only really took off in the 20th century. Now, there are many book publishers in the country. Before the 20th century, most books in South Africa were imported from the Netherlands or the United Kingdom (UK).

2.4 Newspapers

Due to the success of printing presses, newspapers started to develop. Newspapers serve as the chronicle of daily life in our society, providing regular coverage of events, both historic and ordinary, and allowing us to learn about current events outside of our community and country. Newspapers were the first mass media to collect and distribute such information to a wider audience. The first regularly (weekly) published newspaper in the world emerged in Paris in 1631, and others popped up in Florence, Rome, and Madrid over the next few decades. The first daily newspaper was published in Leipzig, Germany, in 1660. In just a little over 100 years, in the late 1700s, large European cities like London and Paris had around 200 newspapers, some published daily, some weekly, and some at other intervals.

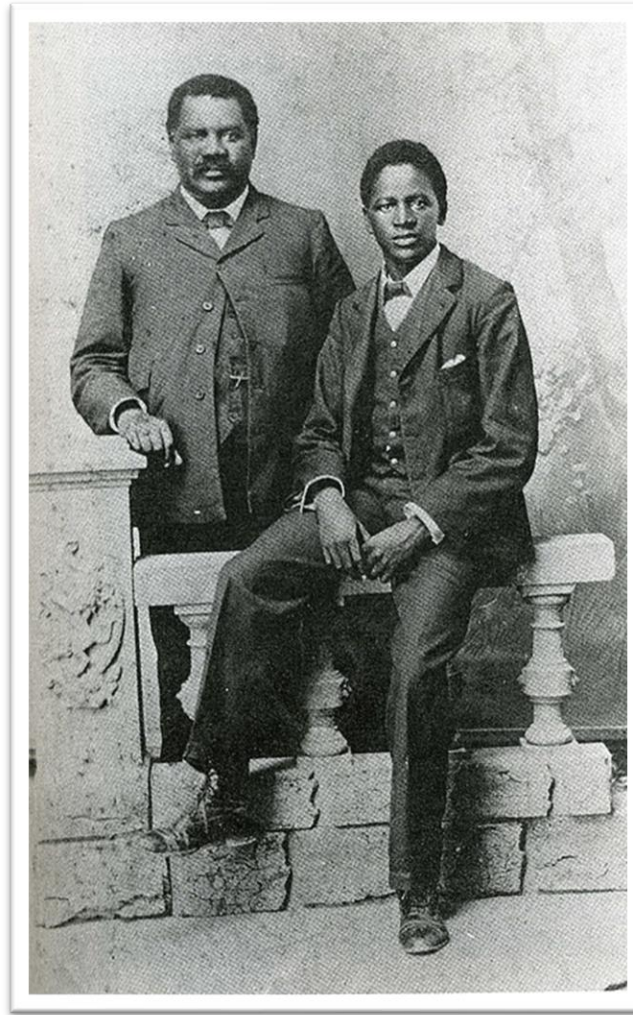
The first printed newspaper in South Africa was the *Cape Town Gazette*, which was established in 1800, precursor to the *Government Gazette*. The *South African Commercial Advertiser* followed it from 1824 (Le Roux, 2012). This newspaper was censored after just 17 issues but resumed printing a few months later. Other newspapers that followed were the *South African Chronicle* and *Mercantile Advertiser* (also established in 1824), and *Umshumayeli Wendaba*, printed by missionaries in Grahamstown from 1837. By 1846, the *Natal Witness* appeared, making it the oldest remaining daily newspaper today. Since then,

many other titles have appeared, such as *The Cape Times*, *Cape Argus*, and *The Star*. The *Afrikaans Patriot* appeared in 1876. In 1915, *De/Die Burger* was established as a daily newspaper. With this, the publishing company Nasionale Pers was founded. This company later became an international conglomerate, focussing less on mass media and more on online retail. Its mass media business is now called Media24, still one of the largest mass media companies in South Africa.

There have always been a number of newspapers owned and managed by black people in South Africa, but because of the political situation in the country, lack of infrastructure and funding issues, over the years, many of these newspapers closed down or were taken over by wealthy white owners who were looking at making money from black readers (The Journalist, 2017).

According to The Journalist (2017), in the late 19th century, John Tengo Jabavu resigned from *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (the isiXhosa Messenger) to publish the first black-owned and controlled newspaper, *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion), in King William's Town in 1884. This newspaper survived until the late 1980s. There were several other black-owned newspapers, including Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's *Koranta eBecoana* (Bechuana Gazette, from 1901), *Izwi laBantu* (1897, in the former Natal colony), *Ilanga lase Natal* (The Natal Sun), and the *Indian Opinion*, founded by V. Madanjith in 1903. Mahatma Gandhi later became the editor of *Indian Opinion*.

However, from the 1930s to the 1960s, wealthy white media owners took over the black newspaper business, publishing, among others, *The World*. Despite being owned by white people, some of these newspapers were involved in the struggle against apartheid and were often banned by the apartheid regime.



John Tengo Jabavu and his son, Davidson Don Tengo, around 1903. John Tengo Jabavu was the founder of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, the first black-owned newspaper in South Africa.

Picture: By unknown author – Higgs, C. *The ghost of equality*. Athens (Ohio), 1997. p. 77, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13496713>

Mass media in South Africa have never really returned to full black ownership or management, except in a few cases, such as the Independent Group.

ADDITIONAL READING: The history of printed newspapers and magazines in South Africa is interesting and long; however, the role of struggle newspapers and community newspapers in the apartheid era is often underplayed in history books. A PhD dissertation written by Hilton Kolbe at the University of Wollongong in Australia contains detailed research into the wider South Africa newspaper landscape, with a strong focus on struggle newspapers. It is available here: [The South African print media: from apartheid to transformation](#). You can also read Pieter Fourie's *Media Studies: Institutions, theories, and issues*, published in 2001. The latter book explores the history of the mass media in South Africa in detail, but because it was published 20 years ago, it does not cover the latest developments.

Newspapers around the world, including in South Africa, have faced many challenges in recent decades, mostly because of the increase of internet-based news, which many people see as “free news”, leading to a major decline in revenue and readers. The declining fortunes of many (not all) printed newspapers over the last few decades are an indication of how quickly things could change.

In the 1990s, printed newspapers had very high circulation numbers, many companies and business advertised in printed newspapers to reach hundreds of thousands of readers, and the money kept rolling in. It was a very successful business model. Then the internet came, and everything changed. Advertising on the internet was a lot cheaper, many people started reading their news online, and newspaper circulation started declining. Today, large newspapers in South Africa that once had circulation numbers (the number of newspapers they sold within a certain period of time) of hundreds of thousands are selling only a small percentage of that. The *Sunday Times* is an example. Once it sold around 450 000 copies per week. In 2021, that figure was 115 000 (Breitenbach, 2021). The overall drop in circulation of South African newspapers from 2016 to 2020 was 59%. Some newspapers closed, and some moved their news online – sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

To deal with financial issues brought about by the rise of online media, papers have laid off employees, cut resources for journalists, closed international and local bureaus, eliminated rural or distant delivery, reduced frequency of publication, and contracted out or partnered on content. While some doomsayers claim the problems experienced by printed newspapers are the “end of news” or the “end of journalism”, it is clearly not true. The world of journalism is simply changing. In legacy media, there are still many highly successful newspapers, online news websites, radio, and television stations.

In South Africa, there are also many community newspapers – papers that focus exclusively on specific areas or suburbs – but these papers have also experienced some financial difficulties. Often, their parent companies relied on a selection of mainstream newspapers and local papers as revenue streams, but these revenue streams have dried up. Different and new revenue models have appeared to help some local news survive, such as initiatives funded by local governments, sponsorships, or simply people who create their own, hyperlocal publications and then rely on advertising from local businesses for revenue.

2.5 Magazines

[Magazines](#) are different from newspapers. They are published less regularly, sometimes weekly or monthly, with a selection of articles about a wide variety of special interests (for example, fashion or health) or general interests. They usually have many photos and illustrations and are aimed at the general public, similar to newspapers. Newspapers are usually published more regularly, with shorter articles, and they generally cover more urgent news and events as they happen, or analyses of these events.

The first magazines published in South Africa appeared in 1822, some time after the British took over control of the Cape Colony and allowed some limited press freedom (Kolbe, 2005). The *South African Catholic Magazine*, launched in 1891, became a strong political voice in the country, despite being a church magazine. Many other magazines were published over the years, but the 20th century was the time when most of the magazines that we still know today came into existence. Most of these were part of the large media companies that still operate in the country, namely Media24, Caxton, Arena Holdings (called Times Media before), and Independent Media. Media24 publishes some of the most well-known magazines in the country, such as *Huisgenoot*, *You*, *Drum* and *Sarie*. Caxton used to publish *Bona*, *Country Life* and many others, but as with newspapers, the magazine industry in the country is experiencing some setbacks with revenue, and many magazines have closed or are changing hands. In 2020, Caxton decided to sell all their magazines or stop publishing some. Independent publishes *Glamour*, *GQ* and *Garden&Home*. There are still many more magazines and publishers in South Africa, also many that are run independently and do not belong to major media groups.

When television arrived on the scene, both newspapers and magazines had to find ways to compete with this new, visual medium. This led to magazines and newspapers becoming more colourful, using more pictures, infographics and illustrations. For a long time, magazines, newspapers and television co-existed well. Television and radio did not seem to affect newspapers and magazines as much as the internet does now. The forerunner to television was radio.

2.6 Radio

We should remember that printed media require literacy – you need to know how to read. Audio and visual media are different. It is quite easy for almost everyone to listen to the news. In general, people also enjoy watching and listening more than reading and writing; the first-mentioned activities require less effort. We had to adapt our brains to decode written language and our arms, hands and fingers to be able to produce written text; however, listening to the radio and watching and listening to television and movies were much easier. This is again becoming increasingly evident in the 21st century, with the increase in audio and visual material available online. This also explains the increasing popularity of digital audio such as podcast and streaming music, as well as digital audio-visual material, for example, streaming services such as Netflix or Disney+.

The origins of radio can be traced primarily to the invention of the telegraph in the 1840s. It was made practical by Samuel Morse, who invented a system of dots and dashes that could be transmitted across the telegraph cable using electric pulses, making it the first nearly instant one-to-one communication technology. Messages were encoded to and decoded from dots and dashes on either end of the cable.

This first cable could only transmit about six words per minute, but it was the precursor to the global communications network that we now rely on every day. However, the telegraph could not transmit the human voice or other messages aside from language translated into coded electrical pulses. Telegraph messages also travelled through a cable, not over the air.

As the telegraph was taking off around the world, physicist Heinrich Hertz began to theorise about electromagnetic energy, which is measurable physical energy in the atmosphere that moves at light speed. Hertz's theories fascinated Italian-born Guglielmo Marconi, who by 1895 had been able to send a wireless signal about a mile and a half. With this, the wireless telegraph – which used electromagnetic waves to transmit signals coded into pulses and was the precursor to radio – was born. Marconi travelled to England, where he received a patent on his wireless telegraph machine in 1896. By 1901, Marconi successfully sent a wireless message across the Atlantic Ocean. Marconi became extremely successful, establishing companies in the US and Europe and holding exclusive contracts with shipping companies (including the owners of the Titanic) and other large businesses.



Electrical engineer and inventor Guglielmo Marconi with the spark-gap transmitter (right) and coherer receiver (left) he used in some of his first long-distance radiotelegraphy transmissions during the 1890s.

Picture: Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6859297>

After Marconi, the road to radio broadcasting was relatively short, as others quickly expanded on his work. Inventions by J. Ambrose Fleming from Great Britain and Lee de Forest from the US paved the way for much more controlled and manageable receivers.

Lee de Forest, in particular, was interested in competing with Marconi by advancing wireless technology to transmit speech and music. De Forest patented more than 300 inventions and is often referred to as the “father of radio” because of his improvements on reception, conduction (conveying the signal) and amplification (increasing the signal strength). The first radio broadcast in the world was on 2 November 1920 when Frank Conrad broadcast the results of the US presidential election from his garage in Pittsburgh to 100 listeners.

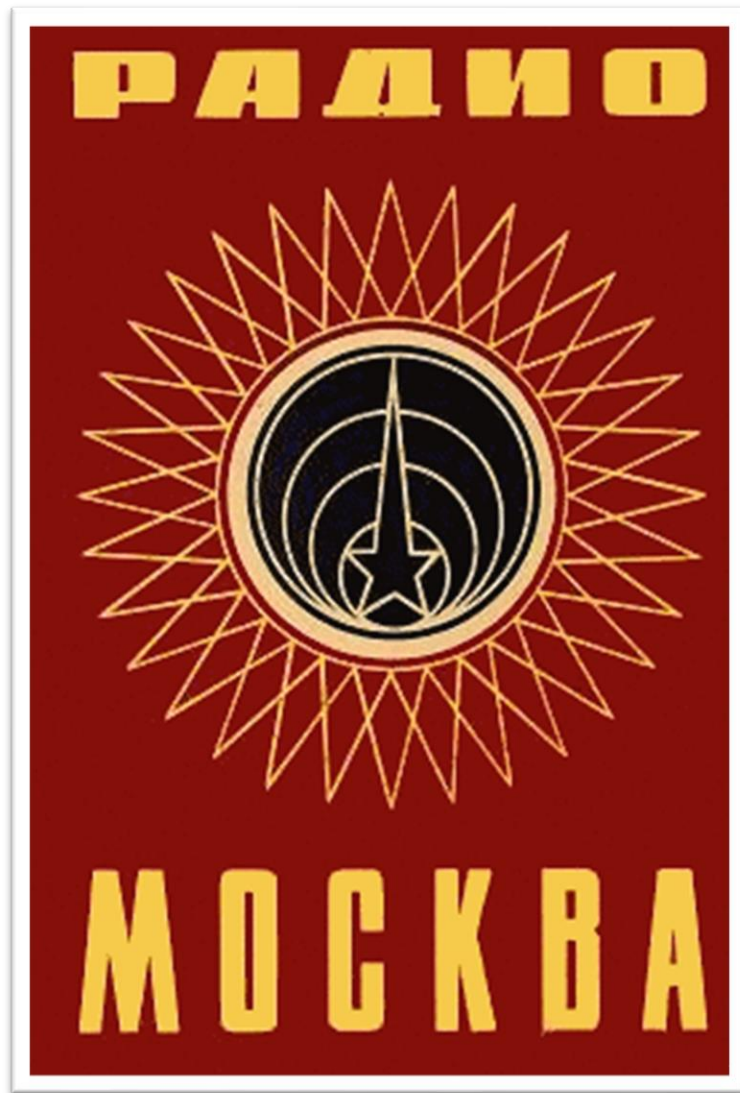


People learn how to use a radio in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, USA, in 1926.

Picture: CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11739378>

During the 1950s, radio technology became portable. Radios were fitted in cars, and people were able to buy smaller, portable receivers to use anywhere.

The first radio broadcast in South Africa was on 18 December 1923 – the Western Electric Company broadcast the first music concert (SA History Online, 2011). The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was founded in 1934 (some sources say 1936), when the African Broadcasting Service, which started broadcasting in 1927, became the SABC. Radio (and television) was always very tightly controlled by the government in South Africa and initially only broadcast in English and Afrikaans. Only in 1950 did broadcasts in indigenous languages start.



The Radio Moscow logo.

From 1963, Radio Freedom – a station run by the ANC from Lusaka in Zambia – started broadcasting on shortwave, a type of radio signal that can be received over vast distances, as an alternative to the state-run radio stations in South Africa. For many South Africans, this radio station became an important source of events in the country, even though it was banned by the apartheid government. There were also other shortwave radio stations at that time, such as BBC World Service, the Voice of America, Radio Moscow and Radio Berlin (from East Germany) that South Africans could listen to for alternative views.

The airwaves were only opened in the 1990s to private and community radio stations, which led to a [profusion of new radio stations](#) in many local languages, aimed at a wide variety of interest groups. Radio in South Africa now operates at three levels: public service radio stations (falling under the SABC); commercial radio stations (in private hands); and community radio stations (run by community volunteers).

Today, some of the biggest radio stations in the country, with millions of listeners, are Ukhozi FM (isiZulu), Umhlobo Wenene (isiXhosa), Lesedi FM (Setswana), and RSG (Afrikaans). These are all public radio stations and part of the SABC. There are many commercial radio stations (in private hands; these are radio stations that work on a for-profit basis), such as Jacaranda FM, Highveld Stereo, and Algoa FM. Then there are also community radio stations such as Pukfm, Jozi FM, Voice of the Cape and many others. These community radio stations rely on volunteers to operate their services and do not operate on a for-profit basis. You can view [a list of these radio stations](#) online.

2.7 Television

As was the case with radio, several people were simultaneously working to expand the technology that would soon be known as television. The earliest television was mechanical, meaning that it had to be turned or moved rather than relying on electronics. In 1884, Paul Nipkow invented a mechanical television-like device that could project a visual image of the then famous Felix the Cat. It took a while for this crude version of a television to be turned into a more functional electronic version. In 1923, Vladimir Zworykin improved on this technology, followed closely by John Baird and Philo Farnsworth (Poe, 2011). Collectively, these men are responsible for the invention of television, which was the first mass medium capable of instantly and wirelessly transmitting audio and visual signals.

However, television arrived late in South Africa, only in 1976. When most of the rest of the world watched the first moon landing live on TV (in 1969), South Africans listened on the radio. The apartheid government feared the influence of television and as with radio broadcasts, when television finally arrived, it was tightly controlled by the government, with only a few channels available. In 1976, there was one channel, TV1, broadcasting in English and Afrikaans. Later came TV2 (isiZulu and isiXhosa) and TV3 (Sesotho and Setswana). Only in the 1980s did a private channel arrive, M-Net, but it was not allowed to broadcast news; this was still controlled by the government. In 1998, e.tv arrived, and after that, television was finally opened up to many other channels – eventually satellite TV also – with a wide variety of local and international news and entertainment channels.

For the past number of years, satellite TV providers as well as public broadcasters have grown increasingly nervous about a new trend in television-viewing habits, namely streaming services. Many people now prefer to stream programmes they would like to watch through internet connections. This way they can choose what they want to watch, at what time, unlike traditional TV broadcasts when programmes are shown at a specific time. Many streaming services also provide a much wider choice than traditional broadcasters. Netflix and Showmax are some of the most famous examples available in South Africa, but there are many others.

2.8 The internet

The internet is also a platform for mass media. It has had, and still has, a significant effect on the mass media. It changed the way things have been done in a very short time. Suddenly people could choose where to find their news, what music they would like to listen to (Spotify, Tidal, Deezer, Apple Music and others), what they would like to watch (Netflix, Showmax, Amazon Prime and others). People could even decide where they would like to find their news, as many news broadcasters (TV and radio) now had streaming services or YouTube channels where one could watch or listen to the news from anywhere in the world, while many people created their own news channels on YouTube. This has possibly been the most significant development affecting journalism since the invention of the radio. It has also opened up a vast world of opportunities for people to be able to practice journalism in ways that might have seemed unthinkable before. It really is true that anyone can now be a journalist – it is very easy to create a YouTube channel where one can present the news; one can create a podcast with news and information; one can even spread the news on social media by using Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok.

The digital era began in 1990 and continues today. Whereas media before used to be defined by their delivery systems – for example, broadcast media and printed media use quite different delivery systems; one uses printing presses and paper, and the other uses radio waves sent over the air – digital media are all similarly constructed with digital, binary code made up of ones and zeros.

A person can now read a book, listen to the radio, and access many television shows all on the internet, anywhere in the world. All material on the internet, whether sound or written words, are made up of code and relies on the transmission of digital signals (made up of digital code) through either fibre-optic cables, telephone lines, or satellites, which are then relayed through network servers, modems, and computer processors. The development of digital code was the first innovation that made way for the internet and all digital media. Surprisingly, this innovation already occurred in the 1940s, leading to the development of the first computers. Secondly, in 1971, microprocessors capable of reading and storing electronic signals helped make the room-sized computers of the past much smaller and more affordable for individuals. Lastly, the development of fibre-optic cables in the mid-1980s allowed for the transmission of large amounts of digital information, including video and sound, using lasers to create pulses of light. These cables began to replace the copper cables used by telephone, television, cable and satellite companies. Information can now travel around the world with ease.

The birth of the internet can be traced back to when government scientists were tasked with creating a means of sharing information over a network that could not be interrupted, accidentally or intentionally. More than 40 years ago, those government scientists created an internet that was much different from what we think of as the internet today.

The original internet was used as a means of sharing information among researchers, educators, and government officials. That remained its main purpose until the Cold War began to fade and the closely guarded information network was opened up to others. At the time, only a small group of computer enthusiasts and amateur hackers made use of the internet because it was still not accessible to most people.

Tim Berners-Lee from the UK is the man who made the internet functional for the wider population. The main problem was that there was not a common language that all computers could recognise and use to communicate and connect. Berners-Lee solved this problem with the creation of the hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP), which allows people to make electronic connections or links to information on other computers or servers. He also invented hypertext mark-up language (HTML), which gave users a common language with which to create and design online content. Berners-Lee also invented the first browser, which allowed people to search out information and navigate the growing number of interconnections among computers. Berners-Lee named his new network the “World Wide Web” (hereafter “the web”), and he put all his inventions into the public domain so that anyone could use and adapt them for free, which undoubtedly contributed to the web’s exploding size. The growing web was navigable using available browsers, but it was sometimes like navigating in the ocean with no compass – a problem that led to the creation of search engines. Yahoo! launched in 1995 and became an instant phenomenon. It was the first search engine that made it possible for everyone to find information online. Since then, there have been many other browsers, such as Google Chrome, Firefox, and DuckDuckGo. The internet is now a space everyone has access to, where everyone can find information, create information, and distribute information.

One of the major changes brought about by the internet in the field of mass media is convergence. Filak (2019) in the book *Convergent Journalism: An Introduction* explains that convergence for journalists refers to the practice of journalism across many platforms (for example, a printed newspaper, a video channel, and social media) by the same team (or person). In the past, journalists often worked only as print or radio journalists; nowadays, journalists are expected to do much more – radio journalists may be required to create videos for social media, and print journalists may be required to create podcasts and take their own pictures. This shows that, even if you plan to start your own news website, YouTube channel or podcast, you need a variety of skills. For example, if you create regular podcasts, you should also make sure that people are able to find your podcasts – there are millions of podcasts out there. Therefore, you need a social media presence, and perhaps a newsletter, to let people know about what you are doing.

2.9 Who are the audience?

Journalism is one type of mass communication. There are various others – advertising and propaganda are also forms of mass communication. Our focus in this textbook is on journalism. Being a journalist means creating news content for an audience. Your audience are the people who consume the journalism you produce.

Whether you distribute your content through printed, broadcast (radio and television) or internet-based mass media, you want an audience to see your content. Audience studies help us understand who the audience are.

According to Media Texthack Group (2014), audience studies have been around for as long as there has been commercial mass media – producers needed to prove to potential advertisers that their message was received by a certain number (or certain type) of people. By knowing who your audience are, you also know what interests them so that you can give them relevant content.

For the mass media, a number of different tools can be used to identify the audience. Some examples are simply counting readers, focus groups, eyeball tracking, and digital analytics. Counting viewers or readers help to identify prime advertising space for advertisers. Focus groups (i.e., where audience members are asked to discuss what they think) are employed to see how the target audience are receiving a particular text, and adjustments are made accordingly. In the digital era, analytics are very important; there are programmes that measure electronically when and how people access stories, how much time they spend on stories, and even what sections they read. We can even use a system such as eyeball tracking to identify audience viewing habits.

Keeping up to date with changes in audience behaviour is a challenge. This is as much a result of changing concepts surrounding audiences as it is a result of changes in the media itself. In the digital era, audiences create their own content while also reading other people's content. In the past, news users simply read a newspaper or listened to a radio programme. Now they can participate in the discussion; they can publish their own comments or views. They can even create their own, alternative presentations of news.

These people are sometimes called **prosumers** (persons who produce and consume content, for example, Instagram users, who create their own posts but also read posts on Instagram pages of news companies).



With eyeball-tracking hardware and software it is possible to see exactly which part of a page attracts readers the most. This helps track what interests readers.

Picture: Von Tschneider – Original Work,

CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=60655049>

You will remember that we discussed the concepts of **senders** and **receivers** above. In mass communication, we use the label of **receiver** to describe those whom the message targets. Even if we leave aside the reality that receivers often become senders too, we should remember that receivers are not merely passive sponges of information – they can interpret material, bring to bear their own experiences, and “read” messages in a number of different ways. The mass media have certain effects on people, and these effects differ, depending on how people receive the information. People are different and receive and process information in different ways.

When thinking about mass communication and broadcasting to a large number of people (this is called many-to-many communication), we need to keep in mind that the audience are not homogenous (all the same). People have different viewpoints.

A new concept of the audience has come to the fore in communication research. There are a few different labels given to similar concepts, so let’s start with the idea of the **user**. A user has a number of definitions given the context, but to start with, we can define a user as an active agent who uses available tools to interact with information.

Users are of interest to us because they move through a number of different communicative positions simultaneously. They can be both senders and receivers, audiences and producers, engaged in interpersonal communication that is also public performance. Users form networks and act as nodes which both pass on and reinterpret information taken in from multiple sources, often other users. Users interact with other users to form networks along which information is not only sent and received but also modified and interpreted. These messy networks quickly go beyond any simple, linear (straight) model that we might use for understanding audiences. The rise of the user in both the interpersonal and mass communication landscape has been enabled to a large extent by information communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones. But there have always been networks between people, even in small villages in pre-colonial Africa, where messages were sent and received. What has changed now is the scale and speed of the network connections.

If users can be both senders and receivers, produce and consume (and reproduce) texts, and always have, at least in theory, equal capacity to play either sender or receiver, then the flow of cultural capital is not only sped up; it is also partially removed from the hands of capitalist content producers (i.e., those producing content to sell advertising around or for monetary gain). You might recall that we already discussed above how anyone can now produce journalism. It is not necessarily large mass media companies creating the most popular content and monetising it now. Ordinary people can do that as influencers or bloggers or entrepreneurial journalists running their own platforms. In the introduction of this book, we spoke about the need to decolonise the media in South Africa, which includes allowing ordinary or marginalised people to have voices. This has already happened on social media, which is almost completely decolonised in terms of who creates and sends content (Mirzoeff & Halberstam, 2018).

The fact that our audience are now people who can send messages themselves is an important aspect of being a journalist in the 21st century. This affects the way journalists should think about their audiences. As journalists, we should remember that our audiences have more freedom than ever before to select where they will find the news that interests them, and they can even create their own news. Hence, it is important to know who our audiences are, and we should do everything we can to maintain the loyalty of our audiences.

Nelson (2019), writing in [The Conversation](#), suggests a number of ways for journalists to improve relations with their audiences. This will help journalists attract a wider audience and maintain their loyalty. These strategies include digital tools to measure what the audience like and dislike, as well as tools to “talk to” their audience and hear what they think, such as gatherings where journalists and the public come together to talk about the news. This is something that many newsrooms in South Africa use. *Daily Maverick* and *News24*, among others, regularly host live webinars where editors and journalists, on the one side, and the audience, on the other side, meet to discuss the news.

According to Nelson (2019), digital metrics are useful, but sometimes newsrooms focus too much on numbers (the number of people viewing a site or a story) and not necessarily the types of stories the audience want or who the audience actually are. Engaging with audiences by hosting webinars or inviting comments and questions appear to offer deeper insight into the needs of the audience. Nelson suggests that whichever method you choose should primarily be aimed at improving your relationship with your audience. It is better to talk with the audience in some way (comments, webinars, questionnaires) than merely to count numbers. In a world dominated by social media where users regularly talk to one another, it makes sense to talk to your audience. It will be easier to get to know your audience if you create some opportunities for interaction and real feedback.

2.10 Media effects

Our audience receive and process messages and information in different ways. The information we send affects people in some way. Researchers have been looking at how mass media affect people for many decades. Research about media effects are ongoing, and new models are developed constantly, while others are discredited. The discussion below is a brief overview of three of the most well-known media effects models, followed by a discussion of two models that still relate strongly to journalism.

In the 20th century, there was a view that the mass media had the ability to mesmerise, influence and even control its audiences. Then new communication technology in the form of moving pictures, the gramophone and radio expanded the mass media previously occupied by newspapers. It might be argued that the First World War was also the first war fought using the media. During a period when public opinion became crucial, the media was used to drum up morale and support, and Britain even established a Ministry of Information to produce the necessary propaganda. The Russians, Germans, Italians, and Spaniards deployed similar methods of mass persuasion. In the intervening years between the two World Wars (1918–1939), this ability of their leaders to seemingly “brainwash” citizens using the media was explained using the **hypodermic needle model** (also known as the **magic bullet**) model. In the hypodermic needle model, the audience were seen as passive recipients of whatever message was injected (or shot like a bullet) by the media. The understanding was that the audience could be manipulated to react in a predictable, unthinking and conditioned manner, because they would simply believe anything the mass media said.

The classic case study cited to support this view is the famous radio broadcast of *The War of the worlds* by Orson Welles on Halloween of 1938. In this episode of a radio drama series aired by Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in the US, the programme was “interrupted” by an urgent announcement of a Martian invasion in progress.

Average net paid circulation for September recorded Daily—1,800,000 Sunday—3,150,000
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NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
Vol. 20, No. 109 New York, Monday, October 31, 1938* 48 Pages 2 Cents IN CITY 1 1/2 CENTS OUTSIDE

FAKE RADIO 'WAR' STIRS TERROR THROUGH U.S.

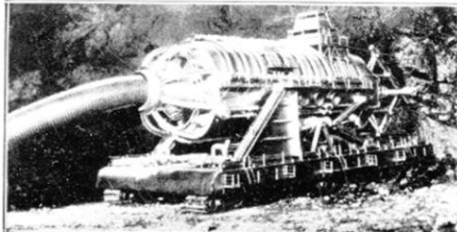
Story on Page 2



"War" Victim
Caroline Canton, WPA actress, listening to this radio in West 49th St., heard announcement of "smoke in Times Square." Running to street, she fell, broke her arm.



"I Didn't Know". Orson Welles, after broadcast expresses amazement at public reaction. He adapted H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds" for radio and played principal role. Left: a machine conceived for another H. G. Wells story. Dramatic description of landing of weird "machine from Mars" started last night's panic.



The radio drama *The War of the Worlds* sparked panic across the United States when it was broadcast in 1938, with many people believing an invasion of Earth by Martians was real.

The realistic portrayal of the story had purportedly sparked widespread panic throughout the country, because people apparently believed Martians really invaded Earth. This was taken by some scholars as proof that the media had the power to control audiences. However, the lack of empirical studies led some scholars to question this model; there was no real proof that many people actually did panic and believe there was a Martian invasion.

Towards the end of the Second World War, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld added to the media effects research field the social aspect of human agency (this means that humans make their own decisions; they do not just believe everything they hear).

Rejecting the direct influence of the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theory, Lazarsfeld introduced an intermediary between the sender of a message and the audience. This intermediary, dubbed an “opinion leader”, was usually a person of influence with greater access to information. They would be seen as an authority able to filter, interpret and explain media messages. This is called the **two-step flow model**. It is the credibility of the weatherman that persuades the individual to bring along an umbrella rather than the factual data from the meteorological department themselves. Also, it would be the community or religious leader expounding on the messages released by politicians that actually hold sway over the public.

Another great example to explain the influence of opinion leaders is the world of fashion. Magazines play an important role in showing the trends of the coming season by passing on information from big fashion brands to a wider audience. The reader’s knowledge of next season’s fashions and trends is filtered by the magazines. While this describes a classic two-step flow of communication, new technologies have changed the role of the media.

In the digital age, new opinion leaders, such as fashion bloggers and influencers on Instagram or TikTok, now influence people’s opinions. In many ways, Instagrammers and TikTok producers are now the people setting the trends, not necessarily magazines or newspapers. Many influencers make a lot of money through strategic product placement or endorsement in their posts or videos.

A more radical shift in focus was to move away from what impact the media has on audiences towards investigating why or how audiences react to the media. Based on the assumption that audiences are not passive or powerless but instead exercise choice, researchers developed the **uses and gratifications model**.

This model sees audiences as active seekers of media that best fulfil their needs or that reinforce their existing beliefs and interests. This is something that has become very clear in the age of social media bubbles; many people only follow people whose opinion they agree with, because they feel good when they read the messages sent by these people, and it is satisfying for the audience to agree with what their idols say.

The importance of this model is largely that it dismisses the idea of the media as able to change people’s opinions. What it does is reinforce the status quo, where the media is satisfying audience needs and desires. For example, if you use social media to satisfy your need, you are using the internet as a way to be entertained and to connect with your friends. Researchers have identified a number of common motives for media consumption. These include relaxation, social interaction, entertainment, arousal, escape, and a host of interpersonal and social needs.

2.10.1 Media effects and journalism

The media can and do have a strong effect on what people think about. By highlighting certain events repeatedly, they create a sense of urgency about those issues even though this is not always an accurate reflection of reality. There are two important media effects models that attempt to explain how journalism affects people and society, namely **agenda-setting** and **framing**.

The media always select certain highlights from all the many things that happen around us every day and then only report on these things they have selected. The criteria for the selection depend greatly on the ideology of the media editors and their own business or personal interests. By highlighting certain events, an uncritical audience might think the reality presented by a certain publication or television station is the only important event at that time. One example is the royal wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton, which mesmerised the world, including parts of the world that have no connection to the British monarchy. This is what we call **agenda-setting**. The mass media have the power to decide what they publish or broadcast, and this influences what people think about, what people think are the important issues of the day. The agenda-setting theory was formally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) when they studied the US Presidential Election of 1968. Their analysis of the news and media coverage revealed that constant coverage of the election influenced the opinions of voters about the election.

Agenda-setting happens through a process of **gatekeeping**. This means the mass media affect or control the information that is transmitted to their audiences. There are four gatekeeping functions: **relaying**, **limiting**, **expanding**, and **reinterpreting** (Bittner, 1996). **Relaying** is the gatekeeping function of transmitting a message, sending it somehow, which usually requires technology and equipment that the media outlet controls and has access to, but we do not. **Limiting** means media outlets decide whether to pass something along to the media channel so it can be relayed. This means the media decide which message to transmit. This is not necessarily bad, because the media select messages that will appeal to their audience, and as we discussed above, it is important to satisfy the needs of the audience. Gatekeepers also **expand** messages. For example, a blogger may take a story from a more traditional news source and fact-check it or do additional research, interview additional sources, and post it on their blog. In this case, expanding helps us get more information than we would otherwise so we can be better informed. Lastly, gatekeepers function to **reinterpret** mass media messages. Reinterpretation is useful when gatekeepers change a message from something too complex or foreign for us to understand into something meaningful. For example, when the Government makes a new law about land expropriation, it might be written in very technical language. The media will help explain what the law means.

Related to agenda-setting is **framing**. The mass media tell stories in certain ways. Framing is when messages are created and distributed in such a way as to highlight, emphasise or hide some aspects of the message over others. We can do this through language via how we organise and structure information. Framing is about how the media present a certain story to an audience. For example, the Ukraine war in 2022. [Many critics](#) in non-Western countries criticised the Western media for highlighting the horrors of the Ukraine war because white people were involved, while neglecting other wars in other countries that were just as serious. This is framing – the story is told in such a way that the war in Ukraine is made to sound more important than any other war because Europeans are involved.²

2.11 The functions of the mass media

The mass media serve several general and many specific functions.³ As you read through the functions below, reflect on whether new forms of media, such as social media, also perform some of these functions in your own life. In most cases, new media do perform similar functions. Journalists also have other specific functions. In general, the mass media serve the following functions: information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion.

- **Information function.** We have a need for information to satisfy curiosity, reduce uncertainty, and better understand how we fit into the world. The amount and availability of information are now overwhelming compared to 40 years ago when a few television networks, local radio stations and newspapers competed to keep us informed. The media saturation has led to increased competition to provide information, which creates the potential for news media outlets, for example, to report information prematurely, inaccurately, or partially.
- **Interpretation function.** Media outlets interpret messages in more or less explicit and ethical ways. Newspaper editorials have long been explicit interpretations of current events, and now cable television and radio personalities offer social, cultural, and political commentary that is full of subjective interpretations. Although some of them operate in ethical grey areas because they use formats that make them seem like traditional news programmes, most are open about their motives.
- **Instructive function.** Some media outlets exist to cultivate knowledge by teaching instead of just relaying information. The SABC, for example, broadcast many educational programmes for students and learners during the coronavirus pandemic when schools and universities were closed.

² The audience and media effects sections above are based on and adapted from a framework used by Media Texthack Group. 2014. *Media Studies 101 – A Creative Commons Textbook*. Available at: <https://mediatexthack.wordpress.com/> [June 30, 2021], CC-BY.

³ This section is inspired by and adapted from *Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2016, by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, which was adapted from an original work in 2013 by a publisher who requested that it does not be named. Available at: <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/> [June 30, 2021], CC BY-NC-SA.

- **Bonding function.** Media outlets can bring people closer together, which serves the bonding function. For example, people who share common values and interests can gather on online forums, and masses of people can be brought together while watching coverage of large events like a storm or an election. (This is one function that social media performs very well; people often bond together in Facebook groups, or as followers of certain influencers.)
- **Diversion function.** We all use the media to escape our day-to-day lives, to distract us from our upcoming exam, or to help us relax. When we are being distracted, amused, or relaxed, the media is performing the diversion function. (This function, again, is performed very well by social media; it can be very entertaining.)

2.12 Some functions of journalism

The mass media in general serve the functions as discussed above, while the normative understanding (this means an understanding of *how things should be* in a certain context) of the mass media in liberal democracies is that the mass media should function as watchdogs of society and of public officials. Some refer to the media as the **fourth estate**, with the branches of government being the first three estates (legislative, executive, and judicial) and the media equally participating as the fourth. The mass media are the watchdogs of the other three estates. However, in recent years, there has been [rising distrust](#) in the media, with many people simply not trusting what they see or hear on the news anymore. The internet has made it easy for everyone to distribute fake news, and many people even accuse the media of spreading fake news if they do not like what they read.

2.12.1 Watchdogs

While countries like China, North Korea, and Zimbabwe have media systems that are nearly, if not totally, controlled by the state regime, the media in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, and many other countries are viewed, especially by journalists themselves, as the **watchdog** over the government. This watchdog role is intended to keep governments from taking too much power from the people and overstepping their bounds. Central to this role is the notion that the press works independently of the government. The freedom of the press as guaranteed by the South African Constitution allows the media to act as the eyes and ears of the people. The media is supposed to report information to the public so they can make informed decisions. The media also engages in investigative reporting, which can uncover dangers or corruption that the media can then expose so that the public can demand change.

Of course, this ideal is not always met in practice. Some people have critiqued the media's ability to fulfil this role, referring to it instead as a lapdog or attack dog. In terms of the lapdog role, the media can become too "cosy" with a politician or other public figure, which might lead it to uncritically report or passively relay information without questioning it.

In the South African media, some politicians sometimes get a lot of good coverage, while others only get bad coverage. In terms of the attack-dog role, the 24-hour news cycle and constant reporting on public figures have created the kind of atmosphere where journalists may be seen to be waiting to pounce on a mistake or error in order to get the scoop and be able to produce a tantalising story. Media scholars have critiqued this practice, saying that too much adversarial or negative reporting leads the public to think poorly of public officials and be more dissatisfied with government, and sometimes the events that are being reported on, are not really important or have no effect on how the country is governed. Sometimes, it is just journalists looking for scandals for the sake of scandal. This leads to a lack of trust in journalists.

In many ways, social media users, and even YouTube producers, now also play a watchdog role, often highlighting issues in communities that the mass media neglect to show.

2.12.2 Agenda-setters

You have already been introduced to the concept of **agenda-setting**. This is the act of choosing which issues or topics deserve public discussion. The media plays a significant part in deciding what is important and what the public will talk about by selecting certain stories to publish and neglecting others. In a postcolonial society, the media should be careful to also cover stories that relate to marginalised people and voices and not set agendas that perpetuate colonial class or power systems.

The internet has changed the agenda-setting role of the media to an extent. Before the internet, the media alone decided what was important; now an issue can become important because it goes viral on social media. Protests can be organised on social media, and issues can be discussed. Sometimes, agendas are now set by ordinary people on the internet and then picked up by the media, like the #Feesmustfall movement. It started on social media and was picked up by the mass media, eventually influencing government policy.

Another example was during the coronavirus lockdown in 2020 in South Africa, when the killing of [Collins Khoza](#) became a matter of the public agenda after social media footage about the event became viral. It is clear that in the digital era, the agenda-setting power of traditional media is often appropriated by social media and smartphones. Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, and other internet sites allow witnesses to instantly upload images and accounts of events and forward the link to friends. Some uploads go viral and attract the attention of the mainstream media. This means that ordinary people now set the news agendas as well.

2.12.3 Journalists as facilitators of transformation

There are many scholars and journalists in former colonial societies that argue the media's role should include helping foster national unity and furthering the transformation process and social change.

In an African context, journalism can also be about nation building and transformation (Rodny-Gumede, 2018). Many South African journalists understand that the watchdog role is not their only role; they also acknowledge that the media need to open up to previously neglected segments of society, to listen to the voices of under-represented people and to provide them with a voice. Journalism in a postcolonial society like South Africa needs to fulfil a public service function as well (Rodny-Gumede, 2018).

In postcolonial societies where conflict is prevalent, there are also arguments for the media to practise **peace journalism** as part of their transformation role and not fuel the conflict.

Prof Fredrick Ogenga from Rongo University in Kenya explained in an article in [The Conversation](#) what peace journalism means:

African peace journalism rejects the notion that ‘nothing good can come out of Africa’. It seeks to challenge the negative narratives about Africa. Africans can be both authors and sources of positive narratives. This requires us to rethink our set of news values if we are to imagine a new kind of transformative journalism.

We must also be clear about what peace journalism isn’t. It is not reporting that is wholly or even primarily oriented towards peace at all costs. It does not sacrifice truth and justice for a ‘law and order’ type of peace as defined by the state. Instead, the essential elements of this form of journalism include sensitivity, agility, caution, factual information and self-reflectivity in relation to what media practitioners put into the content of news reports and editorials.

Peace journalism is a type of journalism that can be very valuable in societies where there is conflict or tension. Rodny-Gumede (2018) writes in an article in [The Conversation](#) that it has been shown that headlines about war and conflict help news media get more readers or viewers, but researchers also found that these types of headlines and stories often help to perpetuate violence. That is why journalists should be careful to report accurately and fairly during periods of conflict. This includes election periods, when the media should give all parties a fair share of coverage and also help ensure that the election proceeds fairly. During periods of conflict – such as the violent protests in South Africa in July 2021 after former president Jacob Zuma was imprisoned – the media can play a role in not fuelling the conflict. They can do this by analysing the reasons for the conflict, by not inflaming tensions further with sensationalist headlines or language, and by helping to look for solutions.

Some people who study and/or work in the media view **media diversity** as a means of expanding public dialogue, creating a more-informed citizenry and enhancing democracy through positive social change – in other words, to help transform society. The media should represent more voices and more viewpoints to help tell stories that are not told enough about marginalised people. Some online news sources have taken up such a call, but they fall short of the popularity or profitability of more mainstream news outlets. In South Africa, for example, [GroundUp](#) covers news for and about marginalised people in society, but their journalism model is not profitable – they rely on grants to make money.

Representation and transformation also refer to the sources you use in stories. Often, the experts that are quoted in sources are male and highly educated; journalists should make a stronger effort to quote a variety of sources and experts, female sources, lesser-known sources, and even ordinary citizens who may be experts on a subject. These sources should also represent all races.

2.12.4 Providing local news

The media can fulfil a public service in small towns and suburbs by offering a platform for public debate and improving citizen awareness. Smaller, local news outlets also provide an important service to local communities. Major national or city newspapers have faced many challenges in recent decades, meaning that many of them do not cover news from small towns anymore. Local and community newspapers are very important in smaller towns and cities. Hyperlocal content includes information like real-estate transactions, obituaries, school lunch menus, high school sports team statistics, and police activities – news that is interesting for people in these towns. In small towns, these are important events, and many local newspapers have a key advantage in that they can provide this type of news.

The four functions of journalism discussed above are not the only ones. Sometimes journalism simply informs people about anything that readers, viewers and listeners might find interesting – from travel to new products to beauty tips.

2.13 Media ownership

There is a growing feeling around the world that the media only [represent certain viewpoints](#) because of the way the media are owned. The debates around Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter in 2022 showed that some scholars and journalists were concerned because they feared Twitter would become right-wing biased. But this [is generally true](#) for all large media outlets – most of them are owned by people with specific political views.

Media interests and ownership have become more concentrated over the past few decades, not only in other countries but also in South Africa. Increasingly, a number of large companies control the most important media outlets. In a country such as South Africa, there are three or four large media companies and the public broadcaster (the SABC). However, increasingly, there are also more independent voices in the media, thanks to the ease of publishing online.

When just a few big companies own the media, they can create a monopoly on information by controlling a sector of a market. When a media conglomerate has policies or restrictions, they apply to all stations or outlets under its ownership, potentially limiting the information citizens receive. Conglomerate ownership also creates circumstances in which censorship may occur because of the interests of the owners. They might not want to publish negative stories about their main advertisers because they need the income from advertisements.

The main media companies in South Africa are Arena Holdings, Media24, Independent Media, Caxton, and Primedia, as well as the SABC. In South Africa, many newspapers or magazines owned by these companies have been closing down because of economic reasons. However, there are many smaller newspapers and community radio and TV channels, as well as independent news websites and entrepreneurial journalists who still provide a variety of views and different voices.

As computers and the internet began to enter households, media companies wanted to take advantage of the prospect of providing additional media services under one umbrella. *Media convergence* (already discussed above) refers to the merging of technologies that were previously developed and used separately. For example, a newspaper might decide to open a website, provide visual news by using videos and also enter the traditional radio market by creating podcasts.

But consolidated media ownership has indeed led to a decrease in localism in terms of local news and local journalists, radio DJs, and editors who work for the large media conglomerates in the country.

The rise of social media and independent journalistic voices show that the public now simply express themselves and tell their own stories when they feel media conglomerates do not represent them well.

Summary: This chapter provided you with a broad overview of technology and the mass media, the development of different mass media platforms, the audience and media effects. It ended with a discussion of journalism and its role in society. In the next chapter, you will be introduced to the concept of news.

3. What is news?

To be a journalist, you need to tell your audience the news. This might seem obvious, but what is news? Once you know what news is, and how to find it, you can start compiling your news package – anything from a story for print to a radio programme to a podcast for online distribution to a TikTok video, and more.

News, in simple terms, means information that is new that people do not know yet and would like to know. It should be interesting. Anna McKane, former Reuters journalist, said in 2006:

It [news] needs to be something that would interest your readers, and **if they already know it, then it is not news**. The first of these two criteria pinpoints one of the reasons why it can be hard for beginners to work out what news is: They need to put themselves in their readers' shoes. They need to understand their readers and decide exactly what they are interested in.

News is information,⁴ but it is a different kind of information. It usually contains something new or interesting that people do not know yet but would like to know. News is presented in a very specific way; news stories are written in certain ways (discussed in chapter 6).

For traditional mass media who need to make money from news, news must also have commercial value. For some types of mass media who depend on grants or donations or other types of income, news values are influenced by the objective of the organisation, such as telling the stories of marginalised voices, or giving people a voice to talk about issues in their small communities. For non-profit media outlets, the commercial value of news is not important; they do not need to make money from the stories they tell. For these types of media outlets, the value of news is determined by the types of stories they feel need to be told. But no matter what type of news values guide you, news must always be **ethical** and **factual** (the ethics of news is discussed in chapter 7).

Traditionally in journalism, a news story is not told in the same way as a fictional story. It does not start at the beginning (“Once upon a time”) and end with an ending. It starts with whatever is the most interesting news, with the most important facts of the story, right in the first paragraph and first sentence, and then follows a certain style. This is what is known as the inverted-pyramid style of news writing (explained in detail in chapter 6). In the digital era, many journalists follow different styles of storytelling online. One popular way is the [T-structure](#), where the most interesting part of the story is at the top (the horizontal line of the T), because this is what readers see first and the rest of the story follows the vertical line of the T in any way the writer wants, often in a narrative or chronological way (this is also explained in chapter 6).

⁴ Parts of this chapter were adapted from a public domain textbook by the United States Department of State, *The Handbook of Independent Journalism*, written by Deborah Potter (2006), available at: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011644/00001/pdf>, Public Domain.

Whichever way you write your news stories, news should be free of opinion. News writing is not about telling people what you think of the story; it is simply about reporting the facts or events that you observed in an unbiased, truthful way. News is not written in the first person (for example, not “Today, I saw the floods in KwaZulu-Natal”; rather, “Today, floods engulfed the northern parts of KwaZulu-Natal”). There is a process and certain methods to write news stories (discussed in detail in chapter 6). There are also certain factors that affect the newsworthiness of stories. In journalism, we call them news values. You need to keep news values in mind when you select a story to write, because the news values will tell you whether your story is really news, whether it will be interesting for your readers, viewers or listeners.. These news values differ according to your context, circumstances and your audience. Generally speaking, news is information that is of broad interest to your intended audience. What is news in Buenos Aires in Argentina may not be news at all in Johannesburg. Similarly, for people living in Cape Town, some things happening in Durban, for example, would not be news. Therefore, journalists use news values to decide what news to cover for their audiences.

3.1 Some news values

News values can help us to decide whether something is news and whether people will be interested in the news. You will see that some of these news values overlap; it is possible for a story to be news because it meets various of these news values. News values are not universal, this means in different cultures people might have different news values. Some of the most well-known news values are discussed below. Thinking about the relevance of information is a way to evaluate news values. Ask yourself the question: Will my audience read this story and find it interesting? If the answer is yes, the news will be of value to your audience.

Timeliness

Did something happen recently, or did we just learn about it? If so, that could make it newsworthy. The meaning of “recently” varies, depending on the medium, of course. For a weekly news magazine, anything that has happened since the previous edition the week before may be considered timely. For a 24-hour news channel, the timeliest news may be “breaking news”, or something that is happening right now and can be covered by a journalist live at the scene. With the arrival of social media, it has become very difficult for news media to “break” news (be the first to tell the news), because now, often, eyewitnesses are on the scene of a news event long before the news media. This means people often see the news as it is happening on social media by following the reporting of people who are on the scene. The role of the news media has, in many cases, become one of interpreting, explaining and clarifying the news, with less of a focus on “breaking” the news.

Impact

Are many people affected by the story or just a few? Contamination in the water system that serves your town's 20 000 residents has impact because it affects your audience directly. A report that 10 children were killed from drinking polluted water at a summer camp in a city far away has impact, too, because the audience is likely to have a strong emotional response to the story. However, if you live in Johannesburg, the fact that there is load-shedding in Cape Town is not news for you. As someone who lives in Johannesburg, the power cuts in Cape Town would not have an effect on you – it is too far away and does not have an impact on you.

Proximity

Proximity considers the location of the event in relation to the target audience of the media outlet. Audiences are more likely to pay attention to stories that take place in their local communities. Did something happen close to home, or did it involve people from your own country? A small plane crash in Chad would probably make headlines in N'Djamena, but it is unlikely to be front-page news in Johannesburg, unless the plane was carrying South African passengers. Similarly, something that only affects people in a specific town, such as potholes in Klerksdorp, would not be news to people living in Durban. Klerksdorp is too far away from Durban; local events in Klerksdorp do not have any meaning for people living in Durban.

Controversy (including conflict)

Are people in disagreement about something? It is human nature to be interested in stories that involve conflict, tension, or public debate. People like to take sides and see who the winner will be. For example, stories about war, crime, and social discord are newsworthy because their conflict narrative spurs interest. Stories about major sports competitions, such as the African Cup of Nations, relate to conflict, because teams are competing against one another. Conflict does not always entail pitting different views against one another. Stories about doctors battling disease or citizens opposing an unjust law, for example, also involve conflict.

Prominence

Stories that feature well-known individuals or public figures, such as politicians and entertainers, carry news value. People are interested in reading about what the rich and famous do. Ordinary activities or mishaps can become news if they involve a prominent person like a prime minister or a film star. Small motor car accidents are generally not news, unless the person involved is a celebrity or famous person. In the digital era, well-known influencers who do relatively ordinary things also sometimes become the news because they are very prominent in the online space. Many people would like to read about their lives.

Currency

This is not about money; in this context, “currency” means “being current” – “happening now”. “Hot topics of the day”, or stories that are constantly in the general public discourse (stories that everyone are talking about at a specific time), are other examples. Topics that have currency value generally have a short lifespan in the news cycle because they are discussed only briefly by the public. The news value “currency” can also be called “trending”; this refers to something that is happening right now, and everyone is talking about it.

Oddity (or novelty)

Stories that are odd, unusual, shocking, bizarre, or surprising have novelty value. An example would be a story about an unusual animal friendship, such as one between a dog and a zebra. Because such a friendship is not a normal occurrence, it sparks the curiosity of audiences. The extraordinary and the unexpected appeal to our natural human curiosity; anything that is strange or unusual can be news. In mid-2021, there were reports that people discovered diamonds in a small village in KwaZulu-Natal. Many people went there to dig for diamonds, even though nobody was sure whether these stones were actually diamonds. This was a strange story that made the news because of the unusualness of the story. The diamond story is an example of two news values: it was something novel; and it was also something that was trending, everyone was talking about it, so the news value “currency” is also valid for this example.

Human interest

Stories that are emotionally compelling capture the audience’s attention and appeal to their attitudes and beliefs. Feature articles often are good examples of human-interest stories when they depict a person, organisation, or community in a way that triggers an emotional connection between the audience and the characters. Other examples are a behind-the-scenes look at the life of an athlete, or the story of a person struggling to overcome an obstacle. Examples can be someone who managed to climb the highest mountain in Africa at a very young (or very old) age, animals doing cute or strange things, people achieving good things in their lives, or people doing special things for their communities.

Size

Stories about the biggest and the best, or even the worst, about new records and achievements, also attract readers. People like to know about events such as the best rugby team, the newest self-driving car, or the latest release of a popular TV or streaming series.

How to

Many news media help people to do things. These are stories that, for example, tell people how to register for a coronavirus vaccine, how to apply for social grants, or how to register and participate in elections. This is a public service that news media play.

3.2 What do the audience want?

News organisations see their work as a public service, so news is made up of information that people need to know to go about their daily lives and to be productive citizens in a democracy. But most news organisations are businesses that must make a profit to survive, so the news also includes items that will draw an audience: stories people may want to know about just because they are interesting and will attract readers. In the digital era, many media outlets cover sensationalist stories just to attract readers and “clicks” on their websites to build up their readership numbers, which, in turn, might provide them with more advertising revenue.

What makes something news, therefore, also depends on the makeup of the intended audience – not just where they live, but who they are and what their interests are. Different groups of people have different lifestyles and concerns, which make them interested in different types of news.

A business programme on the radio attracts business owners and people who are interested in investments and the stock market. A radio news programme targeted at younger listeners might include stories about music or sports stars, or influencers, which would not be featured in a business newspaper aimed at older, wealthier readers. A weekly magazine that covers medical news would report on the testing of an experimental medicine, because the doctors who read the publication would be interested in such a story. However, unless the medicine is believed to cure a well-known disease, most general-interest local newspapers would ignore the story. An exception might be a newspaper or a website in the community where the research is being conducted, reporting on the story because the audience might feel proud about the achievement by their local researchers.

As a journalist, you need to know your audience well (as also discussed in section 2.9). Apart from the type of publication you work for, which tells you something about the audience, there are other ways to get to know the audience.

Audience comments on social media give an indication of topical issues for the audience. Analytics on websites can tell you more about the times of the day when people read the news, the stories that interest them the most, and where they are based. Surveys and audience events tell you about the age, level of education, and interests of your audience.

By knowing what interests your audience, you would know what types of stories to focus on more. This is particularly important when you work for commercial media outlets who rely on advertising and sales to make an income. If you work for non-profit media, or media that rely on sponsorships, your audience are still important, but in many cases, non-profit media also have other mandates, such as working towards transformation of society, or representing marginalised voices.

3.3 Types of news

There are two basic types of news – hard news and soft news.

Hard news is essentially the news of the day. It is what you see on the front page of the newspaper or at the top of a web page, and what you hear at the start of a broadcast news report. For example, war, politics, business, and crime are frequent hard news topics. A strike announced today by the city’s minibus taxi drivers that leaves thousands of commuters unable to get to work is hard news. The news values of timeliness, conflict and impact are all present in the minibus taxi-strike story. The community needs the information right away because it affects people’s daily lives.

By contrast, a story about an athlete who grew up in an orphanage and who is now preparing to take part in the Olympics in 2024 would fit the definition of **soft news**. It is a human-interest story involving a prominent person, and it is an unusual story that people likely would discuss with their friends. But there is no compelling reason why it has to be published or broadcast on any particular day. By definition, this makes it a feature story. Many newspapers and online news sites have separate feature sections for stories about lifestyles, home and family, the arts, and entertainment. Larger newspapers may have weekly sections for specific kinds of features on food, health, education, and so forth.

These types of news stories are usually written in different ways. Hard news often follows the inverted pyramid or T-structure style of writing, where the most important aspect of the story is always right at the top. Soft news is written in feature style, with more of a build-up to the main point of the story. Feature writers often begin with an anecdote or example designed primarily to draw the audience’s interest and then slowly reveal the full story.

Some stories blend these two approaches (these different writing styles are explained in detail in chapter 6).

3.4 News beats

We can distinguish between different news “beats”. Beats refer to different categories of news (or feature) journalists who specialise in reporting about specific categories of news. In many newsrooms of the past, there were specialised health journalists, science journalists, religious affairs journalists, and others.

There are still journalists who specialise, especially people who work for niche mass media, for example, as a technology or business media outlet.

At specialised media outlets, all journalists are experts in their field; they focus on only the news that they have expertise in. But at most mass media outlets, journalists are now expected to cover all categories of news due to staff shortages and monetary constraints.

Some news categories (or beats) are:

- **Politics:** News about political events, political leaders, municipal politics, elections, what happens in Parliament, the work of politicians.
- **Business:** News about financial and business issues, such as the petrol price, the rate of inflation, employment, joblessness, student loans, student funding, the stock exchange, the price of books.
- **Sports:** News about sports events, big sports matches, sports stars and their lives, preparation for major sporting events (such as the Olympic Games).
- **Development:** News about issues affecting the development of the country, new houses, hospitals, roads, schools.
- **Weather:** The weather is always news; people like to know about weather events that might affect them, snow, very hot or very cold weather, storms, even good weather when it is holiday season.
- **Crime:** This includes all kinds of crimes, robbery, murder, sexual offences, and also crimes such as corruption and financial misdeeds.
- **Emergencies:** News about disasters and sudden, unexpected events, such as when the coronavirus first spread around the world – this was a sudden and unexpected emergency.
- **Human interest:** Stories about people and animals doing interesting things.
- **Famous people:** Similar to human interest, but the difference is that these stories are about *famous* people doing interesting things, not ordinary people. Sometimes, famous people make the news even if they do quite ordinary things, for example, if Justin Bieber went to a supermarket during his tour of South Africa to buy a chocolate bar and many hundreds of customers saw him and surrounded him for autographs, then this would be news.
- **Fact-checking:** Some media outlets now specialise in fact-checking. Journalists work on checking that stories are true. There are fact-checking organisations, where all journalists are specialists in fact-checking.
- **Specialised categories:** There are many specialised beats, such as motoring, travel, technology, science, religion and various others.
- **Entertainment:** Audiences generally enjoy stories about entertainment, for example stories about concerts, art shows, festivals.
- **Reviews:** Many outlets specialise in reviews of new products. Journalists provide a service to consumers by offering well-informed advice about whether to buy a new product, or not.
- **Food:** Cooking and food shows have become very popular on streaming services and televisions. Many news outlets, therefore, also hire specialised food writers.

3.5 How to find the news

As a journalist, news blogger, entrepreneurial journalist, or social media news creator, you will need to find newsworthy stories to tell your readers, listeners, viewers, and users.

The news does not just come to you; you need to take proactive steps to find the news.

Journalists find news in all sorts of places, but in a very simplified way, we can see that most news flows from some of these basic situations (there are many others):

- Naturally occurring events, something that happens, such as a storm or a landslide.
- Planned events, or events caused by people, such as protests, meetings, elections.
- Unplanned events, such as a train crash, car accidents, violent attacks. These types of events often become major news stories when they display some of the news values discussed previously because they are unplanned and surprising.
- Things that people do or say.
- Leaked information, for example, when someone in a government department leaks documents to the media that expose corruption.
- Research – Often academics and other researchers develop new medicines or new technology; this is also news.

Some more specific sources of news are discussed below.

Witnesses and strangers

Citizens who witness a news event often contact a news organisation. Journalists also learn about these events from emergency services such as the police, fire or rescue officials.

Sometimes, story suggestions come from strangers who may visit, phone, or e-mail the newsroom with a complaint or a concern. Some news organisations actively ask for ideas from people who live in the communities they serve by providing a telephone number or an e-mail address where suggestions can be submitted.

Schedule of daily events

In many newsrooms, the most obvious source of news is a daily schedule of events in town, which includes government meetings, business openings, or community events. News editors and journalists often receive many e-mails with information about scheduled events. These events should be added to a formal list of events that everyone in the newsroom can access. Such a list of activities is not automatically newsworthy, but it provides a good starting point for journalists searching for news. Journalists who regularly cover specific kinds of issues or institutions (“beat” journalists) say they often get story ideas by looking at agendas for upcoming meetings.

Press releases

Press releases can be another source of news, but they are just a starting point. Dozens of press releases arrive in newsrooms every day, usually by e-mail. Government officials and agencies generate many of them, but other large organisations like private businesses and non-profit groups also issue press releases to let the news media know what they are doing. Many organisations also post their press releases on their websites, so it is useful to keep a list of important websites and to regularly check these sites for new press releases. A press release may resemble a news story, but because it is produced by someone with a vested interest in the subject, it is not likely to tell the complete story. Press releases may be factually correct, but they usually include only those facts that reflect positively on the person or organisation featured in the release. Even if a press release looks newsworthy, a professional journalist must first verify its authenticity and investigate further.

Staged events

Staged events, such as demonstrations, can also produce news, but journalists must be wary of being manipulated by the organisers who want to tell only their side of the story. Politicians have become adept at staging events and “photo opportunities” to attract coverage, even when they have no real news value. This does not mean journalists should ignore these events but only that they need to do additional research to get a complete story.

Your own observations

Most importantly, journalists should always keep their eyes and ears open to find news. Often, you will find something newsworthy just by listening to people, observing what is happening around you and in your town, and by constantly being aware of the main issues that affect your users, whether they are website readers or podcast listeners. Know what the audience would like to hear, and then make a point to look for these kinds of stories, everywhere you go. Most journalists say their best stories come from their own enterprise – from looking for stories themselves in the streets and among the community. Sometimes, it can be as simple as overhearing someone telling their hairdresser that the mayor is stealing money. That would be your tip to go and investigate. It is important to remember that tips and hearsay do not provide you with enough information to write a news story; you need sources and facts (discussed in chapter 5).

Social media

Social media can be a very good source of news. By following various people on their social media channels, you may be able to find interesting stories when people post about them. Trending topics on Twitter can also sometimes provide you with good ideas for a news story. Always make sure that you verify information that you find on social media. Social media sources can never be trusted 100%; many people post blatant fake news on social media.

Contacts

Journalists spend a lot of time building relationships with people who can provide them with information. You will meet many important and knowledgeable people as a journalist. Try to cultivate meaningful relationships with these people so that they trust you and will contact you when they have interesting information for you to write a news story. As a journalist, you can build contacts with sources at the police or the ambulance services by talking to them and building a relationship of trust so that they will inform you about events in your town. This is an important part of being a journalist – you need to create a list of contacts who can help you with information for your stories. Every time you meet someone as a source for a story, you should take down their full details and keep it in an organised space (like a personal phone book in print or online). You never know when you might need to contact this person again.

Follow-ups

Another way to find news is to ask what has happened since the last time a story was covered. Follow-ups often lead to surprising developments that are even more newsworthy than the original report. For example, a story about a fire the day after it happened might tell you how many people were killed and the extent of the property damage. But a follow-up several weeks later could discover that a faulty radio system made it impossible for firefighters to respond quickly enough to save more lives.

Documents

Documents, data and public records can also lead to good stories. Journalists can use them to look for trends or to spot irregularities. This kind of work requires more effort, but the results are almost always worth the trouble. It is considerably easier when the data are made available electronically, of course, but sometimes you need to go through a process to find the information. You may need to request the information from a government department; sometimes, sources might give it to you, but, surprisingly, there is often a lot of publicly available data on websites or in archives that nobody has bothered to examine. By just looking at the minutes of municipal meetings, you might find clues of mismanagement.

SUMMARY: This chapter introduced you to the concept of “news”, the difference between hard and soft news, how to identify news, news values and how to find news. In the next chapter, we will explore different types of newsrooms and the work of a journalist.

4. The work of the journalist

The previous chapter showed you how to identify news and where to find news. Before we talk about the process of compiling stories once you have found news, we discuss different types of newsrooms.

Journalists (the term, as throughout this book, refers to both professional journalists and ordinary citizens who create journalism) work across many different news platforms, from websites and podcasts to newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, and even on social media.⁵

New technologies have made it possible for anyone with a computer to disseminate (distribute) information as widely as the largest news organisations. It is now possible for bloggers, independent journalists, and social media news creators to reach as many, if not more, people than major news organisations. In South Africa, for example, Boitumelo Thulo, entrepreneur and actor, had 5.6 million followers on Instagram in May 2022. She uses her Instagram page to promote her brand but also to motivate her followers. Another example is Uleen Fourie, a health coach who had 41 700 followers on Instagram in May 2022. Compare this to the news website with the most followers in South Africa in July 2021 – namely News24, with 7.4 million likes on Facebook but only 321 000 followers on Instagram – and you can see how single people with many followers on Instagram can easily have as much influence as large media organisations with many employees. However, remember that there is a difference between influencers who simply promote their work or products, and journalists or journalism influencers (they do exist!) who distribute news content and who should understand and follow the principles of journalism.

Here is an example of people doing journalism by using their smartphones: in 2020, a video showing a security guard brutally attacking a patient at the Estcourt Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal went viral in South Africa. The legacy media also [started writing about this story](#). The eyewitness observations and discussions on social media about the assault placed the story in the public eye.

Apart from formal newsroom structures, there are now more informal newsroom structures, where people work independently as journalists. The public now also create and share news because they experience what is happening in their communities and share this on social media. This is a type of journalism, sometimes called citizen journalism. Some researchers now see the work of citizen journalists as just the same as professional or trained journalists (Swart *et al.*, 2022).

⁵ This chapter is loosely based on and adapted from various sources, including a public domain textbook by the United States Department of State, *The Handbook of Independent Journalism*, written by Deborah Potter (2006), available at: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011644/00001/pdf>, Public Domain, and *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries* by Jasmine Robberts (n.d.), available at: <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/> [July 21, 2021], CC BY-NC 4.0.

Journalists, whether professional or independent, today have more outlets for their work than at any other time in history, from small community newspapers to worldwide television news channels, online news channels, social media sites, YouTube channels, personal newsletters, podcasts, and even their own websites. Some of these media outlets are legacy media; others are new media. Each has different strengths and weaknesses.

4.1 Journalistic roles in newsrooms

In the evolving world of news, many journalists find they need additional skills to do the job that is expected of them. They often fulfil many roles. Journalists may be expected to shoot photographs for use on the internet in addition to interviewing sources and writing stories for the newspaper. Sub-editors may be asked to post stories on the internet in addition to checking journalists' copy and writing headlines. Photographers may need to shoot video as well as still pictures, and they may also have to provide text to go along with their pictures. Many news organisations provide training for journalists who take on new roles in the newsroom. Also, journalism educators are helping students learn the multiple skills they may need in the future. In the newsrooms of the digital era, there are now some roles that focus on producing interactive content for online consumption, producing visual stories and infographics, and roles that focus on engaging with readers via social media. These roles include social media editors, digital editors, digital producers, and videographers. This is true for all types of newsrooms, whether TV, radio, online, or newspapers.

Almost all journalistic roles now include some form of digital news production, either in combination with existing tasks (such as writing for a newspaper), or exclusively digitally (such as when you work for a news website and do all your work for online consumption only). This is increasingly what most journalists who formerly specialised in print do – they create content for online publication first and sometimes do additional work for print. Radio and television journalists often work for their specific platform first, and then do additional work for online platforms, such as engaging on social media or creating podcasts or short videos of their shows.

Despite the many changes in roles and responsibilities, it is still possible to identify some important journalistic roles that can usually be found in most newsrooms, from converged newsrooms to broadcast newsrooms. There are some differences in what these roles are called in different types of newsrooms, but many of the functions these journalists perform share some similarities. Of course, in smaller newsrooms, there will be far fewer of these roles.

- **An editor-in-chief (in South Africa often simply called an editor)** is the journalist who oversees the entire news outlet. This person is the public face of the outlet, makes sure that the outlet maintains high standards and does not break the law, often writes the editorial (which shows the views of the publication on important issues), and manages finances in the newsroom.

- **A department manager/editor** is at the head of a specific department, such as the business desk, or the news desk.
- **A news editor** is a person in any type of newsroom (whether online, print or broadcast) who manages the daily news diary (or news list, a list of stories for the day) and who manages the team of journalists. The news editor assigns stories to young journalists (experienced journalists will often find their own stories) and who informs the production team about the stories they can expect for the day, for broadcast or publication. In broadcast newsrooms, the news editor is called a **news director**. The name **news editor** is well-established in newsrooms, although some people might prefer to call this role assignment editor. But *news editor* is universally understood as the person who assigns stories to journalists and creates and manages the daily news diary.
- **A journalist** identifies news, finds stories, does research and verifies the information, and then writes stories for print, online distribution, or broadcasting.
- **A multimedia journalist** is like a journalist, but their work involves creating news stories that can be told on a variety of platforms. For example, a multimedia journalist might write a story for use online, take pictures to go with the story, create a video that adds additional details to the story – this can be uploaded to the news outlet's YouTube channel – and may also create a podcast to be distributed on audio channels. They can also create information graphics and other types of stories, such as social media posts. Most journalists – whether they work for print, online, or broadcast – are now multimedia journalists.
- **A sub-editor** is a person who checks and corrects stories before publication (for online or print use). Sub-editors (also called copy editors) are content quality controllers; they check and correct stories after they have been written or put together to make sure the correct language was used and to make sure there are no factual or other errors. They often write or check headlines, or create blurbs (a short promotion to attract people to a story). In the digital era, journalists often copy-edit their own stories – a huge responsibility. Sub-editors do not play the same role as editors; sub-editors are only concerned with the quality and factual correctness of content. Producers do the work of sub-editors and can also work in broadcasting newsrooms.
- **A photo editor** is the person who finds and sometimes edits visual content for the organisation. The role is somewhat like that of the news editor; it just focusses on pictures and visuals instead of story content.
- **A photographer** takes pictures. In the past, many mass-media companies had dedicated photographers whose only function was to take pictures, but in the digital era, many journalists now take pictures as part of their jobs, often using their mobile phones. They also create videos.

- **A layout designer/artist** uses layout software to create the layout for the printed paper. In an online environment, there are often templates – this means it is not necessary to create a new page design every day. News stories are uploaded to a content management system and then published inside an existing design.
- **An art director** is responsible for the visual appearance of a publication. Often, publications only have a **photo editor** who plays the same role.
- **An infographic journalist** creates infographics for the publication. Now, journalists often create infographics themselves.
- **A radio/audio or TV journalist** does the same work as a journalist, but they produce their stories as television clips, radio clips, video clips, or podcasts. These clips can include interviews and audio or video content of the story.
- **A radio or TV presenter** is different to a radio or TV journalist. Presenters present a show, hosting a discussion or an interview, while radio or TV journalists actually find and compile the news stories as audio or video clips. Presenters also introduce video or audio clips. In the past, the faces of radio presenters were not visible to listeners, but increasingly, some radio stations also livestream shows on YouTube or on their websites, which means the distinction between TV (where faces have always been visible) and radio is fading in some cases.
- **A news anchor** appears on radio, television, or online television to read the news from prepared news bulletins written by journalists.
- **A producer** works in the broadcast environment and is usually responsible for managing and coordinating a specific sector of media; for example, a business producer may work on putting together clips for the business section of the publication.
- **A camera operator** works in broadcast newsrooms and is responsible for setting up cameras and shooting scenes. A camera crew usually assists the camera operator.
- **A grip** is someone who looks after the camera equipment in a broadcast newsroom.
- **A sound or lighting technician** has specialised skills to create good-quality sound and audio in audio and video news or to ensure that lighting in newscasts and videos is good.

New roles in journalism are constantly developing, and some roles are changing.

4.2 News providers and their structures

Newsrooms have traditionally been associated with legacy media (newspapers, magazines, broadcasters, radio stations) outlets – companies with offices where journalists worked together to distribute their news. This still happens, even as many formal newsrooms have moved to virtual environments where journalists now work from home. But the basic building blocks of newsrooms have remained the same while new types of newsroom structures have also come to the fore.

The legacy media employ a number of people in varied positions to help their newsrooms function. These newsrooms have different structures. Newsroom structures can be as simple as entrepreneurial news websites with just one or two employees (a journalist and a sub-editor) to large, converged newsrooms with many employees doing many different things.

A converged newsroom is one where many different departments and journalists work together in one newsroom, sharing their skills and knowledge. For example, videographers and writing journalists will all work in the same newsroom. In a converged newsroom journalists will also apply various skills to their work, a writing journalist might also take photos and make videos. The digital era has led to convergence in many newsrooms around the world, where journalists are expected to be multi-skilled.

Newsrooms have been changing in the last few decades. The coronavirus pandemic has also led to some significant changes in newsroom structures, but, mostly, newsrooms have been changing because of new technology since the advent of the internet. New technology led to convergence. This means that newsrooms now often produce stories for many different platforms. They have structures that help them reach this goal. There are very few newsrooms left that produce news for one platform only.

Many newsrooms are no longer physical. The *Potchefstroom Herald* is among many newspapers that no longer has a physical newsroom. News work is done remotely from the homes of journalists and editors. News meetings take place virtually. Even a large company such as Media24 decided to close its office in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, and has journalists who now mostly work from home. They sometimes gather at a central office for discussions or meetings. This is partially a way to save money, but it is also an efficient way of working because, with fast internet speeds, it is now possible to do much work from home. This saves commuting time and fuel costs and leads to greater productivity.

Traditionally, large newsrooms follow a hierarchical structure (a structure with different levels or ranks). Generally, whether in a news agency, television or radio station, newspaper or magazine, the structure is somewhat similar, and a typical day at the office follows more or less the same pattern.

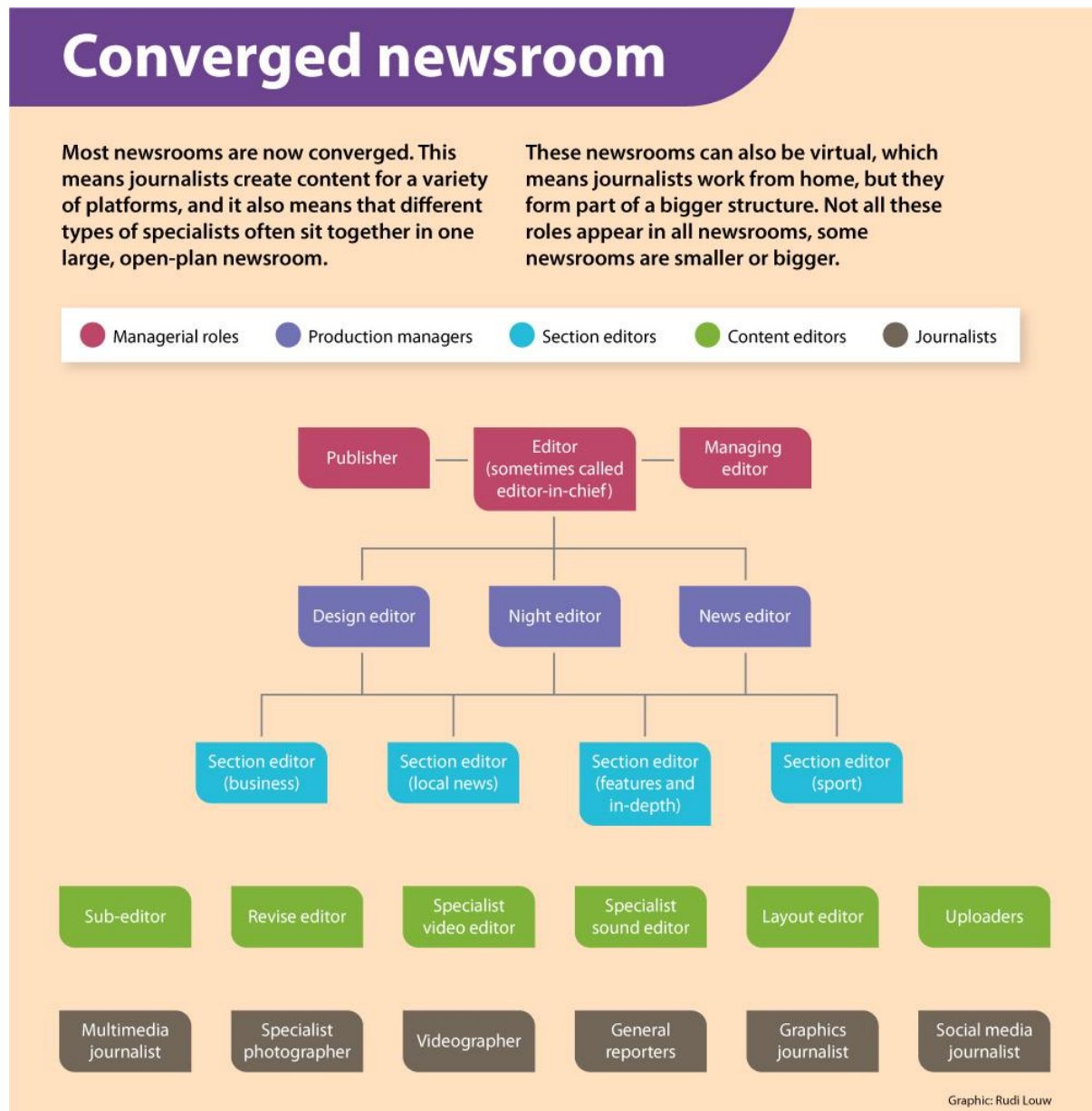
There are several departments in every media organisation. These include administration, engineering, commercial/advertising, and editorial. The editorial department is directly responsible for what is read, heard or seen in the media. This is the department that interests us the most; but, of course, the advertising and marketing departments are also important because they help find the money to keep the business going. If you work for a small news organisation, you might be expected to help find sponsors and come up with ideas to find money to finance the news production process, apart from doing your journalistic work. You might be expected to do marketing work as well. If you work for a non-profit newsroom, you might be expected to help look for new sponsors.

4.2.1 Daily newspapers or websites

In most countries, large daily newspapers generally have a large staff. With the addition of online sites, many newspapers now publish news regularly throughout the day, not just once a day or once a week. Some only appear online, as print circulation has declined so much that, for some publications, it is no longer financially viable to publish printed editions.

In South Africa, some examples are the *Daily Sun* and *Volksblad*. In the UK, *The Independent* is an example of a formerly printed newspaper that now only appears online.

Daily newsrooms at printed newspapers and converged print and online news outlets have a relatively similar structure. **The graphic below illustrates a converged newsroom in a general way.** There are minor variations between newsrooms. Very small newsrooms will have only a few of these roles.



4.2.2 Radio

Radio – one of the most widely used sources of news in the world – has the advantage of speed and easy availability. Radio journalists can get the news on the air quickly, and anyone with even a battery-powered radio can hear the news almost anywhere at any time. It is also easier for most people to process audio news, as it takes more effort to read the news than to listen to the news.

Radio journalists tell stories with sound as well as words, so listeners feel they have experienced some of what the event was really like.

Radio news is on the air many times a day, so it is frequently updated. However, most radio stations provide only a limited amount of time for each news bulletin (unless they are talk radio stations where they may talk about the news all day).

On many radio stations, news bulletins are a brief summary of only the biggest stories, without the depth or breadth that a newspaper or audio documentary, such as a podcast, can offer. Some radio stations present longer news discussion and documentary programmes. Some radio stations now also present podcasts.

The infographic below shows what a radio newsroom usually looks like. This can differ between different radio stations.



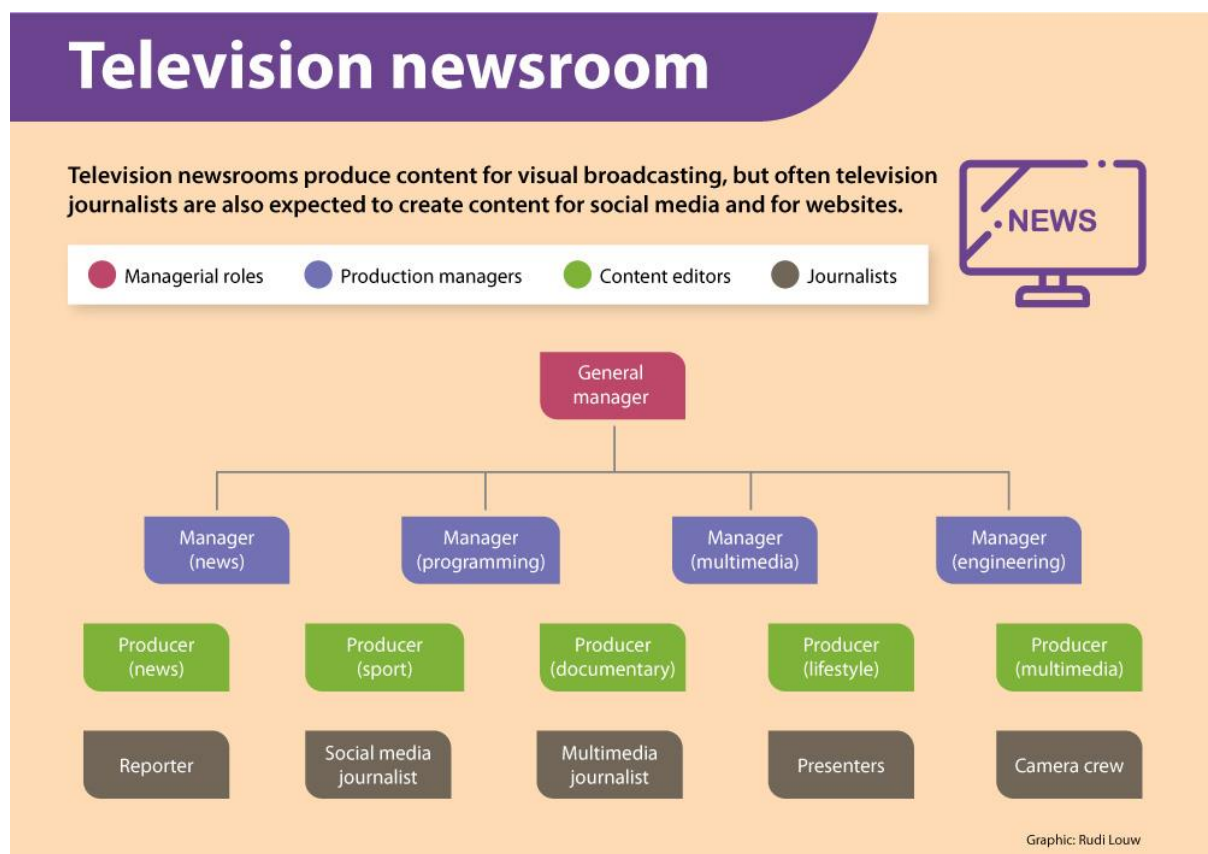
4.2.3 Television

With both sound and pictures, television news bulletins can show viewers what is happening, not just tell them about it. One of television's strengths is its ability to convey emotion and share experiences with viewers.

Studies have shown that people remember television news much better than any other medium because it contains visuals and sound (Fox *et al.*, 2004). Technological advances – smaller cameras, digital editing, the use of mobile phones to record visuals, and mobile uploading of stories to the newsroom's content management system – have made it possible for television to be almost as fast as radio in getting a story on the air.

Television's dependence on pictures can be a drawback: television news sometimes avoids telling complicated stories because they are not visually interesting. For example, a long and important sitting of parliament might not make it to the television news bulletin because visuals may only show people talking behind their microphones.

The diagram below shows what a typical television newsroom looks like. Note that there can be minor differences between different types of television newsrooms.



4.2.4 Online newsrooms

The distinction between the traditional categories of print and broadcast news has blurred. In South Africa and many other countries, many news organisations now produce news across a variety of platforms, including the internet. Since the internet is infinitely expandable, online news is not necessarily subject to the same restrictions of space and time imposed on the print and broadcast media. News sites can provide more information and keep it available for a longer time and they can make it possible for users to search for the news that interests them the most.

Online news sites affiliated with newspapers, radio and television stations may look similar to the converged newsroom structures described above. Journalists in online newsrooms for radio and television stations also illustrate their stories with photographs, and many offer streaming videos of stories or complete visual news bulletins. They may also supply a podcast version so that readers can listen to the news. News organisations sometimes also post their own blogs, letting journalists write online diaries about the stories they are covering or the decisions being made in the newsroom.

The structure of online newsrooms is quite similar to the converged newsroom, shown above, although there are many different types of online newsrooms. Some online newsrooms consist of just a few people, while others are very large. There are now many independent, entrepreneurial journalists who create their own content and distribute this content on platforms such as YouTube or TikTok. These can be called “one-person newsrooms”.

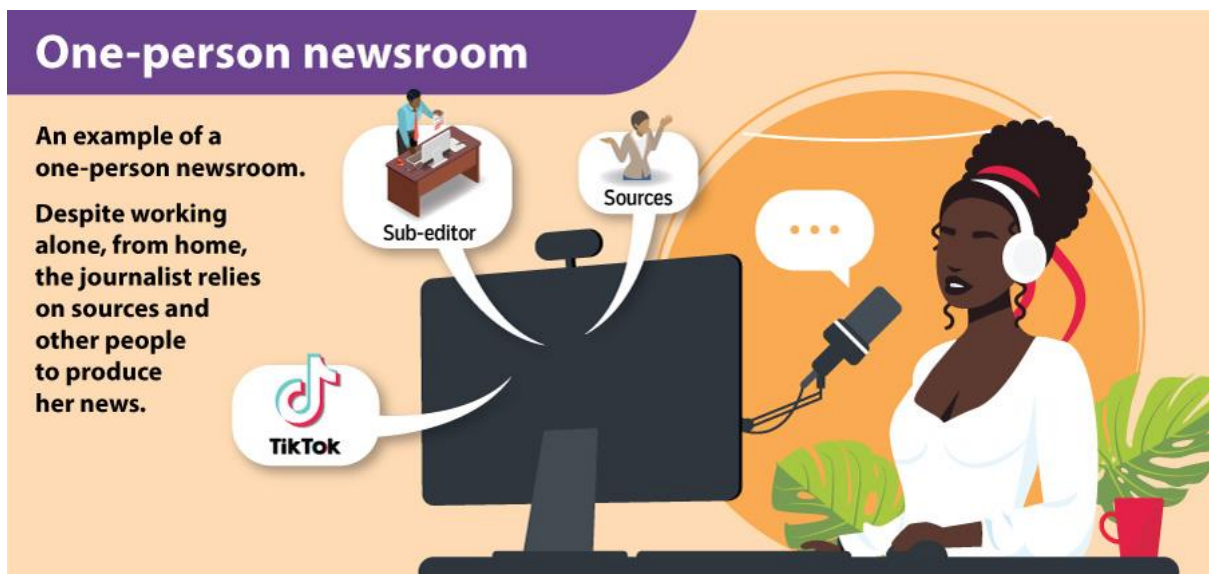
4.2.5 One-person newsrooms

A new type of “newsroom” might be called one-person newsrooms. The ease of creating and distributing news online has made it possible for anyone with a smartphone or a computer with access to the internet to create news channels and distribute their news. This can be on social media, through newsletters, blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, websites, etc. There are many examples of people on social media platforms, such as TikTok and Facebook, who distribute news on their platforms (see chapter 9).

These people work in newsrooms from their home, in coffee shops, or even on the road, from hotel rooms or their cars. These types of newsrooms carry some risks, particularly because some independent journalists are biased and distribute only information that shows one side of a story. If you work alone, there is also a risk that your news stories are not properly checked for grammar and spelling mistakes and that there is no second pair of eyes to help you verify your content.

However, one-person newsrooms can work. Many well-known journalists (see chapter 9) work for themselves. They write or create their own news videos and publish themselves across various channels.

The graphic below shows a one-person newsroom:



A good one-person newsroom should consist of the journalist (who also plays the role of editor) and at least one other person (or even a friend) who can help with editing stories and verifying facts. It is very important if you work for yourself that someone else should check your work. As you will see in our discussion in chapter 5 about creating news packages, it is essential that stories should always be checked. You cannot check your own stories, the human mind misses our own mistakes. Some independent journalists also use video or audio editors on a freelance basis to help with the creation of videos or podcasts.

4.3 Journalistic genres

There are a wide variety of journalistic genres. Genres refer to types of journalism. Examples of these genres can be found across many different types of journalistic platforms, whether in print, online, or in broadcasting.

For some people, it can be confusing to distinguish between article or story types and journalism genres. Article types refer more to the characteristics of your story – for example, news or feature stories – whereas the genre refers more to the specific type of journalism you are practising. For example, you can practise news journalism (genre) by writing news articles (article type) and news features (article type). You can be a culture journalist (genre) by writing feature stories about famous artists (article type).

An easy way to remember this: genres and beats are quite similar – if your beat is sports journalism, the genre of journalism that you are practising is also sports journalism. Journalism genres can be easily identified in specialist publications.

There are publications that focus on business news (such as *Business Day*) – thus, the genre of journalism you will find in *Business Day* is business news – while a publication such as *Glamour* in South Africa is an example of the celebrity and fashion genre.

Some publications, especially newspapers and general news websites, cover a variety of genres, from news to business to fashion to travel, etc. These publications often employ general journalists – journalists who do not have specific beats, and they cover all kinds of news and events.

The following are some well-known journalism genres (there are many others) and publications in South Africa:

- **News journalism** – journalism about the events of the day; this would include most newspapers, such as *The Star* or *Natal Witness*.
- **Culture journalism** – journalism that covers cultural happenings, such as art exhibitions, theatre shows, and music concerts. In South Africa, a publication in this genre include [LitNet](#) (online).
- **Celebrity journalism** – journalism that focusses on celebrities and the things they do; an example of such a publication is *You* and *Huisgenoot*, which cover other genres also, but with a strong focus on celebrity news.
- **Investigative journalism** – journalism that focusses on finding the story behind the story; deep investigative pieces to really show readers what is going on. An example would be the *Mail & Guardian*.
- **Community journalism** – this is journalism that focusses on specific areas or specific communities, for example, the *Roodepoort Record*, which focusses on stories that are relevant to the Roodepoort area.
- **Journalism for social change** – journalism that focusses on making positive changes in society, for example, [The Odyssey Online](#).
- **Developmental journalism** – journalism that tries to make a difference, focusses on the public interest and tells stories about marginalised people who are not often heard or seen in other publications, such as [GroundUp](#).
- **Peace journalism** – journalism that focusses on promoting peace in countries or areas affected by conflict; an international example is *The Peace Journalist*.
- **Sport journalism** – journalism that focusses on different sporting codes, or one specific sport, such as *SA Rugby Magazine*.

Summary: This chapter showed you the different types of journalists, the work they do and the newsrooms where they work. In the next chapter you will discover how to be a fair and credible journalist, you will learn about story types, and you will find detailed information about finding sources and how interview them for your story.

5. Find your story and collect information

There are various story types. Many of these can be found across all the different journalistic platforms. For example, news stories and features can appear in newspapers, online, on television, on the radio, and in newsletters. Usually, you would approach the process of compiling your story in slightly different ways, depending on the platform on which the story will be disseminated (distributed). However, in all cases, the basic requirements of good journalism remain the same, and many story types can be adapted to be used across various platforms.

Some of the key differences between print and broadcast journalism have faded over the years. Print journalism used to work towards one deadline a day (or a week), because newspapers were printed on a daily (or weekly) basis. With newspapers now mostly also available online, it means that even print journalists now compile stories for fast publication to get stories online as soon as possible.

This chapter shows you different types of stories and how to collect information. In chapter 6 we look at how to compile a story. Compiling your story refers to and putting the story together – whether it is a written piece for a newspaper or website, or an audio piece for the radio, or an audio-visual story for television or the Web. The steps you need to follow are the same; the only difference is in the way that you ultimately present your story.

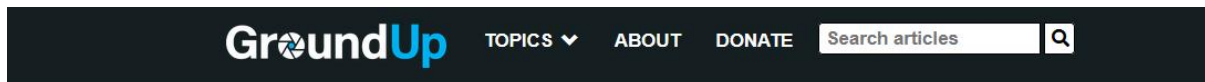
Chapter 6 discusses specific details about writing stories for print or online publication, and about preparing broadcast stories.

5.1 Objectivity, fairness and credibility

Journalists should always strive to be objective and present fair and complete news and feature stories.⁶ There are opinion and comment pieces in journalism, but there should always be a clear separation between the two.

Opinion pieces are usually published in a completely different section of a newspaper or a website, or in a specific slot in a broadcast programme. Opinion, comment and editorials are also usually labelled as such – it is clear to the reader when they are reading someone's opinion and when they are reading news.

⁶ This chapter is loosely based on a public domain textbook by the United States Department of State, *The Handbook of Independent Journalism*, written by Deborah Potter (2006), available at: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011644/00001/pdf>, Public Domain, and *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries* by Jasmine Robberts (n.d.), available at: <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/> [July 21, 2021], CC BY-NC 4.0. These sources provided general context and background and have been updated extensively, with fresh material and examples from academic, professional and student sources, as well as current practice.



GroundView: Our editorials



A challenge to Cape Town's new administration: please fix the sewerage system

This is one thing which affects all of us

By [GroundUp Editors](#)

GroundView | 20 January 2022

The editorial page from the South African news website GroundUp. The page is clearly labelled as “GroundView: Our editorials”, and the writers are identified as “GroundUp Editors”. This makes it clear these are the editors’ opinions, not news. Screenshot: GroundUp (CC BY).

News and feature stories, on the other hand, must always be written in an **objective way**, tell both sides of a story and be accurate. Therefore, journalists should not only collect the information they need to tell the story; they must verify (check, confirm) the information before they can use it. Journalists should always rely on a variety of sources and their own first-hand observations, when possible, to find information for their stories. This helps them ensure their stories are reliable. Sources must always be identified clearly, except in rare circumstances. This is one of the most important aspects of journalism – something that novice journalists often neglect. A news story is simply not credible or trustworthy without good sources quoted in the story.

Unlike people who work in public relations and who would like to present a company or event in the most positive way possible, a journalist attempts to provide a complete picture, even if it is not entirely positive, to always be fair and objective. This is where it becomes tricky when you are an independent journalist. Independent or entrepreneurial journalists often depend on sponsors. Some of your sponsors might insist on positive reporting about them. If you decide to run a news platform on TikTok, for example, you should think carefully about how you would explain your situation to your sponsors. If you want to be a TikTok journalist, your sponsors should know that your aim is to present accurate and objective news and not marketing.

It is also important to remember that journalists are not supposed to present their own opinions and views as part of their news stories. They should always do original reporting, dig deep, find all the information, present all sides, and cast their own views aside. That is why most stories cannot have just one source. One source only presents one side of a story. Journalists should not confuse fact with opinion or rumour.

Sometimes, journalists get ideas for stories on social media, but social media are full of disinformation and rumours. Journalists should always check the facts first by speaking to various sources before they publish anything.

Journalists owe their primary allegiance to the public. That is what journalists do – they inform the public. It is a huge responsibility and should be taken seriously. The South African Press Code (2020) states: “The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve society by informing citizens and enabling them to make informed judgments on the issues of the time... As journalists we commit ourselves to the highest standards, to maintain credibility and keep the trust of the public.”

These basic principles of journalism remain the same, no matter the platform. In chapter 7, we talk about journalistic ethics in more detail. For now, as you learn how to compile news stories and find sources, keep in mind that journalists should always be committed to telling truthful stories in a non-biased and ethical way. That is what makes journalism different from all other forms of communication. Journalists are trusted because the audience know journalists work hard to present all sides of a story, and the full story, unlike influencers, public relations people, or propagandists. Of course, there are some journalists who have broken the rules (some examples are discussed in chapter 7) and, therefore, many people now do not trust journalists as much as they should. Every journalist should work hard to build and maintain the trust of the public.

Journalists should be as **objective** as possible. The executive editor of the American newspaper *The Washington Post*, Leonard Downie (from 1991 to 2008), took the concept so seriously that he refused to register to vote. But many journalists today accept that total objectivity is impossible. In 1996, the United States Society of Professional Journalists dropped the word “objectivity” from its code of ethics. Journalists are human beings after all. They care about their work, and they do have opinions. Claiming that they are completely objective suggests that they have no values. But journalists mostly agree that they must be aware of their personal opinions so they can make sure their opinions do not creep into their stories too much. The audience should not be able to tell from the story what the journalist’s opinion is.

In a postcolonial society like South Africa, some journalists feel strongly about playing a certain role in society. They are guided in their work by some personal values that they feel are important in their work.

In South Africa, many journalists feel they have a role to play in nation building, transformation, and development (Rodny-Gumede, 2018). This does not mean that they are no longer objective; it simply means that they accept their responsibility to society, i.e., journalists can also productively help build a new society. Journalists can help establish a sense of solidarity (unity) in society, which also helps them to maintain peace in a country – an important role for journalists in Africa (Ogenga, 2020).

Apart from objectivity, another important requirement of journalism is **fairness**. Journalists should always strive to be fair in their reporting by not telling one-sided stories. They should look for contrasting views and report on them without favouring one side over another. They do not just verify facts; they also look for differing opinions so that they can tell all sides of a story.

Fairness is not the same thing as balance. Balance suggests that each side should be given equal weight. Journalists who seek that kind of artificial balance in their stories actually may produce coverage that is fundamentally inaccurate. It is still important to get information from both sides, but journalists need to make informed decisions when writing. For example, most independent economists may agree on the consequences of a particular government policy, while a handful of economists have a different opinion. It would be misleading to give equal weight to the handful of economists who have a different opinion. In such stories, your research will show you which viewpoint should carry more weight.

Credibility is a journalist's most important asset, and accuracy is the best way to protect it. To ensure accuracy, journalists must check, and double-check, all the information they collect for a news story. They must speak to a variety of sources. They must weigh the evidence and consider the inputs from various sources. They must evaluate the credibility of their sources, thus, make sure that their sources can be trusted. Journalists may sometimes make mistakes, but they should be rare. Mistakes, in this instance, have six causes:

- **Working from memory.** That is why you need to keep clear notes or make recordings of interviews when speaking to sources.
- **Making your own assumptions.** It is very dangerous to add your own perceptions or ideas to news stories. Remember, you are not the expert on the topic you are writing about. Your sources are the experts.
- **Dealing with untrustworthy sources.** Always check the credibility of your sources by speaking to many sources and cross-checking information and facts.
- **Plagiarism.** Using someone else's story, pictures, or information without properly crediting them is stealing. Even if you use just one line or one paragraph from another story or another published piece of information, you must credit the author properly.
- **Making up facts.** This is a cardinal sin in journalism and often leads to dismissal and the end of your career as a journalist because nobody will trust you.
- **Being biased.** This happens when you listen to and report on only one side of the story. All stories have several sides. Make sure you find them and report all sides.

We cannot talk about credibility without mentioning **numbers**. Most journalists do not like mathematics, but they need it, and they need to know why. Journalists need numerical literacy (the ability to understand basic numbers) to tell the difference between a meaningless number and a significant one or they risk writing stories that are misleading and confusing, at best, and, at worst, flat out wrong. When this happens, they and their publication will lose credibility.

Some important facts about **numerical literacy** for journalists:

- You should have mathematical intuition; you should know when numbers just do not make sense. You need to understand percentages and the meaning behind data. You need to understand what terms such as bankruptcy and inflation mean. This will help you understand numbers and explain these to your readers.
- Journalists need basic arithmetic (counting) and statistics skills so that they can check numbers. They should know how to calculate percentages, ratios, rates of change, and other relationships between numbers that tell far better stories than raw data can. They can and should translate numbers into terms that readers and viewers can easily understand.
- Journalists who understand numbers are in demand in today's highly technical world. They are the writers and editors who can assess and explain scientific, medical, technological and economic developments. They are the journalists who can also find stories in databases by crunching numbers themselves instead of waiting for someone with a vested interest to do it for them.
- Once the numbers have been checked and rechecked, the journalist must decide how to use them in a story. The rule of thumb is: the fewer numbers, the better. Numbers should be rounded off for simplicity's sake and put in context for clarity. Journalists who understand numbers will know when to use numbers and when to rather leave them out. Sometimes, too many numbers might just confuse the audience. It remains the task of the journalist to tell stories in ways that their audience will understand.
- Journalists who do not understand numbers will not understand important numbers such as crime statistics and unemployment figures.
- Without mathematics skills appropriate to their beat, journalists might struggle to tell accurate stories.

Journalists are the news organisation's first line of defence against errors. Journalists who take excellent notes and consult them often, who use good and many sources, and who understand numbers are better able to ensure that their work is always accurate. But journalists and publications do sometimes make mistakes; they are only human. If journalists make mistakes, all credible news organisations will correct the errors, either in a short story or a broadcast piece, or in a special column that might appear on a weekly or monthly basis. If the press ombud (discussed in chapter 7) of South Africa rules that a publication needs to make a correction, the ruling usually also contains a directive that the error must be corrected on the same page (in the case of a newspaper or a website) where the incorrect story first appeared.

As you can see, journalists have a very responsible role in society. In the digital newsroom of the 21st century, there is a lot of pressure on journalists. Journalists need to meet strict deadlines and production schedules. Despite the pressure, journalists should never neglect the important requirements of true facts, objectivity, and fairness.

If you know how to find your stories, how to find your sources, and how to put together your stories in the best way, you will manage to cope with the pressure more easily.

Regardless of whether you work in print, online, broadcasting, or for yourself, fair, objective, accurate and credible news stories are always created in a similar way:

- Find the story (by identifying news values).
- Find sources, observe events.
- Speak to your sources to gather information.
- Evaluate and select information in a fair and objective way.
- Identify the type of story you would like to compile.
- Put your story together (for example, write a story, create a video, make an audio clip).
- Let someone check your story and help with corrections.
- Publish or broadcast.

5.2 Story types

In journalism, there are several different story types found across all platforms. Below we look at different story types. There are some examples right here in the textbook, but you will also see links to other examples that you can look at. Some of these examples are too long to show in their entirety in the textbook. These examples are all from websites – the most dominant platform for news writing now – but as you read through them, consider, for example, whether you would find similar story types in broadcasting (radio and television). (Answer: Yes, most of them are found in broadcasting as well.)

A **news story** is the most important story type in journalism. It aims to tell the reader something they did not know before about the news of the day by answering six important questions: what, where, when, why, and how. This is known as the *5 W's and the H*. Journalists should answer these questions as neutrally and objectively as possible. The purpose of news is to tell people what has happened, without taking sides. You will remember that we discussed news values in chapter 4. News values help us identify whether something is news.

Traditionally, news stories for print publication have been written in the inverted-pyramid style, but there are also other ways to write news stories, such as the T-structure, the diamond structure, and the hourglass structure. We look at all these later. The inverted-pyramid format is seen as the traditional news writing style because it gives the reader all the information quickly, usually in the first few paragraphs, and towards the end of the story, there is less important information that can easily be cut by the sub-editor, if needed, to save space in the printed newspaper. With more stories now being published online, there is not always a need to write in the inverted-pyramid format anymore, because there are no space limitations online. However, readers still want to hear the news fast, so whichever news writing style you follow, you should get to the point quickly.

The article [at this link](#), from GroundUp, is an example of a **news story**. It is a story about how many people had applied for the special Covid grant of R350 in South Africa. It is something that happened at a specific time and was important to publish at the time. As you read the story online, see if you can identify the 5 W's and the H.

News stories are published in print and online and are broadcast on television or on the radio. They always tell the reader about the news of the day in a quick, easily understandable way. Broadcast and internet news stories often have more video and audio elements, which print stories do not have. As print news stories are limited by being published in paper format, they often focus more on deep details and descriptions, while online and broadcast stories can use audio and video clips to help tell the story. For example, instead of using the written word to tell a story, a radio, television or an online news story can play the voice of the person being quoted and show them while they are talking.

A **Q&A (question and answer)** is another story type. This is a question–answer format, where both the journalist's questions and the interviewee's answers are quoted directly. An interview can also be a narrative, where you present what the interviewee said in a chronological form. [This piece](#) from *The Guardian* is an example of a Q&A with Marie Kondo. The journalist asks questions and the interviewee answers them. The article simply presents the questions and answers.

Q&A stories can also happen online and in broadcast media. In Q&A stories, the journalist would ask someone a range of questions, prepared and unprepared, and the answers are recorded and broadcast. It is the same process as in print, except in online and broadcast media, the interviewee can be seen and heard. [Here](#) you can listen to a Q&A on public radio in the US.

A **feature** is another type of news story. It is much longer than a news story. A feature can be more creative, it is usually more in-depth, but it is still based on facts and should be fair and accurate. Feature stories provide scope, depth, and interpretation of trends, events, topics or people. They aim to humanise, add colour, educate, entertain, and illuminate.

A type of feature can be a news feature on something that is currently in the news – for example, a story about Ukrainian refugees and their new lives in another country.

The article [here](#), from GroundUp, is a feature article. It is quite long and not reproduced here, but you can follow the link to see what a feature article looks like. You will see it is written in a different style than a news story. Later in this chapter, you will learn why and how we write news and feature stories differently. [Here](#) you can see a video feature from the BBC about a nuclear accident that almost happened in the US.

Feature stories also appear online and in broadcast media. They are the same as feature stories one would see in print in the sense that they delve deeper into a topic, but once again, online and broadcast feature stories can also use audio and video to help tell the story, not just the written word as in print.

Columns, editorials, and reviews are other types of news stories. These are more subjective story types than features. They can, and usually do, include openly personal opinions from the journalist. Editorials are pieces where the editors of a publication present their opinion on the news of the day. Reviews are analyses of products, movies, books, or new technology, or various other subjects, where the writers examine something and offer an informed opinion. A good review not only presents the critic's opinions but also shows their expertise. A movie critic, for example, would not simply say why a movie is entertaining to watch or not; the review would be based on the critic's extensive knowledge of the field. A good column is also based on facts, not merely opinions. It should be a well-argued piece of writing, making a certain point.

[This article](#) is a review. The writers examined and tested scooters and made an informed decision, based on their tests, to select the best ones.

[Here](#) is a review in podcast format about running shoes, where various athletes also give their opinions. This is an example of a well-researched review based on good information, not just opinion.

Reviews and editorials can appear in print and online, be heard on the radio and be seen on television. A column, on the other hand, is a print-specific article type. It can only appear in print. It is usually a piece written by an expert who takes a certain side in an argument. Columns often present the opinion of the writer.

The article [at this link](#) is a column. You will see the author expresses her opinion about the types of leaders she would like to see in South Africa. She is a leadership expert and, therefore, she has the knowledge to express such an opinion.

Column writers, despite taking clear sides and expressing opinions, should still be experts in their fields to be believable to the readers.

The article on the next page, from GroundUp, is an editorial. It contains comment by the editors of GroundUp. It is not a news story but the opinion of the publication's editors about a pressing issue. It is clear that this story is an editorial because the byline (the names of the writers, at the top of the story), says "GroundUp Editors".

Groundview: The Cape Town fire is an urgent reminder to offer solutions to homeless people

If people are chased away, they are likely to return until a solution is found to the problem that prompted them to move there in the first place

19 April 2021 | By [GroundUp Editors](#) [Groundview](#) | [Cape Town](#)

It seems that one of the fires which devastated parts of Cape Town on Sunday and Monday may have been started by someone cooking on the mountain.

Timeslive [quoted](#) SA National Parks saying that it was believed a fire left unattended by a “vagrant” was the cause of the first blaze.

Investigations will perhaps show whether or not this was the case..

But even if it didn’t happen this time, sooner or later, a fire will be started, inadvertently, by someone living on the mountain. Sooner or later, someone will fail to extinguish a cooking fire, or the wind will pick up a live ember. It’s a fact: the presence of people living and cooking on the mountain is a fire hazard.

People live on the mountain for a reason. And even those who would have no compunction about chasing them away will acknowledge that if people living on the mountain are chased away, they are very likely to return until a solution is found to whatever problem prompted them to move there in the first place.

For some, the solution may be a shelter. For others, it may be social services, help reconciling with family members, getting a social grant or an identity document, or registering for worker’s compensation or for a place on the housing list. For others, who have skills but cannot apply for jobs, it might be help finding employment. And for yet others, it may be psychiatric care. Some people are homeless because they suffer from conditions which need either acute or long term care, and perhaps permanent accommodation in care homes.

This fire is an urgent reminder that there are compelling reasons - other than compassion - to offer better solutions to the people living on the slopes of our mountains. Not only for their sake, but for the sake of the whole city.

Now you know about the different types of news stories you can tell. But how do you find your story? The next section will show you the secrets of finding news stories.

5.3 The information you need for a news story

News reporting is a long process that involves collecting **information, facts and comments** and checking them carefully for accuracy. Journalists sometimes witness stories first-hand, but more often they find out about stories from others. Once you receive a story idea from someone, you should first verify the information to make sure you really have a good story and check against the list of news values in chapter 4 that your story really is a news story. Then you start with the information gathering.

As mentioned earlier, the information a journalist collects should answer questions that are commonly known as the **5 W's and the H**: who, what, where, when, why, and how. These questions help you identify the information you need for your story. You should use the answers to these questions to guide you when you start writing or compiling your story to make sure that you present all the necessary information to your audience. **The answers to the 5 W's and the H should be present in ALL news stories, there are no exceptions.** The 5 W's and the H form the basic building block of all news stories because they help you make sure that you have all the facts – that you are telling the full story. Below are some examples of questions you might ask. Not all these questions will be valid in all stories but see this as a checklist when gathering information for news stories.

Who:

- Who is involved in this story?
- Who is affected by it?
- Who is the best person to tell the story?
- Who is missing from this story? Who has more information about this?
- Who is in conflict in this story? Do they have anything in common?
- Who else should I talk to about this?

What:

- What happened?
- What is the point of this story? What am I really trying to say?
- What does the reader, viewer, or listener need to know to understand this story?
- What surprised me? What is the most important single fact I learnt?
- What is the history here? What happens next?
- What can people do about it?

Where:

- Where did this happen?
- Where else should I go to get the full story?
- Where is this story going next? How will it end?
- Where are the sources from?

When:

- When did this happen?
- When did the turning points occur in this story?
- When should I report this story?

Why:

- Why is this happening? Is it an isolated case or part of a trend?
- Why are people behaving the way they are? What are their motives?
- Why does this story matter? Why should anyone watch, read, or listen to it?
- Why am I sure I have this story right?

How:

- How did this happen?
- How will things be different because of what happened?
- How will this story help the reader, listener or viewer, or the community?
- How did I get this information? Is the attribution clear?
- How will readers react to the story?

When you start out as a journalist, you should add this checklist to your notebook, or somewhere on your smartphone, and constantly refer to it while gathering information so that you can make sure you are gathering all the information you need. Many long-time journalists would tell you how they had to go back to a source or a scene where something had happened because they did not gather all the information and their stories could not be published or broadcast without full and accurate information. You will save yourself a lot of time and energy if you do it right the first time.

The importance of collecting enough information and verifying everything cannot be overstated. In August 2021, two well-known South African singers, Killer Kau and Mpura, died in a car accident, and rumours at once started circulating on Twitter that DJ Kabza De Small had also died in the same accident. This was not true and shows the danger of relying on social media only for collecting facts about stories. Kabza had to [publicly state](#) that he was still alive so as to stop the rumours. Always make sure you have all the correct information before you write or compile a news story!

However, what exactly are “facts” in journalism? News stories usually rely on comments from sources – for example, eyewitnesses may comment on what they saw at a scene; experts may provide their opinion on important events; or government officials may make comments at a press conference. Some young journalists find this confusing – what is the difference between verified facts in a news story and the opinions and comments of sources who are talking about their experiences? It is important to remember that opinions and comments about events also count as factual information in news stories.

Many journalists rely on the commentary of various people to create their news stories. Think of it like this: Someone who witnesses an event or who expresses an informed opinion about something is also providing you with facts about what they saw. A witness of an event can be seen as an “expert” because they saw what happened. If they tell you what happened and someone else tells you a similar story, you can use this information as facts in your story to explain the event to the reader. Always verify information, speak to various sources, and make sure the information you get from different people corroborates what others have said. Also check information against what official sources, for example, the police, have said.

Let’s take the example of a protest that turned violent. Shop owners in the area were attacked by protesters. For this story, you can speak to protesters and shop owners to get information. They may all be quite angry and emotional and provide two slightly different versions of the story. The protesters may claim that they had a right to attack the shop owners because they felt prices were too high. The shop owners may feel they were attacked without reason. These are two different views of the same story. Provide both these views to your audience. But then also speak to the police to get an official view. This way you can be sure that you are telling the audience all sides of the story; each person who was involved experienced events differently, and what you do as journalist is to share the individual experiences with your readers. By using various sources from both sides, your information will be trustworthy and count as facts because you spoke to everyone.

Similarly, if you ask experts their opinion about something, their comments and interpretation of events count as valid information for your story. Let’s say South Africa built a space rocket and launched it successfully. You need comments from people for a story about the rocket launch. There are various sources you can speak to, for example, scientists, lecturers at universities, and mechanical engineers. They may all provide you with their viewpoints based on their expertise. By putting their comments together, you will be able to create a complete story because you will provide your audience with a variety of views from various experts, covering different aspects of the story.

It is crucial to use many sources and to identify them correctly by providing their full names and titles (what they do, which would explain why you spoke to them). This is called attribution (see the discussion on sources below). Attribution makes your story trustworthy.

5.4 Gathering information

It is better to collect too much information than too little. Journalists gather information for stories in various ways. Usually, a combination of the following steps is needed:

- Observation on the scene
- Initial research
- Speaking to eyewitnesses
- Contacting other sources and experts.

5.4.1 Observe and record information

On-the-scene observation is one of the fundamentals of good reporting. Journalists want to witness events for themselves whenever possible so they can describe them accurately to their audience. Good journalists use all their senses on the scene. They look, listen, smell, taste and feel the story so the audience can, too. For example, on the scene of a fire at a tyre factory, a journalist who witnesses the scene can describe the smell of the burning rubber to the audience and describe the black cloud of smoke hanging over the area. It is worth mentioning here that journalists are *allowed* to observe people in public spaces and even to take pictures or videos. In terms of South African privacy laws, people who enter a public space (the streets outside) implicitly give other people permission to look at them and even take their pictures. However, in private spaces (such as inside a supermarket or inside a lecture hall), the privacy rules of the institution take preference. In these cases, you usually need to ask permission first before you take pictures or make videos. In our chapter about journalistic ethics (chapter 7), these issues are explored in more detail.

To describe scenes to their readers, journalists need an **accurate record** of their observations. Many journalists still use **notebooks and pens** to record observations and comments from sources but most now also use their smartphones to help them capture information. With smartphones, journalists can take pictures, record sound clips, and make video recordings. The quality of mobile phone pictures and videos is now so good that even large broadcasters, such as the BBC, routinely play video clips on TV that were [made on mobile phones](#). The viewers probably do not even know that much of the news they are watching on TV was shot using mobile phones. One of the best skills you can develop as a journalist when gathering your information is to know your mobile phone well and to use it to record video, sound, and images.

Using your phone's **voice recorder** is one way of making sure that any quotations you might use are accurate. But electronics have been known to fail, so it is important for all journalists to be skilled notetakers. Do not rely on only your phone for recording information; make sure that you also keep written notes.

Here are some tips on notetaking from experienced journalists:

- Write down facts, details, thoughts, and ideas. Make clear which is which and where they came from.
- Draw diagrams of rooms, scenes, or items in relationship to each other. This is also useful if you need to brief an infographics journalist later to create an infographic for your story.
- Always get correctly spelled names, titles, and contact information. Ask for birth date and year to make sure you have the person's age right. Do not be shy to ask people to spell out their names if you are not sure of the spelling.
- Do not crowd the notebook. Leave space for adding notes later.

- Make sure you take down correct notes – that all your information is correct.
- Add additional notes as soon as possible after the interview if you remember something important that was said.

Many journalists mark the most important information they have learnt, good quotes they may use in the story, anything they need to follow up on or check for accuracy, and questions that still need to be answered.



Make sure that you take all the tools you need with you when you go out to cover a story. A mobile phone is usually enough to take pictures with and make recordings of your interviews, but you also need a notebook and a pen. Sometimes, a camera is also needed, but most journalists now use only their mobile phones.

Photo by [Frans van Heerden](#) from [Pexels](#)

Smartphones are very good tools to use for gathering and recording information in journalism. You can use smartphones as notebooks to take pictures and to make videos. Smartphones have quite good cameras now (Podger, n.d.) and work well for making news videos or taking pictures. Even less expensive phones now have excellent cameras.

There are many apps and external tools that you can use to turn your smartphone into a professional journalistic tool. Some of these tools are external microphones, tripods and various apps that can help you edit pictures and audio-visual material. An external light and a power bank, for when your battery runs down, may also be useful.

It is not the aim of this textbook to delve into all the finer details of smartphone journalism; there are excellent resources online that provide detailed information, with tips on how to prepare the scene, how to record, how to edit your material, how to improve sound and video quality, and other useful information. You can start with the [Mobile Journalism Manual](https://www.mojo-manual.org/) from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung⁷ – it is an excellent and complete manual with all the information you need.

The most important points to keep in mind when using your smartphone as a journalistic tool for information gathering are the following:

- **Know how your phone works.** Get to know the functions and apps on your phone by making some test videos and recordings.
- **Download the apps** you think you might need before heading out looking for stories. These can be video-editing apps such as PowerDirector and GoPro Quik, photography apps such as ProShot and VSCO, or audio apps such as Ferrite or n-Track.
- When making a video, carefully consider whether your story has **visual appeal**. For example, “talking heads” – people who are just talking – are not visually attractive. Rather try to find scenes that are visually interesting so that you can tell an interesting visual story. If you interview someone who wrote a new book, let them show the book, page through the book, and show their research files instead of just talking all the time.
- **Do not interrupt** your subjects while they are talking. Let them finish what they want to say, and then ask the next question. This will also make your editing easier, because usually you will need to remove all your questions from the final video anyway.
- When taking pictures or making videos, **get as close to the subject as you possibly can**. This way you can get clear and useful pictures and visuals. It is better not to use the phone’s zoom function, unless you tested it well and know it works. Sometimes, zoomed-in pictures or videos look fuzzy.
- **Use both hands** to hold your phone when recording a video if you do not have a tripod. This will ensure a steady shot, with less shaking.
- **Frame your subjects clearly** – make sure there are no distractions such as trees or noisy people in the background. If necessary, try to move your interview subject to a quieter spot. The Lifelong Learning Foundation (KVS) and Birzeit University Media Development Center (MDC) have an excellent guide available online with detailed tips about [taking good pictures](#) and [making good videos](#).
- **Use an external microphone** when interviewing sources, especially if you need to broadcast the interview online or on radio or television. Most phones have good microphones, but one needs to stand very close to the microphone for good sound.

⁷ *Mobile Journalism Manual* by Corinne Podger (n.d.), published online by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Singapore Lt., under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license, available at: <https://www.mojo-manual.org/>.

An external microphone, held up to the source's mouth while they are talking will ensure good sound. Many phones are shipped with free hands-free sets; these sets are perfect to use as external microphones.

- **Use your phone's recorder function** if you need to make a quick voice note of something that you feel you might forget.
- **Activate your phone's airplane mode** while filming or recording. You do not want to start all over because WhatsApp message tones or phone calls interrupted your recording session.
- **Be aware of ambient noise** when you are making recordings. Try to move away from noisy areas if possible so that the sound will be clear. This is particularly important if you want to broadcast your recordings or use them in a video or sound clip on a website.
- A **wearable camera** – for example, action cameras used by athletes – if you have access to such a camera, could be a very easy way to make recordings while you are talking to someone for some additional footage. But do not rely on the wearable camera only; also use your smartphone camera where you can frame your recordings properly.
- **Clean your lens** before shooting a video.
- **Try to plan your video or audio story** beforehand, if possible. This way you can make sure your story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Video stories should usually follow a narrative style, with a clear beginning, details in the middle, and an end.

When using your smartphone to gather information, it is a good idea to upload the information to a folder in the cloud – you can use Google Drive, Dropbox, Huawei Cloud, OneDrive or various other services.

Sometimes, you might be able to use your company's cloud service. Google Drive gives all users 15GB of free space, which is quite enough for pictures and videos. It is important to upload your information to the cloud from the scene to make sure you do not lose the information. You might lose your phone, or there might be a technical error. If you set up your phone to make back-ups of notes, pictures, and videos automatically, you will always know that your information is safe.

To summarise, it sounds obvious, but journalists must be sure they have the tools they need before heading out to cover a story; at the very least, you should always carry a notebook, pen, smartphone, freshly charged batteries, and a power bank.

There is nothing more embarrassing than arriving on the scene only to discover that your pen has no ink left, or your smartphone battery is flat. Make sure that you test your phone beforehand to make sure the camera, video and sound recording work as they should. Familiarise yourself with the steps needed to start and end recordings, and make sure that the recordings are saved properly on your phone. Make sure you know how to use your phone for journalism.

5.4.2 Research

Journalists tend to collect much more information than they can put into a story, but that information always helps them better understand the event or issue they are covering. Journalists need background information about a story to help them understand the story. Sometimes, background information is essential to give a story deeper meaning. You need to know what you are talking about, or what you are seeing on the ground, so you should always read up a little about a place or people or an event before you go there. Arriving without any background knowledge may mean that you might not interpret the situation correctly or know what is going on or what questions to ask.

Journalists have more research tools available today than ever before, thanks to the internet. Many of the tools used in the past are now available on our computer or even on our mobile phones, for example, phone directories, encyclopaedias, and maps. Wikipedia is also useful to get basic information quickly to give you some context about a story, but do not rely on Wikipedia for all the facts in your story. Wikipedia facts might be outdated or unreliable. Wikipedia is a good project, with many people around the world contributing their knowledge for free, but it can be biased or incomplete. Hence, you always need to get facts directly from your sources. Use Wikipedia to get an overview of a subject, and then start digging deeper to find other sources. There are many databases and reports available online that would have been much harder to find in the days before the internet, requiring a personal visit to a library or a government building.

You can also use search engines, blogs, chatrooms, e-mail lists, social media messaging services and instant messaging services to find new information. All of these resources are useful to journalists collecting background on a story. But one of the most basic research tools has not changed in a century: the news organisation's own library of previously published or broadcast stories. Now, most news organisation have online libraries or easily searchable websites where you can find previous stories about the topic you are covering (writing or broadcasting about). These previous stories are a useful starting place for all kinds of stories. Many journalists also keep their own file system of all the stories they have written. This is a particularly useful way to build your own encyclopaedia – just file all your previous stories somewhere, in a logical way, so that you can refer back to your own stories to check information. Using the cloud (such as Google Drive or DropBox) for storing your work is useful because you can access your own stories and personal encyclopaedia anywhere you are, even from your mobile phone while you are on the scene of a story.

5.4.3 Finding sources

Journalists cannot write news stories without sources. Good sources are usually other people, for example, experts, witnesses, participants in events, or people who have been affected by events. These are **primary sources**. Primary sources are better in news stories.

Original documents related to a topic – such as a report about pollution in the Vaal Dam – are also primary sources. Primary sources are always related to a story topic in a direct, immediate way. Journalists who view events are also primary sources because they see the event with their own eyes and can report back what they saw.

Journalists also use **secondary sources** when reporting news. A secondary source might be a written report based on an original document. In the case of a fire, for example, the person whose house burnt down would be a primary source, so would a firefighter who was involved in putting out the fire. But the press release issued by the fire department the next day, based on their own internal report of the fire, would be a secondary source.

One very important rule of thumb journalists follow when researching a story is that **no single source** can provide all of the information they might need. Usually, each source leads to another source. Sometimes, sources contradict each other. To clear up discrepancies, journalists may have to see where the weight of the evidence lies or seek out original sources, such as documents, to determine which version is true. Secondary sources are most useful as a way of confirming information acquired from primary sources. There are almost no news stories that can be written with just one source. Generally, it is a good idea to find at least three sources for each story. This way you will be sure that you hear different points of view, then you can weigh the evidence and make an informed judgement.

Whatever sources you use to research the background of a story, it is critical to consider the validity or credibility of the source. These days, anyone can design a professional-looking website or arrange to send an e-mail that looks authentic but is really a hoax. Just because you can find it online does not mean that it is true. This is especially true for any information you find on social media and messaging platforms in e-mails. There is a lot of misinformation and fake news on social media, and it is very easy to fake an e-mail. Gullible people often believe these lies. As a journalist, it is your job to check and verify any claims you see on social media. It would be hugely embarrassing if you wrote a news story based on information that is untrue. For example, in 2001, *The Guardian* in London published a story, based on a chain e-mail, that George W. Bush's IQ was the lowest of all US presidents. [It was fake news.](#) Therefore, journalists need to verify all information as well as the *source* of all information to determine whether these are credible enough to use in a news story.

Deciding what sources to use for a story is a large part of a journalist's job. Here are some useful questions for evaluating whether you have chosen the right source or the best source for your story:

- How does this source know what they know? (Is this person in a position to know these things, either personally or professionally? For example, if they claim to know something about a secret nuclear weapon being developed in Zimbabwe, how do they know that? Are they scientists? Nuclear experts?)
- How can I confirm this information through other sources or through documents? (All information should be verified against other sources.)

- How representative is my source's point of view? (Is this just one person who complains loudly about the landlord because they have a personal problem? Or is this someone who is speaking on behalf of an entire group of tenants who have serious, legitimate problems?)
- Has this source been reliable and credible in the past?
- Am I only using this source because it's the easy way to go or because I know I'll get something I can use?
- What is the source's motive for providing information? (Is this person trying to make themselves look good or to make the boss look bad? Why are they talking to me in the first place?)

WARNING: Be careful when using social media as sources; there are many unsubstantiated claims on social media. The same is true for rumours. Rumours can never be trusted, but sometimes they do lead to interesting stories. Treat social media and rumours the same; always verify the information to make sure that you do not spread fake news. Using social media as your only source is extremely dangerous. In South Africa, there is legislation against spreading fake news, and if you republish fake news that you found on social media, it can have serious consequences. Always check the facts.

5.4.4 Interviewing sources

Journalistic interviewing is a skill you need to learn; it is different from a casual conversation. You should approach your source in the correct way, behave in a certain way, ask good questions, and give your source time to respond. Interviews are an opportunity to find all the information you need to compile a story. You should know how to do interviews well.

For many stories, you will need to speak to sources. Often, this means that you will need to interview people. News cannot be written without sources, and 99% of the time, your sources will be people. Websites and other news media can also be sources, but the best source with the latest information will be directly involved in the story in some way.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to arrange interviews. Where do you find the people you want to interview? How do you get hold of them? How do you arrange the interview? You will identify sources based on some of the examples we have already discussed – witnesses, experts, people who want to share information about something. Sometimes, you will need to do some research to find out which expert would be able to give you information on a certain topic. Then you need to contact them, preferably by phone, and ask for an interview.

Many people may not want to talk with a journalist, especially if the story is controversial. All interviews will be different, and all sources will be different. Over time, you will learn some tricks to convince people to talk to you. For example, when dealing with government officials, start from the idea that the public has a right to know what the officials are doing.

Experienced journalists have found they can persuade even the most reluctant officials to agree to an interview by being prepared and by explaining to officials that people need to hear their side of the story. When talking to ordinary citizens, also try to convince them that it is important for them to tell their side of the story so that the story is not one-sided. Try to convince them that the reader or viewer would like to see their opinion. Of course, sometimes, a source will refuse to talk to you no matter what. That is not the end of the story. You then need to find someone else who can also give you the information.

As a journalist, you do not need to ask sources to approve your story, nor can they insist on seeing the story before publication. This is to ensure that the story is presented as objectively as possible, based on your final evaluation of all source material. Sources may not be allowed to change stories. If a source insists on approving a story before speaking to you, you should decide whether you really need that source or whether you should just find someone else. If you *really* need a specific source and there is no one else (for example, the source might be one of the few experts on COVID-19 vaccinations in South Africa), then you can agree to let the source see your story to make sure that you quoted them correctly and that the facts (especially if the story is filled with complicated scientific facts) are correct. But you must agree upfront that they cannot change the story; they can merely indicate if there are factual or scientific errors and correct these. This can be helpful if you write stories about complicated issues – experts can help ensure that the story is correct. But also remember that, while interviewing people about complicated issues, you should already ask them to clarify anything you do not understand so that you can explain the story clearly to your audience.

Some excuses sources come up with, and how to deal with them

Sources may have all kinds of excuses for why they cannot talk to you. Some of these are listed below, with some possible solutions.

- “I don’t have time.” The journalist can offer to meet at the most convenient time or place for the person they want to speak with and keep the interview short. You can also suggest meeting them in an online interview, using tools such as Zoom, Google Meet or Teams, which can often be quicker than driving somewhere to meet.
- “I am afraid the story will make me look bad.” Treating people with respect and telling them precisely why you want to talk with them would help sources be less anxious. Often, it helps to tell people you want to show all sides of the story.
- “I don’t know what to say.” Journalists need to be clear about why the story needs a particular person’s point of view. Explain to people what information you think they can add to the story.
- “I don’t want to talk to anyone from your publication.” This is a difficult one. It is true that some sources might distrust your publication for a personal reason. You should try to convince the source that your publication is trustworthy and that it would be worthwhile for the source to speak to you.

Sources may be hard to reach. Journalists often must go through an administrative assistant or public relations officer to contact the person they want to interview. This can be cumbersome and, sometimes, your messages are not conveyed. You can try to write a direct e-mail to the source or call during lunch or after business hours in an effort to get through. You can also (as a last resort) try to contact people via their social media platforms.

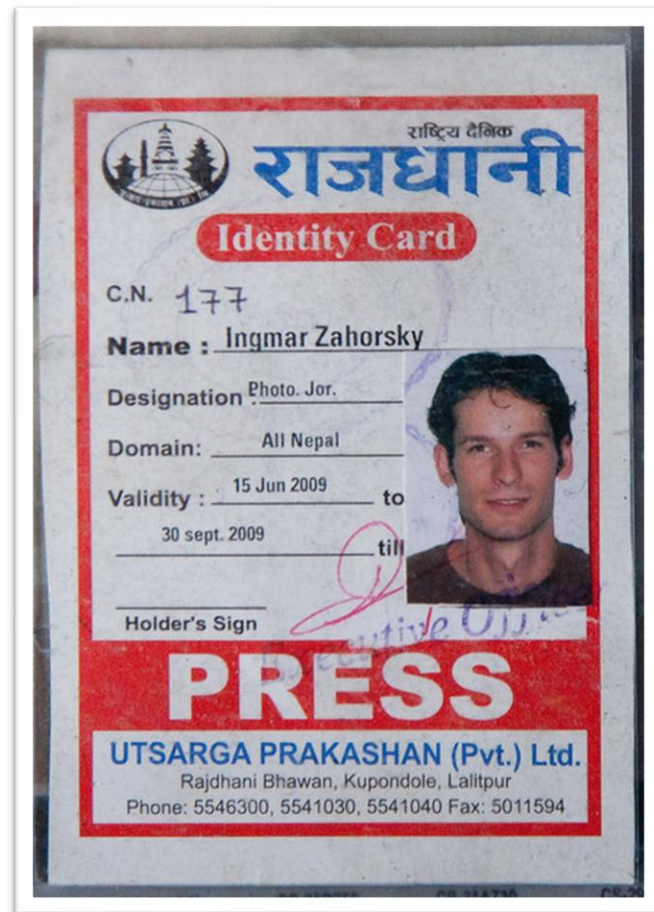
IMPORTANT: Whenever you approach a source, explain to them clearly that you are a journalist and that you are gathering information for a story. It is completely unethical to gather information “under cover” or under false pretences and then to use that information to write a news story. You should always make sure that your sources know exactly who you are and that you are gathering information to write a story that will be published or broadcast to the wider public.

It is also important to remember that you should treat certain sources with **compassion**. You may be required to interview people who have experienced traumatic events. They might still be in shock when you speak to them. Respect them; do not force them to speak to you. If they are unwilling to speak to you, you should accept that and find someone else who would be willing to speak to you. Understand that victims of traumatic events are still working through the trauma. In some ways, you might actually help them by offering a receptive ear – it sometimes helps people to talk to someone about their experience.

As a journalist, you should not abuse their vulnerability; make sure that they do understand you would like to use their information in a story and that they are willing to share their story with the public. If you see that a source appears to struggle to cope with their experience, you could offer them some help by providing telephone numbers or contact details of trauma counselling services.

As a journalist, you should not become involved in a personal way. This is difficult for many journalists to deal with, but you need to remember that you are the observer and the person who will share the story of events with the public; you are not the person who is expected to help the victims. However, this does not mean that you should be cold-hearted; you can still help people by directing them to professionals who can assist.

Most journalists use press cards to identify themselves to sources. This helps sources trust you and believe that you really are a journalist. A press card can also be very useful if you need to enter a building or an event where regular members of the public are not allowed, for example an official government briefing that might only be open to members of the press. It is important to treat your press card with respect and not abuse the privileges that the card provides.



An example of a press card. Photo by Ingmar Zahorsky from [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

5.4.5 Asking the right questions, and what *not* to ask

Once you have secured the interview and researched the person and the topic, there is still more preparation to do. Most journalists develop a list of questions or topics which they take with them but do not read from during the interview. Instead, they refer to the list only near the end to make sure they have not forgotten something important. The list also includes other information, documents, or photographs they want to obtain from the source.

IMPORTANT: Something to remember when doing any kind of interview: you are not allowed to record the interview or take pictures without permission. Make it very clear to the interviewee(s) that you would like to make a recording or take a picture and ask their permission that you may use the recording or picture(s) in your story.

Questions are the backbone of an interview. Good questions can reward you with unexpected answers, rich information, and surprises; poor questions can leave you wondering why you bothered to talk to that person anyway. Questions that are too specific can lead you down the wrong trail.

The first question in an interview is important because it sets the tone for what follows. Many journalists like to begin with an “ice-breaker” question that lets the source relax. It is something the source is comfortable answering. It may in fact have nothing to do with the reason you are there, but often it helps to establish your credentials with the source, and that can establish a sense of trust and openness. This helps both the journalist and the interviewee because it calms the nerves and puts both parties at ease. However, some sources do not like the informal chit-chat at the start of an interview, so it helps to be a judge of character or to read the situation and use a more formal style when needed.



When you interview someone, you should make sure that you know the background to your story and that you have some good questions ready to ask them.

Photo by [EA Grafiks](#) from [Pexels](#)

Most of the time, the best questions are open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They are also non-judgmental in that they do not show the journalist’s point of view. There is a difference between “What do you think about that?” and “What were you thinking?!” The sentence “What were you thinking?!” is judgemental, it implies that your source was not thinking clearly. While it is important to ask good questions, it is also important to be quiet and let the interviewee talk. Good journalists are good listeners and often learn the most significant information by being silent. What you hear also can lead to additional questions that may not have occurred to you.

There are some questions that journalists should **not ask** (Strong, 2014). These are closed questions, presumptive questions, and double questions that refer to two aspects.

Closed questions usually have one-word answers (such as, “yes” or “no”, “blue” or “red”). You need longer quotes to compile better stories. Presumptive questions make your own opinion come through, which should never happen, because you should be objective. These questions can make sources agree with your point of view without them realising it. Double questions can have two answers or one answer that does not make sense.

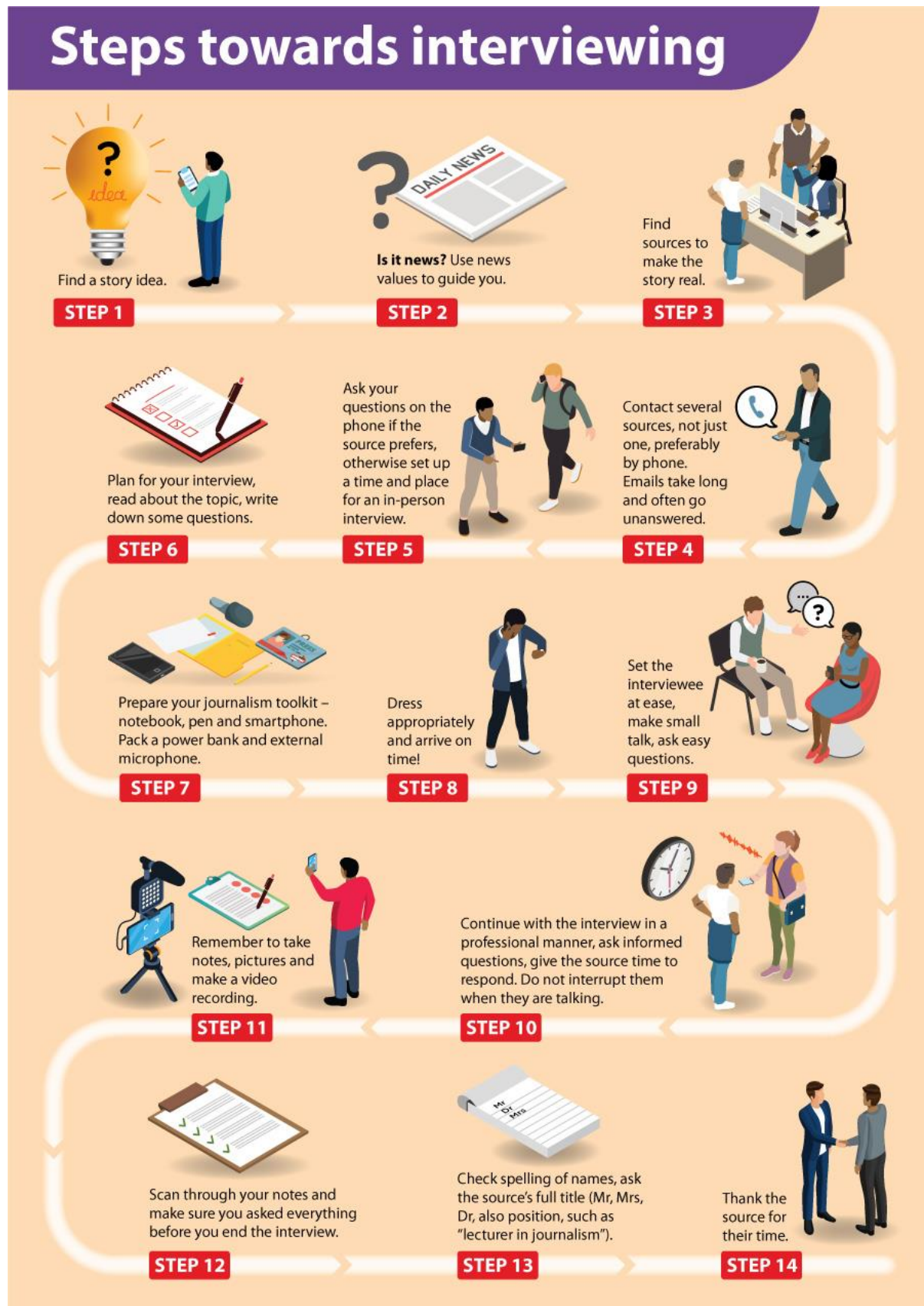
Examples of questions

Inadequate question	Better question
Was the rain very heavy last night? <i>The answer is a simple “no”; you need a description.</i>	What happened last night during the rainstorm? <i>This would lead the interviewee to explain and describe the heavy rain.</i>
Was there a flood last night? <i>Again, the answer is just “yes”. No details.</i>	Can you explain what happened last night during the flooding?
Do you think the closure of the newspaper <i>Free Press</i> by the government is censorship? <i>This is a presumptive question; the journalist wants the source to agree to their view that the newspaper was closed because of censorship.</i>	Why do you think the newspaper <i>Free Press</i> closed down? <i>This is an open question asking for an explanation. Perhaps it was for financial reasons. The source can explain this now.</i>
Do you think former president Jacob Zuma was corrupt, and why do you think so? <i>This is a double question and a presumptive question trying to lead the interviewee towards a certain viewpoint.</i>	What do you think happened at the Treasury when former president Jacob Zuma was in office? <i>This is an open question, allowing the interviewee to explain what they think.</i>

Some general questions that you can almost always ask:

- What happened?
- How did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- Can you describe what happened?
- What is your opinion about this topic?
- Do you have a solution/suggestion for this issue?
- Why do you think this is a problem/an issue?
- What would you like to see to make things better?
- Please clarify what you just said; I apologise, it is complicated for me, and I would like to make sure my readers understand.
- Please spell your name for me so that I am sure I write it correctly.

The graphic below shows the steps you need to take when planning and conducting an interview:



5.4.6 How to do interviews

Journalists can do interviews **in person**, **by telephone**, via **email**, **instant messaging** or by using **video-meeting platforms** such as Zoom, Teams or Google Meet. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. The best method is always to meet someone in person and speak to them directly, but sometimes this is not possible. The least-successful interview method is email interviewing. Many sources ignore requests for email interviews.

- **Interviewing in person** gives the journalist a more complete sense of the individual. But journalists should also observe the surroundings. What kinds of photos are on the wall? Is the desk messy or neat? What books are in the bookcase? Meeting in person gives the journalist the ability to judge the source's credibility based on their demeanour. Do they look nervous or comfortable? Are they willing to look the journalist in the eye? Christopher (Chip) Scanlan (2002) – director of writing workshops for The Poynter Institute, a journalism school in the US – [tells the story](#) of interviewing a woman who had lost her husband to cancer. She gave him a tour of her home, and in the bedroom, she said, “You know, every night I put just a little of [my husband’s] cologne on the pillow, so I can believe he is still with me.” It is a detail that the reader can smell and feel, which Scanlan never would have learnt over the phone or online.
- **Telephone interviews** take less time, and some journalists find it easier to take good notes when they do not have to worry about maintaining eye contact with the source. They can even type their notes on their computer. Sometimes, if a source is far away, or if it is not practical to meet for some reason, a telephone (or video) interview is a good second choice.
- **Email or instant messaging interviews** are useful for reaching people in distant places, but the journalist cannot listen to what is being said and follow up in “real time”. Instant messaging via messaging apps is a little bit more like a telephone interview because you can ask follow-up questions. But both online methods raise the question as to whether the person they appear to be from has actually sent the answers. A problem with email interviews is that many people feel they do not have time to “write your story for you”. If someone needs to answer email questions, they need to spend a lot of time typing out their answers, and in the busy world of today, some people just do not want to do this. But they might be willing to say a few words over the phone or in person. Journalists using email or other online forms of communication should follow the same professional standards as they would in any other form of communication. They must identify themselves as journalists and tell what information they are seeking and why. They need to apply the same fact-checking and thinking skills they would to any other source of information. Write your e-mail in a professional style, address the person properly, and sign the e-mail with your name and job title. Sending unsigned one-liners is not professional, and most people will not respond to such sloppy emails.

- **Video-meeting** interviews are extremely useful when people are far away or if you cannot meet people in person because of other concerns (such as during the coronavirus pandemic when people had to practice physical distancing). Video interviews can be quite similar to in-person interviews because you can see the person you are interviewing, observe their mannerisms, the space around them, and even make eye contact. You can take pictures (screenshots) while you are talking (just make sure that you ask the source first if you may take pictures and use them in your story). One great advantage of video meetings is that you can interview people from all around the world (Johnston, 2013). A disadvantage is that you need a stable internet connection and a back-up plan if the internet goes down.

5.4.7 Attribution of sources and information

All news stories contain attribution. Attribution simply answers the question “Who says?” and identifies the source of the information reported, particularly any controversial statements or questionable information. The attribution should include full details about the source, such as the name, the title and the position of the person. A university professor called Mpho Kganyago in Journalism at the North-West University (NWU), will not be identified as Mr Kganyago from the NWU. In this case, the correct attribution would be Prof Mpho Kganyago from the School of Journalism at the NWU Mahikeng Campus.

One major reason to attribute information in news stories is to allow readers, listeners and viewers to decide for themselves whether to believe the information. For example, a report that North Korea has decided to suspend its nuclear programme could be seen as more or less credible by some audiences, depending on who is quoted as saying so – a North Korean farmer, or an international team of scientists who visited the nuclear facility?

Another reason for attribution is to place responsibility for a controversial statement where it belongs – with the person who said it, not with the journalist or the news organisation. This does not imply immunity from lawsuits, as legal protections vary from country to country. But it is good journalistic practice to make clear who is making allegations or taking a particular stand. Not all information in a news story needs to be attributed, however. Naming the source of every bit of information would make stories almost incomprehensible. Information that a journalist observed directly can be stated without attribution – the source in that case is the journalist who reports what they observed. Indisputable or well-accepted facts do not need to be attributed either. A journalist could say which team won a soccer match without attribution because the final score is certain. But writing that one candidate won a political debate would need to be attributed or it would blur the line between fact and opinion.

Attribution can be placed at the beginning of a sentence to introduce information or be added after a statement. The most common verbs used for attributing human sources are “said”, “stated”, and “asked.” For records or documents, use “reported”, “claimed”, and “stated”.

Direct quotes should be surrounded by quotation marks and include the source's exact words. Paraphrased statements and indirect quotes should not be placed in quotation marks.

Here are examples of attributed statements:

"The libraries are usually crowded and filled with students around this time in the semester," said Jonathan Chose, a first-year student at the North-West University in Potchefstroom.

A heavy cloud of smog hung over the city Wednesday, Weather SA officials said.

According to a statement from Parliament, the president will announce his pick for the vacant High Court position on Monday.

When initially referencing a human source, include the person's full name. Use only the last name for subsequent references. You can read this article on [GroundUp](#) as an example – the minister's name is mentioned in full in the introduction, "Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga", but only the minister's surname is mentioned in the following paragraphs.

Include important qualifiers (explanation of who the person is) with the first reference to demonstrate that the source has expertise on the topic. For example:

"Using Twitter in the classroom actually enhances student engagement," Ethel Mavuso, a journalism lecturer at the North-West University's Vaal Campus, said.

Notice that the direct quote with attribution uses the qualifier "journalism lecturer at the North-West University's Vaal Campus" to indicate the source's credibility.

Qualifiers are also used to explain a source's relevance to the topic. The following example might be used in a news article reporting on a crime.

"It was just complete chaos in the store. The police were trying very hard to catch the looters," eyewitness Angela Nelson said.

The qualifier "eyewitness" helps to establish Nelson's relevance to the narrative.

Finally, attribution should flow well within the story. Avoid using long qualifiers or awkward phrases.

5.4.8 Protection of sources

Most interviews are conducted "on the record", which means the journalist can use anything that is said and attribute it directly to the person who is speaking. It is important to make sure the source knows this, especially when the journalist is dealing with ordinary people who are not accustomed to being quoted in the newspaper or on the air. That is why it is compulsory that you should always identify yourself as a journalist when talking to sources and explain to them clearly that everything they say can be used in your story.

If sources prefer that some information should not be on the record, both the journalist and the source must agree in advance to the conditions under which the information can be used. An interview “off the record” or “not for attribution” generally means the information can be used in a story and the source’s words can be quoted directly, but they cannot be named. However, the source can be identified in a general way, for example, as “a foreign ministry official” or “a company engineer”, as long as the source and the journalist both agree on the description used.

Many young journalists are unsure about when to use anonymous sources. Generally speaking, it is not the role of a journalist to “protect” sources. Journalists should use facts in their stories; sources should not be ashamed to talk about facts. If the source insists on remaining anonymous for no obvious reason, you should question the source’s integrity and find someone else to interview. Many news organisations have written policies regarding the use of anonymous sources. *The New York Times* newspaper, for example, says, “The use of unidentified sources is reserved for situations in which the newspaper could not otherwise print information it considers reliable and newsworthy. When we use such sources, we accept an obligation not only to convince a reader of their reliability but also to convey what we can learn of their motivation.” Journalists should not be too quick to agree to talk off the record because sources sometimes try to use it as a cover for a personal or partisan attack, knowing it cannot be traced back to them. Also, using an unnamed source makes it more difficult for the audience to evaluate the information.

There are some instances where there are valid reasons for protecting a source’s identity. Minor children, for example, need protection in some cases, such as when they may be victims of crimes. Whistle-blowers (people who expose corruption or wrongdoing somewhere, thereby placing their own career or safety at risk) may also need protection. Some laws in South Africa also prescribe how journalists should treat the names of people who are being accused of crimes. This is to protect people from being falsely convicted. In South Africa, someone who has been accused of a crime may only be named once that person has appeared in court and pleaded to the charges against them. Once someone appears in court, it means there has been an investigation, and there is some proof that the person may be guilty (a *prima facie* case). Only then may you name them, even if you know about the case against them before the time.

Sometimes, journalists use the argument of “public interest” to name famous people before they appear in court. This is because some people are in the public eye all the time and, sometimes, the public has a right to know about things they allegedly did because their actions may affect the public good. A good example is the Oscar Pistorius murder case in South Africa. He was named in the media when he was arrested, well before he had appeared in court. Chapter 7 in this textbook discusses journalistic ethics such as this in more detail. There are different laws and journalistic codes of conduct in different countries.

Journalists should be clear about how far they will go to protect the identity of a source. In some countries, journalists may risk going to jail if they refuse to reveal information about a confidential source in a court of law. If a journalist is not willing to risk facing time in prison to protect a source, they should say so.

Journalists should also understand the use of an **embargo** on information provided by a source. This means the information is provided on condition that it is not to be used until a specific time. A government agency announcing a new policy may provide a written summary several hours in advance or even a day ahead. That gives journalists time to digest the information before the press conference making the policy official. Journalists who accept information under an embargo are bound to honour it unless the news becomes public before the specified time. The Minister of Finance usually also releases the budget speech to journalists before the time, so that they can start working through the information. They may only start publishing after the speech had been delivered in Parliament.

SUMMARY: This chapter showed you the information that you need to create credible news stories (the 5Ws and the H), and how to find and interview your sources to gather enough information to make your stories credible. Once you have all the required information, you can start putting the story package together. The next chapter shows you the different ways you can put your story package together. You can write a story that can be published in print or online, but you can also create audio or visual material for broadcasting or online publication.

6. Telling news stories

This chapter will show you how to tell your story on different platforms. Sections 6.2 to 6.6 are specific to written journalism, for online or print. Section 6.7 is specifically about compiling broadcast stories. Sections 6.1 and 6.8 to 6.10 are relevant to all types of stories and all types of newsrooms.

News stories are told somewhat differently on different platforms, and the way you tell your story will also differ depending on the story style you choose. The main focus of this textbook is to show you how to tell news stories. The following sections show you how to tell news stories in written words (in print or on the internet) and how to tell broadcast stories (audio and audio-visual stories). We touch on feature stories briefly so that you understand the difference between news stories and news features. You can explore feature stories in more detail on your own by looking at some of the resources provided below.

We start our discussion with written news stories. Once you have all your information, you need to tell your story. Telling a news story usually follows a specific pattern. A news story should be simple and get straight to the point because readers often just want to find out quickly what is going on in the news. News features are longer stories and told differently. Readers who consume news feature stories have made a clear decision in their minds to investigate the news more, to spend more time on reading, watching, or listening.

The difference between print and online news stories has faded to a certain extent. Most websites offer stories in word form, to be read, just as they would be in a newspaper. What makes online stories different is that they can also include digital elements such as videos or sound clips, whereas printed news stories rely on pictures and graphics to help you tell the story. The reality now is that most journalists should think about all aspects of a story – not just the words, but also the pictures, videos, graphics, sound clips, and interactive elements such as polls.

Whether you write for websites or printed publications, news stories should provide the most important information in a clear, simple way.⁸ That is why many news stories follow the inverted-pyramid style – **a story always starts with the main news** in the first paragraph (called the introduction) in a factual way. Stories written in the inverted-pyramid style then follow a pattern where facts and information are presented from the most important to the least important. There are also other ways to write news stories.

⁸ This chapter is loosely based on a public domain textbook by the United States Department of State, *The Handbook of Independent Journalism*, written by Deborah Potter (2006), available at: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011644/00001/pdf>, Public Domain, and *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries* by Jasmine Robberts (n.d.), available at: <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/> [July 21, 2021], CC BY-NC 4.0. These sources provided general context and background and have been updated extensively, with fresh material and examples from academic, professional and student sources, as well as current practice.

Some journalists and news readers argue that the inverted-pyramid style is too formal and does not attract readers. In the digital era, some users appear to enjoy less formal styles in news writing; there are now many examples of stories online that follow the T-structure. Like the inverted-pyramid style, the T-structure also presents the most important news first, but the rest of the story then follows a more narrative structure, often chronologically, from the beginning to the end.

Once you understand that good journalism involves selection, not compression, you will understand journalism. This means that journalists do not try to tell everything about a story by forcing too many facts and too much information together (compressing everything into one story). Good journalism is not about trying to force everything into one story. Journalists should select the most important parts of stories; this means you need to decide what is most important to include in a story, in what order to put it, and what to leave out. Select and use only as much information as is necessary for your reader, viewer, or listener to understand the story. (Of course, when creating feature stories, this is different, but our focus now is on news writing. We look at features a little later.) For many journalists, the most difficult part of telling a story is deciding what to leave out. One way to make such decisions is to choose a central point or a theme, also called a focus, for the story.

6.1 Focus

The focus of a story, whether for print, online or broadcast, is quite simply the answer to the question, “What is this story really about?” This is probably the most important skill to learn when you are writing a news story. Really think deeply about what your story is about – usually, there is only one very important main point that you are trying to make with your story. Focus is important because this will determine the introduction of your story. The introduction of your news story is the first paragraph of the story where you should provide the most important information – the *news*. To determine the focus, Poynter Institute writing instructor Chip Scanlan suggests asking a number of questions (Scanlan, 2002):

- **What’s the news?** In other words, what is *new* about this?
- **What’s the story?** So, what do I want to tell my readers, viewers or listeners? What is this really about?
- **What’s the image?** Imagine that you can picture the story in one image, what is it?
- **What is the one thing I really want to tell my reader?** This will really help you focus on just the main important point.
- **So what?** In other words, why am I telling this story, why is it important?

Let’s look at an example. Imagine that you covered a fast-moving veld fire in the town of Coligny in the North-West province. You have been out talking to people and observing the damage all day. The fire destroyed five houses along the edges of town, but the local high school, in the same area, escaped the fire. The families who lived in the five houses all survived, without any injuries.

The five houses were completely destroyed in the fire, and the families lost all their possessions. This happened in October just before the start of the final matric exams. Now, you need to focus your story before you begin writing. Here is how you might use Scanlan's questions to find your focus:

- **What's the news?** A fire destroyed five houses along the edges of the town, but no one was injured, and the high school, in the same area, was spared.
- **What's the story?** Five families survive fast-moving veld fire.
- **What's the image?** Grateful family members hugging each other after escaping the fire.
- **What is the one thing I want to tell my reader?** No lives lost in fast-moving veld fire.
- **So what?** Community members will be happy that their neighbours and fellow residents of the area were not injured or did not die in the fire, and the community will be happy that their school was not damaged.

The journalist now knows that the introduction of the story should be about the families who lost their homes but survived and the school that was not damaged. The rest of the story would probably contain a quote from a family member expressing gratitude that everyone survived, and there would be general information about property damage. The journalist also knows that some information – such as the houses on the far other side of town that were not damaged because they are simply far away from the affected area – can be excluded. The focus would only be on the events in that particular area where the fire destroyed houses.

A possible introduction (usually, journalists just talk about an *intro*) for this story could be:

A veld fire destroyed five houses in one street in Coligny, but the residents managed to escape unharmed, and the town's high school in the same street escaped the fire.
This intro provides the most important information in the story in just a few lines.

A bad intro for this story would be:

There was a veld fire near Coligny yesterday. ***This intro does not say anything about what actually happened. Here one could ask, "So what?" It is not clear why this is news.***

Can you see the difference?

The example above is not meant to show that every story has only one acceptable focus. On the contrary, journalists for different news organisations and different platforms may take the same basic facts and compile their stories quite differently because they have decided on a different focus. In the case of the veld-fire story, a journalist could use the same five questions to come up with a different focus, depending on their audience and their publication. For example, a journalist who focusses on education, will find different answers to the five questions.

- **What's the news?** The town high school escaped damage in a veld fire that destroyed houses in the same street.
- **What's the story?** Teachers, parents and learners are happy that the school was spared, because matric exams are approaching.
- **What's the image?** Learners looking at their undamaged school.
- **What is the one thing I want to tell my readers?** Matric exams can continue.
- **So what?** Learners who have worked hard for many years to earn matric certificates can still complete their final matric exams.

This version of the story would start with the relief of teachers, parents and learners and use a quote high up from the headmaster whose school was spared. Both stories would include the same basic information – i.e., that five houses were destroyed, all families survived, the school was unaffected – but their emphasis would be quite different. The education journalist would focus on the important matric exams that can still continue.

Experienced journalists do not wait until the end of the day, after they have done all their research, interviews, and observation, before seeking a focus for their story. They may actually start the reporting process with a focus in mind which helps them decide where to go and whom to interview. Of course, the focus can change as they collect more information, and it often does. The most important thing is for the journalist to have decided on a focus for the story before sitting down to put the story together.

Having a focus in mind is just the first step in planning your story. The second is to organise the story so you know what information goes where. This will depend on the story structure you use. There are various story structures (discussed in the “Story structure” section below). As highlighted earlier, in the past, the inverted-pyramid structure was dominant in news writing, but digital media have led to the emergence of other structures.

- Begin by listing the basic facts of the story, and decide what should be at the beginning, at the end, and in the middle.
- Select the best quotes or sound bites from your interviews and decide where they should go in the story.
- Make note of any details you want to be sure to include.
- Before you begin to write or compile a story, it can be useful to create an outline on paper that you can use as a kind of road map for the story.

6.2 Good news writing

Good news writing is concise, clear, and accurate. That sounds simple enough, but it is actually quite challenging. As already mentioned, journalists tend to want to include everything they have learnt in their stories. But stories that get to the point are more likely to appeal to busy news consumers, and a news organisation that lets stories run on and on will not have much space or time left to cover other news.

- Generally speaking, news stories have shorter sentences and paragraphs than most other types of writing.
- Each paragraph contains one main idea. A new paragraph begins when a new idea, character, or setting is introduced.
- Journalists use simple, direct language that is easy to understand, with more nouns and verbs than adjectives and adverbs.
- Well-written news stories are not vague, ambiguous, or repetitious, because every word counts; do not use needless words.
- Good writers always try to choose the most appropriate word to convey what they mean.
- Journalists use dictionaries and reference books regularly to make sure the words they choose really mean what they think they do.
- Because they write stories for a general audience, journalists also try to avoid jargon (i.e., specialised language or technical terms unfamiliar to most people). A hospital spokesman might describe a person as suffering from “lacerations and contusions”, but a journalist should use simpler terms: “cuts and bruises”. If a technical term must be used for accuracy, it is a good idea to include a definition as well. For example, the term “fossil fuels” in a story about global energy issues should include a concise list of what those fuels are: coal, oil, and natural gas.
- Journalists must avoid euphemisms (i.e., words or phrases that may confuse or mislead the audience). If the city council votes to approve “a new interment facility”, the story on the website or in the next day’s newspaper should tell residents that the city “plans to build a new cemetery”.
- Journalists must also be careful not to use hyperbole (exaggeration). Avoid terms such as “the best ever”, “the first ever”, “ground-breaking” or “the new car is faster than the speed of light”. Often, this is not true; usually most things have happened before, somewhere in the world, and to be “ground-breaking”, something must be really unique and special. Sources who are trying to promote events or inventions would often use these words, but as a journalist, you should carefully consider whether such words are true.
- One key principle of news writing is to **show** the audience what happened instead of just **telling** them about it. The concept of showing and not telling may be difficult to grasp, but once you understand what it means, it will help you to write good stories that your audience will enjoy reading. For example, rather than saying, “Family members who attended the funeral were grief-stricken”, say, “His father wiped the tears with a clean, white handkerchief, while his mother stared blankly at the pastor.” What you *describe* shows the reader what happened instead of *telling* them your interpretation of what happened. When you *show* readers the events using clear descriptions of your observations, they can picture or feel the events in their own mind, it is not you telling them what to think.

- As we have already discussed in the previous chapter, accuracy is critically important in news writing. An accurate story gets the basics right: grammar, spelling, punctuation, dates, addresses, numbers, and all the other details that go into a news story. Getting someone's name or age wrong is the kind of error that can make a journalist lose credibility.
- An accurate story also tells a complete story, not just one side or another. This does not mean that any single story should include everything there is to say about a topic, but it does mean that journalists must not leave out key information that could distort the story's meaning. For example, writing that a new test makes it easier to detect oral cancer suggests that the old test was unreliable. If the new test is merely faster, the journalist should say so.
- News stories are told in simple language written by the journalist, but most stories also include the words of other people in quotations or sound bites (when telling audio or audio-visual stories). Quotes can make stories stronger by sharing the direct experience of someone involved.
- It is never worth quoting everything someone says in an interview; use quotes that would add colour (i.e., feeling and emotion) to your story. Avoid quotes that merely state facts, for example: "We expect to have a decision next week on contingency plans for the distribution of municipal funds to low-income recipients." Such information can be written in simple language using your own words. But a quote such as, "I always believed the rain would stop. I knew we would survive," by a survivor of a flood is filled with emotion and makes your story stronger.
- Avoid using swear words or highly descriptive language for graphic scenes of violence. Journalists should be aware of the community standards in the area in which they work and avoid offending community sensibilities. This also includes religious references, which should be handled with respect in highly religious communities. Sexist language or derogatory language for minorities, including sexual minorities such as the LGBTQI+ community, should also be avoided.

Now that you know how to find stories, find and interview sources and what good news writing is, we will continue to explore in detail how you should go about writing your news stories – i.e., how to put your stories together. News stories have certain types of introductions, follow certain structures, and end in certain ways.

6.3 Introductions

The beginning of a news story is known as the introduction or intro. In the US and some other countries, it is called the lead (also spelled "lede"). It is meant to capture attention and to draw the reader, listener, or viewer in. In South Africa most journalists use the term "intro".

There are two basic types of intros: **hard** and **soft**. A hard intro summarises the essential facts of the story — the 5 W's and the H discussed earlier — whereas a soft intro may set the scene or introduce a character. Another way to look at the difference between these types of intros is to consider a hard intro as the answer to the question, "What's the news?" and a soft intro as the answer to the question, "What's the story?"

Either type of intro can be used for a hard-news story. For example, a story about the election of a new president could be written one of several different ways:

A **hard intro** might read like this:

Former rebel leader James Makanga was elected president of Wakanda tonight, winning more than 80 percent of the vote in the country's first democratic election since 1993.

A **soft intro** would take a different approach:

Growing up in Freeville, James Makanga was a little boy with big dreams. Always small for his age, he says the bigger boys at school bullied him. When he told his grammar schoolteacher he would be president someday, she laughed.

No one is laughing now. Makanga won yesterday's election with more than 80 percent of the vote, becoming Wakanda's first democratically elected leader since 1993.⁹

As you can see, a hard intro tends to be shorter than a soft intro — often, only one sentence long. While a soft intro can be longer, every sentence in the intro supports the main point of the story. Also, both include the most newsworthy elements of the story. Choosing the right kind of intro depends on many factors, including the importance and timing of the story and the type of news organisation, publication, or broadcast involved. News stories that thrive on immediacy generally use hard leads. A weekly news programme or magazine is more likely to use a soft intro because most of the audience would already know the main facts of the story.

The most common type of soft intro is the anecdotal lead, similar to the example used in the president story. An anecdote is, by definition, a brief story; when used as an intro, it illustrates or foreshadows the larger story. A story about a social trend might begin with several related anecdotes or examples. On rare occasions, a quotation or a question may be the best way to begin a story. All of these intros also can be described as "delayed" intros, because the reader has to wait for several sentences to find out what the story is really about. But keep in mind that, in news writing, you should always get to the point of the story quickly and always use the most important information first. In news features, you can keep the reader waiting a bit longer before you get to the main point. In a feature, you almost "tease" the reader in a way by making them curious so that they continue reading.

⁹ Wakanda is an imaginary country and James Makanga is an imaginary person, used here to illustrate how to write an intro.

6.4 Story structure

All stories have a structure in the same way that people have a spine – it is something that holds the story together in an ordered way. Without a structure, stories would be a jumble of facts with nothing to hold them together. Structure is essential for stories to be understandable and meaningful, but not all stories should be structured in the same way. Good writers choose the most suitable shape for the story they are telling. One of the best ways to learn about story structures is to try to identify how the structures discussed below are used in news reporting you see around you. When reading news stories, try to identify which of the four structures below the journalist used.

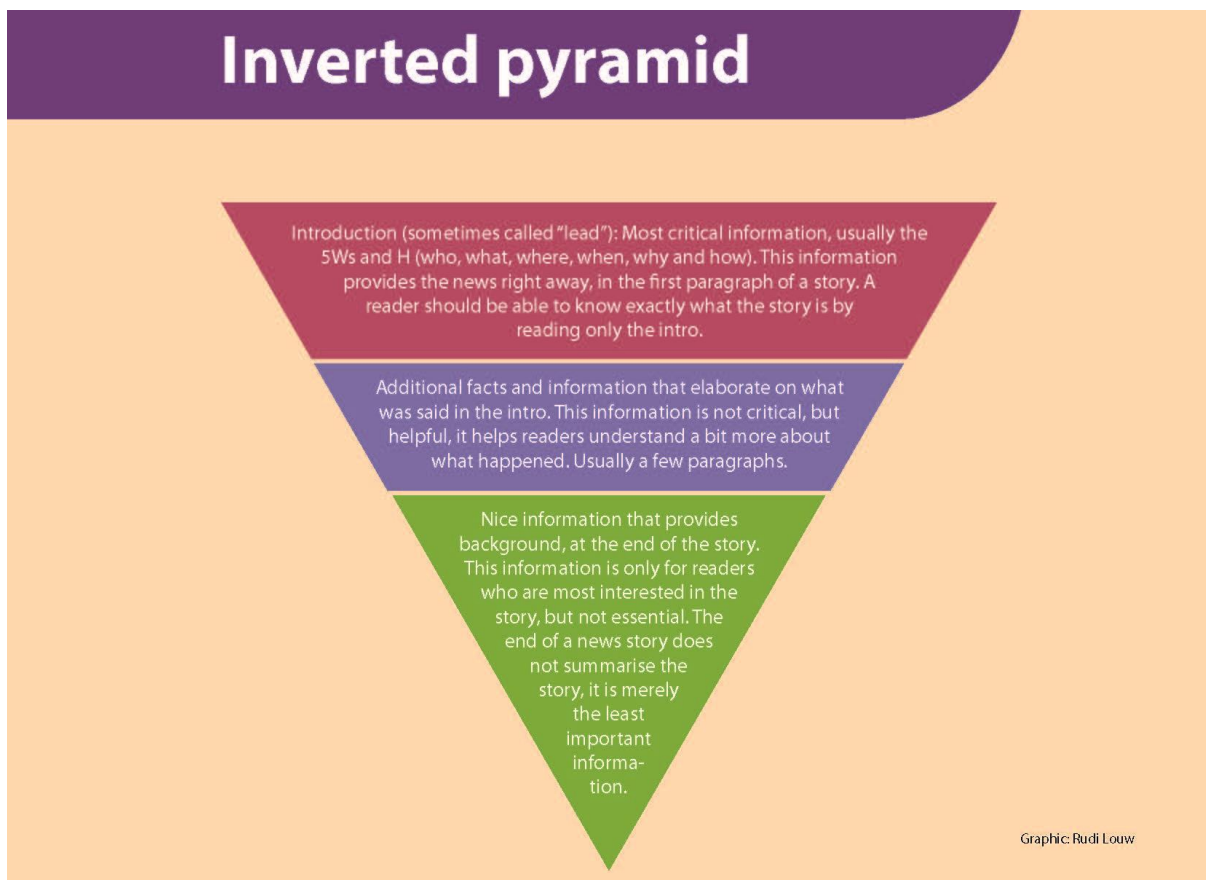
6.4.1 Inverted pyramid

Many news stories begin with the most newsworthy information, following a traditional story structure developed more than 100 years ago. The “inverted pyramid” form puts the most important information at the top, followed by other information in descending order of importance. This shape is useful when reporting important or breaking news – when timeliness is of the essence. If you are the first to report a significant development, you will want to tell the audience what has happened right at the top of your story. A report on a massive storm and flood damage – such as the April 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal, for example – would likely begin with the death toll and the location of the heaviest damage.

Writers who do not use this structure when it is called for may be accused of “burying the lead”, making it more difficult for the audience to find out what the story is about. Like all news stories, those using the inverted-pyramid structure should provide the reader with the most important information right at the start of the story. If you do not get to the point quickly, the reader may think you could not identify anything newsworthy. When writing your lead (remember, we can also call this the intro), keep thinking about the 5 W’s and the H; if you can put most of the 5 W’s and the H in the lead already, it would be a good intro.

In the inverted-pyramid structure, information following the intro expands or develops the point that is made in the lead. In the case of the heavy-storm example above, the writer might describe the scene of the worst devastation and then include quotes from a survivor or an emergency worker. Supporting paragraphs would elaborate on the topic, filling in details and providing background on the storm, for example, why the flooding was so severe, why the rain was so heavy, why there was so much damage, where damage occurred, etc. Towards the end of the story, you might refer to other storms that happened in the area before. This is not important detail about the *current* storm and could be removed from the story without taking away any of the most important information. This is one of the reasons why the inverted pyramid structure is popular – it is possible for editors to cut the story (make it shorter) from the bottom by simply removing the last few paragraphs. Editors know they will not remove important information this way.

Below is a graphic representation of the inverted pyramid:



The article below from GroundUp is a news article written in the inverted-pyramid style. You can easily identify the inverted pyramid – the introduction contains the most important information. You can read the original article online [here](#).

Learners must get meals during Covid-19 pandemic, court orders

Minister and MECs to provide detailed plans within a month

21 July 2021 | By [Tania Broughton News](#) | [South Africa](#)

Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga and eight provincial education departments have been [ordered](#) by a court to provide meals to learners who need them during the Covid-19 pandemic. ***You can identify most of the 5Ws and the H in the intro. Who: the minister and provincial education departments; What: court order to provide food; When: 21 July 2021, it is in the dateline, just below the headline of the story; Where: South Africa, this is implied but not stated directly, the story is about the South African minister; Why: learners need food during the pandemic; How: the minister and education departments must provide meals.***

From here the story provides additional information and details, on order of importance: The negotiated settlement, made an order of court, has put Motshekga and the provincial education MECs on terms to produce, within one month, a “realistic and practical” plan to provide qualifying learners with a daily meal during the pandemic.

Equal Education (EE), which launched the court proceedings, says it will be closely monitoring and evaluating the revised plans “in the spirit of cooperation and with the shared interest of putting learners first” and to ensure the successful rollout of the National Schools Nutrition Programme (NSNP).

This week, EE and two Limpopo schools sought an urgent order from the Gauteng Division of the High Court, Pretoria against the Minister and the MECs, claiming they were in breach of a previous order granted in July last year, that they ensure that all qualifying learners, whether attending school or not, were given a daily meal.

The most recent statistics in March this year, showed that some 1.5 million learners were still going hungry, EE said in its court papers.

EE and the schools said the Minister and the MEC’s were also in breach of the conditions of the July 2020 order, that they report back to the court on progress every month. In this regard, EE asked the court to grant an order that, with the exception of the MEC of Education for the Free State, they be directed to provide reasons as to why they should not be held in contempt of court and sent to jail or fined.

EE wanted an order giving Motshekga and the MECs a month to formulate and implement revised “realistic” school feeding scheme plans, detailing any challenges, and with proper roll-out directions.

In a joint statement on Wednesday, EE and its legal representatives SECTION27 and Equal Education Law Clinic, said in response to the urgent court application, the respondents’ legal representatives had proposed a negotiated settlement which had now been made an order of court.

“It contains clear commitments for the existing delivery of the NSNP to be revised and for reasonable time frames for implementation,” the statement said.

The court order states that the plan will take into consideration the challenges experienced so far in delivering the NSNP during Covid-19; the need for realistic and responsive plans that ensure every qualifying learner receives a meal - either through hot meals or food parcels - under the NSNP; the need to feed every qualifying learner during the school calendar year, regardless of whether schools are closed due to COVID-19 or whether learners are at home because of a rotational timetable; and, the need for communication plans that ensure that all learners and schooling stakeholders are aware that meals are being provided, the manner in which meals will be provided, and the availability of scholar transport where applicable.

The plan must also include the steps taken by the education authorities to comply with their obligations, and when each step will be taken.

The first report must be filed within one month and then further reports must be filed monthly.

“This order is a victory for learners’ rights to basic nutrition, basic education, equality and dignity,” the statement read.

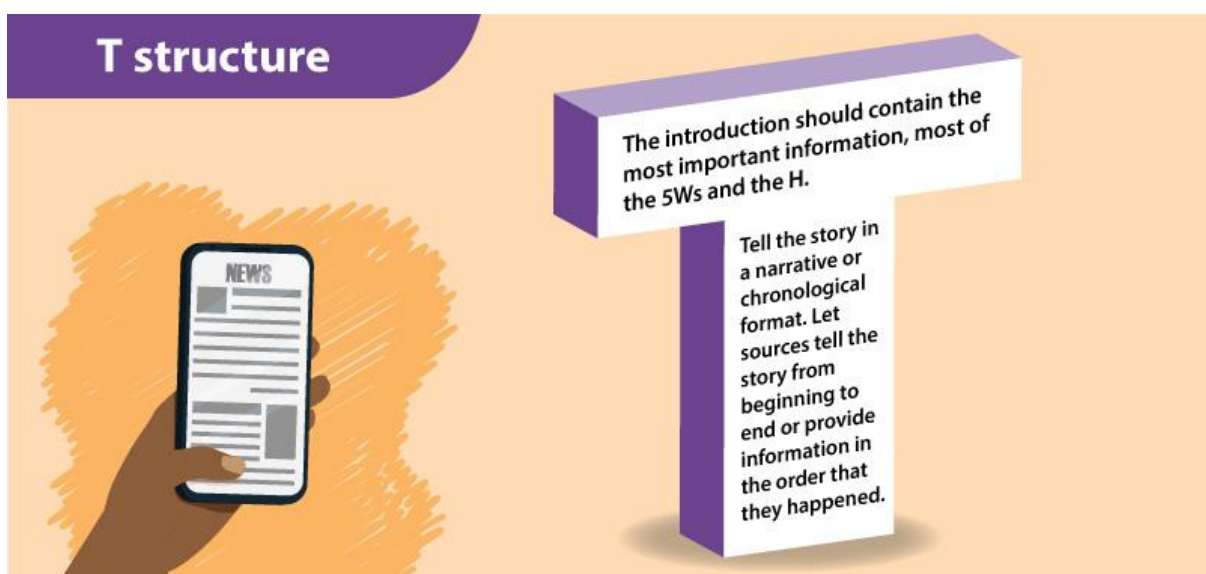
“It is a victory for over nine million learners and the millions of households whose food security has been compromised during the Covid-19 lockdown and the current unrest within South Africa.” ***There is no ending to summarise the story. The story simply ends with another quote.***

6.4.2 The T structure

The T structure has become popular in the online environment. This structure, like the inverted pyramid, provides the most important news in the introduction (this is signified by the horizontal line of the T). This is important because, in the online environment, you need to tell the readers quickly what the story is about, otherwise they will not read it.

The online environment is full of choices for the reader; they can go anywhere with the click of a button. If a story’s introduction is not interesting, readers may just click elsewhere. But once they start reading, they have a reason to continue. You can then tell the story in any way you like, for example, as a narrative (traditional story format, from beginning to end) or by using an anecdote and then telling the story (Dube, 2003). This structure is now also used in printed media.

Below is a graphic illustration of the T structure:

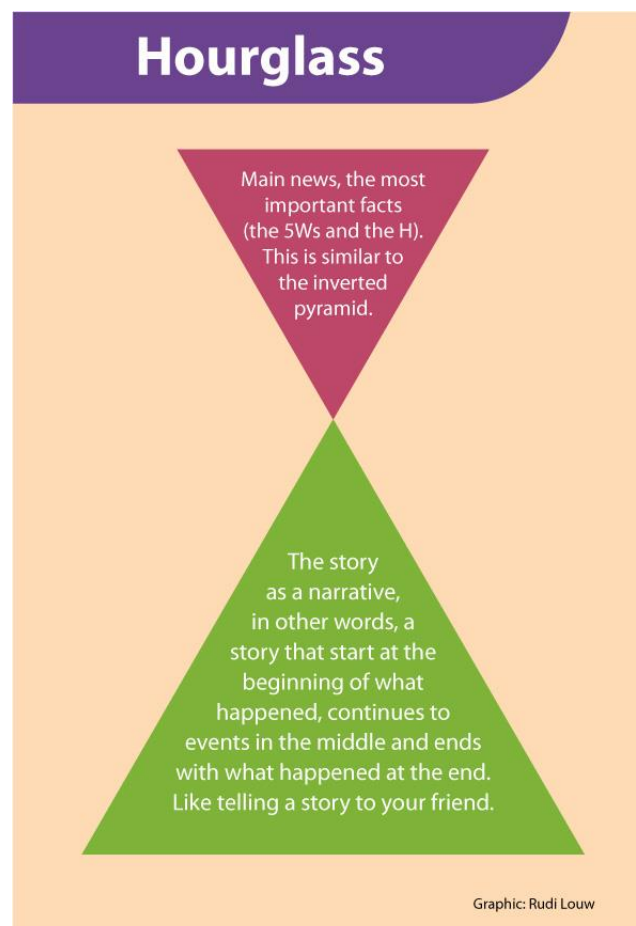


The story [at this link](#) by Al Jazeera is an example of the T-structure being used in practice. The writer provides the most important information in the intro – many months after a huge earthquake in Peru, people are still homeless. The story then follows a free narrative by jumping back to the elections a year earlier, discussing people’s hopes and expectations during the elections., before jumping back to the present again.

6.4.3 Hourglass

A modified form of the inverted pyramid is known as the hourglass structure. It begins in a similar fashion, with the most important information, but after a few paragraphs, it takes a turn and becomes a narrative, usually told in chronological order. Using the example about the massive storm in KwaZulu-Natal above, a journalist could start with a hard intro, giving the facts about the storm, provide a few paragraphs of support, and then tell the story of the storm as witnessed by one survivor. This kind of story form requires a clear transition between the opening section and the narrative. The hourglass is a good shape to use when you want to report the news, but you also want to tell a story (Scanlan, 2003).

Below is a graphic representation of the hourglass form:



[This story](#) by the BBC, about a couple who was hijacked at sea, is written in the hourglass form. The story starts like an inverted pyramid story, with the most important information, but then it shifts to the hourglass form, a chronological telling by the couple of their story. They describe the events from beginning to end. The writer mostly uses the couple's quotations to tell the story. There is a clear transition between the first part of the story and the start of the narrative. After providing the most important information (the 5 W's and the H), the journalist writes that the couple are back home safely. This indicates that they are back home after their ordeal, and then the narrative part of the story begins with quotes by the couple explaining everything that happened to them from beginning to end.

6.4.4 Endings

News stories have different types of endings, but these are not traditional "endings" like in narrative stories. Narrative stories usually start at the beginning ("once upon a time") and end with a clear ending ("they lived happily ever after"). News stories do not work like that. In each of the structures discussed above, there are specific ways to end your story, but these structures all have one thing in common: they do not end with a summary of the story. Stories written in the inverted-pyramid form have no real endings; the last paragraph simply contains the least important information. Stories written in the T-structure and the hourglass shape may end in various ways – for example, by returning to the beginning of the story; with a quote; with an anecdote; or in the case of a narrative, with the logical last part of the story. If a story has raised a problem, the ending might offer a solution. Endings can also look towards the future – to what might happen next. Let's look at the examples we discussed above.

- In the inverted-pyramid example, the story about the children and food ends with a quote that describes the court decision (that school children should get food) as a victory. This is interesting information but not essential to the story. The most important information is about how and when children would get food – this is what is discussed in the body of the story.
- In the T-structure example about the homeless people after the earthquake in Peru, the story ends with a quote that looks towards the future – a survivor says that she still hopes that things will change and get better.
- In the hourglass example about the couple who were abducted at sea, the story ends with a quote by the woman, saying that she always believed they would survive and return home. This is an emotional quote that will linger with the reader.

These examples show that news stories do not simply end with a summary of the story. News stories should either end with the least important information or with an ending that will somehow linger with the reader. This is similar to feature stories; such a story should always

end in such a way that the story lingers with the reader, i.e., they still think about the story for a little while after they have read it.

6.5 Feature stories

The main focus in this textbook is on news writing, but a brief discussion of feature writing is appropriate so that you know the difference. Feature stories and news stories differ in the way they are written. The most obvious difference is that feature articles are longer than news stories. Also, while traditional news stories use a summary introduction, where you state the most important information immediately, feature stories use delayed leads. They usually begin with anecdotes. The writing style is different. Traditional news articles tend to paraphrase information rather than state it verbatim, while feature articles include many quotes and use more emotional language, focussing much more on showing the reader what is going on. In feature stories, readers should almost be able to *feel* the story; they can picture what is happening because feature stories use much more descriptive language.

Feature leads (or intros) can be much longer than news intros. Most features use anecdotal leads and descriptive leads. An anecdotal lead unfolds slowly. It lures the reader in with a descriptive story that focusses on a specific minor aspect of the story that leads the reader to the overall topic. This is an example of an anecdotal lead:

CapeNature ranger Hilton Bocks bends down to point out a tiny succulent, one of many spread over the stony plains of the Knersvlakte Nature Reserve on the West Coast. The pebbles crunch under our shoes as we walk around.

“This one is endemic,” says Bocks. “It’s young. I’m guessing five to six years. They take very long to grow in this area.” (Source: [GroundUp](#))

Descriptive leads begin the article by describing a person, place, or event in vivid detail. They focus on setting the scene for the piece and use language that taps into the five senses to paint a picture for the reader. This type of lead can be used for both traditional news and feature stories. This is an example of a descriptive lead:

Chikwawa, Malawi – A few metres away from the joyful shouts of children playing soccer and the low whispers of women hunched together discussing the weather in small groups, Bernard Samson and other men are digging a pit latrine.

Standing at only 1.65m (5ft 4”), Samson, the 44-year-old father of six and district head of the Chikwawa community in southern Malawi, is a man used to leading a tall order. (Source: [Al Jazeera](#))

The content in a feature article is not presented in the same way as in a news story (based on the structures discussed in the previous section). While the pyramid, T-structure and hourglass formats are particularly useful in news writing, the diamond format (see the

broadcast stories section below for an example of the diamond format) can be particularly useful in feature writing.

All of the information in a feature article should be presented in a logical and coherent fashion that allows the reader to easily follow the narrative. This can be done by starting with an anecdotal or descriptive lead and then continuing in a logical way to present all the background information and quotes. The feature story can then end in a way that lingers with the reader, for example, with an emotional quote, a statement that makes the reader think, or what is called a “circle ending”, a return to the anecdote at the beginning of the story. This could be an update on what has happened. For example, the story about succulent smuggling ends like this:

The resident GroundUp spoke to in Springbok suggested that instead of poaching, the community could start cultivating the plants and sell them legally to make an income. ‘If we can cultivate them, then we can protect them too. Then they don’t have to go extinct.’
(Source: [GroundUp](#))

This is a forward-looking ending – an ending that suggests a solution to the problem.

As you can see, feature stories work well for telling long, softer stories and are written in a different way than news stories.

6.6 Sub-editing

Usually, in large newsrooms, there are sub-editors (copy editors) who do the final editing of news pieces, checking for grammatical mistakes, factual errors, story flow and content – in short, they usually “clean up” the story before publication in print or online. Sub-editing is a specialised skill and something that one learns over many years.

Sub-editors serve as a second set of eyes looking for any errors in a story. The emphasis here is on a second set of eyes. That is because journalists should always check their own copy for accuracy before submitting it to an editor. Every writer should allow some time for revising their own copy. After your own revisions, you do need a second pair of eyes for a final check. Good writing, by definition, requires editing; a second pair of eyes is essential to really look at your story and make sure that the message comes through clearly, that everything you need in the story is there, and that there are no mistakes or legal issues.

An accuracy check is the first level of copy-editing. Sub-editors look for grammatical and usage errors as well as for spelling mistakes. They pay particular attention to subject–verb agreement and subject–pronoun agreement. Sub-editors make sure that all numbers in a story are correct: addresses, telephone numbers, age, date, and time references. They rework any calculations the journalist may have performed to make sure the math is correct. They confirm that the journalist has used proper titles for everyone who is quoted, and they review the use of attribution throughout the story.

Sub-editors also look closely for any errors of fact or issues of fairness.

Thorough editors read stories with a sceptical eye, with questions like these in mind:

- How does the journalist know this?
- Why should the audience believe this?
- Is the main point of the story supported?
- Are the quotes accurate, and do they capture what the person really meant?
- Are all sides represented?
- Is something missing?
- Is the story fair?

Sub-editors pay attention to style (many publications have their own writing style) and language, which vary depending on the local culture. This is important because different communities have different standards. As a journalist, you should be aware of this. In most communities, you would not use strong language (swear words) or graphic descriptions of violence in your stories. This could be as simple as phrases such as “bloody hell” or “damn”; some people might find these words offensive. As a journalist, you should know your audience and know what to avoid, but sub-editors also check this.

Sub-editors and journalists alike should read the copy aloud – especially in broadcast newsrooms – listening for sentences that are too long, redundancies, awkward phrases, and double meanings. In many newsrooms, sub-editors have the authority to change a journalist’s copy without consultation to fix these kinds of basic problems.

Sub-editors are not simply proofreaders, however. They are journalists in every sense of the word. Most sub-editors either have reporting experience or reporting skills. When they read a journalist’s story, they are looking for much more than basic accuracy. They want to know if a story would make sense to someone who knows nothing about the subject. They are mindful of the need to make stories engaging and interesting.

REMEMBER: Once you have filed your story (this means once you have submitted your story for publication), it does not mean your job is done. The story needs to be edited, which means you need to be available to assist sub-editors while they are editing your story in case they pick up gaps or discrepancies. They should be able to reach you to help them fix the story where necessary.

If a story incomplete, the sub-editor must be able to work with the journalist to improve the final product. That is when their leadership skills come into play, as they use a process commonly called “coaching”. Despite the presence of sub-editors and producers in newsrooms, it is expected of journalists to ensure from the start that their stories are complete, well-written and accurate. In many newsrooms, especially online newsrooms,

journalists now often check their own stories before publication, which means you need to ensure that you write well and cover all aspects of good news reporting. Before submitting your story for publication, you will be expected to write **headlines and captions**.

Good headlines are short and to the point; headlines are not “titles” but they tell a very short story and usually contain a verb. A headline is short and catchy – both a summary and an advertisement. It gives the audience a quick idea of what the story is about and tells readers why they should be interested in reading the entire piece. A print or online headline summarises the story, gets the reader’s attention, helps to organise the news on the printed page, and, through the use of different sizes of type, indicates the relative importance of each story. When writing a headline, you try to capture the central point of the story in the headline. For example, a story about a new political party called SA Now winning the local elections by a landslide would have a headline like: “SA Now wins local elections by landslide” and NOT “Local election winners”. The headline contains facts, news and interests the reader; it is not simply a statement of something that happened. Online headlines should be very descriptive and contain detailed information so that search engines can find the story. That is why online headlines should be written with search engine optimisation (SEO) in mind. [See this article](#) for more information about SEO.

The language in headlines should be simple and straightforward. Use proper names and present tense. It is generally acceptable not to use conjunctions, articles like “the”, and to drop linking verbs like “is” or “were”. A story that tells how a woman and her boyfriend were arrested for a string of bank robberies might be headlined: “Bandit, boyfriend held in robberies”. A headline should match the tone of the story. Hard news stories demand a straight summary, like this headline from *The Zimbabwe Independent* newspaper: “Smugglers dent Zimbabwe’s gold production”. The headline makes sure the reader knows exactly what the story is about. Feature headlines, on the other hand, may only hint at the story’s content since they are written primarily to pique the reader’s curiosity. For example, Argentina’s *Buenos Aires Herald* ran this headline over a review of a new recording: “Sassy Madonna goes back in time”.

Headlines must be accurate and honest, not misleading. What is in the headline must be in the story. Nothing annoys a reader more than a story that does not deliver what the headline promised.

Captions serve a different purpose. Instead of summarising content the way a headline does, a caption helps the reader appreciate what is inside the visual frame. The photograph and caption together form a small story that the reader can understand without having to read the text of the story that accompanies them. Captions should clearly identify the main people in a photograph. If several people are featured, it is often helpful to let the reader know that the central character is the one “wearing a cap” or “standing on the right”. Captions should not repeat the exact wording of the headline or lift a sentence directly from the story. Most captions are short, just one or two lines, often in smaller type. But on occasion, a newspaper

or online site may contain multiple photographs with longer captions in a photo essay that tells a complete story. Longer captions can use quotations from the people pictured. It is important to identify all people in a caption and to indicate where they are, unless there are too many people, then you can identify just the main characters.

6.7 Broadcasting: Telling audio and audio-visual stories

Even if your interest is only in broadcast journalism, before you continue with this section, you should read chapter 5, for a discussion about objectivity, fairness, and credibility; story types; finding your story; and gathering information. These sections are relevant to all journalistic platforms. Also look at sections 6.1 and 6.8 to 6.10 in this chapter.

Broadcast journalism traditionally refers to radio or television programmes that are broadcast over the airwaves and received on radio receivers or television sets. It is also now possible to tell audio-visual stories online through platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, TikTok, or on websites. Audio is increasingly distributed through podcasts, while radio stations can now also be streamed online. This section relates to all kinds of audio and audio-visual stories. As with printed journalism and online journalism, there are many similarities between making an audio documentary for a radio station or for a podcast. Similarly, a video news bulletin for a TV station or for a news website can be packaged (put together) in similar ways.

Just like with printed stories, you need to identify the **focus** in your broadcast story. This means “what is this story really about?” Focus is important because this will help you find an introduction for your story. In broadcasting, the introduction is called the lead. Similar to printed stories, you can ask yourself the following questions to help determine the lead:

- **What’s the news?** In other words, what is **new** about this?
- **What’s the story?** So, what do I want to tell my readers, viewers, or listeners? What is this really about?
- **What’s the image?** Imagine that you can picture the story in one image, what is it?
- **What’s the one thing I really want to tell my reader?** This will really help you focus on just the main important point.
- **So what?** In other words, why am I telling this story, why is it important?

When you have the answers to these questions, you know what to lead with, and you can start planning the structure of your story – be it for TV, a website, or an audio story. As with print and online publications, broadcasting also has different story types. Traditional broadcast story forms are the tell or reader story, the V/O or voice over, and the wrap or package. A reader story is just what it appears to be — a story without additional sound bites or video, usually presented by the newscaster or anchor in the studio. A V/O is a television term for a story told with video but no sound bites, the broadcast term in English for direct quotes. The newsreader or anchor reads the script while the video is playing.

These story forms, reader and V/O, are short: usually less than a minute and sometimes only 10 or 15 seconds long. News videos for websites are also often short, about 60 to 90 seconds, and tell the full story in a visually appealing way, with a lead (short introduction to explain what the story is about), a middle section consisting of quotes, visuals, sound clips and information to develop the story and an ending.



Television news stories are visual and presented differently than printed or online news.

Photo by [Frederic Köberl](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A complete broadcast story by a journalist is called a “wrap” in radio and a “package” in television news language. It consists of the journalist’s narration, also called “track”, and often includes sound bites and natural sound (sound that occurs naturally in location). Obviously, the television version has video, which may include graphics, either static or animated. These types of stories can be presented live or be recorded in advance, and they tend to run longer than the other story forms – sometimes up to six or seven minutes, depending on the format of the newscast. Each package also has a “lead-in”, or introduction, to be read by the newscaster. Many also include a “tag” which provides additional information at the end of the journalist’s package.

News videos created for websites and podcasts are similar – they tell audio-visual or audio stories in a similar way to a television or radio package. They consist of the journalist’s narration or captions, sound bites and ambient sound, interviews, and proceed in a logical way with a beginning and an end.

Unlike a television package, web videos do not have lead-ins; they are published on websites and have written introductions or captions. The video itself should contain a full introduction to the story. This is because many online videos are shared by people with their friends, who then see only the video, removed from the context where it was published in the first place.

Online videos should be able to stand on their own regardless of where they are viewed so that people will always understand the story, no matter where they view the video or listen to the audio. That is why online videos and audio packages should tell complete stories.

6.7.1 Preparing broadcast stories

Radio and television stories are written for the listener's ear and eye. Print stories are written for reader's eye only. Audio-visual journalists must write copy they can read aloud; this should be clear, conversational copy that is easily understood. Unlike newspaper or online readers, the live broadcast audience cannot go back and take a second look at or listen to a story that did not quite make sense the first time. The words are spoken and done – you cannot change it. Online, people can watch videos again and again, but you still need to make sure that you are speaking clearly and in simple language, otherwise they will not understand you, no matter how many times they view your video.

Broadcast journalists are more concise than their newspaper colleagues. They must be. The printout of a half-hour news broadcast on radio or television would fill only a page or two in the newspaper. A broadcast intro cannot include all 5 W's and the H – it would be too long and too hard to follow. Instead, a broadcast writer selects the two or three most significant points to use in the intro and puts the rest in the sentence that follows. Broadcast stories also tend to leave out some details, such as age and addresses, which are routinely found in print. This is to save time. Broadcasters write shorter sentences so they can read them aloud without running out of breath.

A television or radio news lead-in is quite different from a newspaper or online intro. In television and radio news, all the information is not given up front. Journalists start their stories in a way that grabs and hold a viewer's interest so they will continue watching. This is also true for online video and audio. This is different than the inverted-pyramid style for print or online news where all the information is given immediately.

Lead-writing for videos and audio news is an art form, meaning it can be hard to define exactly how to write a good one, but you know a good lead when you hear one. They are a chance to be creative. They are also very important: get one wrong and you could lose your viewer. Your competition is fiercer than ever, and you need to guide your viewer along.¹⁰

You should accomplish three basic things in a video or audio lead:

- Capture the viewer's attention
- Set the tone of the story
- Prepare them for the information to follow.

¹⁰ From *Writing for Electronic Media* by Brian Champagne (n.d.). Available at: <https://press.rebus.community/writingforelectronicmedia/>, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Leave out information like names, age, addresses and other details if they are not interesting or part of the news hook. If someone has the same name as a famous singer and gets all the fan mail, the name could be in the lead. If a 100-year-old just passed matric at high school, the age could belong.

Present-tense leads are preferred, and future-tense leads are even better. Present-tense leads make your newscast sound up to the minute, allowing your viewer to feel the same. You write a present-tense lead by writing what is true now. The woman who robbed the shop was arrested at 10:00 this morning, so what is present for your six o'clock newscast? She is in jail. The owners are relieved. Police are building a case against her. Pick whichever of these you can write the most compelling lead about. For example: A woman is sleeping in jail tonight after police said she robbed a mobile phone store in Orkney.

Journalists for radio and television must be attuned to the sound of the words they use. Like poets, they are alert to pacing and rhythm. Consider this sentence from a script by Edward R. Murrow, the famed CBS correspondent who covered World War II from London: "The blackout stretches from Birmingham to Bethlehem, but tonight, over Britain, the skies are clear." This is writing that is meant to be heard. The words are simple; the ending is crisp.

Broadcast writers must be wary of language that might be correct in print but sounds ridiculous when read aloud. When the American actress and TV entertainer Lucille Ball died, a print story called her "the 83-year-old Ball". On the radio, the story said, "Lucille Ball was 83 years old." (It thus avoided confusion over other meanings for "ball" in English.) Broadcast writers should also beware of words that sound alike but have different meanings (i.e., homophones). In English, for example, "miner" could easily be confused with "minor". These words must be used in the proper context so their meaning is clear.

Broadcast journalists make a habit of reading their copy aloud before going on the air or making recordings to catch this kind of problem as well as potentially embarrassing double meanings that are not obvious on paper. Reporting on a charity golf tournament, you do not want to say that someone "played a round with the President". ("Play around" in English can connote "misbehaved with".)

Even though broadcast scripts are written to be read out loud, it is just as important to spell correctly for broadcast as for print. Misspellings often result in stumbles or mispronunciations during live broadcasts on the air. To make sure they know how to correctly pronounce difficult words, broadcast journalists often include phonetic spellings in their scripts. Correct spelling also matters more today because many stations post their stories online. Some stations have computer software that automatically converts scripts into closed captioning or subtitling for their newscasts as a service to hard-of-hearing viewers. In both cases, misspellings reflect badly on the journalists and the station.

Radio and television news is written in a more conversational style than news in print. Put another way, broadcast journalists should write the way they speak.

A newspaper story might read, “The man escaped in a red Toyota bakkie, police said.” But in broadcast, attribution comes first, so the script would read, “Police say the man escaped in a red Toyota bakkie.” To maintain a conversational tone, broadcasters do not need to use complete names and titles in news stories. Generally speaking, middle initials are not used on the air unless the initial is an essential part of the name. And at times, not even the name is required. A newspaper story would note, “Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri met his Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom in Istanbul, Turkey, on Thursday.” But the radio story might simply say, “The foreign ministers of Pakistan and Israel met in Turkey today.”

Immediacy is a key feature of broadcast news. If something is happening while you are on the air, you can and should say so – “The President is flying to Cape Town ...” is more immediate than, “The president flies to Cape Town today”.

Generally speaking, radio and television journalists avoid using time references in their leads, unless the event happened today. Wednesday’s newspaper would publish this lead: “President Ramaphosa flew to Cape Town on Tuesday”; whereas the radio newscast Wednesday morning would put it differently: “President Ramaphosa has arrived in Cape Town”. Better yet, the writer would look forward to what the president is doing in Cape Town on Wednesday so the story could be written in the present tense: “This morning, President Ramaphosa will meet with students at the University of Cape Town”.

In broadcast journalism, you need to create a **broadcast tease**, which is much like the headline on a written story. It is designed to draw the viewer’s attention to the rest of the story. Teases are subject to many of the same rules as headlines. Producers must watch the story and talk to the journalist before writing a tease. Trite and clever do not work in teases any more than they do in headlines. And teases should not over-promise or over-sell the content of the story that follows. Unlike a newspaper headline, the broadcast tease is written in complete sentences. It stands alone, separated from the story by other news or advertising content. A tease usually does not summarise the story the way a headline would, since its goal is to make the viewer want to stay tuned to learn more. Instead, producers write teases that leave some questions unanswered, or they may create anticipation by promising to deliver a benefit to the viewer who keeps watching.

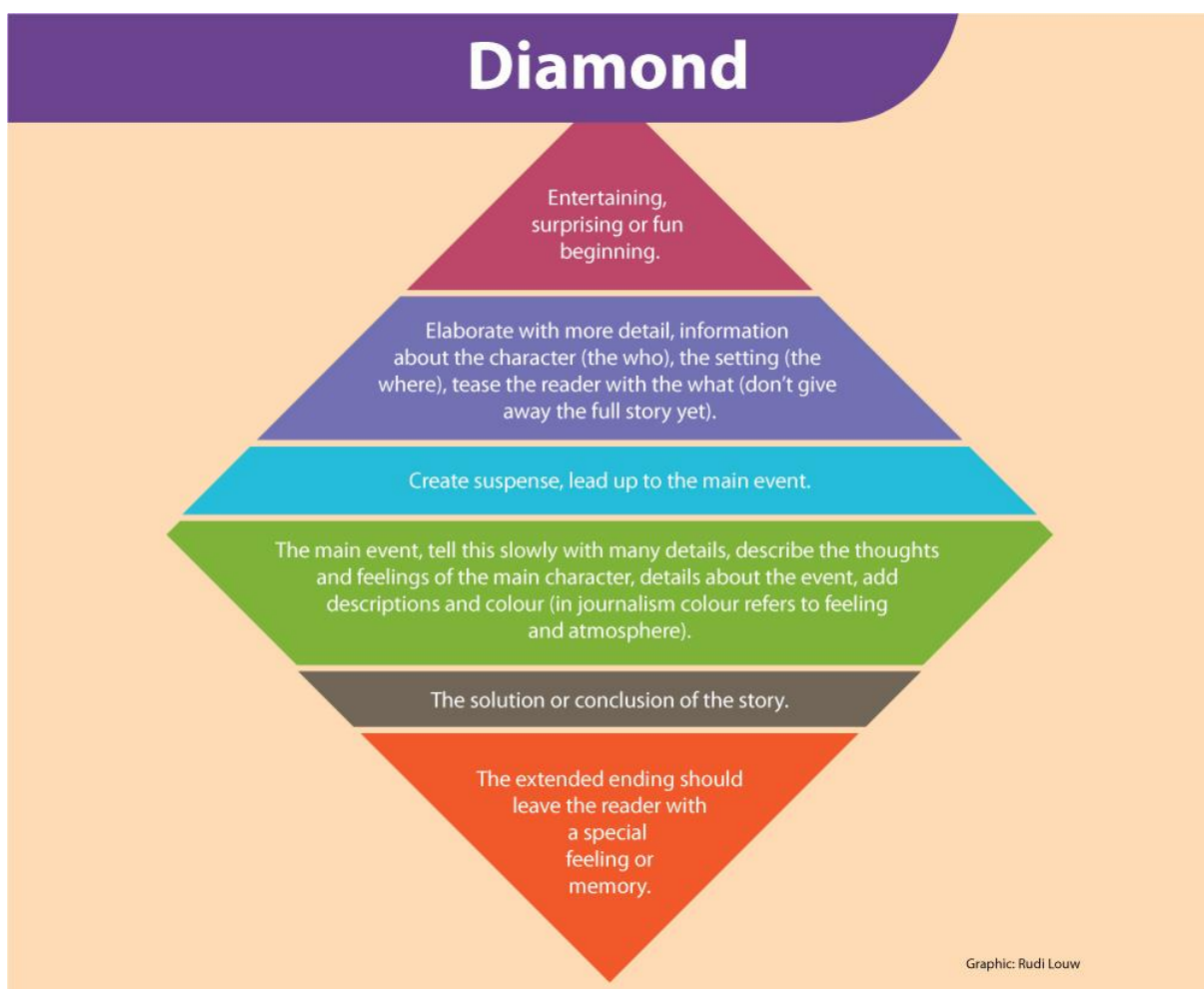
The principle behind the broadcast tease is also often used in online publications to make the reader curious and get them to click on the story. For example, a story for print about a surprise winner at the Durban July horse racing event would state directly: “Golden Prince wins Durban July”. A broadcast tease and some online headlines might read: “Surprise win at Durban July”. This will motivate people to click on the story or listen to the broadcast bulletin.

One way to approach a broadcast news story, both audio and video, is the **diamond format**. (This format is also a good format for written feature stories.)

6.7.2 The diamond format

A journalist using this structure would begin with an anecdote, introducing a character whose experience illustrates what the story is all about. This small story would then broaden out to show its wider significance. Towards the end, the journalist would return to the individual character's story as a way of concluding the narrative. By using the diamond format, a video or audio journalist might begin a story about a new COVID-19 treatment by introducing a patient who needs the treatment, then describing the experimental drug and how it works, and concluding by noting that doctors gave the patient we met earlier only a limited time to live if the new treatment is not effective.

Below is a graphic representation of the diamond form:



In broadcast (radio and TV), it is important to have a strong ending. This is because of the way the news is presented. Unlike print or online news, broadcast news is linear – the audience cannot choose the order in which they receive the information – and research has found that viewers and listeners tend to remember best what they hear last. Hence, many broadcast stories conclude with a summary ending, reinforcing the story's main point. This is quite different to written news, where the ending should *not* summarise the story.

6.7.3 Choosing sound bites carefully

The sound bites that audio and video journalists use in their stories are the broadcast equivalent of quotes but choosing them requires an additional layer of decision-making.

It is not enough for the sound bite to make sense on paper. It must be clear enough to understand over the radio or on television. Broadcast journalists must be mindful of how long a sound bite runs. What looks short on paper may actually take someone quite a long time to say – so long, in some cases, that it cannot be used in its entirety without making the entire story exceed its allotted time if the story is meant to be broadcast in a television or radio news bulletin, which runs for a very specific, limited time.

Broadcast writers pay particular attention to the transitions into and out of sound bites. Their goal is to create a seamless narrative that will retain the attention of the audience all the way through the story. If a sound bite begins with a pronoun, for example, the writer must make the meaning clear at the front end by crafting the sentence so that the ear gets the information needed to decode what is coming next. Let's say there is an outbreak of head lice in the local school. A school nurse says in a sound bite, "They come in here scratching, and we just know what we've got. It's so obvious." When she says "they", she means the schoolchildren. It will not do if the sentence before that sound bite says, "School nurses say they are dealing with a terrible outbreak of head lice", because the sound bite that follows would appear to suggest that "they" refers to head lice.

6.7.4 Using pictures and visuals well

Television and video news is much more than radio with pictures. Skilled television journalists marry their words with the video to tell a more powerful story. Pictures are not just video "wallpaper"; they are an essential part of the story. The visuals tell the "what" of the story. The words tell the "why".

Television journalists need to know what video they will use in a story before beginning to write. Whenever possible, they should look at all of the video first so they can be sure that what they write will match the pictures. This is not just an issue of style. Research has shown that viewers understand and remember stories much better when the words and video match – i.e., when they tell the same basic story. When the video does not match the words, viewers tend to remember more of what they see than what they hear.

Imagine, for example, a story about the effects of a major storm on a country's fuel supplies. If the video shows only storm damage and its aftermath, the viewer might miss the central point that fuel supplies have been disrupted. The story would be easier to follow if the video shows storm damage while the journalist talks about the aftermath and then switches to pictures of stranded fuel trucks or people waiting in line trying to buy fuel while the journalist describes the effect of the storm on fuel supplies.

Synchronising words and pictures does not mean that journalists should simply describe what the viewer can see. Let's say the video shows a bakkie driving down a dusty dirt road, through a gate and past a signboard with the name of their farm. There is no point in having a journalist say something obvious, such as, "The Magashules live at the end of this long, dusty road." It would be clear to the viewer that they are driving in their bakkie towards their home.

Instead, the audio track should offer information that adds context and meaning to the picture. In this case, the journalist might say, "The drought has been so bad that the Magashules haven't had any crops to sell this year." This would explain why the road is so dusty.

There are excellent resources available with more detailed information and tips specifically about online video and audio storytelling. A good place to start is the Mobile Journalism Manual, which has a section about how to master shot types and angles in [video journalism](#) and a section about video storytelling for [social platforms](#).

6.8 Graphics

News journalists sometimes resent the use of graphics because they feel graphics take up space, forcing stories to be shorter. But good graphics not only add to the visual appeal of a newspaper but also attract readers' attention and make stories more understandable. They help journalists' stories rather than take away from them. Graphics help tell full stories.

Every graphic must have a purpose. Filling empty space or airtime (broadcasting time) is not a sufficient reason for using a graphic. A graphic should enhance the reader or viewer's understanding of the story, which means the designer (often the journalist) must fully understand the story before designing or choosing a graphic to go along with it. Graphic artists sometimes produce the graphics, and sometimes journalists need to create their own graphics, using a variety of programs.

Graphics can convey basic facts or illustrate a process. Imagine you are reporting on air pollution in your country. A map could be used to show where the air is most unhealthy. An illustration could be used to show how air pollution affects the lungs. Both types of graphics work just as well for broadcast as they do for print.

Whatever the medium, avoid graphics that are crammed with too much information. The reader or viewer should be able to look at the graphic and take away some basic ideas. Think of a graphic as a sign next to the road where you can only stop for a minute or two – the driver does not get a chance to study it because things are going by too fast, so the information has to be clear and easily absorbed.

Whenever you are working on a story, you should think about ways to tell parts of the story using graphics. Our readers and viewers enjoy graphics and visuals. That is why the online world is a very visual place now – think of the success of Instagram or TikTok, both very visual.

You can use graphics to, among others, explain difficult concepts in stories to your viewers or readers; to help them understand the story better; to show them locations; to help them understand data; or to provide them with steps on how to do something. Graphics, like any news story, should be full stories. They should contain short introductions and/or clear headlines to explain what the graphic is about, information that tells the story, and visuals to explain the story.

Use images carefully in graphics; make sure they actually help to illustrate the graphic. Many people make the mistake of using any pretty picture they can find to illustrate a graphic just because they think the picture is pretty. Pictures in graphics should illustrate the content only, they should not be used “to make the graphic look pretty”. Graphics should always contain sources, just like any news story, to give the graphic credibility.

It is easy and fast to create graphics. There are many free online programs, including Canva and Infogram. But be careful when you use these programs; do not simply use any illustration or any diagram you find in templates available on Canva or Infogram because you think they look pretty. Use images in a meaningful way, because your viewers and readers are looking for meaning in a graphic. A simple example – if you have a graphic that shows the number of people in your country who are 100 years old (let’s say there are 11 of them), then your graphic should have 11 tiny human figures. Not one figure, not 10 or 12. Not 100. The viewer will look for the meaning of the number 11, so show it correctly. Just like any news story, a graphic should be accurate and credible. Remember this when you create a graphic. It is just as important as a news story and should be approached in the same way by using good sources and telling a truthful story in an accurate way.

6.9 Managing social media

Journalists in all newsrooms are now often expected to manage social media accounts. Sometimes, they manage general accounts named after the newsroom, and sometimes they manage their own professional accounts to create a presence on social media platforms and interact with their audience.

The digital era has made it possible for audiences to talk to journalists in a much more direct way by posting comments or replies on social media platforms. This is both an opportunity and a risk. It is an opportunity because it makes journalists accessible – our audience enjoy talking to us. Sometimes, they even provide ideas or information for stories. It is also a risk because journalists now have very public profiles where they represent their publications. Journalists must always behave professionally on social media and must make sure that they have separate professional and personal social media accounts. The audience do not necessarily see the difference, so if you have a personal account where you post about personal issues such as your relationships, partying lifestyle or your financial problems, the audience may not distinguish. They may see you as a partying journalist who cannot handle money and, therefore, they would more than likely not trust your stories.

It is best when you are a journalist to limit your personal social media accounts to friends and family only. Keep your private life private.

The most important characteristic of social media is, as the name suggests, it is *social*. It is where people interact with one another, it is about spreading messages, and it is about building networks. On journalistic social media platforms, you will be expected to build networks with your audience and to market your stories by posting links to the stories or teasers to attract readers and viewers. You will be expected to represent your publication by interacting with the audience, taking questions, and responding to messages. You will also be expected to help build a community of followers by posting regularly about things that will interest your audience and that show you have your ear on the ground and you know what is happening in your community.

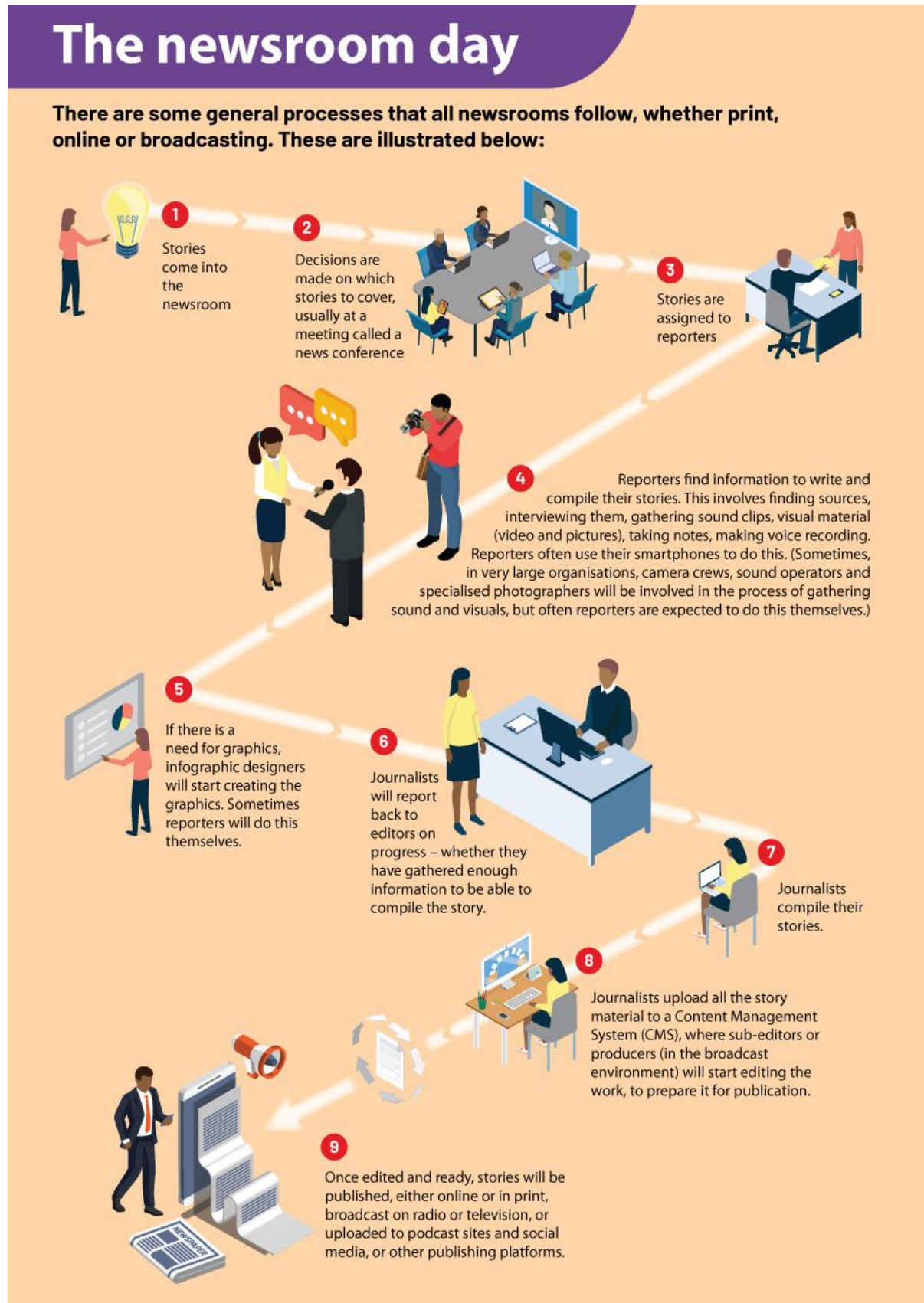
The most popular social media platform used to be Facebook, but among young people, TikTok and Instagram are more popular. On all three these platforms, it is possible to publish short news stories, pictures, and videos. Twitter is popular for very short messages and is a type of “town square” where everyone talks about everything. Journalists use all social media platforms for spreading messages but also to monitor what is going on. It is sometimes possible to find story ideas on social media. Twitter in particular is very useful because it is often the first place where the news breaks. If there is a big news event somewhere, someone is bound to post about it on Twitter almost immediately. Social media are often also the places where trends emerge, where people start discussing things that are important to them. When this happens in a big way, the news media often pick up the story and write news articles or broadcast news about what people are talking about. As a journalist, it makes sense to follow people in your area. These people can be anyone, from the mayor to local politicians to schoolteachers to ordinary citizens. Of course, as we discussed in previous sections, you should not believe everything you see on social media. Always verify everything you see on social media before you write or compile a story.

FURTHER READING: [Media Guide](#) has an interesting section about social media and how it is used in journalism, with discussions about the pros and cons of social media, the various platforms, and how one can use social media as a journalist.

6.10 The news day

There are many similarities in the way different types of newsrooms – television, radio, print, online – function on a typical day. Most journalists in the 21st century need a variety of skills that can be used in any type of newsroom and should be able to produce stories for a variety of platforms. In most newsrooms, journalists may be expected to do many things, from writing stories to making videos, managing social media accounts, and taking pictures. Modern newsrooms demand a variety of specialised skills and follow a variety of processes.

These newsroom processes are illustrated in the graphic below:



A news day at any type of news outlet usually includes a news conference, where editors, journalists, and photographers meet to discuss the day's news.

Usually, there is a short discussion of the previous publication, stories that performed well, and feedback received. Then a news diary is prepared, which is a list of stories for the day (or week or month). A typical news diary contains some details about the story, the name of the journalist, the name of the photographer, and an indication of where the story will be used. In converged newsrooms, some stories may be held back for the printed newspaper; others will go live online as soon as they are ready.

In many newsrooms in South Africa now, and around the world, most stories go online immediately. The process is similar in most newsrooms – for example, in broadcast news, there would usually be a discussion of stories that will go on TV and which ones might go online immediately.

Of course, the stories and the news diary will change during the course of the day (or news cycle). There may be gaps early in the day (such as for page 2 in the news diary example on the next page), new things may happen, some stories might not work out because they cannot be confirmed, or sources might be unwilling to talk. In the news diary example on the next page, the “world news” page is also left blank early in the morning, as the news editor is clearly waiting for more world events to happen during the course of the day before selecting some relevant stories.

Deciding what to run (publish or broadcast), what to drop (not publish or broadcast), and what to hold (keep for later) is the job of the news editor, other senior editors, and producers (for broadcasting). They will choose and change the stories of the day based on importance, interest, new developments, and the time or space available.

As and when journalists manage to get enough information and verify their stories, they will start producing, either writing and uploading to the web, or producing broadcasting clips. The stories then go through a process before they are published: they are usually checked by a number of people, who could include the news editor, sub-editors, and even the editor-in-chief.

Only once the story has passed all the checks will it be published or broadcast in whatever form the newsroom decided on. There will also be constant updating of social media pages, which need to be active throughout the day. On websites, news also needs to be updated regularly; people who view news online expect new news at regular intervals.

A typical news diary for a printed newspaper that also has a website is shown on the next page.

The Daily News, News Diary for Monday 2 May 2022

Social media:

- Samuel to tweet from court during mayor's corruption trial
- Kgomotso to tweet from the Drakensberg, on snow patrol!

Page	Story	Reporter	Pic or graphic	Publish online
1	Mayor's corruption trial – new evidence of Porsche bought cash	James Moloto	Pics	Hold for print
2	Background: How many people own Porsches in SA? How can they afford it?	James Moloto	Graphic	Hold for print
2	?			
3	Snow in the Drakensberg	Kgomotso Dube	Pics (gallery)	Yes
3	Justin Bieber to sing in town	Sarah Smith	Pics	Yes
4	Heist at Liberty Mall	Jonathan Klein	Pics	Yes
4	Fuel prices rise again	Khanyi Khumalo	No	Yes
5	Feature story: Good news story, Samaritan helps needy student pay for PhD	Sarah Smith	Pics	Yes
6	World news – to be updated at 14:00			

SUMMARY: This chapter showed you how to put your story together, whether for print, online or broadcast. To be a credible journalist is not only about making sure that you tell factually correct stories, but also means that you need to be ethical in your journalistic decisions. Ethical journalism is discussed in the next chapter.

7. Being an ethical journalist

“The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy.” This quote by Mahatma Gandhi¹¹ summarises the ethical responsibilities journalists have – service to the public, in a responsible way.

For journalists, the most basic responsibility in a free society is to report the news accurately and fairly, i.e., to practise ethical journalism. In postcolonial societies, such as South Africa, there is also a feeling among many journalists that they should be socially responsible and help with nation building (Rodny-Gumede, 2018).

Ethics is a system of principles that guides action. While the law establishes what you can and cannot do in a given situation, ethics tell you what you should do. Ethical decisions are based on values – personal, professional, social, and moral – and spring from reasoning. Ethical decision-making simply means applying these values in your daily work (Potter, 2006).

Ethical lapses do occur in journalism. For example, in the past, journalists have invented information; editors or journalists have accepted payments from sources in return for positive stories; news organisations have published sensationalist news for the sake of clicks and sales; news organisations have published personal information about people that is not in the public interest; news organisations have published false stories fed to them by sources who were trying to influence public opinion.

ADDITIONAL READING: Sadly, there have been many examples of major ethical lapses by journalists in South Africa in recent years. These lapses always lead to a loss of trust in the media. This is why it is important for journalists to always maintain ethical standards; it is necessary to maintain and re-build the trust of the public. You can read about the SARS “rogue unit” scandal and the ethical lapses that occurred in journalism in [this article](#) from the *Daily Maverick* and [also here](#) from *The Odyssey*. You can read about a journalist who published fake news about a mother from Tembisa who allegedly gave birth to decuplets (ten babies) [here](#). The story was not true and not properly verified. Another journalist was accused of [accepting money](#) from South African crime intelligence.

When ethical lapses happen, the public has a right to question what appears in the news media. Ethical lapses also lead to a loss of trust in the media. This harms journalism. All journalists, and all news organisations, suffer when journalists behave unethically because such behaviour calls the entire profession’s credibility into question. Journalism should not be only about chasing clicks and money but should be practised in an ethical way, in the public interest, for the good of society.

¹¹ From <https://www.mkgandhi.org/indiadreams/chap68.htm>

7.1 Ethical principles

Ethical journalists do not put words in people's mouths or pretend to have been somewhere they have not. And they do not pass off the work of others as their own. Fabrication and plagiarism are violations of basic journalistic standards the world over. Ethical journalists never make up stories. Journalists only report real facts from real sources. Ethical journalists respect the law (Potter, 2006).

But journalists face ethical dilemmas every day, under pressure from media owners, competitors, advertisers, and the public. They need a process to resolve these dilemmas so that the journalism they produce is ethical. They need a way of thinking about ethical issues that will help them make good decisions, even under a deadline.

The Ethical Journalism Network in the United Kingdom – an organisation that represents editors, media owners, and media support groups around the world – identified five principles to ensure ethical journalism. These are:

- **Truth and accuracy.** Journalists should always make sure they provide all relevant information and check the facts. If it is not possible to corroborate information (to find evidence for the information), you should tell your readers.
- **Independence.** Journalists should not be influenced by any special interests, including political parties, financial stakeholders, or anyone else. Journalists should declare conflicts of interest when they arise. A simple example, if you are asked to do a story about someone you know very well who has been accused of something, you should tell your news editor you know the person and cannot do the story. In South Africa, in 2021, a journalist [was suspended](#) after it became known that she had fallen in love with a convicted murderer while covering the story. She was clearly not independent because she was in love with the main subject of her story.
- **Fairness and impartiality.** It is important for journalists to remember that a story has two sides or more; therefore, they must always provide the full context and remain impartial.
- **Humanity.** The sole purpose of journalism is to provide the public with important information and not to intentionally cause any harm. Journalists should be aware that their words may be hurtful to others and carefully consider the consequences of what they publish or broadcast.
- **Accountability.** Journalists should hold themselves accountable. If they make a mistake, they should apologise and correct the error (EJN, n.d.). This means that you should always take final responsibility for whatever you publish. As a journalists you should be willing to face the consequences of you publish untruths or slanderous information.

There are many other principles¹² to keep in mind when making ethical decisions.

- One example is coverage of **minorities, migrants, discrimination** and **hate speech**. This would include coverage of the LGBTQI+ community, migrants from other countries who come to South Africa, or people with disabilities. Reporting about these groups require care and understanding of their situation. You need to inform yourself so that you do not base your reporting on misperceptions or use derogatory terms. Journalists should never use discriminatory language or hate speech. If you quote someone in a story who uses hate speech or derogatory language, you should replace the derogatory words with a blank space or a dash. This would depend on the standards of the community. According to the South African Constitution, discrimination against anyone based on race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, or mental illness is illegal. Take care not to break the law in your reporting. Even if you quote someone who breaks the law by using hate speech, you as the journalist will be held accountable.
- **Privacy** is also important; people have a legal right to privacy. People who are in the public eye – such as politicians and celebrities – give up some of their right to privacy once they enter public life. It is more acceptable to report about the private lives of famous people because they are in the public eye than ordinary people who have the right to their privacy. For example, you cannot publish a picture of someone that you took with a secret camera inside their own house. This would be a breach of privacy and breaking the law in most countries around the world. In the US, this is called “intentional intrusion” (Baron, 1998). This is also true for celebrities or famous people. But you can publish a picture of someone on the street because the street is a public place and people give up their right to privacy when they enter a public place. You can also use someone’s picture from social media if their social media page is public. This is just the same as a public street. But if someone’s Instagram page, for example, is private and only open to their friends, and you somehow get hold of a picture from that page, it would be a breach of privacy to use that picture. It comes from a private page. Privacy also refers to South African cultural customs and protecting the dignity of people who are bereaved.
- People should also always have the **right of reply**. This is essential in ethical journalism. Whenever someone is implicated in a story in some way, you should give them an opportunity to respond. Let’s say a university is being accused by student leaders of providing students with inadequate accommodation. You cannot publish only the accusations; that would be unethical. You need to contact the university and give them an opportunity to respond to the allegations.

¹² This section is based on information from the [South African Press Code](#), the [Independent Online Press Code](#), and the [Code of conduct of the SA Union of Journalists](#).

- Reporting about **children** should be approached with care. Under South African law, anyone under the age of 18 is considered a child. Children must be protected. You cannot publish the names of children or their pictures without the permission of their parents or guardians.
- **Victims of crime** may never be identified if the crime was of a sexual nature. You should also take care to not publish any kind of information that may inadvertently lead to the identification of the victim, for example, by saying that the victim is the principal of a local school. The audience will know who the person is, and this is not allowed.
- As we have already discussed in the previous section, you should also ensure that you **gather information** for your stories in an ethical way. This means you may not gather information secretly; you may not go undercover to observe someone without their knowledge; you may not intercept someone's personal communication; and you may not obtain documents in an unauthorised way (for example, by just taking documents from someone's office without permission). All these examples are invasions of privacy and not just unethical but also against the law.

When you are faced with difficult choices, such as exposing information about someone that you know very well, or, for some people, this may be covering sexual minorities or political groups who have opinions that you might not agree with for personal or religious reasons, you must always remain objective and fair. Journalists should never allow their feelings or personal beliefs to interfere with their work. It remains the task of a journalist to inform the public about issues of the day in a fair and accurate way, without judgement.

The Ethical Journalism Network (n.d.) explains:

The most common justification that journalists make for their work is that it is 'in the public interest.' It is this notion that underscores the moral authority of journalism to ask hard questions of people in power, to invade the privacy of others and to sometimes test the limits of ethical practice in order to discover the truth.

Put simply, the public interest is about what matters to everyone in society. It is about the common good, the general welfare and the security and well-being of everyone in the community we serve.

You should always ask yourself whether your story is in the public interest. Do people need to know this? But sometimes that is not enough. Also consider whether the story is really necessary, whether your story might affect those involved in unnecessarily negative ways without really serving a purpose.

7.2 Ethics codes and laws

Fortunately, there are codes, guidelines, community standards and laws to help journalists practise ethical journalism.

Journalists in South African are generally guided by the **South African Press Code (2020)**, which is governed by the South African Press Council, and certain **community standards**. There are also some other codes of conduct in use in the country, because some news media are not members of the Press Council.

7.2.1 The preamble of the Press Code states:

The media exist to serve society. Their freedom provides for independent scrutiny of the forces that shape society and is essential to realising the promise of democracy. It enables citizens to make informed judgments on the issues of the day, a role whose centrality is recognised in the South African Constitution.

Section 16 of the Bill of Rights sets out that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes:

- a) Freedom of the press and other media;
- b) Freedom to receive and impart information or ideas;
- c) Freedom of artistic creativity; and
- d) Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

The right in subsection (1) does not extend to:

- a) Propaganda for war;
- b) Incitement of imminent violence; or
- c) Advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

The media strive to hold these rights in trust for the country's citizens; and they are subject to the same rights and duties as the individual. Everyone has the duty to defend and further these rights, in recognition of the struggles that created them: the media, the public and government, who all make up the democratic state.

The media's work is guided at all times by the public interest, understood to describe information of legitimate interest or importance to citizens.

As journalists we commit ourselves to the highest standards, to maintain credibility and keep the trust of the public. This means always striving for truth, avoiding unnecessary harm, reflecting a multiplicity of voices in our coverage of events, showing a special concern for children and other vulnerable groups, and exhibiting sensitivity to the cultural customs of their readers and the subjects of their reportage, and acting independently.

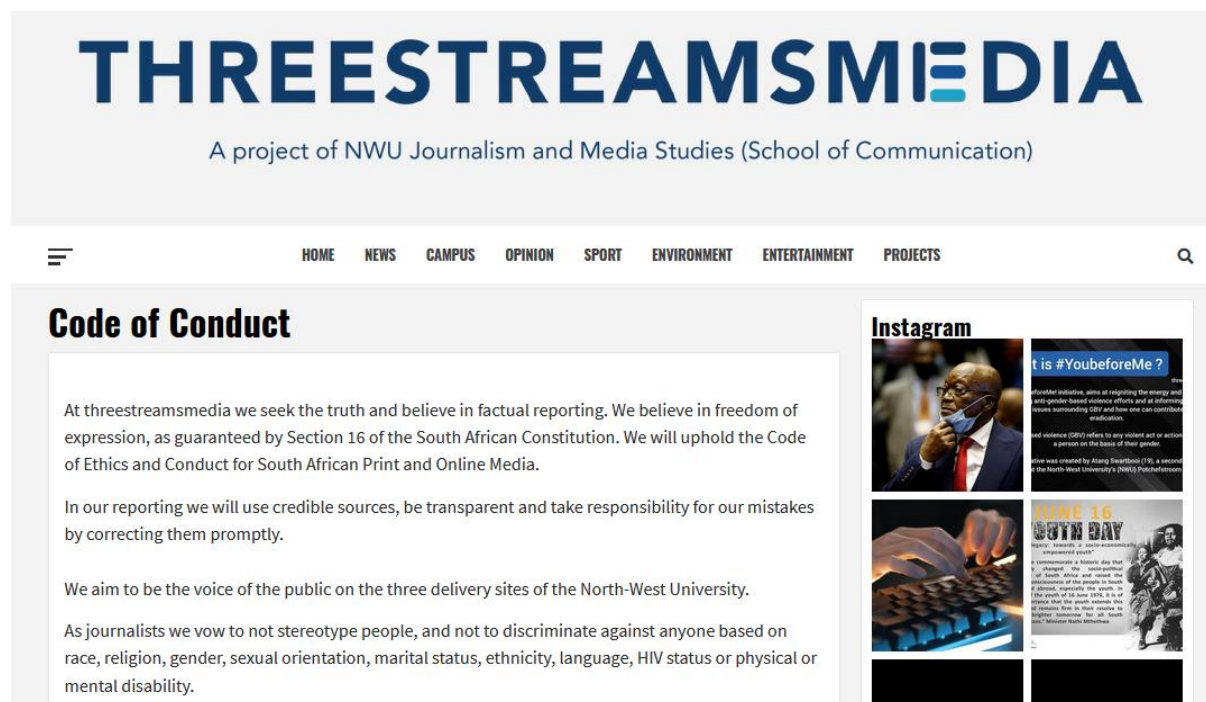
You can read the full Press Code [online](#). The South African Press Council and the Press Ombud form an independent co-regulatory mechanism created by the print and online media in the country to provide impartial, quick and cost-effective adjudication to settle disputes between newspapers, magazines and online publications, on the one hand, and members of the public, on the other, over the editorial content of publications (South African Press, Council, 2021). This means they form a regulatory body where members of the public can complain about unfair or unethical news coverage.

The Press Ombud has the power to rule on unethical conduct in the printed and online news media and to order newspapers and websites to make corrections or apologise for incorrect reporting. That is why it is so important to make sure that you never make a serious mistake in your reporting.

Journalism associations and federations around the world have also well-established codes of ethics to guide the work of member journalists. Ethics codes can cover everything from plagiarism to privacy and from corrections to confidentiality. In South Africa, we are guided by the Press Code (already discussed above). The South African Press Council makes sure that its members adhere to the code. Some news media and journalists in South Africa have their own codes of conduct, such as the [Independent Media Group](#) and the [South African Union of Journalists](#).

These codes are sometimes voluntary in nature, with no clear consequences for violators. Journalists who transgress the South African Press Code do face consequences, usually an apology and correction of the error. There are, of course, also legal consequences if you publish fake news or untruths.

The code of conduct of threestreamsmedia – a student news website at the NWU – is one very simple example.



THREESTREAMSMEDIA
A project of NWU Journalism and Media Studies (School of Communication)

HOME NEWS CAMPUS OPINION SPORT ENVIRONMENT ENTERTAINMENT PROJECTS

Code of Conduct

At threestreamsmedia we seek the truth and believe in factual reporting. We believe in freedom of expression, as guaranteed by Section 16 of the South African Constitution. We will uphold the Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media.

In our reporting we will use credible sources, be transparent and take responsibility for our mistakes by correcting them promptly.

We aim to be the voice of the public on the three delivery sites of the North-West University.

As journalists we vow to not stereotype people, and not to discriminate against anyone based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, ethnicity, language, HIV status or physical or mental disability.

Instagram

It is #YoubeforeMe?

It is #YoubeforeMe? is a social media initiative, aimed at regaining the energy and anti-gender-based violence efforts and at offering support surrounding GBV and how we can contribute to eradication.

Gender violence (GBV) refers to any violent act or action against a person on the basis of their gender.

This initiative was created by Amary Smith (PMA) a student at the North-West University's (NWU) Potchefstroom campus.

JUNE 16 SOUTH DAY

Today, towards a socio-economically transformed South Africa, we commemorate a historic day that is a day of shared struggle and the liberation of the people in South Africa, especially the youth. On the 16 June 1976, it is a day of shared struggle and the liberation of the people in South Africa, especially the youth. It is a day of shared struggle and the liberation of the people in South Africa, especially the youth. It is a day of shared struggle and the liberation of the people in South Africa, especially the youth.

The Code of Conduct of [threestreamsmedia](#).

In their codes of conduct, many news organisations limit what journalists can do both on and off the job. The main reason for these limitations is to protect the credibility of news organisations. Journalists and photographers may be told explicitly that they cannot manipulate or “stage” the news by asking people to do something for a story that they would not do ordinarily.

Journalists may not be allowed to conceal their identities to get a story, unless there is a clear and compelling public interest in the information, and it cannot be obtained any other way. The use of hidden cameras or surreptitious recording in gathering the news is usually forbidden unless a manager approves it for public-interest reasons. This is very rare in South Africa.

With the advent of digital and mobile phone photography, new standards have been added to prohibit altering photographs or video in a way that could mislead the audience. Several high-profile incidents contributed to these new policies, including a photograph on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine in the 1980s that digitally moved the famous Pyramids of Giza in Egypt closer together.

Many of the regulations in newsroom codes of conduct address issues of journalistic independence. To avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest, journalists may be forbidden to own stock or have a personal interest in companies they cover. Journalists may not be allowed to take a public position on a political issue or openly support a candidate for office. The news organisation may prohibit journalists from having a business relationship with any news source, or from doing any outside work for pay unless approved by a manager.

With many journalists now very active on social media, there are also codes of conduct for social media use. Journalists sometimes forget that when they are using social media, they are still representing their news organisation; therefore, it is important to follow strict rules and not post anything that may embarrass the organisation. Social media codes of conduct are not restricted to journalism; almost all organisations have such codes to protect their reputation. One example is the [social media policy](#) of the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.

7.2.2 Community standards

News organisations often face conflicts between newsworthiness and community standards and resolving them requires the skilful practice of ethical decision-making (Potter, 2006). Suppose a member of parliament used strong language when discussing a member of the opposition party. Some newspapers might print the exact words the MP used. Others could use only a few letters followed by dashes to indicate what he said without spelling it out. And some newspapers would likely only report that the official had used offensive language. Newspaper editors choose different solutions, depending on what they feel the readers would be willing to tolerate. This would depend on the standards of the community. In a conservative rural community, the words would not be printed. In a very liberal city, the editor might decide to print the words. Unfortunately, sometimes, news media go ahead with a decision knowing they may offend some readers. They make the decision based on offending the fewest possible readers or viewers. Sometimes, they cannot please everyone. Editors face similar difficult choices when it comes to shocking photographs or video the audience may find distasteful but that may be the most powerful way to tell an important story.

Many newspapers and news media in South Africa are very careful about publishing shocking, graphic images of violence because they know readers will be offended. Sometimes, reports about violence describe what happened in words, but without pictures. Some people might still be offended, but fewer than if the news media had used graphic pictures of violence.

To minimise the harm such a choice might cause, many news managers now choose to explain why they made the decision they did, either in the text of the story or in a separate “editor’s note” alongside it. For example, a photograph of a mother holding the weary, thin body of her son who died of starvation would certainly be disturbing. Instead of waiting for angry phone calls and responding to each individual complaint, the editor’s note might say that this picture of suffering tells the story of famine much more clearly than words alone. By explaining their decisions to the public, journalists can live up to the guiding principle of accountability. This is still not necessarily the best solution in all cases. You always need to consider whether your audience really need to see a certain picture, or read certain words, and whether there are other ways to still tell the story in an effective way.

Many South African communities are very religious; this is something that you should also keep in mind in your reporting. The Constitution forbids discrimination based on religion, but you should anyway always be respectful of your audience’s religious beliefs.

Similarly, despite legislation protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ people in South Africa, there are communities who do not accept LGBTQI+ people. As a journalist, you should follow the law and not take the side of the audience, so your reporting about these communities must remain objective and non-judgemental, even if your audience thinks otherwise. Sometimes, journalists also play a role in educating their audience and changing opinions.

7.3 Legal issues

According to Potter (2006), the cornerstone of international standards on the news media is Article 19 of the United Nations Charter, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Countries that are members of the United Nations are committed to upholding the charter, including Article 19, but that has not stopped some countries from suppressing their own news media and blocking access to international news. In some cases, journalists have been killed, imprisoned, or exiled for trying to do their jobs.

Danilo Arbilla of the Inter-American Press Association and Uruguay’s website Búsqueda says the best press law is no law at all. In the ideal world, he says, legislation governing press freedom would take up no more than a couple of pages, “containing clear and frankly worded clauses prohibiting any attempt to regulate ... freedom of expression”.

Needless to say, the world is not an ideal place. Press laws vary around the world to such an extent that it is not possible to summarise them all. Some democratic countries have laws to ensure journalists' access to public information, while others limit what information can be published or aired. In some countries, it is illegal to name the victim of a sexual crime, or to identify juveniles accused of criminal activity. Even within countries, there may be differing local laws covering issues such as whether a journalist can be forced to name a confidential source or provide reporting notes to a court of law and under what circumstances. Suffice it to say that journalists need to be aware of the laws in the countries in which they work as well as ongoing efforts to have restrictive laws lifted.

In South Africa, there are various laws that govern the media, some aimed at specific sectors, such as broadcasting. Broadcasters in South Africa need licenses. Newspapers and websites do not need licenses. State information is protected by law. This refers to strategic information that could affect the safety of the country if it becomes public. The South African Constitution clearly protects the freedom of the press. During the apartheid area, the mass media in South Africa were censored, therefore, the Constitution of democratic South Africa makes specific mention of the media.

Article 16 in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution¹³ states: "1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes: a. freedom of the press and other media." There is a limitation, namely: "2. The right in subsection (1) does not extend to: a. propaganda for war; b. incitement of imminent violence; or c. advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm." It is clear that the Constitution allows for a great deal of press freedom in South Africa, with only three clear and reasonable exceptions.

There are, however, some laws that either restrict or enable the work of the media. During the covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, the state of disaster regulations made false reporting about the pandemic an offence. The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) of 2020 protects the right of the public to keep their personal information private. This means organisations may not share personal information of people that they might have on record with anyone else, except with permission. Journalists should be aware that POPIA also criminalises the spreading of certain content online, including hate speech, unlawful intimate pictures, and messages that incite violence. The Promotion of Access to Information Act of 2002 enables the media to apply for access to government and other types of information that could be in the public interest. The act allows the media (and everyone else in the country) to request access to information held by the government or by any other person if this information is required to exercise a right. The right that the media exercises when applying for information in terms of this act is to serve the public interest. This is a very helpful act, because the media can source all kinds of information through the provisions of this act to cover important news.

¹³ From <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights#16>

One of the most common kinds of legal issues journalists face is libel or defamation, which is an offence. In South Africa libel can be a civil or criminal case. Defamation is a statement of fact that is substantially false about someone who can be identified and that tends to harm that person's reputation. Defamation is called "libel" when the statement is published, and "slander" when it is broadcast, but the basic parameters are the same. Generally speaking, if a statement is true, it cannot be defamatory. Journalists, therefore, must confirm independently what their sources say if those comments could defame another person. There have been very few successful defamation court cases in South Africa, where people have taken newspapers or news media to court because their reporting was either inaccurate or false, thereby injuring these people's reputation. One example is a case from 2013: a journalist was found guilty of defamation after publishing stories about a magistrate where it was claimed that the magistrate abused his power to protect a friend. This was not true, and the journalist was [found guilty of a crime](#). He had to pay a fine.

As new technology changes the way journalists do their work, media laws are changing. It is difficult to regulate online media, but there is a need to protect people from misinformation, fake news, hate speech, and discrimination. Governments around the world are working on ways to protect the public. As mentioned above, POPIA in South Africa now criminalises certain types of messages online.

As we already discussed above in this section, journalists are subject to other laws that apply to individuals in a given country, such as laws governing privacy. A journalist who wants access to information cannot enter private property, take documents without permission, or secretly listen in on a telephone conversation. These are breaches of privacy and illegal. Large news organisations usually have lawyers on call to guide journalists and editors when they need to make journalistic decisions that raise tricky legal questions. Smaller news organisations and independent journalists need to rely on online resources and their own knowledge of the law. Many of the laws that are applicable to journalism are available [at this link](#).

7.4 Ethical decision-making

From the previous discussion, it is clear that ethical decision-making can be complicated. It should be informed by principles such as truth, journalistic independence, fairness, humanity, accountability, as well as concern for minorities, privacy, and the right of reply. There are press codes and laws to guide you. But even with all these guidelines and principles, ethical decision-making can be difficult. How, then, can journalists possibly make good ethical decisions when faced with personal beliefs that clash with their story or the possibility of harming someone through their story? Some situations are best dealt with by avoiding them in the first place. For example, journalists may choose not to belong to any outside groups, or they may disqualify themselves from covering stories involving any groups they do belong to, or stories that cover topics where they hold very strong personal views. Most news editors would understand if you explain the situation.

In other cases, a journalist must always find the best possible balance between their own conflicting principles and the story, always keeping in mind that, as journalists, their role remains to seek the truth and serve the public. Fortunately, there are also structures and codes of conduct in place in newsrooms to help you with difficult decisions. You do not have to make these decisions alone.

Some newsrooms deal with ethical quandaries from the top down.¹⁴ Whenever an issue or dilemma arises, a senior manager will help you decide what to do. This approach has the advantage of being quick, but it can be arbitrary. It does nothing to help journalists make good decisions when they are out in the field or when the manager is unavailable. Hence, many newsrooms have adopted an ethical decision-making process that is more inclusive and that helps all journalists make good decisions under different circumstances.

The first step in the process is to define the dilemma. Most people recognise when they are facing an ethical quandary. Something makes you feel that there is a problem; it just does not feel quite right. When this happens, you should step back and think about it. What is it about the situation that makes you uncomfortable? Why do you feel something is wrong? Do not be afraid to listen to your own moral code at this point. Your own moral code is usually the first thing that warns you that something is wrong. Then think about the situation professionally. What are the ethical values that may be compromised if you do the story? What journalistic issues are at stake? Often, there is tension between a journalistic goal and an ethical stand. The journalist who has an exclusive story may want to rush it into print before anyone else gets it, but they also need to consider the possible consequences. What if the story turns out to be wrong? What if you destroy someone's life by publishing false information about them, just to get the story out because your news editor told you to get the story? You should never sacrifice your ethical values to achieve other objectives, such as beating the competition.

The next step after defining the problem is to collect more information to help you make a good decision. Consult newsroom policies, codes of conduct and guidelines, if any exist, and talk to others about the dilemma. Begin with colleagues and supervisors in the newsroom, but do not stop there. It is often useful to include other voices, people who are not directly involved in the story, but who are knowledgeable about the circumstances.

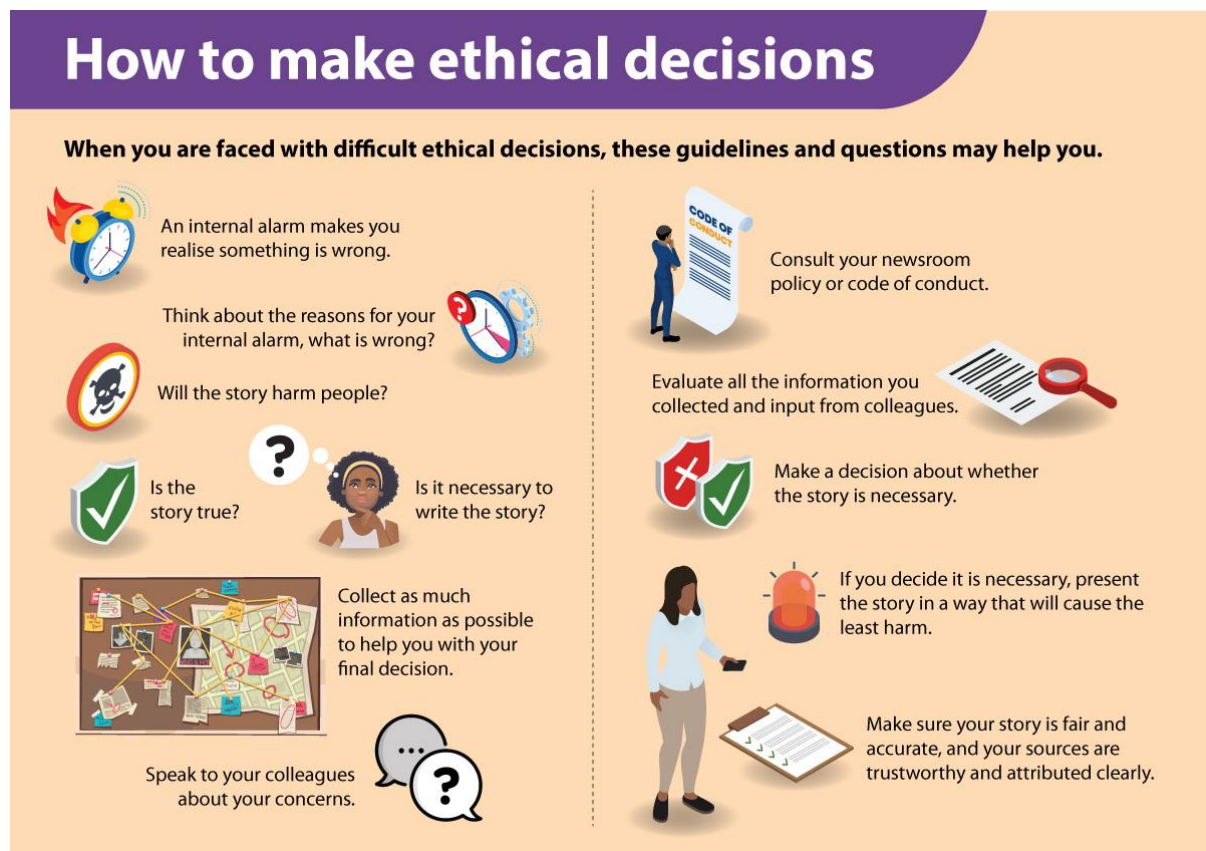
It is important to note that journalists, unlike doctors, are not expected to promise to do no harm. Many truthful and important stories may hurt people's feelings or reputations. It is inevitable. But journalists do try to minimise the harm by not putting people at unnecessary risk. Imagine you were the one people were writing about, how would you feel? Once you have evaluated all the information, spoken to colleagues, looked at your organisation's code of conduct, you will be able to make an informed decision.

¹⁴ Parts of this chapter were adapted from a public domain textbook by the United States Department of State, *The Handbook of Independent Journalism*, written by Deborah Potter (2006), available at: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011644/00001/pdf>, Public Domain.

Potter (2006) provides the following example: Say a reporter has discovered a factory in a country where boys under the age of 12 work 10 hours a day, six days a week, and are paid less than half the country's minimum wage. The country's Constitution prohibits employers from hiring anyone under 16, and it is illegal for anyone to work more than 45 hours a week. Finding the factory means the reporter has proof of child exploitation, but what more does the reporter need to know before publishing or broadcasting the story?

Telling the truth about the factory would certainly have consequences, and some of them could be hurtful. When faced with this kind of story, it can be helpful to create a list of people and institutions that might be affected by the story and to consider the impact the story might have. The story about the factory would affect the boys directly, of course, but it would also affect their families and the factory owner. The families of the boys may lose their income. The community may reject the factory owner's family. Knowing the possible consequences, journalists can begin to look at alternatives for presenting the information, so the story remains truthful but does not cause as much harm. In the case of the factory, the journalist might decide not to use photos of the children and not to name them, because it would be illegal and may harm them, but the story will still be told in words.

The graphic below explains the steps you can take to make ethical decisions as a journalist:



The example of the factory discussed above is just one example of a journalistic decision that can have ethical consequences. Others include the type of coverage, how you place stories on a page or website, as well as the tone of the story.

Even headlines can have ethical consequences. The impact of a front-page story with a large headline and a large photograph is much bigger than a smaller story on one of the inside pages. A television story that is promoted multiple times before it airs would have more impact and, therefore, greater ethical consequences than a story told once in the middle of a newscast. Headlines or leads in video news must always reflect the story accurately. Sometimes, headlines are misleading to attract readers, but this is unethical. For example, a story about a slight increase in covid-19-positive cases should not have a headline that says “covid-19 shock”. Such a headline would be misleading.

Whenever journalists and editors make decisions about ethical dilemmas, they should justify their decisions, if only to themselves. But by explaining to readers what was done and why, journalists are also able to bolster their credibility and justify the public’s trust in them. It is, therefore, also essential to keep records of decisions and records of source material for the story if anyone were to ask questions later. Newsrooms that value ethical decision-making make sure these kinds of issues are discussed regularly and not just when a dilemma occurs. Journalists should participate in these discussions with an open mind and learn. This way it would be easier to make ethical decisions when you are faced with an ethical dilemma yourself.

7.5 What happens if you make a mistake?

While the public generally accept that mistakes happen, they do not look kindly upon journalists and news media who make repeated ethical mistakes. It is always best to avoid mistakes in the first place. Every time a journalist or news medium makes an ethical mistake, the public lose a little bit of trust in the news media. Therefore, it is essential that all mistakes be acknowledged and rectified immediately. Our audience understand that we are human and will accept genuine apologies. However, if mistakes happen continuously, it is inevitable that you and your organisation will lose the public’s trust.

The South African Press Council has a process in place for addressing ethical and other mistakes in the news media. Usually, readers will approach the Press Council with a complaint. There will be an investigation, and if the Press Council finds that a newspaper published a misleading or an inaccurate story, the newspaper will be ordered to rectify the mistake on the same page where the story was published originally. If the story was published on the front page, the correction must also be published on the front page.

Journalists who make major ethical mistakes often need to resign or are dismissed. In the examples shown at the start of this chapter, the journalist who fell in love with a murderer was dismissed, and the journalist who had received money from South African crime intelligence and the three journalists involved in the “rogue unit” story all had to leave their jobs because their reputations were damaged.

In less serious cases, an apology and correction are usually sufficient. Some newsrooms might have internal disciplinary measures when ethical lapses happen often. Some newsrooms might send journalists who make ethical mistakes for additional training to prepare them better so that they can make the right decision. Usually, when an ethical mistake happens, the journalist who reported the story is held liable, not the sub-editor. In many cases, the editor (or editor-in-chief) may also accept responsibility, because editors of news organisations are where “the buck stops”. They are the people who need to take final responsibility for everything that is reported in their publication, on their website, or broadcast on various channels.

There can also be legal ramifications and criminal liability for both the journalist and the news organisation in cases where reporting breaks the law. In cases of defamation, journalists who are found guilty may receive fines, or even go to jail. Whenever a journalist breaks a law (for example, POPIA), there may be a court case, and if found guilty, there will be a penalty. News media can also be found guilty as organisations if they contravene POPIA.

Of course, the most serious consequence of unethical journalism is that the public will lose their trust in you and your organisation. It is very hard to regain the public’s trust once it has been lost. That is why ethical journalism practices should not happen out of fear for the law or other penalties; ethical journalism should happen because you want to maintain the trust of the public by doing what journalists are supposed to do – report truthfully and accurately about events of the day.

7.6 Ethics handbooks

The South African Press Code provides ethical guidelines to journalists in South Africa. There are further many ethics handbooks to give you an idea of different ethics codes around the world. Journalists can regulate themselves to make good ethical decisions by consulting these handbooks.

The principles of self-regulation have been written down in the ethical codes of journalism. An ethical code is a set of guidelines that is often more precise than the law. It defines readers’, journalists’ and interviewees’ rights. It also defines the basic principles guiding journalistic work, such as truthfulness and objectivity. Ethical codes are country-specific because of differences in cultures and legislation.

The resources on the next page are from many countries, but they share many similarities. Reading a few of these will give you a good overview of ethical principles that are valid all around the world. For South African journalists, the South African Press Code should be their starting point and permanent guide.

Ethical guidelines and resources:

- [South African Press Code](#)
- [Visual Journalism Ethics](#)
- [NPR Ethics Handbook](#)
- [Standards and Ethics – The New York Times Company](#)
- [Los Angeles Times Ethics Guidelines](#)
- [Associated Press News Values and Principles](#)
- [The Guardian's Editorial Code](#)
- [BBC Editorial Guidelines](#)
- [International Fact-Checking Network Code of Principles](#)
- [Ethical Journalism Network](#)

SUMMARY: Journalists sometimes don't realise how much power they have and how their decisions can affect other people. Therefore, it is very important to make decisions about your stories in an ethical way, to still tell the story in a way that does the least harm. This chapter showed you how to make ethical decisions as a journalist. Journalists also need to know about the world, they need to be information literate. The next chapter discusses information literacy and shows how you can evaluate information so that you do not spread false information yourself.

8. Media and information literacy

Media and information literacy are essential for quality journalism. There is an overload of information in the internet era, with so much information around, it is necessary to understand and evaluate information to make sure that you are able to select between real, truthful information and disinformation. This can be done by developing your media and information literacy skills.¹⁵

Countries and development organisations around the world are recognising the relevance of media and information literacy. This is because media and information literacy (and these terms also include news literacy, which refers specifically to the ability to find and evaluate news) are seen as sustainable and effective responses to the explosion of disinformation globally. Disinformation threatens the achievement of sustainable development goals – in general, democracy, good governance, and social cohesion. It is also important for journalists to develop media and information literacy skills and knowledge to understand how people understand the media and use the media. This is part of knowing who your audience is. You also need to know the skills they have to access news and information and how they understand and evaluate news and information.

Various UNESCO publications about media and information literacy emphasise that media and information literacy enable citizens (including journalists) to access, receive, critically evaluate, create, use, and disseminate information and media content of all forms.¹⁶ They understand and know their rights in the field of working with information and the media, as well as their individual rights to demand quality information and media systems that are free, independent, and diverse. In their relations with the media, they understand the role and functions of information and media providers as well as the conditions for the implementation of these functions.

As a journalist, you also need to understand media and information literacy to do your job well, because you work with information all the time. The main advantage of being media and information literate is that you will be able to evaluate information and other media sources. To understand what *media and information literacy* means, we first need to understand what *literacy* means. Literacy in the most basic form means to be able to read and write, but in the context of media and information literacy, it refers to knowledge – the knowledge to be able to find media and information; to analyse, evaluate and understand media and information; and to be able to create media and information.

¹⁵ This section adapted from Muratova, N. (2019). *Media and Information Literacy in Journalism: A Handbook for Journalists and Journalism Educators*. Available at: https://ru.unesco.org/sites/default/files/english_24.01.2019_0.pdf. Published by UNESCO under an Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO, CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO.

¹⁶ United Nations Human Rights Declaration, Article 19 (1948). <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

8.1 The five areas of media and information literacy

- **Access**, which is the ability to have access to information, media, and news.
- **Analysis and comprehension**, which means that people should be able to analyse and understand information, media, and news.
- **Critical evaluation**, which means that people should be able to evaluate the truthfulness of information, media, and news to consider what the message is, what the aim of the sender is – in short, to make sure that the media, information, or news can be trusted.
- **Use**, which refers to being able to find value in the media, information, or news that you consume; it should have some meaning for you.
- **Creation and engagement**, which refers to people not just being users of information, media, and news but being able to engage with them and even creating their own media, information, and news.

It is important to understand how the digital world works to be able to participate fully and responsibly in it. Because of easy access to this digital world, everyone should have the skills to understand that not everything out there can be trusted, that many people have agendas with the messages that they send, and that there is a lot of disinformation and fake news on the web.

The ability to identify fake news or disinformation – which is a major problem in the digital era – is very important. It is all around us; many people send around messages on WhatsApp or on other platforms that are simply not true. There are “trolls” on platforms such as Twitter who deliberately spread disinformation for political or other reasons. Journalists should develop the skills to identify disinformation and fake news. Being media and information literate already helps you to identify fake news and false information, because you will know how to evaluate information.

8.2 Fake news and disinformation

There are various **motivations** behind the creation of fake news: poor journalism, parody, provocation, passion, partisanship, profit, political influence, or propaganda (see categories of fake news).¹⁷

False information may then be disseminated in various ways (unwittingly or deliberately).

¹⁷ This section adapted from Fake news. 2021 and Information literacy, 2021. Libguides, University of Groningen, the Netherlands, published under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Available at: <https://libguides.rug.nl/fakenews> and <https://libguides.rug.nl/c.php?g=545900&p=3744353>, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Some of the ways that fake news or disinformation can spread are: shared on social media; amplified by journalists (this means that some journalists may pick up news stories on social media that are fake, but they still publish the stories without checking the facts, leading to more and more people receiving the fake news); pushed out by loosely connected groups attempting to influence public opinion and spread as part of sophisticated disinformation campaigns using bots and troll factories; or simply as clickbait to make money. Fake news often uses sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines.

Take note that intentionally misleading and deceptive fake news is different from obvious satire **or** parody, which is intended to amuse rather than mislead its audience. But the “satire” label is also sometimes used intentionally to spread fake news (see below).

Fake news takes all forms. Any format that can convey information can also convey disinformation: print, online, podcasts, YouTube videos, radio shows, images. Fake news has become a daily phenomenon in the changing media landscape where readers are becoming publishers themselves. Hence, being able to spot fake news and assess the quality of news are increasingly becoming important skills.

When it comes to evaluating content online, there are various types of fake or misleading news we need to be aware of. These include the following:

- **Clickbait:** These are stories that are deliberately fabricated or exaggerated to gain more website visitors and increase advertising revenue for websites. Clickbait stories use sensationalist headlines to grab attention and drive click-throughs to the publisher website, normally at the expense of truth or accuracy. This is an unethical business model but many people use it. They deliberately create fake news to earn clicks and then make money from advertising.
- **Propaganda:** Stories that are created to deliberately mislead audiences, promote a biased point of view or a particular political cause or agenda.
- **Satire/Parody:** Many websites and social media accounts publish fake news stories and claim it is entertainment and parody. But they hide the “parody” label so that many people will in fact think the story is true.
- **Sloppy journalism:** Sometimes, journalists may publish a story with unreliable information or without checking all the facts, which can mislead audiences.
- **Misleading headings:** Stories that are not completely false can be distorted using misleading or sensationalist headlines. These types of news can spread quickly on social media sites where only headlines and small snippets of the full article are displayed on audience newsfeeds.
- **Biased/slanted news:** Many people are drawn to news or stories that confirm their own beliefs or biases, and fake news can prey on these biases. Social media news feeds tend to display news and articles that they think readers would like based on their personalised searches.

- **Conspiracy theory:** Sources that are well-known promoters of kooky conspiracy theories.
- **Rumour mills:** Sources that traffic in rumours, gossip, innuendo, and unverified claims.
- **Hate news:** Sources that actively promote racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

There are **four broad categories** of fake news, according to Media Professor Melissa Zimdars (Merrimack College) in the USA:

- **Category 1:** Fake, false, or regularly misleading websites that are shared on social media. Some of these websites may rely on “outrage” by using distorted headlines and decontextualised or dubious information to generate likes, shares, and profits. The information may be entirely fabricated.
- **Category 2:** Websites that may circulate misleading and/or potentially unreliable information. These websites may intentionally misinterpret facts or misrepresent data.
- **Category 3:** Websites that occasionally use clickbait headlines and social media descriptions. The information may be accurate or partially accurate but use an alarmist title to get their audience’s attention.
- **Category 4:** Satire/comedy sites, which can offer important critical commentary on politics and society but have the potential to be shared as actual/literal news. This may be a critique on a topic.

8.2.1 How to spot fake news

Below are some steps you can follow to help you spot fake news.

Consider your source

- Who published the story? Real news is published by trustworthy news sources with a reputation for checking their facts.
- What claims does the news story make? Are these backed up by facts or evidence that you can double-check? If you cannot find any facts or evidence, take care – this might be a fake news story.
- Does the story include more than one point of view? Fake news stories often only present one side of the story.
- How does the story make you feel? If the story makes you feel angry or frightened, be careful. Fake news stories often use your emotions to try to influence what you believe.
- If you think a story might be fake news, then do more research. Ask more questions and find answers from another source.

Check the author

- A simple web search will often help you find information about the author. If you cannot find the author's name easily, or if the author's name appears on other websites that seem fake (based on the other steps to identify fake news or disinformation), then think twice. If the author's name appears on the sites of well-known news media or information providers, then you can rest easy.
- What do you know about the author? Is the author an authority on the subject? A recognised author in their subject area?
- What do you know about the organisation? Publications by well-known and respected organisations are generally more reliable than material published by vague charitable foundations with dubious or unclear objectives.
- Does the author or organisation receive funding from sponsors? Sponsorship is not necessarily a problem but be aware of any commercial interests that may be involved.
- Can you assess the quality of the publication? Fake news websites often contain many spelling errors and are often badly designed.

Check the date

- When was the piece written? Is there a date? Does it make sense (not 31 June 2101)?
- Is it current? The term "current" usually refers to recent events or developments. To determine whether information is current, check whether it still reflects the present situation. Remember, even if a book was written long ago, it might still be relevant.

Check your biases

Bias is a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others, which often results in treating some people unfairly.

- **Explicit bias** refers to attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) that we consciously or deliberately hold and express about a person or a group.
- **Implicit bias** includes attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) about other people, ideas, or issues that we are not aware of ourselves and cannot control but that are affecting our opinions and behaviour.
- **Confirmation bias** is our subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information in ways that affirm our existing beliefs, ideas and expectations. It mostly occurs around beliefs and ideas that we feel strongly about.

Read beyond

The web pages shown on the next page may be legitimate, but they should not be mistaken for impartial news sources:

- **Opinion pieces/editorials** may be written by journalists or experts, but they should be clearly marked as opinion pieces and not be mistaken for an impartial news report.
- **Native advertising or “sponsored content”** are there to sell, not to inform. Wikipedia defines native advertising as “a type of advertising, mostly online, that matches the form and function of the platform upon which it appears. In many cases, it manifests as either an article or video, produced by an advertiser with the specific intent to promote a product, while matching the form and style which would otherwise be seen in the work of the platform's editorial staff”.
- **Press releases** are public relations pieces from a company or an organisation; they often are marked “For immediate release”.
- **Publications by advocacy organisations or think tanks** can be useful materials but they should be understood to represent a particular point of view. It would be wise to seek other viewpoints for a more balanced understanding of the issues.

Supporting sources

- Use various sources: see if the news has also been reported by other newspapers, television news, online articles.
- This is often one of the easiest ways to detect fake news. If the news is really incredible, really big news, it is guaranteed that there will be many news platforms reporting on it. It will not be on only one site. For example, if aliens really landed in Johannesburg, then all the news media in South Africa will write about it, fast. So, if you see news about an alien invasion on only one website, you can know for sure it is fake!
- If you see unbelievable news on social media only, chances are very high that the news is fake.

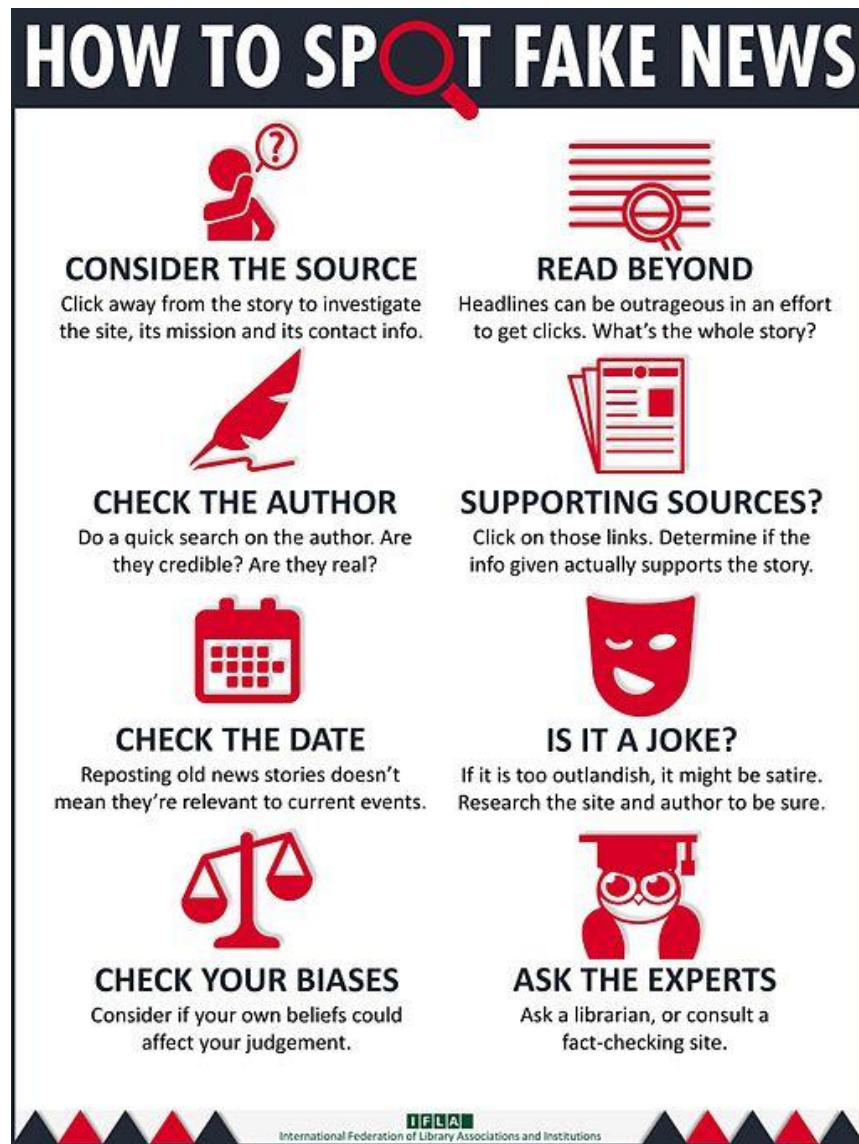
Is it a joke?

- The purpose of satire or parody is to entertain and perhaps to persuade, but these kinds of sources should not be mistaken for news sources. They obviously differ from intentionally misleading and deceptive fake news.

Ask an expert

- Ask a library expert, another journalist, or a subject expert.
- Use online sites that check facts and ask them to check something for you. The most well-known one in South Africa is [Africa Check](#) and one can also use [Snopes](#) for more international news.
- Ask academics or other people with expert knowledge.

The infographic below, from the International Federation of Library Associations, shows the eight steps discussed above that one can use to spot fake news.



- Source: IFLA, CC BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

The South African fact-checking site **Africa Check** also has a handy guide with specific tools useful in the South African and African context that you can use to help you recognise fake news and disinformation when you see it. (Reproduced here in full, with permission from [Africa Check](#). The guide is also available [here](#).)

Think of the most horrible or weird thing that could happen to people in the news or in your country. A petrol bomb thrown in the car of the judge presiding over the Oscar Pistorius case? South African universities now offering a BSc degree in Witchcraft? Write it down, post it to your website, and voilà! You have now joined the ranks of the fake news websites that are mushrooming across South Africa. These websites exist to make money from the ads they display, media attorney Nicholas Hall [explained to Cape Talk Radio](#). The more outrageous the story, the higher the traffic to their sites, and the more money they can make.

So what is the harm in fooling people and making a buck from that? Besides causing pain and suffering to people mentioned in these fake stories, they can harden stereotypes and lead people to make poor health decisions, among other reasons. Facebook is the most important weapon in these websites' arsenal. You may have heard about the social media network's "algorithm". That is just a fancy word for the calculations Facebook does to work out which posts are the most popular. The more people click on a post, comment on or share it, the more people Facebook shows it to – and that is how a post can go viral.

8.2.2 Africa Check's steps to recognise fake news

We have all become journalists in some way, [writes the editor-in-chief](#) of *Eyewitness News*, Katy Katopodis. Every internet user now has the power to publish stories or videos that only journalists used to publish.

As our tools for getting and spreading information become more sophisticated, so should we. It starts with a simple step: pause for a minute and look closely at the thing you want to share. Then follow some of the tips below, [shared by MyBroadband](#).

Click on the website's "about us" section or look for a disclaimer

Many fake news websites attempt to soften their dishonesty by saying that they cannot guarantee that their content is true, either in the "about us" section or in a "disclaimer". One can usually find these links at the top of the website or right at the bottom. Sometimes there are obvious spelling or grammatical mistakes, such as in the example below.

Disclaimer

African News Updates is a news and political satire web publication, comprised of individual posts, some taken from or inspired by real news events but the stories are almost entirely works of complete fiction. This site is a source of parody, satire, and humor and is for entertainment purposes only. Said posts or stories may or may not use real names, always in semi-real and/or mostly, or substantially, fictitious ways. Therefore, all news articles contained within African News Updates are works of fiction and constitute fake news.

Look for a "satire" or "fauxtire" label

Genuine satirical websites – like South Africa's ZANEWS – try to make one laugh about real news events. Dreaming up false stories is not satire, but labelling them as such is another way in which fake news websites attempt to get away with their lies.



UN declares SA as the most corrupt country in the world.

ECONOMY, NEWS, POLITICS, **SATIRE** — 21st September 2016, by news — Comments Off — 47936

Check if the site is an Interactive Advertising Bureau member

The member base of the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) includes all of South Africa's big-name media platforms such as News24, *Mail & Guardian*, IOL, and Daily Maverick. Look for the IAB logo at the bottom of a website or [search the bureau's membership directory](#). If a site is not listed there, it might mean that the site distributes fake news. However, do remember that many legitimate sites are not members of the IAB, so also use some of the other tools to check the legitimacy of a site. It might not be a member of the IAB but might still be trustworthy.

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Search for the owner of the website

By typing in the website address [on a lookup website](#), you can see who registered the address (called a domain). Compare the results for News24 and Mzansi Stories: News24's registration clearly shows the address, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of its owners, Media24.

By contrast, Mzansi Stories hides behind a domain registration company, making them virtually untraceable. This is, of course, not a guarantee that the site is fake but should set alarm bells off. Use these lookup websites to see who registered a website:

- [International website addresses](#) (.com)
- [Local website addresses](#) (.co.za)

The internet has the potential for great good and terrible harm. It is in your hands. Play an active role in limiting harm by vetting the content you want to share. If you do not have time to follow the verifications tips listed before, rather not share the story.

SUMMARY: This chapter explained how important it is as a journalist to evaluate information, mostly because you do not want to redistribute fake news by thinking it is a story. If you always evaluate information and follow all the other steps discussed in the previous chapters of this book, such as never writing one-source stories, making sure that you made the correct ethical decisions and ensuring that your stories go through the correct newsrooms processes, your stories will always be credible and based on facts. If you have read the book up to this point, you should now have enough skills and knowledge to start creating news stories by yourself. The next chapter shows you how you can be an independent journalist by working for yourself.

9. Become a journalism entrepreneur

Once you have worked through this handbook and mastered the content, you can try to start making money from journalism by doing your own thing if that is your aim. Many journalism students prefer to complete their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and move into the world of traditional mass media, but others might want to try earning an income on their own. As also explained in the introduction, the purpose of this handbook is not only to provide a theoretical base and an understanding of practical skills of journalism to undergraduate students but also to empower them with the background and skills to be responsible journalists no matter the platform. This includes those who live in communities with no reliable news sources, those who are unable (for example, due to lack of formal qualifications) to join traditional mass media outlets, those who have an entrepreneurial spirit and would like to explore the possibilities and also those who perhaps already practice journalism without even knowing it. Knowing the skills and theories of journalism are helpful to all these people.

The internet can be a good source of income. The online exchange of news and information is constantly evolving, even more so after the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many people all around the world have moved to a work-from-home environment, where they use the internet to access their office virtually. But people have been making money off the Web for decades now. The success of influencers and sites like eBay and Takealot have really opened people's eyes, for the first time, to the possibility of using one's own brand to make money or opening a web store where one can sell just about anything (Communication in the Real World, 2016). Almost anyone can establish a web presence now, whether it is through starting your own website, building a profile on an existing website like a blog-hosting service, or using a space you already have, like Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok. You can quite easily create your own news page online.

As an entrepreneur, you should think carefully about what you can offer people as an independent journalist. Perhaps you live in a small town where there is no credible local news source. Perhaps you have specialised knowledge in a certain journalistic genre, such as entertainment news, or sports news. You can start by creating a platform that everyone in your community has access to (perhaps on YouTube or Facebook if there are good internet connections in your area), or you can even consider creating a small, printed publication. There are excellent free tools available to do the layout of your printed publication. Creating a printed publication is particularly useful in rural communities or areas of the country where people do not have regular access to the internet. In South Africa, many people still do not have good internet access, not necessarily because the infrastructure is not available – in many cases, there are broadband signals all over the country, but the problem is the cost. The internet is still too expensive for many South Africans.

If you do venture online, once you have a brand, you can use social media to promote your brand. The secret is to identify a gap in the market and to then create something that others would like to read, listen to, or view. You need to find an audience and offer them something that they cannot find elsewhere; it is also a good idea to write about things you know – i.e., to really be an expert in the journalism genre you decide to cover (Dyer, 2019).

Opportunities for distributing content and earning an income from it are constantly evolving. Journalists who earn good incomes by doing this all offer something unique or valuable which encourages people to pay for the content. You need to find something special to do, and do it well, then you will be successful. Remember that you will be competing against many other people – established media outlets and independent creators. Hence, you need to consider carefully which gap in the market you will fill, and then you need to make sure that you create good journalistic content based on the skills and theory of journalism you have learnt in this textbook. Also keep in mind that readers and viewers are constantly searching for new and exciting content. Sometimes legacy media are bound by the “old” way of doing things. As an independent journalist, you can experiment with innovative ideas and present your news in different ways.

Some experts believe that the future of journalism lies in independent creators who will fill the gaps all around the world, including South Africa, where traditional mass media outlets have moved away from smaller towns and cities because of financial difficulties, leaving residents in these areas hungry for local news. Jeremy Caplan, programme director of the City University of New York’s journalism entrepreneurship course, said the following: “The next journalism era will be driven by independent creators launching local and niche sites, newsletters, podcasts, and YouTube channels. Some will fill news desert gaps and others will revitalise civic engagement in underserved communities.” (The City University of New York, 2021). In South Africa, there are many opportunities for lively local news websites or other types of platforms in many towns and cities, even down to suburb level. Most South Africans would probably recognise that there are already messaging groups (for example, using WhatsApp or Telegram) in their areas, where they often find news about what is going on in the area. Information about road closures, criminal activity, or load-shedding schedules, for example, is often spread on these suburban messaging groups. This is similar to what local newspapers might have done in the past. It is clear that there is a gap for local news in many areas of South Africa.

Some of the opportunities for independent journalist are discussed in this section, hopefully providing some inspiration to all who would like to be journalists. This section does not claim to cover all the possibilities; it offers a brief overview of some possibilities for independent journalists in the 2020's, but new opportunities are arising all the time, while others might end. As a prospective independent journalist, you should also look at what other independent journalists do. This might inspire you to do something better!

9.1 Independent journalism creators

An increasingly popular route for many journalists is to create their own content and distribute it on certain platforms where they either find subscribers to pay for the news or, as some sites call it, “patrons”, who are willing to pay to read their content.

Two of the most well-known platforms for independent creators of news are [Patreon](#) and [Substack](#). Patreon is a site that has many independent journalism pages, where “patrons” pay a monthly or annual fee to access the news. Some popular news pages have subscribers that pay them thousands of US dollar per month. The success of these news pages flow from having a specific focus and filling a gap, thereby finding readers who are willing to pay for the news. In July 2021, a news page called Gaslit Nation, which focusses on rising autocracy around the world, had almost 5 400 patrons, paying at least US\$1 per month. That is at least US\$5 400 per month.

Substack works in a similar way. Here, you can find subscribers to your newsletter. There are many journalists from well-known mass media outlets who left their companies to distribute their own newsletters on Substack. One example is Matt Taibbi – his newsletter is called [TK News](#). He used to write for *Rolling Stone* magazine and now has tens of thousands of subscribers on Substack. Each subscriber pays a monthly fee to receive the newsletter. Some sources estimate that Taibbi earns more than US\$600 000 per year from his Substack newsletters (Guzey, 2020). Andrew Sullivan is another famous Substack writer with a newsletter called [The Weekly Dish](#). The most successful newsletter on Substack (in terms of paid subscribers) is written by a history professor, Heather Cox Richardson, from Boston College in the US. Despite being a history professor, she [writes a journalism newsletter](#). She earns about a million dollars per year from her newsletter.

You can make a good living by creating a quality news page on Patreon or newsletters on Substack. Until now, not many South African writers are present on these platforms. Remember that Substack and Patreon earn some commission for hosting newsletters or news pages, but their commission is relatively low, and writers earn their fair share on these platforms, much more than, for example, they would earn on YouTube (where one can also earn a good income). Some writers on these platforms are very successful because they are good journalists, identify clear gaps, and they help readers get a feeling that they are contributing to good journalism that adds value to their lives. Of course, it is important that whatever you present is of outstanding quality and that you follow the basic principles of journalism, otherwise, people will not pay you money to read your work. Your news and stories are your product; they should be exceptionally good to get readers, viewers, or listeners.

Another way to create your own news content is to create podcasts. There are many platforms where you can upload your podcasts (some of the more famous ones are Spotify, Podbean, Spreaker, but there are many others). Some of these platforms charge a fee for hosting but also assist with ways to make money. Podcasts are a good way to build up a fanbase, but you can also consider hosting your podcasts on platforms such as Patreon (discussed above), where people may subscribe to your podcasts. You will need to market your podcasts on social media to attract subscribers.

Yet another way is to create a YouTube channel. YouTube has [monetisation options](#), where you can earn money from advertisers. To monetise a YouTube channel, you need a minimum of 1 000 subscribers and 4 000 hours of view time before you can follow the application process for monetisation, so this is not a quick way to make money. However, if you are patient and you present good content, the subscribers will come. You can also use social media to promote your YouTube channel. YouTube has a [Black Voices Creator Fund](#), specifically aimed at helping voices from the black community grow. The fund supports successful applicants with funding and training.

In South Africa, there are also independent news platforms who rely on donations or grants to produce news with a specific focus. [GroundUp](#) is one example, and another is [New Frame](#). Both are completely independent, run by groups of journalists whose aim is not to make money. Both platforms aim to tell the stories of marginalised people in the country – people whose voices and stories have not been heard very often in the traditional mass media. New Frame managed to get over 100 000 readers in just one year. These websites also earn their income from grants and donations.

9.2 Create a community news platform

In South Africa and many other countries, local news is very important. People would like to know about what is going on in the area where they live. Why does the power keep going out? Why are the potholes not being fixed? What are the local politicians doing to build a school for all the children who need to drive to a neighbouring town to go to secondary school? Who won the club cricket match? In many cases, larger mass media outlets do not cover local news anymore. As discussed in this textbook, because of the downscaling of newsrooms for several reasons, there are fewer journalists available to cover all the news in smaller towns. This creates an opportunity for local journalism entrepreneurs to fill the gap.

Community journalism is very important because community journalists encourage public debate within the community about important issues, they encourage economic growth, and they help cultivate a sense of geographic community (SCJ, 2021). Local news also brings people together and encourages political participation (Abernathy, 2019).

It is easy to build a simple website (for example, using [Wordpress.org](https://wordpress.org) or [Wordpress.com](https://wordpress.com)), and it is also easy to create a simple print publication that can be distributed by hand to houses in the area. There are free and very good online layout programs available to design your own newspaper (such as [Scribus](https://scribus.net)). You can earn an income by getting advertisements from local businesses; often, they will be willing to advertise in a local newspaper because the audience that your paper or website will reach are all right there where the businesses are. Advertising rates are also less expensive in smaller publications. You can even purchase a small printer to print your newsletter yourself, or use local printing companies that might be less expensive.

A model that has become popular in the US is one where local government (municipalities) help fund local news because they realise the value and importance of covering news that matter to the community. In New York City, in 2019, the mayor, Bill de Blasio, signed a directive that more than half the city's budget for advertising in print and online should be spent at small, independent community newspapers and websites. This provided a steady and reliable stream of income to these community news outlets (Bartlett & Sandorf, 2021). There are initiatives underway to promote similar programmes elsewhere in the US. You could try to approach your local municipality and find out if there are similar possibilities in your area.

There have always been many [small, independent newspapers](#) in South Africa, who are members of the Association of Independent Publishers. Some of these papers or websites (some publish only online) are run by just one or two people, and they are distributed in areas of the country where no other news media (except, sometimes, public radio and TV) reach. Many of these newspapers rely on funding from government advertising, which has its downsides. In some cases, this leads to under-reporting of corruption or bad governance, because some of the news outlets do not want to antagonise government. There is a need to think of different funding models, perhaps sponsorships or grants, to make sure that these papers survive and that others will get off the ground. Printing is relatively expensive but publishing local news online can be done much more inexpensively. These independent, local newspapers who have been in business for many decades show there is a demand for local news.

There will always be a need for independent media – smaller organisations that do not speak to only a certain constituency, usually wealthier readers who pay for advertising and subscriptions (Bernardo, 2019). Independent media are outlets for different voices, allowing people who are not usually represented in the media to also have a say (Bernardo, 2019).

A good place to start, if you are considering launching a local news website, is to keep your eyes open for international media organisations that often advertise grants or projects to encourage the creation of independent media outlets in developing countries. Wits University in Johannesburg has a journalism incubator programme called [Jam Lab](#) which helps start-up journalists with training and funding opportunities.

9.3 Freelancing

Freelancing is not new to the digital era; it has always been part of journalism, but in recent years, there has been a rising demand for freelancers. As many newsrooms have been forced to downscale because of financial difficulties and declining advertising income, many of these sometimes rely on freelancers to help them tell their stories. It is often less expensive for newsrooms to pay freelancers per article than to keep someone as a permanent staff member. This means there are many newspapers, magazines, and websites who would pay you to use your stories. One major advantage of being a freelancer is that you can decide what you would like to write about and who you would like to write for (The Writer's Bureau, 2022). Some media houses might expect specific stories from you. A major disadvantage, though, is that you need to find media organisations who are looking for freelancers and need writers, sub-editors, multi-media journalists or graphic designers. This is not always easy, as there are many people who choose to do freelancing nowadays. You will be competing with well-established writers.

To find freelance work, you will need to talk to people, make contacts, and find out which newspapers or websites in your area are looking for content. Then get in touch with the editor or news editor and ask to send them a sample article. As a freelancer, you need very good journalism skills, and your stories should be complete and accurate and cover events that will be of interest to the readers of the publication you are writing for. You should read the publication, know it well, know what they write about, and then try to find gaps in the news they cover and present some new stories about events that are uncovered for publication. If your work is good, there is a better chance that they will keep asking you to write more stories.

There are also online platforms that connect people all around the world to freelance opportunities. [Fiverr](#) and [Upwork](#) are two of the most well-known freelancing platforms. You need to create a profile, explaining what you can do, and companies from all around the world may get in touch to offer you possible opportunities. There are many good opportunities on Upwork for content creators, but you need to be careful that your skills are not exploited and that your clients do not underpay you. Shop around and find the best opportunities.

9.4 News influencers

Professional journalists would like to claim that their work is distinct from what social media influencers do, even though most journalists are very active on social media platforms. It is expected of journalists at traditional mass media outlets to build a presence on social media. But the relationship between journalists and people who compete with them for attention and authority on social media is an interesting one. There has been much research on how journalists would like to draw boundaries around their work to maintain their authority (Coddington & Lewis, 2018), but journalists have never actually asked the audience what they think, whether these boundaries are necessary.

In a study discussed by Coddington and Lewis (2018), two researchers, Susan Banjac and Folker Hanusch, used focus groups of young people in Austria to examine their perceptions of journalists and content creators on Instagram, YouTube, and blogs, and also the standards young people set for these content creators and journalists.

The results showed that audiences want both groups to maintain the same high standards. The standards that audiences in this study set for content creators were the same as for journalists: they expected authentic work, more engagement, transparency, and prioritising content over clicks.

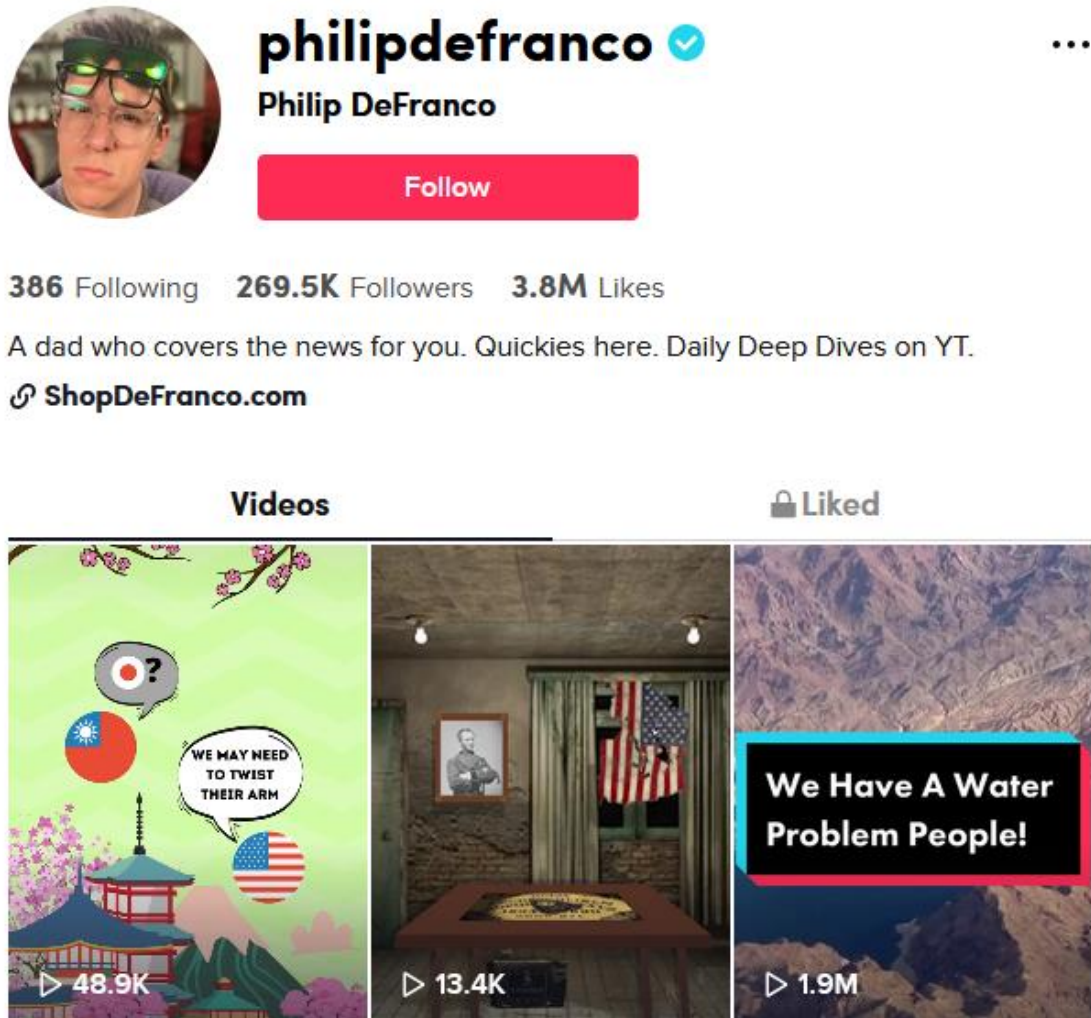
This study showed that, for audiences, the standards of journalism may be bleeding into other content creator groups. Audiences seem to think that content creators and journalists are not that distinct and that they should all maintain certain standards. This is an interesting study and important to keep in mind when we talk about journalism influencers.

Just like you can be a make-up influencer, for example, you can also be a journalism or news influencer. It is possible to create news content on YouTube, Instagram, or other platforms, gain many followers, and then earn an income through endorsements (just like newspapers earn an income through advertising).

Many younger people prefer to find their news on social media platforms (Malone, 2021), so there is clearly a gap for good news influencers, for example, on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The advantage of being a news influencer is that you can build a sense of familiarity with your audience – they feel they know you, unlike when the audience consume the news from large organisations, which they see as faceless (Hlaithwa, 2019).

There are already people who make money by being news influencers. One example is Philip DeFranco, an American news commentator on TikTok. He records his shows in Los Angeles, presents short episodes of news discussions, talking about the main events of the day, and he has 1.2 million followers (Malone, 2021). DeFranco's niche is that he aggregates (gathers) the interesting news of the day from various sources and then talks about the news in a fun way. He found an audience who likes that.

A former television news presenter in the US, Marcus DiPaola, left the formal media business and started a TikTok channel, [@marcus.dipaola](#). He presents short news clips of news events as they happen, aimed specifically at a younger audience. He has 2.6 million followers. Also, a university student from Texas (Arizona), Emma Silverman, has a news channel on TikTok, called [@emma_silverman1](#), where she discusses the news with her followers. In mid-2021, she had more than 214 000 followers. It is clear that many young people are interested in the news, especially if presented by their peers.



Philip DeFranco's TikTok page.

TikTok creators and other news influencers make money from advertising and brand merchandise. Some TikTok creators also make money from sponsored posts, which is risky when you are creating a news channel because you need to remain independent. Being a news influencer is quite different from being a fashion influencer, where it is all about you and your fashion likes and where you might even recommend certain brands because you are paid to do so. As a news influencer, you may become an independent source of news in your community because people trust you and believe you because you follow the basic principles of journalism as discussed in this textbook.

You should not take money from advertisers to tell only their side of the story – that would be unethical. If you do allow sponsored posts, just make it clear that the posts are sponsored so that your viewers do not confuse your news posts with the sponsored posts. This way you would maintain your journalistic independence, just like large news media organisations who also publish sponsored “news” but clearly indicate that the news is sponsored.

The ideas discussed above are just some of the popular entrepreneurial journalism options that are available. Once you put your mind to it, you might come up with a brand-new idea that nobody has thought about yet.

SUMMARY: This textbook provided you with a general introduction to journalism. Upon completion of the book, you can feel confident that you know enough about journalism to enter the field to be able to create good-quality, trustworthy news stories. But do not stop learning here, keep reading about journalism and keep practicing your skills. And maybe try your hand at some news creation on social media like YouTube. There are still many gaps in the growing and changing field of journalism that young, independent journalists can fill.

10. Student stories

Mpho Khoka



As an honours graduate in BA Communication, specialising in journalism and media studies, I will perpetually be indebted to the teachings I got during my student days - especially during my honours year. These teachings have really helped me in doing the journalism work that I am doing now with ease. I am currently employed as a journalist at the *Sowetan* newspaper, one of the biggest daily newspapers in South Africa. I do not have a specific beat.

During my honours year, our lecturers taught us how to write different pieces from news stories to features to opinion pieces. They also taught us the basics a news story should have such as a lead or introduction with the 5Ws and H. These teachings assist me during my line of work. I do not struggle when it comes to writing a story because I still use the basic helpful tips I got from my former lecturers.

Before I write a story, I know it should have a lead or an introduction with the 5Ws and H – the ‘Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.’ Whenever I am done gathering information out in the field, before I write my story, I identify the 5Ws and H from the information I put together and then start writing my story.

Similarly, sometimes I write features such as personality profiles and human-interest stories. My lecturers identified the characteristics of a feature for us, whether it was a personality profile or human-interest story. The characteristics they gave us help me when I write features in my current work. I know what kind of descriptions and items should go into the writing of a feature. In a nutshell, the academic advice that my past lecturers gave me when coming to the writing of stories and all sorts of editorial pieces make it easier for me to do my work as a journalist today.

Finally, as a journalism graduate and former student in this discipline, I would be excited to see current students do well in their studies and choose a career that best suits them. One way for students to do well in their studies is through a method which I used myself, to always prepare for their classes or lectures. Prepare for your class. Do not go to your lecture empty minded. Go through the reading work you have, to grasp the meaning before the start of class. This helped me a lot when I was still a student.

In addition, use your talents or skills to help you choose a career that is best for you. Whatever you are passionate about should be what you use as a basis for choosing an occupation suitable for you. For example, if you are passionate about radio, you may fancy being a radio journalist and not a print or newspaper journalist.

That's my two cents worth. All the best with your studies!

Denise Robertson



Never in my life would I have imagined that Journalism and Media Studies could assist me in building a successful business known as Sublime with Lime (Pty) Ltd. Here I am, with no official business background whatsoever, flourishing and growing towards goals that I never thought were possible – believe Justin Bieber when he says, “never say never!”

The great benefit of owning my own company is that I get to create optimal opportunities for others and authentic journalism helped me to accomplish this. Journalism taught me how to remove my egotistic self from any given situation and adopt a bird's eye perspective that takes all possible angles into account. The skill of communicating with an audience to inform them in the most ethical and transparent way possible, is the reason why my target audience keeps on coming back.

Not only did journalism aid the process of building a proper brand presence and media following, but it also helped me to build significant relationships with contacts and sources that is further growing my business as we speak.

The ability to overcome anxiety and stress is the most valuable tool that I acquired as a journalism student. If you are reading this, you are probably stressed or worried about your next deadline – but let me tell you a secret: the power is within you to take control of that which you have control over. The power is also within you to accomplish anything you put your mind to. Never limit yourself to become the perceived predictable outcome of Journalism and Media Studies. Yes, South Africa needs ethical journalists to cultivate informed and autonomous citizens. But South Africa also needs courageous journalist-mindsets in all industries.

Journalism has been the wildest ride and it keeps on taking me to breath-taking places I could never have imagined. Even if you do not see yourself as a journalist, may the invaluable journalist-mindset follow you wherever you go!

Vonani Ngomana



When I obtained my BA Honours degree in Journalism from Stellenbosch University, I knew then that I did not want to become a journalist. The programme was so excellent at giving us practical and real-life experiences that one did not have to wait until they entered the workforce to decide if being a journalist was for them or not. The programme either confirmed or challenged our career decision because we were not just students that year; we were student journalists.

We experienced the newsroom, we experienced having an editor, we experienced publishing an article with our name on the byline, and we experienced breaking the news.

While my year as a student journalist confirmed that becoming a journalist was not what I wanted, it also opened a world of possibilities that I would have otherwise not known about. I decided that I wanted to travel and write about it instead. My year as a student journalist made me realise that I love telling stories. I wanted to write about the other side of widely visited places that are not shared in the mainstream media. Travelling seemed so far from me as a girl from the township, so I wanted to open that world to people like me too, and that is what I did. For two years I travelled and wrote about it. I went to Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, the United States, to name a few. I fell in love with it. I decided that I wanted to do that until I grew tired of it. That was such a great plan, I thought, but the pandemic happened before I could get tired of it.

When covid-19 became uncontrollable, and countries began closing their borders, I was visiting home but preparing to move to Japan. I waited until I had no choice but to cancel my flight and my plans to continue my travels. It took me several months to accept that I was not going on the path I had set for myself. I started looking for jobs here at home, and the great thing about journalism is that I was not limited to just being a journalist.

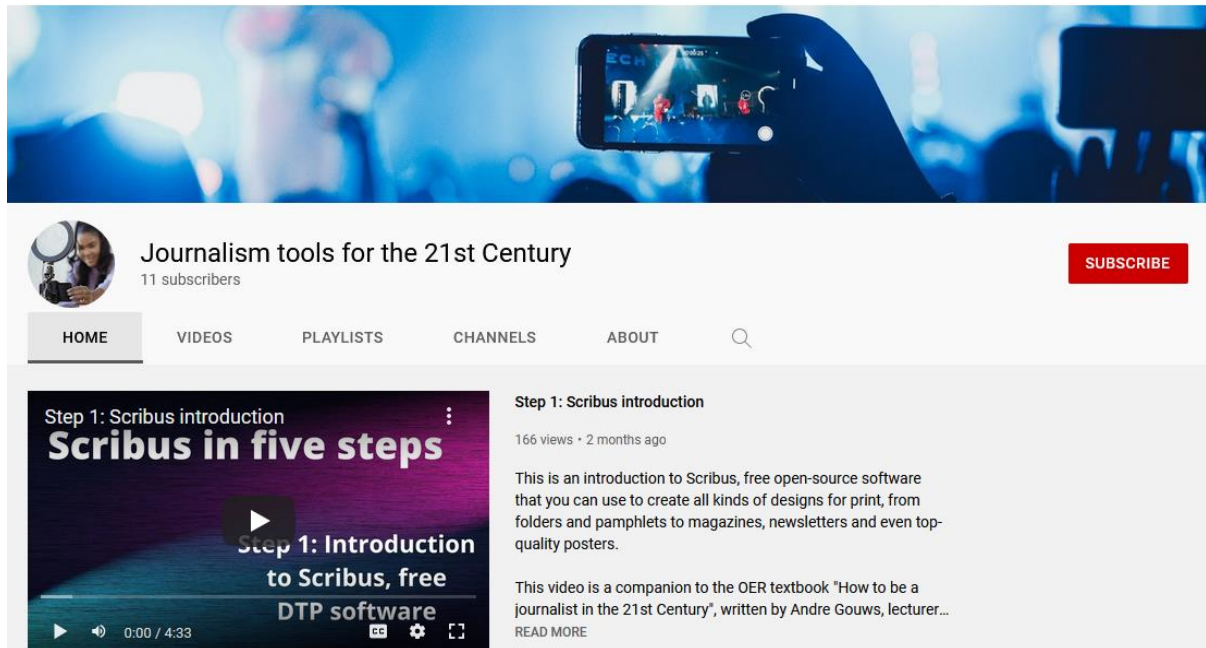
I got a job as a content manager for a non-profit organisation. I still contribute to my blog as a passion project. I enjoy my job as a content manager, especially because the organisation's work is fulfilling. I am so glad that journalism does not teach a set of skills that are only good for one career path. I can do so much with it; the opportunities are endless.

11. Glossary

- **Angle.** This is the way you approach a story; the journalist's way of presenting the information. You will usually choose an angle, which is usually the main news in the story, the one thing you want to present to the reader first.
- **Attribution.** The name of a source in a story and their title or role.
- **Backgrounder.** Often used in broadcast journalism; it is a background story that provides context and history.
- **Beat.** The specialised category that some journalists cover, such as health or motoring. Like journalistic genres, if your beat is health, your genre is health journalism.
- **By-line.** This is the name of the journalist(s) writing the story. It usually appears at the top of a story.
- **Body copy.** The text of the story; the contents.
- **Caption.** A short passage written to accompany an image or a photograph, which comments on the picture. A caption often includes the photo credits.
- **Close-up.** Used in broadcasting or when taking pictures to refer to a nearby shot of someone's face.
- **Crop.** To cut the parts of a picture that are not necessary, for example, trees next to a profile picture of a person that do not add value to the picture.
- **Cut.** To shorten a story or audio-visual story by removing words or content.
- **Dateline.** The name of the place where the story was written; this is not the date.
- **Embargo.** A restriction on the time of publication. Sometimes, organisations may issue press releases with interesting information, but there might be an embargo so that all news media are forced to publish the news at the same time.
- **Fact box or numbers box.** A summary is placed next to the article in the layout. It provides the basic information of the article, such as names and key figures, in an easily readable format.
- **Feature.** A human-interest story, or a news story that investigates aspects of the story in more detail than just a straightforward news story.
- **Feed.** A live transmission, such as a live sports transmission from a stadium.
- **Hard news.** News that is important and current; happening now.
- **Headline.** The title of the article that summarises the essential information from the article and grabs the reader's attention. In an article, there can be multiple sub-headlines. Writing headlines is often done by the sub-editor.
- **Introduction.** The lead or core of the article. The aim of the introduction is to make the reader read the article to the end. The lead is usually the first one or two sentences of the text. It is usually shortened to "intro".
- **Kill.** Sometimes, an editor or news editor will "kill" a story. It means what it says, that is the end of the story – it will not be published.

- **Lead.** The main story on a page; the most important story. Also, the main story in a broadcast bulletin, the first story to be heard or seen. Also sometimes used to refer to the intro of a story (see above).
- **Lead-in.** Used in broadcasting; the introductory words at the start of a video or an audio clip.
- **Masthead.** At the top a newspaper or a news website – the name of the publication, the date, and (for print) the issue number.
- **Off the record.** When sources provide you with information, but this is merely as background, and you cannot name the source.
- **On the record.** When sources speak to you with a clear understanding that everything they say can be used in your news report.
- **Picture credit.** The name of the photographer who took the picture with your story. Usually appears next to or below the picture.
- **Podcast.** A form of digital media, usually an audio file that is created in the form of a radio show, monologue, or interview.
- **Press release.** Publicity hand-outs presented to news organisations for possible publication. You need to rewrite press releases to make them news stories.
- **Pull quote.** A quoted passage from the text, which is enlarged and highlighted in the layout phase. Pull quotes make the body text lighter and more visually appealing. They can also be used to highlight the most interesting parts of the text.
- **SEO.** Search engine optimisation – to ensure that a story can be found by search engines, like Google Chrome or Firefox, when people type keywords into the search bar.
- **Slug.** The name given to a story in the newsroom.
- **Source.** People, documents, or other material (such as other news articles) that provide one with information for the story.
- **Tags.** Words that are added to a story's tag editor to help with SEO. These words should be similar to the headline of the story and should help people find the story by searching for it.
- **Voice-over.** A production technique that superimposes a narrating voice over visual narration. Voice-overs are commonly used in news and film production.
- **Zoom.** Close-up focus when taking pictures or making videos.

YouTube page



This textbook has an accompanying YouTube page, where various journalistic tools and skills are explained in video format. The page is updated regularly. All content on the YouTube page is licenced under a Creative Commons CC BY licence, which means you are welcome to adapt or re-use the content as you please.

Visit the site at: [Journalism tools for the 21st century](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8)

Get in touch

We hope you found our textbook useful. We welcome comments and suggestions for changes and additions to future editions. You may contact Andre Gouws at andre9@duck.com with your ideas.

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