

Basics first

by Steve Wrottesley



Over a quarter of a century ago, I arrived in Johannesburg as a drop-out engineering student to attempt to pursue a career as a journalist. On 27 January 1977 I walked into the South African Associated Newspapers building in Main Street to learn my trade – or profession, depending on who is talking.

Those early days are a blur in my mind but there are two people I remember.

One was Harland Bohler. He was head of the cadet school and, on the first day, he said: **“You will be jumped on for many things by your newseditor. But one thing he will not jump on you for is reading the newspaper while on the job”** (designated groups in management positions were not an imperative then).

The other was Lyn Menge (if your name is spelt wrong, Lyn, blame Mervyn Rees, Wessel De Kock and Archie Henderson). I don't recall her designation on the Rand Daily Mail's newsdesk but her stock comment was: “Stick to the basics”.

It took me close to 25 years to cement in my own mind what those basics were. And that was only after reading Bob Giles' book, *Newsroom Management: a Guide to Theory and Practice*.

My distillation of his views has brought the basics down to accuracy, grammar, context and use of best source.

We will get nowhere in transforming journalism training and education unless we deal with those basics first. But, as with so many things, for any treatment to succeed, there needs to be an acceptance that the treatment is required.

In our attempt to attract the best applicants for internships and entry-level jobs we use multiple criteria for selection and one of these is a general knowledge test we have developed.

Applicants also do a grammar test, a writing test and are interviewed. But the general knowledge test does go some way towards

showing us whether they have what we require – an abiding interest in news. **And it shows them that they still have a lot to learn if they wish to become journalists.**

There is no fail or pass mark, merely averages and trends. The tests do not end on appointment. They are ongoing and at the time of writing, five have been completed by our five subediting learners and six interns – who have now completed their internships. Seven new interns have written two of the tests.

The first test was the same as that given to applicants seeking places on Stellenbosch University's post-graduate journalism course. The questions in the other four were drawn from topics dealt with in our titles over the previous month and included such elements as people in the news, countries in the news and acronyms.

The tests are linked to a request that the participants devote at least half an hour a day to reading the newspaper. In the case of the subeditors, there is an enforced reading period. With the interns, it was left to them to set aside the time.

It is my view that reading the paper goes a major way towards dealing with the training issues of accuracy, grammar, context and use of best source. Language has to improve if a person is reading (we have a great problem with the correct use of reported speech), an awareness of what is happening in the world must help with contextualisation and what better place to find sources than in the newspaper.

What the tests have shown is that there is a serious lack of basic knowledge among the trainees and that reading does help develop that knowledge.

In April, President Thabo Mbeki said to editors at the All Africa Editors' conference: “I believe that you should answer the question, honestly, whether you yourselves know Africa.”

In May, the learners were given a map of Africa and asked to identify **10** Southern African countries and name their capitals. The sub-editing learners had an average of 92% correct, and the interns 47%. Among the incorrect answers were:

- ★ Namibia identified as the Northern Cape and Botswana; and
- ★ Zimbabwe identified as Angola, Gauteng and Namibia.

In June, after the meeting of **the G8 leaders**, the learners were asked to identify the G8 countries by marking them on a map. They were also asked to name their capitals. The subediting learners had an average of 96% correct, the outgoing interns had an average of 45% and the incoming interns had an average score of 35%.

Among the incorrect answers were:

- ★ Russia identified as France
- ★ Japan's capital identified as Beijing
- ★ The US identified as Mexico, and
- ★ France identified as Iraq

By identifying this grave lack of very basic general knowledge, it is hoped that the interns will confront the problem head on and deal with it.

The enforced reading of the newspaper has certainly helped the subediting learners. When they wrote the first general knowledge test in February, their average score was 26%. By June, this had risen to 79%. However the interns, who had not been forced to read the paper on a daily basis, had an average of 34% in February that rose to 48% in June.

There has been critique of the relevance of some of the topics in the test. Because of this, all applicants for internships were asked during their interviews **why their general knowledge was so bad** and what questions they would put in a test if they had a chance to set one.

As far as the geography element of the test was concerned, the applicants, almost to a person, said there were no maps in their classrooms and this was why they did not know where countries were situated. It is a problem we have to recognise and deal with.

One applicant for an internship said the information asked for in the test was not the sort of information “the man in the street would know”. It had to be pointed out to her that she wanted to be a journalist, not a “man in the street”.

And, when they were asked to give their five questions, these questions largely ended up being similar to those asked in the initial test.

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