C21

Communicating
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Contents

8 Media communication

Media communication

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain the global and technological background to modern media
- Identify ways in which bias can occur in the media
- Discuss the relationship between communication style, audiences and markets, and technology
- Distinguish different phases of a media content production model
- Explain techniques of interviewing, researching and framing
- Demonstrate print communication techniques of formats and structures, layout and text, story development and style
- Demonstrate techniques for television, radio and online communication

The media (i.e. the various channels of mass communication) today comprise print-based communication modes such as newspapers and magazines, electronic-based communication modes such as television and radio, and, increasingly, new media such as online or Internet communication. The media convey but also transform messages, and are at once both global and local in impact and focus (McLuhan 1964 [2004]). Although the rate of technological change in media communications is high, traditional skills and knowledge remain indispensable. In this chapter we consider the context in which media content is produced, and learn about the techniques required to develop competence in this exciting but demanding area of applied communication.

The media: yesterday, today and tomorrow

In the beginning was the word, and the word was the printed word. The physical production of books and newspapers using printing presses led to the word 'press' being applied generically to both print journalism and later media channels: today's press conference may well attract more representatives of non-print media than print journalists, but the old-technology term survives. The historical context of the media should be considered (Conboy 2002), not least because history reveals the continual interplay between technology and message, between process and content.

Tabloid: a paper size format; also used to describe print media featuring populist, down-market, sensational content

Broadsheet: a paper size format; also used to describe media carrying elite or up-market content

The physical dimensions of newspapers, for example, have had a critical impact on the content of those papers. **Tabloid** newspapers normally use A3-size paper; a **broadsheet** newspaper page is twice as large, using A2-size paper. The more convenient tabloid format encouraged a simple, condensed approach to news coverage and the use of many photographs, which proved very popular; over time, 'tabloid' journalism took on a down-market, sensational character, often distinguished from 'the quality press' printed on broadsheet (Sloan 2001). Of course, there are variations on this paper size–audience–content mix, but for the most part the distinction seems to hold true in spite of changes in media strategy. For example, in late 2003 the UK *Independent* and *Times*, traditionally broadsheet 'quality' press publications, produced tabloid-size editions which might perhaps be more popular with commuters trying to read in crowded public transport situations. A cartoon nicely captured the tension between the denotative sense of tabloid (meaning small) and connotative sense (meaning down-market): Rupert Murdoch is shown saying to his son Lachlan, 'We're going to turn the *Times* into a tabloid'. Lachlan's reply is 'I thought we did that years ago' (*Private Eye*, 11 December, 2003, p. 4). More recently *tabloid* has been applied in the electronic media to content of a similarly populist and sensational nature (Glynn 2000).

A print format known as the 'Berliner', which is longer and wider than the tabloid and shorter and narrower than the broadsheet, is also becoming increasingly popular with newspapers around the globe (e.g. *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom, and *Le Monde* in France).

Media today are characterised by trends such as:

- globalisation, in particular as it relates to the global spread of media ownership and practices (Van Cuilenberg & McQuail 2003)
- convergence, or the merging of broadcast media with telecommunications and computer systems (Pavlik 2004)
- demassification, that is, the decline of media units (magazines, broadcast programs) aimed at broad, general audiences and the proliferation of media units aimed at narrower, more specialised audiences (Ruggiero 2000). While this promises a virtual infinity of magazines, digital radio stations and television channels (not to mention websites), is there perhaps a danger that individuals will only begin to use media that reflect a narrow and possibly pathological universe (or 'microverse') and never be exposed to alternative points of view, so that shared values and views no longer exist, or at least are dramatically diminished?

- a blurring of the lines between information and entertainment, tabloid journalism and quality news, and objectivity and subjectivity, with the rise of 'infotainment' and 'reality' television programs, 'lifestyle' print journalism and a preoccupation with celebrity (Lumby 2002), and the reconfiguration of news production as part of a global 'entertainment industrial complex' (Barlow 2001). A disturbing aspect of this type of 'reality' programming seems to be the deliberate attempts to humiliate, entrap, impose meaningless but high-pressure deadlines and manufacture conflict while expecting participants to behave 'normally'. Nothing is quite as 'unreal' as it seems for some 'reality' shows. Weiss (2008) notes that there is a long history of 'investigative immersion and stunt journalism', which started in the US, where volunteers, or 'victims', in 1887 and 1972 feigned mental instability so well for some stunts that medical staff refused to release them [see also Andrejevic 2003; Janning 2008].
- an explosion of new modes of communications, and communicators. 'Citizen journalists' have created weblogs or blogs in astounding numbers. In fact, journalists and executives have begun to follow this habit to create a website where they air their views on many topics. They represent a new style of informality and self-disclosure – a type of online diary. New media configurations like MySpace, Facebook, eBay and YouTube have created numerous opportunities for individuals to bypass the media and communicate and network on a peer-to-peer basis. Podcasting (a combination of the words 'broadcasting' and the Apple computer company's iPod) allows individuals to 'narrowcast' audio and video files to others. Proprietary Apple equipment is not necessary for all podcasts, and the more generic 'netcast' may supplant it. Some content is music, some is recordings of educational lectures.

What do the media do? Agenda setting and upsetting

Agenda setting: the process of selectivity and framing in media reporting

Do the media reflect the outside world in an impartial way? Do reporters simply report? The media may in fact engage in **agenda setting**, selecting and emphasising or framing different aspects of stories – in fact, telling us how to think about issues rather than simply informing us of the issues (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan 2002; Peake & Eshbaugj-Sohab 2008; Sweetser et al. 2008; Tan & Weaver 2007). Television interviewers, producers and editors, for example, may influence the final shape of a program based on their ideas of 'relevance', rather than the actual content of interviews or factual material (Nylund 2003).

Biased media?

The question of whether the media are biased is large and complex. There are (at least) six different ways in which media representations of reality and truth can raise questions about media credibility. These are:

1. *Editorial bias:* This refers to prejudice or deliberate unfairness on the part of writers and editors. Charges of bias are often made against the media, usually in terms of political ideology: it is a commonplace, for example, for people who might meaningfully be placed politically left of centre to assert that the media have a right-wing or conservative bias (Herman & Chomsky 2002), and for people who might meaningfully be placed politically right of centre to assert that the media has a left-wing or liberal bias (Coulter 2003).

2. *Editorial incompetence:* Some reporters and/or editors, out of laziness or a lack of professionalism, do not cover all sides of a story, or pursue an angle that leads them to de-emphasise other important points of view.

3. *Self-censorship:* Media staff may be socialised into taking on unspoken and unwritten norms that, for example, restrain them from criticising their employer; in other words, if a

news-gathering organisation finds that, in addition to its normal activities of finding news, it has itself become news, and bad news at that, then the chances of that bad news being covered impartially by its own staff are not good (see chapter 20, 'Team communication').

4. *Distortion:* The media may give disproportionate emphasis to crime, violence ('If it bleeds, it leads') and other negative stories, selectively focusing on atypical events and people. Thus, international students watching daytime talk TV obtain a view of US sexual mores seriously at variance with reality (Woo & Dominick 2003).

5. *External pressure:* Actual or perceived pressure by outsiders, such as sponsors and advertisers, can change or censor editorial content, or blur the line between editorial and advertising content via puffery, and surreptitious advertising and product placement (Price 2003; Baerns 2003; Hilliard 2004, pp. 13–16).

6. *Audience misperception:* Audiences may subjectively interpret neutral media stories as biased against their own and others' points of view (known as the **hostile media effect**) (Arpan & Raney 2003; Chia et al. 2007; D'Alessio 2003; McChesney 2003; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart 2004). Thus, media consumers, when reading stories about crime, may interpret the actual crime levels in a community in terms of their own subjective experience rather than according to objective levels (Lupton 1999).

Hostile media effect: the phenomenon of audiences subjectively perceiving unbiased coverage of a story as biased

The media: business, technology and style

Stories are reported by journalists, who often have a strong ethical commitment to the truth and a strong professional ethos. These internal impulses are reinforced by external factors such as laws relating to slander and libel, and community/audience perceptions of credibility. But without audiences (readers, viewers, listeners), the media could not function, and the pursuit of those audiences means that media organisations often have strong organisational and profit-maximising norms that may conflict with the ways in which journalists would wish to portray truth.

Organisational norms also interact with technological and style factors to produce the range of media experiences available to audiences. For example, an audience is not monolithic or homogeneous, but rather comprises numerous subgroups, stratified according to income, behaviour and preferences. **Demographics**, statistical data relating to objective factors such as income and address/location, have often played a role in media planning.

In recent years, psychographic data has become almost as important. **Psychographics** relate to the values and perceptions of audience members (Kahle & Chiagouris 1997; Weinstein 2004). For example, table 8.1 shows PALS (Personal Aspiration Lifestyle Segments) psychographic data developed by Nielsen Media Research. Figure 8.1 shows in greater detail the consumer behaviour of a particular market segment within this schema.

Demographics: the statistics of a population or group (relating to variables such as age, income, socioeconomic background and place of residence)

Psychographics: the study and statistical representation of personality traits (relating to variables such as values and perceptions)

Table 8.1: PALS (Personal Aspiration Lifestyle Segments) psychographic data

Balance Seekers	Representing 19 per cent of the population (aged 14+), they actively aspire to a balanced lifestyle, and are more likely to be middle aged, with those in the workforce more likely to be found in managerial or professional roles • More likely to have a young family • Lead healthy lifestyle • Not too concerned about how others see them in terms of appearance • Less attracted than most to new ideas and technology • Only slightly motivated by success, but family very important — it's all about balance • Light viewers of commercial TV • Medium to heavy viewers of non-commercial TV

Health-Conscious	Representing 29 per cent of the population, their priorities are health and fitness. They avoid unhealthy foods and exercise regularly to maintain their fitness, although they are less likely to be concerned about their image. Definitely not early adopters of new technology. • Heavily skewed to couples with no children • All about health-living, exercising and eating • Least likely of all groups to adopt new ideas or keep up with new technology • Less likely to be concerned about career and goals than other groups • Heavy commercial TV and pay-TV viewers • Medium to heavy non-commercial TV viewers • Light to medium use of the internet • Magazine heavy
Harmony Seekers	Representing 13 per cent of Australian consumers, these people are older; they have arrived and are now concerned about giving and sharing through community work. They are actively involved in hobbies and indulge in luxuries afforded by their achievements. They are not concerned about physical fitness or health, and are not quick to embrace new ideas or technology. • Singles/couples, no children at home • Not particularly concerned about health • Not concerned about trying to impress others • Career and goals do not dominate their thinking • Light viewers of commercial TV but heavy viewers of non-commercial TV • Heavy viewers of pay-TV • Medium to heavy use of internet
Individualistic	Constituting 18 per cent of Australian consumers, these are 'me first' people who consider family a low priority. Life is really all about themselves; they are image and fashion conscious, heavily oriented to success and goal achievement. They are also big new technology, media and internet users. • No children in the home; heavy skew towards singles • Like to wear clothes noticed by others and be stylish • Early adopters of new technology and new ideas • Conscious about health • Success and goal oriented • Light commercial TV viewers • Medium to heavy non-commercial TV viewers • Heavy internet users • Heavy non-commercial radio • Most likely to have a pay-TV subscription but are medium viewers
Fun Seekers	Representing 4 per cent of Australians, they are heavy consumers of commercial media and while responsible concerning family and financial security, they aspire to add more fun so as to improve their fairly structured lifestyles. Their escapist attitude makes them ideal candidates for holiday/entertainment and lifestyle improvement products and services. • A sense of fun in their life is their main priority • Skewed towards families with a heavy skew towards young families • Like to look good and care about their appearance • Medium commercial TV viewers • Less likely to watch non-commercial TV • Heavy listeners of commercial radio

Success Driven	
Success Driven	Representing 17 per cent of Australians, they consider their career a top priority, so success and visible signs of success are important to them. While families play a role in life, they are strongly oriented to personal goal achievement. They are early adopters of technology and new ideas and heavy consumers of media to stay in touch. • Career is a top priority • Very goal and success oriented • Skewed towards families • Least likely to be concerned about health • Very conscious regarding their image — strive always to look stylish • Early adopters of technology and new ideas • Light viewers of commercial and non-commercial TV • Heavy internet users • Heavy cinema goers

Source: Nielsen Panorama: Survey 7 September 2007–August 2008, 12 month database.

Figure 8.1: Behaviour of success-driven consumer segment

Success Driven	
Are more likely to be:	**Index**
Students	233
Trades & Related	134
Professional	126
Salesperson/Personal Service Worker	125
Are more likely to earn:	
Up to $9 999 per annum	149
$40 000 to $49 999 per annum	105
$50 000 to $69 999 per annum	110
$70 000 to $99 999 per annum	109
$100 000 to $119 999 per annum	101
$120 000 to $139 999 per annum	130
$140 000+	107
Are more likely to have:	
Young Family	138
Older Family	149
Children in the Home	142
Household size 5+	152

Success Driven	
Must see TV programs include:	**Index**
My Wife and Kids	167
The Simpsons	167
Neighbours	151
Rove	146
South Park	143
Prison Break	138
Big Brother	136
Heroes	132
The Footy Show	130
Soccer	129
Ugly Betty	126
Supernatural	124
Listen to Radio Stations:	
Nova 96.9 (Sydney)	158
Triple J (Sydney)	152
2Day FM (Sydney)	146
Fox FM (Melbourne)	147
Nova 100.3 (Melbourne)	142
Mix 101.1 (Melbourne)	142
Nova 106.9 (Brisbane)	145
B105 (Brisbane)	121
Triple J (Brisbane)	112
Are more likely to read:	
Dolly	208
Girlfriend	207
PC Powerplay	186
Shop Til You Drop 4 Kids	180
Men's Style Australia	176

Success Driven	
Are more likely to read: *(continued)*	**Index**
FHM	175
TV Hits	174
Ralph	169
Mother and Baby	167
Shop Til You Drop	167
Cosmopolitan	164
Rolling Stone	161
Are more likely to visit:	
Dolly.ninemsn.com.au	197
Thehothits.com	192
aol music	178
Cosmo.ninemsn.com.au	172
Cleo.ninemsn.com.au	172
Take40.com	171
Myspace.com	162
Harpersbazaar.com.au	153
Atari.com	151
Ralph.ninemsn.com.au	141
Are more likely to have participated in the following activities (past 12 months):	
Undertook Study/Coursework	158
Night Clubs	153
Went to a theme park	139
Brought work home	134
Went to the gym	130
Camping	129
Travel:	
Domestic travel past 6 months	100
Domestic travel next 6 months	101
Overseas travel past 12 months	103
Overseas travel next 12 months	101

Demographic and psychographic data and market segmentation will, to a certain extent, help predict:

- what type of media channels will be chosen by individual audience members
- the types of products that will be advertised on one radio station but not another
- the mix of music that will be played on one radio station but not another
- the types of products that will be advertised on one television program or network but not another program or network
- the types of products that will be advertised in one newspaper but not another.

Media content, format, design

Psychographic data and demographic data, and their application to media audiences, confirm that the media industry is a business (Beaudoin & Thorsen 2002). For example, a major preoccupation of media proprietors may not be excellence in editorial content but rather the cash flow that comes from display and classified advertising. Pursuing market share is a priority in public sector/national and community media as well as in the arena of commercial media. Media segmentation and consumer targeting is standard in most businesses, with the media themselves no different in this respect.

All businesses need revenue to survive, and while public sector organisations can be funded from tax revenues, private sector organisations need funding from sources such as advertising. The audience/advertising nexus is critical to the content and style of all media (Turnbull 2002; Sinclair 2002), not least because targeting of audience/market segments facilitates the sale of sponsors' products. Business dynamics can sometimes lead to interesting hybrids of editorial and advertising content, and of convergent technology and entertainment and marketing imperatives, such as:

- 'catazines' or 'magalogues' — magazines aimed at specific audiences, such as teenage girls, which also contain catalogues of products and forms to order associated products (Merrill 1999)
- 'reality' TV programs such as *Big Brother* and *Australian Idol*, copies of Dutch and US shows, with built-in interactive aspects so that audiences vote by using short messaging service (SMS) messages via mobile or cell phones (television stations reaping revenue from SMS as well as advertising, and marketers 'training' consumers to use mobile technology, encouraging them to consume in new ways) (Lester 2003).

There are also interactions between market segments and style, design and focus. For example:

- Broadsheet newspapers and national electronic media tend to use text with higher **readability** (reading age) scores than tabloid newspapers and commercial electronic media (see online chapters 3 and 4).
- Tabloid print media tend to use more photographs and graphics than broadsheets, with newspaper design significantly influenced by television formats.

Readability: statistical estimate of reading age required for comprehension of text, depending on word and sentence length

- Tabloids tend to have less coverage of politics, economics, finance and technology and more coverage of 'human interest' topics, celebrities and sport than broadsheets.

Such complex interactions (figure 8.2) suggest that media communicators need to be able to vary their style for print, broadcast and online channels, depending on the targeted audience or audiences.

Figure 8.2: Relationships between market segments/audiences, media content, design and format, and readability of media text
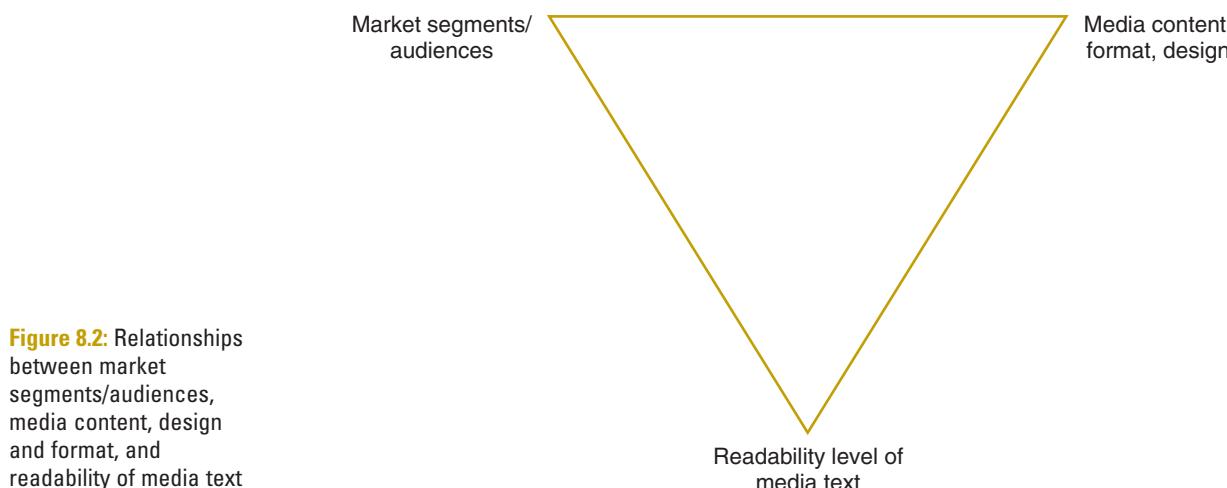
ASSESS YOURSELF

Using word processing software, test the readability scores of:
- two different publications (e.g. a broadsheet versus a tabloid newspaper)
- different sections within one publication (e.g. the finance versus the sport pages).

What conclusions can you draw about style and audience/market segment?

Media content production: a model

Let's now consider the way in which media communication actually occurs. We will first look at a general model of content production and go on to consider specific writing approaches for particular media.

Certain common dynamics apply to most production of media content (figure 8.3).

Figure 8.3: A media content production model
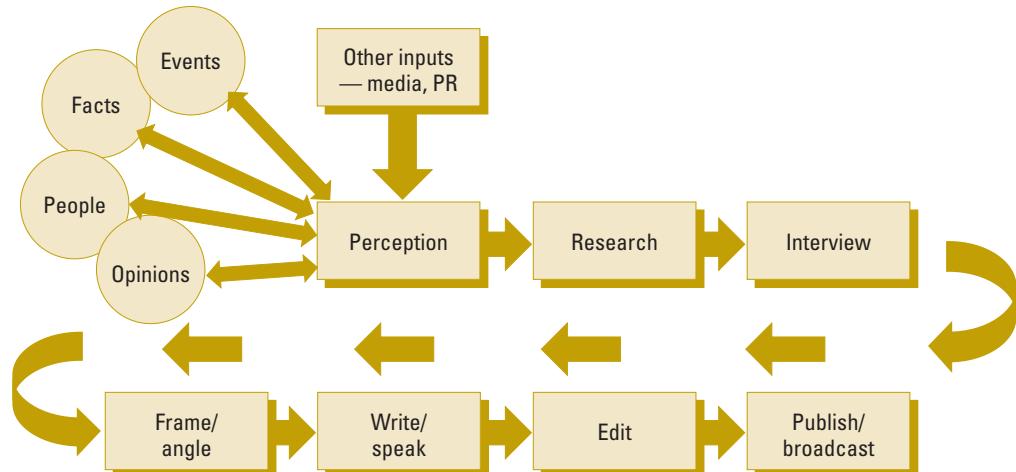
Perceiving news

For example, journalists will be aware of a range of events, people, facts and opinions abroad in the real world. Presuming no biases are in operation (or, if present, at least acknowledged), individual writers or teams of writers need to be able to make sense of this barrage of data, using values and standards to distinguish between what is newsworthy and what is not. Cohen-Almagor (1999) suggests there are six types of events that media reporters may consider covering, only the first two of which should actually be covered (figure 8.4).

Events that have a social or public meaning	These might include, for example, the election or assassination of a prime minister, a train overturning, war situations, airport delays, terrorist attacks or scientific discoveries.
Gossip: events that have little social value but are of interest to the public	The line between the public and private sphere of people's lives needs to be noted, and here distinctions can be drawn between: • people who choose a life in the public eye, such as politicians, diplomats, show business personalities, artists and sportspeople (but only if events in their personal lives can be construed by a court of law as having public interest) • ordinary people who do not have the resources to protect themselves from invasions of privacy.
Heightened events	These are events that are embellished or even influenced by reporters for the sake of a story — e.g. when terrorists seize hostages and a reporter asks them for details of (hitherto unmentioned) ultimatums.
Exaggerated events and twisted stories	These are reported events whose substance and details are misrepresented — e.g. dramatically overestimating the attendance at a funeral, or giving prominence to lurid accusations against individuals but not covering their later acquittal on the charges.
Staged events	These are events that would probably not have occurred had the media not been present — e.g. a person sets himself on fire as a protest, with attendant media crews doing nothing to dissuade him, or media representatives paying demonstrators to protest for the cameras.
Fictitious events	These are events that have no connection to reality, or at least there is no tangible evidence that they occurred — e.g. a journalist receives the Pulitzer Prize for a story about an eight-year-old drug addict, who, it turns out, did not actually exist.

Figure 8.4: Six types of events

Source: Adapted from Cohen-Almagor (1999, pp. 17–22).

Unscrupulous writers may also scan other media or accept input from public relations specialists. Indeed, the increasing proportion of media content that is influenced by, or is simply lifted from, existing public relations material is a source of concern for some media commentators (see chapter 21, 'Public communication').

Researching

Research, of course, is vital to any communication endeavour. Researching a story may involve identifying:

- statistical data about the relevant suburb, city, state or country
- personal details of the people involved
- archival material concerning background factors
- quoted opinions and facts from people close to the story in space and/or time.

Research helps create a context for personal interviews, as illustrated by the two experienced television interviewers quoted below.

> I do a lot of research [in planning personal profile interviews]. Then I like to spring from the things that have an impact on me, and then I like to go over them with the interviewee. I think that gives me the maximum opportunity to get something real, because if the subject is even remotely interested in the interviewer he will sense that these things inspire passion. (Jana Wendt, in Wilson 2000, p. 156)

> A current affairs interview goes to the heart of analysis. I'm doing my own analysis, in my reading, in my talking to people, before I actually frame the questions. What the audience is seeing is me testing out my own analytical conclusions with the person most relevant to the issue — it might be the minister — so they are seeing an honest process. Journalists from time immemorial have gone out and done the groundwork and done the collating in the same way that a bricklayer might organise his bricks and his mortar before he builds the walls of the house. As an interviewer, you are displaying at least some of that process more obviously to people, and in that way it's more direct — not necessarily more honest, but more direct...
>
> You approach every interview on the basis of doing adequate preparation and background reading, thinking about where the subject is coming from, trusting that your instincts are in tune with what the audience wants to know, looking to the logic of how you will marshal the questions so that there is a logical flow and a rationale driving the interview... you prepare questions, but you've got to be prepared to throw them away if an unexpected tangent comes up or if what you think logically might flow as question eight is presented as a follow-up to question two. (Kerry O'Brien, in Wilson 2000, pp. 94–5)

Research is primarily concerned with secondary data — that is, data that already exists. Primary data, that which is created by the researcher, can consist of opinions gathered randomly or systematically in the field, or (budget and time constraints permitting) commissioned opinion polls or surveys. Research allows writers to draw on existing information when preparing interviews, helping them to develop their own opinions and write sound questions while avoiding the potential embarrassment of factual errors, not to mention possible legal action. Good research skills depend on good organisation and sound record-keeping practices.

Interviewing

In the print media interviews may form the basis for a text story, while in the electronic media the interview itself is what is published or broadcast. The purpose of most interviews is to seek answers to the basic **5W-H questions** — that is, the *what*, *where*, *why*, *who*, *when* and *how* of a story (see online chapter 5).

Questioning techniques are a vital part of any communication process (see chapter 11). Working with interviewees or sources requires some skills that are unique to media communication situations, and some that are generic to all situations. Interview subjects are like expert witnesses: their opinions, based on their grasp (or lack of grasp) of the particulars of a situation, are the raw materials for creating the story. Interviewers build up their subjects' points of view, from which they can extract a series of quotations to help bolster the credibility of the final media communication.

5W-H questions: the fundamental questions behind any news story — namely, What? Where? Why? Who? When? How?

The interviewer needs to establish a working relationship from the outset. You want something from the interviewees or sources, and you need to negotiate the circumstances under which they will give it to you. Whether in person or via the telephone, you should approach each source with tact and empathy. In the transition phase from pre-interview to interview, consider how you can develop rapport, and indeed whether rapport is appropriate.

> In the lengthy personal interviews it's absolutely critical to establish some kind of a relationship. People will be more candid with you if you have established a human rapport. And that can be hard...I don't see any point in dogged pursuit of [personal areas that are off-limits]. Apart from anything else, it has the potential to damage the rest of the interview and the rapport with the interviewee. I mean, if you can't extract some information gently, you can't extract it at all...If you know that you are going to challenge someone such as a politician on his position, it is difficult. It's a real skill, to extract information without going in with a sledgehammer. But even so I would say that there is a common humanity, and I think it's just as well to establish that commonality under any circumstances.
>
> On the other hand there are times — I'm thinking of interviews on *60 Minutes* — when you know you are going to be discussing really bad behaviour on the part of your interviewee, and that you will be asking questions that become increasingly unpleasant. In cases that might involve, say, an out-and-out criminal, I am not in favour of establishing that human rapport. I would regard that as pretty hypocritical. (Wendt, in Wilson 2000, pp. 157–8)

Within the interview itself, strategies for effective questioning include (Rich 2003, pp. 123–9):

- using a mix of closed and open questions (closed questions require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, while open questions require a more discursive response)
- being comfortable with being 'dumb'. Remember, the source is the expert, and it's OK not to have expertise in an area. If you are stumped, consider saying to the source, 'I'm sorry, I don't understand this. Could you explain it so I can write it clearly for my readers?'
- starting with non-threatening questions before moving on to questions that might cause discomfort with certain interviewees
- dispensing with pleasantries with media-wise interviewees, such as politicians – going in hard to set a no-nonsense tone and cut to the chase
- establishing a chronology of events – what happened when to create the current set of circumstances
- repeating questions where necessary. If the source is being deliberately evasive, or is wandering from the topic, try changing the subject and come back to the salient question, perhaps in a reframed form.
- asking for definitions. Cut through jargon.
- using the 'blame others' technique. When you have to ask tough questions, blame someone else: 'Your opponent says you cheated on your income taxes. How would you respond to that?'
- using silence when appropriate. If a response is unsatisfactory, don't rush on to the next question. Create a silence to see if the interviewee will fill that silence.
- handling emotional questions with tact
- asking free-choice questions. Ask the source if there is anything he or she would like to add.
- verifying everything. Check spellings of names, and check the accuracy of source documents such as résumés or press releases.

Let's consider the question of what are inappropriate questions or questioning strategies. How far should you go to get what you want? In other words, what are the ethics of your interviewing strategy?

> You've always got to ask yourself whether there is validity in asking a question. What's your aim, what do you achieve, is it fair? Particularly about people's private lives, you just have to bring sensible and responsible judgements to bear. If something about the private life of a public figure is relevant to their public role. That is a point of concern, and it may be valid

to ask a question about their private life, but you have to think very carefully about that stuff. Yes, you should have boundaries …

There are degrees of confrontation, just like anything else. I mean, is it confrontational when you have asked an absolutely legitimate question about a point of policy that could affect many people's lives, when you might have a cabinet document written by the minister who is sitting across the table from you, and he is engaging in doublespeak? Do you have a right to say to the minister, 'I'm sorry, minister, but you haven't answered the question'? I believe you do. Is that confrontational? To a degree, yes. Do I have the right to lean across the table and grab him by the shirt and shake him? No. (O'Brien, in Wilson 2000, p. 98)

Frame/angle

Angle: perspective or point of view adopted in presenting material in a story

How to frame the story – to decide on an **angle** or perspective – is a vital part of communicating the story (Greenberg & Knight 2004; Scheufele 1999; Tilley & Cokley 2005). Everyone interprets events in different ways. This is immediately apparent when we compare how different media cover the same story; it is also confirmed when we talk to different people about the same topic or event. Media communicators, too, will bring different preconceptions to any story. This is human nature, and it's acceptable so long as avoidable bias is not part of the interpretation.

Even factual news stories are subject to this process. The facts of a simple news story could easily fill several pages, so decisions need to be made about what to include and what not to include. These decisions are made before or during writing, well before any formal editing or subediting.

For example, consider the following simple news story: A new version of a famous computer game is being launched. The launch is attended by a famous musician, and the event features actors dressed up as characters from the game. Attending journalists might adopt any of a number of angles, depending on their media outlet and audience, and their own perceptions and values (table 8.2).

Table 8.2: Angles on a story for different media outlets

Media outlet	Angle	Visuals/sounds
Information technology section of a newspaper	Market reaction to new game. Will the game be better than previous version? Update on new features	Screen shots of game
General news section of tabloid paper	Focus on musician, then on sales figures of game	Musician playing game on computer, surrounded by actors wearing costumes of game characters
Feature section of broadsheet	Violence in computer games — will this game make things better or worse? Musician as role model	Screen shots of game, emphasising violence
Finance magazine	Sales strategy of game manufacturer	Montage of musician playing game and sales figures graph
Music television channel	Musicians and their computers	Musician at launch, at home on computers
Game industry trade magazine	Technicalities of new game	Before and after shots of different versions of game. Programming code of new version
Radio program on new technology	Capacity of existing computers to cope with new games	Interviews with game designers, sound effects/dialogue from game

Considering the best angle to take on a story can help create new points of view. A free-lance communicator, for example, may be able to sell a story several times over for different media outlets, using a different angle each time. It is important, however, that 'getting an angle' does not involve trivialising or distorting the fundamental news values of the story (see the discussion of 'spin' in chapter 19, 'Public communication').

Editing

Editing is about shaping content (Hicks & Holmes 2003; Bowles & Borden 2004). Sometimes the shaping is done for the most mundane reasons – for example, for length. Sometimes the shaping is done to sharpen a particular angle, or to bring out patterns that exist already in the raw text. Editing of print text can be made easier by writing techniques such as the inverted pyramid approach. In the electronic media, bringing back large quantities of audio and/or visual material from the field can make the task of editors both easier (more options to choose from) and harder (more material to evaluate).

In most media organisations, content creators and editors are different people, and that can sometimes cause conflict. In book publishing, editing is undertaken by specialist editors, while in newspapers and magazines editors oversee content, but most of the mechanical text editing is performed by subeditors, who work with reporters' copy to create final versions. In the electronic media, reporters may have more opportunity to participate with sound and image editors in the editing process. The war between editors and writers has been well-documented by both sides:

> Editing is the same as quarrelling with writers — same thing exactly. (Harold Ross)

> No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft. (HG Wells)

> Yes, I suppose editors are failed writers — but so are most writers. (T.S. Eliot)

> An editor is someone who separates the wheat from the chaff and prints the chaff. (Adlai Stevenson)

Publish/broadcast

The culmination of the process, the artefact of the story, is what the audience receives. When a reporter presents a live broadcast, the entire process is telescoped, but without some preparation, the advantage of immediacy will be compromised by unprofessional delivery.

Writing for print

Having reviewed the broad processes of media communication, let's now tighten the focus by examining approaches to writing for different print, electronic and online media. We'll start at the beginning, with the basics.

Media communication: back to basics

Whether writing or editing articles, or improvising in front of a camera or microphone, the media communicator is ultimately alone with the language. True communicative and stylistic ability depends, in the final analysis, on how good a technician the writer is. Above all, this means a mastery of the basics of language, such as grammar, spelling and punctuation (see online chapters 1–5). All too often, however, young entrants into the field of media communication are weak in these areas, as many older professionals have observed:

> Some people may be surprised to learn that Australian newspapers use stylebooks, given the misspellings, the poor syntax, the malapropisms and the erratic punctuation that find

their way into print. But we do. We compile, revise and issue them to staff because they are essential to newspaper production.

Apart from seeking consistency, we need our stylebooks to teach basic grammar and punctuation. The advent of the computer has seen wise old heads disappear from the subs' desks, people who knew the difference between p-o-r-e and p-o-u-r, between the three spellings of their/there/they're and between incredible and incredulous. They didn't hesitate to strike out such nonsense as to hone in, 7 am in the morning and nerve-wracking, with a /w/ on racking. Now, subs' desks are populated by youngsters who have not always been reporters before moving up, people who have seen to hone in in print and have heard it on TV from such icons as Dermott Dunstall or Alfie Lazarus and have therefore thought it must be right.

The copy these young subs read is written by younger reporters whose English teaching at school was no better than their own. I once advised a junior reporter that there was no need for a hyphen in an adverbial compound adjective, such as slowly running stream. He looked blankly at me, and asked what adjectives and adverbs were. He had passed year 12 English with an A. (K. Lockwood 2004, pers. comm., 15 November)

Journalism students tend to be short on verbal skills and general knowledge but enthusiastic about new media. So concluded a panel of educators and conventioneers at the Society of Professional Journalists gathering in Universal City, Calif., Oct. 22–26 . . .

The Orange County Register completes the education of its journalism graduates with in-house classes on everything from writing to understanding the topics and people they cover, said training director Larry Welborn.

'The industry is changing, and we find that some young reporters are poorly equipped for the changes,' he said, as j-schools 'are moving away from practical training toward theory and research.'

Assessing the writing skills of some new hires, he commented, 'There are times when I feel the use of active verbs has become a lost art.'

Another attendee, Lester Brownlee, who teaches at Columbia College in Chicago and reported for the now defunct Chicago Daily News, decried the emphasis on digital communication, declaring: 'Where is the emphasis on the basic skills — good, clear writing? There is not enough of that in journalism schools. Whether it's on the Web or in a newspaper, it's still journalism.' . . .

Tennessee State University professor and former newspaper journalist Harriette Bias Insignares called on high school journalism teachers to work together to strengthen verbal skills and general knowledge before students enter college. 'We must impress upon students that English proficiency is not just a matter of passing tests but a vital tool for getting through life,' she stated. 'And if they're going into journalism, their career depends on such skill. We're getting too many kids who are weak in grammar, punctuation and spelling.' (Stein 1998, pp. 11–12)

If the résumés and cover letters that have come across my desk in the past year are any indication, we, the print media, are doomed.

I have advertised four open editorial positions for my sports-related trade magazine in the past sixteen months. Every day during my search for qualified candidates, I'd open my mail with a quiver of excitement that this might be the day that a prospective editor would make it all the way through a two-paragraph cover letter without making errors that demonstrate a) a fundamental lack of knowledge of English or b) the kind of carelessness that you'd really rather not see in someone whose job is primarily to catch other people's errors . . .

Several journalists saved their worst for last. A journalism grad/newspaper writer whose cover letter included thirteen punctuation errors ended it with this memorably penned flourish: 'I thought that your company and me might make for a fairly close fit.' Another, who

had a B.Sc. in journalism and six years of editorial experience, wrote a great letter that unfortunately ended with a suggestion: 'Let's get together and see if we a match.' Sorry — we not interested . . .

If there's a bright spot in all this, it's that my candidates winnowed the field for me. An amazing three of every five I received failed their first test as editors — although they didn't know they were being tested. And what of the clean letters? Since I know these could have been created by cover-letter software complete with spellcheck, I invited surviving candidates to come in and take an hour-long proofreading test that has roughly forty errors in spelling, punctuation, consistency, grammar, and redundancy. Four of five candidates scored below twenty . . .

Whenever I get together with other curmudgeons — and I'm only thirty-nine — we never run out of people and institutions to blame for this sad state of affairs. There's the crappy educational system that pushes out graduate after graduate who can't spell. There are the journalism departments that teach students how to get the 'who', 'what', and 'when' in their leads but fail to note the importance of reading to students' writing. (Cohen 2001, p. 75). (Reprinted from *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 2001. © 2001 by Columbia Journalism Review.)

The upshot of all this criticism is that if you want to survive, and then excel, in media communication, you must strive to learn your craft, and in the first instance that means grammar, spelling and punctuation — not very glamorous, perhaps, as a career prescription, but realistic nonetheless.

Getting started

How does a media communicator begin the process of writing copy? There are many strategies for planning work and breaking writer's block, but perhaps some advice from practitioners specifically aimed at media writing problems may be useful here.

Scanlan (2002, p. 24) suggests six steps to getting started:

1. Lower your standards, and stop trying for perfection. (This is a good starting strategy, but a bad finishing one.)
2. Get something down. Free-write: simply stop thinking and start writing.
3. Swallow the bile that rises in your throat when you write a first draft because, as you will learn, it contains the promise of the final one.
4. Print out early. One of the downsides of the computer is we don't hit the print button soon enough.
5. Read aloud. People don't read aloud enough. Better yet, have someone else read it to you. If they're stumbling, it's probably because it's not expressed clearly.
6. Apply critical standards. Move your standards up from low to high, and self-edit (see also online chapter 5).

Steve Lovelady, who has worked as an editor with numerous journalists, suggests this remedy for writer's block: try to sum up the gist of the story in 25 words or less. In other words, pitch the story (see chapter 12, 'Oral communication') to cut through to its essence.

Believe it or not, this works. You, the investigative reporter, may well think your project is far too complex, far too nuanced, far too important to be reduced to a twenty-five-word nut. I can only tell you this: in the course of editing eleven Pulitzer Prize-winning stories or series and, in the magazine realm, a National Magazine Award winner and three finalists, I have yet to run across the story too complex or too nuanced or too important to be summed up in twenty-five words or less. And once the reporter-writer submits himself to

that discipline — thinks it through and comes up with the twenty-five words — a magical thing can happen.

Three things, actually. Presto, the heart of the story — the incisively stated, powerful topic paragraph — has been essentially written. And, in all likelihood, a blueprint has been revealed for how to go about constructing the entire story or series. And just as important — it will quickly become clear if there are holes in that mountain of assembled data on which you are both staking your careers. (Lovelady 2001, p. 41). (Reprinted from *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 2001. © 2001 by Columbia Journalism Review.)

Formats and structures

There are two major formats or styles of journalism writing – news and features. The news style uses a direct mode of exposition, the feature style an indirect mode. These formats or styles in print communication have their equivalents in broadcast communication in news and current affairs styles respectively.

Perhaps the most critical part of any story is the lead, or opening sentence. The lead is the crux of an article, similar to the topic sentence in an essay (see chapter 7). It is also the hook that grabs the reader. Straight news stories have direct leads: the reader learns right away what the article is going to be about. Feature stories usually have a delayed lead: the scene is set for the reader before the main point becomes apparent (table 22.3).

Table 8.3: News versus feature leads

News style lead	Feature style lead
'Flash fires swept through hills surrounding the Victorian resort town of Lorne today in scenes that were reminiscent of the 1983 Ash Wednesday disaster.'	'When Country Fire Authority volunteer Melody Asquith woke on Wednesday, she could not have dreamed that within hours she and her fellow volunteers would be pushed to the limits of endurance and would look death in the face.'

Inverted pyramid technique: approach to arranging material in an article in diminishing order of importance to facilitate cutting to length

A common approach to structuring a story is to apply the **inverted pyramid technique** (Pöttker 2003). This simply means that the most important material is put at the beginning of the article, and points are then developed in diminishing order of importance. This makes it easier for editors to cut the copy to fit the space available (figure 8.5).

Lead

Supporting material

End
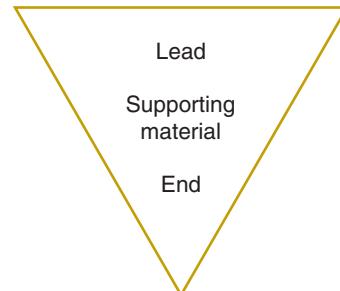
Figure 8.5: The inverted pyramid approach

The inverted pyramid approach can help speed up writing both because the writer does not have to create an elaborate structure, and because editors can work quickly with copy created in this manner. However, the technique is not without its critics, who sometimes refer to it as the 'perverted pyramid' technique (Fry 1999; Kennedy, Moen & Ranly 1992). DeSilva sees the apparent convenience of the technique as far outweighed by the damage done to the structure of the story.

The inverted pyramid makes endings impossible. You simply can't have an ending in an inverted pyramid. You have to order your information most important and most interesting first. The story becomes progressively less interesting and less important as you go along. The theory is that we must do this because people don't read to the end. Well, of course they don't! It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. We teach readers not to read to the end of newspaper stories.

There are a number of things that the inverted pyramid makes impossible. One of them is drama and suspense. You can't have drama and suspense if you order your information in its order of importance. Drama and suspense have to do with chronology. The inverted pyramid is one of the reasons why the world is so incredibly interesting until you read about it in the newspaper. It makes things boring. It makes things dull.

A good ending absolutely, positively, must do three things at a minimum. It must tell the reader the story is over. Must do that. It also needs to nail the central point of the story to the reader's mind. You have to be leaving him with the thought you want him to be taking away from the story. And it should resonate, it really should. You should hear it echoing in your head when you put the paper down, when you turn the page. It shouldn't just end and have a central point. It should stay with you and make you think a little bit. (DeSilva 2002, p. 48)

Layout and text

The page of a newspaper or magazine is like a mosaic: its component parts form a pattern of shapes and text that is critical to making sense of the stories, and also to motivating the reader to keep reading. Learning the visual grammar of layout and text can help you as a writer and as an editor. Different publications use different layout models and shift from one model to another; and terminology relating to layout, as well as other approaches to media communication, varies considerably from country to country to country, and even sometimes from state or region to state or region within one country. Let's look at some layout features.

Headlines

Headlines must grab the reader's attention, accurately encapsulating the content of the article. They should not be full sentences, or punctuated other than for clarification. Short words are usually best, as they avoid the need for unsightly hyphenation. To add vigour to the message, a high proportion of headline words should be verbs.

Straps/kickers

A *strap* or *kicker* is a headline above the main heading that gives further context to the story. It is usually set in a different font from that used for the main story.

Precedes/deckheads

Precedes, *deckheads* or *go-firsts*, like straps or kickers, are assistant headlines. They are summary lines that are positioned after the headline and tend to be longer than straplines or kickers. They may also appear in a different font from that used for the main story.

Crossheads

Crossheads are smaller headings within an article. They tend to signal a transition to a new topic or emphasis within an article. They can also be used simply to break up large blocks of text, which tend to deter some readers. Shorter stories (under 1000 words) do not usually need crossheads.

Captions

Captions accompany photographs and other visual material. They tell readers what they are looking at, ideally including further, not-so-obvious information. Captions should be kept as short as possible. If a photograph or illustration shows more than one person or object, it is

important that the caption provide appropriate identification (e.g. *left to right...clockwise from top right ... middle row ...*).

Breakout/pull quotes

Breakout or *pull quotes* are simply text drawn directly or adapted from the body of the article and run in a prominent position within the article. Like crossheads, pull quotes help break up long blocks of text, making them easier for the reader to absorb. They should also intrigue readers, motivating them to read the article in full. Such quotes tend to be set in a large or bold and perhaps italic font.

It is sometimes necessary to edit the exact words of a quotation, whether to fit the space provided, to clarify an obscure reference or to conform to the grammatical structure of the introductory clause. Where words are omitted, this should be indicated by an ellipsis (three dots); any added or amended words should be placed within square brackets. Of course, care should be taken not to distort the sense of the original (see online chapter 2).

Sidebars, breakouts

A *sidebar*, *breakout* or *box*, set into an article, may feature information, perhaps in bullet points, that helps amplify the main text and provide visual variety.

Paragraphs, sentences and words: the long and the short

Paragraphs in newspapers and magazines tend to be shorter than those used in other genres. Generally, a paragraph comprises a number of linked sentences dealing with a single point or topic. In newspaper writing, it is common to see one- or two-sentence paragraphs, with several consecutive paragraphs focusing on the same point. One reason for this is the relatively narrow measure of the average text column in newspapers and newsletters, which creates visually very long paragraphs. In the print media, therefore, it is customary to break up these paragraphs into shorter ones in order to hold the reader's attention.

Similarly, newspaper writers aim for shorter sentences and try to avoid too many long words that are likely to require unattractive end-of-line hyphenation. This does not require you to change your style to an absurdly oversimplified one; it simply means you need to be aware of layout constraints and how these will affect your communication with your reader, and then adjust your writing style appropriately.

Story development

Stories can be developed in numerous ways. We have noted the 5W-H formula (by which the writer sets out to answer the critical *what*, *where*, *why*, *who*, *when* and *how* questions). Another central issue is the SW question − so what? In other words, what is the relevance of the story to your readers? How does it affect their lives, and why should they keep reading?

Standard patterns of exposition include:
- *inductive:* from the particular to the general (often used in feature writing)
- *deductive:* from the general to the particular (often used in news writing)
- *chronological:* the sequence of events leading up to the present
- *geographic:* house to house, street to street, suburb to suburb, state to state, country to country.

Rhythm and patterning in stories can be created by:
- interconnecting general statements and quotes from sources used as proofs
- alternately using concrete and abstract terms
- giving alternative points of view
- showing conflict and contrast/antithesis and then resolution − action then reaction
- using transitional words and phrases to signal movement between ideas.

Figure 8.6 illustrates a number of layout and story development features.

4 News

FACE OF POVERTY

At least one million people live in poverty in Australia. Rusty is one of them.

Feature-style headline; news-style headline would only use first sentence

Despite record prosperity, homelessness is on the rise — and welfare groups say it's time to focus on the nation's disadvantaged, writes **Farah Faroque**.

Precedes/deckhead

Byline

His friends call him Rusty, and last month he was thinking of proposing to his girlfriend. But 16 days ago, life went awry. After a bipolar episode, Rusty found himself homeless, jobless and living out of his car.

Feature style lead — case study of Rusty

Having exhausted the goodwill of family and friends, he secured crisis accommodation. But after two nights in a hostel, he moved out. He says someone threatened to pull a knife on him for reheating pies from a soup kitchen and trying to sell them on as "midnight snacks".

"You do what you do," Rusty says. "I made a few dollars."

News-style lead might begin with this type of material

After a national election fought amid record prosperity, welfare gorups this week tried to turn the spotlight onto social disadvantage under the banner of Anti-Poverty Week.

At 29, and with a couple of years of university behind him, Rusty doesn't provide a stereotypical face of the problem.

Inductive development—specific to general

He gew up in Cranbourne, is articulate if sometimes prickly, and has plenty of aspirations. "I want to start a small business. I've got a lot of ideas," he says.

His well-worn Nissan Pathfinder is crammed with things, but the load has lightened since he's been sleeping rough. Rusty says he's "hocked" goods worth $4000 because his bank account is in deficit. He still owes thousands of dollars on his vehicle. For now, though, he's waiting for his first dole payment.

Rusty doesn't need to hear debates about the definition of poverty; he's living it every night by the beach. He says he's discovered he's part of an invisible community of car-dwellers.

This isn't news to Sue Parkes at the Sacred Heart Mission in St Kilda, which gives 500 meals each day to Melbourne's poor. "Sometimes you might see an entire family and a dog in a car. They usually park in places like Elwood and St Kilda," she says.

Quoted sources

Heather Lyon, from Hanover Welfare Services, says each night at the service's South Melbourne crisis centre, one in three people is rejected when they come looking for shelter.

"In the light of the economic boom that has benefited many people in our community, it is reprehensible that homelessness is actually increasing," she says.

And having a job, these days, is no guarantee of escaping poverty, according to St Vincent de Paul's Peter Rigg. He says working families on low incomes can easily fall through the cracks following domestic disruptions from a fridge breakdown to a death in the family. "When a death occurs, families on low incomes have to find $3000 or $4000 for funeral expenses. That is a pathway to poverty," he says.

It's these social realities that Anti-Poverty Week organisers have tried to capture in events around the nation this week. However, capturing the public imagination is proving difficult in these bountiful times. After all, according to a Federal Government report, the boom times equate to every man, woman and child in Australia having a net worth of $250,000.

"But there's an inward-looking aspect to prosperity," notes RMIT social policy researcher John Murphy, Anti-Poverty Week's co-convener.

Pull quote/breakout quote

Academic discussions don't wash when confronted with the reality of people's lives.
FATHER PETER NORDEN

"People are, understandably, concerned about their own family circumstances especially if they have a staggering mortgage," he says. "Even on the most stringent measure of poverty, however, the percentage of the population who are below the poverty line is growing."

The week's organisers are using a baseline figure of 1 million to estimate the number of Australians who live in poverty. This figure has been suggested by the right-learning Centre for Independent Studies.

Data core

A report bya Senate inquiry earlier this year cited estimates that ranged from 2 to 3.5 million. Under a definition of the poverty line used by the respected National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling in a Smith Family report, 13 per cent of all Australians, and almost 15 per cent of all children, lived in poverty in 2000.

"Out of a population today of 20 million, this is about 2.6 million Australians," suggests John Murphy.

Antithesis/contrast

But Peter Saunders, from the Centre for Independent Studies, is not convinced, saying the word poverty is emotional and politicised. "There is no 'true' rate of poverty, nor any authoritative definition of what the term means," he writes in *Australia's Welfare Habit*, where he argues for large welfare cuts.

"In the context of Australia, I'm not sure poverty has a relevance," he told *The Age* this week.

Second antithesis/contrast

"I think what people really mean when they talk about poverty is inequality."

Jesuit Social Services' Father Peter Norden disagrees: "Peter Saunders ought to come and visit the familiies at the high-rise public housing estates in my parish in gentrified Richmond … Academic discussions don't wash when confronted with the reality of people's lives."

Recap of opening material

It's not a view that washes with Rusty either.

He's now renting a caravan site on the surf coast, hoping something better will sail onto his horizon.

Cross-refer to editorial on same topic

OPINION Editorial INSIGHT 8

Source: Farouque (2004).

Figure 8.6: Print media layout and story development

Find hard-copy versions of at least two different newspapers or magazines. Note similarities and differences in format, structure, layout, and text and story development. If possible, seek out versions of the same publication 10 years ago, 50 years ago and 100 years ago.
What similarities and differences can you identify?

Style

Style is closely related to readability and audience/market segmentation, and thus will vary considerably from publication to publication, and indeed within one publication: a sports story in a newspaper or television news program will be written in a style quite different from that used in a story about finance or politics.

Personal versus impersonal style

There is always a tension between writing in a neutral, reporting style and infusing style with personal elements. Hiestand argues that, without renouncing the traditional impersonal style, media communicators should be encouraged to add more personal characteristics to their style:

> [The] 'news voice' [is] the conventional, most typical voice in journalism. It's crisp, lean, quirk-free, just the facts ma'am. And that, of course, is a style. In my view, it's a great style. It is a thing of beauty. It's a great accomplishment and of enormous importance in our civic life. It isn't full of personality and color, but it's a very elegant, stylistic achievement. News voice and personal voice do different things, and we really need them both . . .

> Allow yourself to use a robust and rangy vocabulary. One of the things that poets do, and great prose stylists, is to work with words that have been forgotten or that have been damaged from overuse or improper use, or words that have been sullied in some way. As prose stylists, you can restore these words, redeem them. This adds a great spectrum of words that may seem off limits.

> Have fun with vocabulary. And listen for specialized ways of talking, for the lingo of subcultures. The way that neurologists talk, or auto mechanics, or urban teenagers. Much great new language is actually being generated by people in subcultures. So scope that out. That is a gold mine. I would really urge you to use in your writing and as much as you can in journalism as well this more personal writing you're doing, any words that intrigue your ear, even if they are unfamiliar to most people. If anything, a rich vocabulary keeps readers with you because you are a source of surprise.

> That's why style is so important. It's a tree inside you and it keeps evolving as you do. And that's why it's so important to readers. Great style tells them that some other human being is really alive and present to them on the page. They pick up that something human is going on, and they respond to that humanness and that imagination. (Hiestand 2002, pp. 40–1)

Clichés

Clichés are tired, overused expressions (see figure 8.7). We tend to use clichés out of laziness, and later feel guilty about using them. The real problem arises when we don't know we are using them. Media writers who use them often, either consciously or unconsciously, tend to become clichés themselves – that is, they become *hacks*, churning out mediocre material without originality or thought. Make sure you are not one of those writers.

Arguably	Raise the bar
Been there, done that	Resonate
Bizarre twist	Rush to judgement
Bloody coup	Sad state of affairs
Chocoholic/workaholic	Same old, same old
Cries of protest	Send a message
Cutting edge	Skyrocketing
Defining moment	So last year
Don't go there	Spawn
Empowerment	Steep decline
Escalated	The answer is yes to all of the above
Free fall	The good news is …, the bad news is …
Ground zero	The nightmare became reality when …
Held hostage	Thin line
Has issues with	24-7
Humungous	Unleash
I'm outta here	Unprecedented
Impact (verb)	Yadda, yadda, yadda
In the wake of	Yeah, right …
Industrial strength	Window of opportunity
In your dreams	Witch hunt
It's a no-brainer	Worst-case scenario
Litmus test	
Low profile	
Meltdown situation	
… or whatever	
Push the envelope	

Figure 8.7: Common media clichés

Sources: Adapted from LaRocque (2003, pp. 66–7); Knight (2003, pp. 151–5); Rich (2003, p. 173).

Clichés can be tedious, but there can be other word games played out in the media, involving distortion of meaning (see also online chapter 4).

Distortion	Function	Example
Removing agency	Using passive voice (see online chapter 1) to de-emphasise unpleasant facts.	A headline refers to dead Guatamalans (an inaccurately low figure) without mentioning which government's role played a part in the deaths.
Facilitating innuendo	Smearing reputations by not making direct claims.	Words such as 'linked' and 'it is reported' and 'officials claim' permit connections and attitudes to be presented without evidence.
Personification and use of collective words	Using only a small convenience sample of interviewees to make generalisations.	An upbeat headline in a financial paper about Brazilian economic scene, that only takes from interviews of bankers and security market officials, which are 0.25 per cent of the total population.

Distortion	Function	Example
Purring	Using words that seem to be describing desirable states, but are either euphemisms for other things or are used to selectively describe certain types of people.	Words used, such as: reform, responsible, accountability, choice, jobs, growth, modernisation, flexibility, cost–benefit analysis, national security, stability, efficiency.
Glittering generality	Using words that seem to be describing desirable states, but are euphemisms for other things.	Words used, such as: new world order, information superhighway, collateral damage, smart bombs.
Testimonial	Using the referent power of a person to add credibility to a venture.	An unpopular nominee for World Bank uses presence of Bono of U2 to deflect criticisms. Margaret Thatcher visits Falklands during 1982 war with Argentina, and then has landslide victory in the 1983 election.
Photo opportunity	Also known as 'photo op', this is a type of pseudo-event or example of public relations spin, where the media is advised, giving full time and place details, that an important person will be doing something photogenic (i.e. shaking hands with someone important, planting a tree, visiting senior citizens, or promoting something).	Well-staged, occurring, perhaps fractionally more often, in tabloid print and electronic media, and often involving elderly people, children, military personnel, or those who may have received some grooming or preparation as props by PR staff of important personage.

Source: adapted from Vincent (2007), Herman (2007), BBC.co.uk (n.d).

Word choices

Where possible, try to employ verbs rather than nominalisations (e.g. 'investigate' rather than 'carry out an investigation'). Choose the active rather than the passive voice in your verbal constructions (e.g. 'The Insight team checked the Senator's voting record' rather than 'The Senator's voting record was checked by the Insight team'). (See online chapters 1 and 4.)

Be wary of telling your audience what to think by overusing modifiers such as adverbs and adjectives. As the novelist Norman Mailer observes:

> The adjective is the author's opinion of what is going on, no more. If I write 'A strong man came into the room,' that only means he is strong in relation to me. Unless I've established myself for the reader, I might be the only fellow in the bar who is impressed by the guy who just came in. It is better to say, 'A man entered. He was holding a walking stick, and for some reason, he now broke it in two like a twig.' Of course, this takes more time to narrate. So adjectives bring on quick tell-you-how-to-live writing. Advertising thrives on it. 'A super-efficient, silent, sensuous … five-speed shift.' Put twenty adjectives before a noun and no-one will know that you are describing a turd.
> (Mailer, quoted in Rich 2003, p. 215)

Anti-clarity: overwriting and chaotic communication

There are many enemies of clarity, but let's look at just two of them. Writers who use language that is excessively elaborate, tortuous and strained are guilty of overwriting or

'Bulwer-Lyttonese', after the nineteenth-century British writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton. As LaRocque observes:

> The following excerpt, from a West Coast newspaper, is a good candidate for the Bulwer-Lytton contest.
>
>> Around the time Buford O. Furrow Jr. allegedly walked into the Jewish community center with an automatic weapon, on a deranged mission that would shock anew this gun-prone and gun-weary land, paramedic Todd Carb was puttering around a firehouse nearby . . .
>>
>> Carb was the first firefighter to reach the boy. 'He looked mortally wounded,' Carb said. 'I had doubts he could hold on.'
>>
>> The rescue of this ebullient child — who was taken off a ventilator Saturday, his condition upgraded from critical to serious — is the stuff of medical expertise flawlessly wielded, of a young life plucked from savagery's foaming maw.
>
> Savagery's foaming maw, indeed. Start a conversation with that language only if you hope to inspire hoots of laughter.
>
> Clarity and a conversational style are intimate allies that together can tighten and brighten writing. But they bring an equally important and perhaps less obvious benefit: A clear, conversational style can also help make our writing more sensible. (LaRocque 2000, p. 30)

Chaotic writing (figure 8.8), another enemy of clarity, often issues from chaotic speaking, and seems to be particularly associated with sports journalism, where **mixed metaphors**, **non-sequiturs**, clichés and **malapropisms** are common.

Mixed metaphor: a figure of speech drawing on two or more incongruous metaphors

Non-sequitur: something that does not logically follow from what went before; a conclusion that does not follow from the premise

Malapropism: misuse of a word, usually with comic effect

'Although we are playing Russian Roulette we are obviously playing Catch 22 at the moment and it's a difficult scenario to get my head round.'

Paul Sturrock, Plymouth Argyle FC website

'I can't fault Mark Palios too highly . . .'

John Motson, BBC1

'The trouble with football these days is that there are too many Madonnas in the game.'

Caller, Radio 5 Live

Figure 8.8: Chaotic communication

Source: Private Eye, Colemanballs, http://www.private-eye.co.uk.

Writing for television

The broadcast media may share similar design and content values with print media. It is possible, for example, to argue that some television and radio programs have more 'broadsheet' or up-market appeal, while some programs have more populist, 'tabloid' or down-market appeal. Both channel the requirement to communicate in a clear, concise and grammatical manner. The dissimilarities can be pronounced, however. Television requires stories to be:
- *shorter:* TV news items are rarely longer than 120 seconds, with many shorter. As we generally speak at a rate of 150–250 words per minute, the word count of most TV items is substantially lower than print articles on the same topic.
- *expressed in simpler language:* Sentences and words used in broadcast journalism tend to be shorter and simpler.
- *more visual:* TV needs pictures to show what is happening. Description, the basis of most print journalism, is not enough.

- *more 'actual':* TV journalists may need to be in the field a good deal more than print journalists. In some circumstances, a print journalist can write a good article without leaving the desk or telephone. Such options are rarely available to broadcast journalists.

TV news copy style tends to be more informal and conversational than comparable print journalism. Some broadcasters consciously try to communicate with the individual watching the program, rather than the mass. Reporters, newsreaders and studio anchor people will often vary the inflection of their spoken delivery to simulate the dynamics of conversation.

The world shown by TV needs to be explained in ways that are different from those used in print journalism (Arnold 2003; Hilliard 2004). For example, graphics shown briefly on a TV screen need to be simpler than those used in print. Certain aspects of the content may need to be repeated to ensure successful communication to an audience subject to many environmental distractions (people talking, children crying, phones ringing) (Rich 2003, p. 255).

The broadcast story usually entails the reporter going out into the field with a video/film crew to get live footage of interviews, events and locations. This raw material is brought back to the studio, where the reporter will work with producers and editors to put together a story. Print journalists will use a fraction of the material they have collected; broadcast journalists may use an even smaller proportion. Twenty minutes (1200 seconds) of an interview or news conference may be reduced to only ten seconds of screen time.

The broadcast writer will work with the images available to create a mosaic of:
- moving and still images
- interviews with individuals involved
- superimposed titles identifying individuals, places and things important to the story
- voice-over commentary by the reporter, recorded in a studio
- a section or piece delivered on camera by the reporter in the field in front of a background relevant to the story
- lead-in and lead-out words spoken by the newsreader or anchor person.

The text created in the broadcast genre is closer to a script than a print article; it is often useful to create a **storyboard** before or after the item is assembled and written.

Storyboard: graphic treatment of a story, broken down into a sequence of text and images; a visual aid for planning a visual narrative

Television news can be compelling and entertaining. It takes us there, and it shows us what is happening, using image and sound, movement and colour. It has potential shortcomings, however. These include:
- oversimplifying events, creating angles where they simply don't exist
- trivialising events by covering them for a short time, after which they are buried under a welter of newer stories, leaving no physical record (as in print stories)
- favouring 'soft' news stories that prioritise entertainment value
- colluding with public relations practitioners who arrange visually rich photo opportunities, events and 'pseudo-events' (see chapter 21: 'Public communication') that make generation of story content an easier but less disinterested process
- overemphasising binary, adversarial conflict in situations by even-handedly presenting opposing points of view
- distorting the import and context of interviews by selecting and running only a few short 'grabs' or samples
- overdoing the conversational delivery of words, so that inflection patterns create a caricature of normal speech
- editorialising on news content, either explicitly or by verbal inflection or body language.

Writing for online media

Online communication is a new and exciting arena of communication (see also chapter 6, 'Online writing').

Online media include sites that are adjuncts to mainstream media, such as online versions of newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, as well as not-for-profit and independent online news agencies. Online media have a number of particular advantages when compared to traditional media. Online media can allow users to access stories on demand, deliver a huge variety of material to people with particular information needs or specialist interests (cheap technology means anyone can publish on any subject), encourage development of communities through online interaction (opinion polls, chat groups, etc.), communicate with global audiences, and provide stories as they break (there are no strict deadlines with the web so stories are published as they break).

In some respects, the paradigm is the South Korean OhMyNews, started in 2000. It taps into the two key questions of online media: credibility, and the business model (i.e. how do you make money on the internet?). OhMyNews makes about 70 per cent of its money through advertising, with the rest coming from reader contributions and story syndication (selling stories on to other news agencies) (Flew 2008). It also has a fair amount of credibility, broadcasting the first interview with the newly-elected President in 2002. But what of the rest? The 'citizen journalists' or bloggers have an uneasy time with actual journalists.

Bloggers do not have high credibility with journalists or public relations practitioners, the latter perhaps because they lack some credibility themselves (Sweetser et al. 2008, p. 179–180). PR practitioners tend to use blogs as a form of environmental scanning (see chapter 19, 'Public communication', p. 643), while journalists have tended to use others' blogs as sources of breaking news (Baum & Groeling in press, have identified bloggers as media 'gatekeepers', along with more conventional sources such as cable TV and talk radio). When journalists write their own blogs, they find that the two-way mode of communication (see chapter 1, 'Communication today') is challenging, but can be useful. Even corporations are now beginning to put blogs on their websites (although unless the information imparted is of top quality, shareholders might begin to wonder if executives have too much time on their hands).

What about the money? Simons (2007) borrows the anthropological term 'gift economy' to make the point that it is difficult to make money on the internet, although one means is through Google Ads, whereby a blogger takes on ads, and each time that ad is hit, the advertiser makes a payment (Simons 2007, pp. 205, 217). She also notes the rise of subscription-only journals, the viability of which is yet to be tested (Simons 2007, p. 223).

Surveys reveal that the credibility of blogs is rising (Sweetser et al. 2008), perhaps at the same rate as the 'voluntary encyclopedia' Wikipedia.

Hester and Dougall (2007) point out that online news services such as those run by Google and Yahoo are making a profit. They are content aggregators for the most part: that is, they pick up news stories (text, audio and video) from existing news services, and put them online. Perhaps they are growing in strength because computer users can work on their main tasks, checking the breaking news hours before the evening television news is aired, which may use the same footage.

There is enormous potential to stream such content onto handheld devices (which not so long ago were simply 'mobile/cell phones'), using 3G (third generation) technology, and with upcoming 4G and 5G technology, media and telecommunication companies may well produce new media hybrids used by millions, if not billions, to stream content to customers. The glamour and beauty of these devices, backed with the marketing resources of large companies, should perhaps not distract actual and potential users from taking note that much more research needs to be done to establish that these devices do not damage a person's health (see Abaya and Gilbert 2008; Maisch 2008; Oberfeld 2005; Wood 2005). There is also the problem of **data shadow** (trackable data). Porter (2008) points out that nothing is ever really lost on the internet, so that intimate details written on MySpace, Facebook and other sites may come back to haunt people in the decades to come (WordSpy 2001).

Data shadow: The trackable data that a person creates by using technologies such as credit cards, cell phones, and the Internet (WordSpy.com)

Writing for an online page

An online page is even more of a 'mosaic' than a typical newspaper page in that more stories can be started on an online page than a print page. This is because a print page a story can be 'spilled' to another page (with 'continued on page 3' instructions or jump lines), while a reader of an online page can 'drill down' into another level of hypertext, or text arranged on and linked between multiple planes or levels by means of computer software and mouse-driven navigation. Online text can also connect with databases, and audio and video files.

Not everyone has access to computer hardware and software and broadband technology that can make all of this work, of course. There can be the more fundamental question of how to make online communication pay – a question not easily resolved.

Basic online writing should apply basic newspaper conventions, which means that stories should be succinct and easily accessed from a main opening screen, while containing further media links where this would be used effectively. For example, videos for particularly significant images, text to explain images, hypertext to connect to related websites, and audio clips where those featured in the story tell their own perspective of the story.

Summary

In this chapter, we considered the global and technological background to the modern media, noting trends such as globalisation, convergence, demassification and a blurring of the lines between information and entertainment, tabloid journalism and quality news, and objectivity and subjectivity. We considered the question of media bias, looking at agenda setting, the hostile media effect and types of bias (editorial bias, editorial incompetence, self-censorship, distortion, external pressure and audience misperception). We explored the relationship between communication style, audience and markets, and considered demographics, psychographics, readability and formats and design. We investigated different phases of a media content production model: perceiving news (including consideration of event types, such as those that have a social or public meaning, gossip, heightened events, exaggerated events, staged events, fictitious events), researching, interviewing, finding a frame or angle, writing or speaking, editing, and publishing/ broadcasting. We then looked at the specifics of print communication techniques, taking note of the need for the basics (grammar, spelling and punctuation) to be mastered and for writers to know how to break writer's block. We considered formats and structures such as leads and the inverted pyramid structure. We looked at aspects of layout and text (such as headlines, straps/kickers, precedes/deckheads, crossheads, captions, breakout/ pull quotes, sidebars and breakouts). We turned to questions of story development and style, such as paragraphing, expositional patterns, techniques for creating rhythm and transition, personal vs impersonal style, clichés, distortions, word choices, overwriting and chaotic communication. Finally, we examined techniques for writing for television and online.

Student study guide

KEY TERMS

agenda setting *p. 8.3*

angle *p. 8.14*

broadsheet *p. 8.2*

data shadow *p. 8.27*

demographics *p. 8.4*

5W-H questions *p. 8.12*

hostile media effect *p. 8.4*

inverted pyramid technique *p. 8.18*

malapropism *p. 8.25*

mixed metaphor *p. 8.25*

non-sequitur *p. 8.25*

psychographics *p. 8.4*

readability *p. 8.9*

storyboard *p. 8.26*

tabloid *p. 8.2*

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Identify at least two ways in which media bias can occur.
2. What is the relationship between readability levels, media types and audiences?
3. What are the technical and content differences between tabloid and broadsheet media?
4. Identify at least three interviewing strategies.
5. A managing editor advertises an editorial position. Applicants submit résumés and cover letters. Commenting on the letters and résumés, the managing editor remarks, 'An amazing three of every five I received failed their first test as editors — although they didn't know they were being tested.' What is likely to be meant by this?
6. What is the inverted pyramid technique? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
7. Explain these terms: news-style lead, breakout quote, sidebar.
8. What are the strengths of television communication of news and current affairs?
9. What is a data shadow and why might it present future problems for people?

APPLIED ACTIVITIES

1. Analyse at least two different commercial electronic media outputs — for example, radio programs and television programs. Speculate on who the target audience is in terms of demographic and psychographic data. How do these data relate to specific content of programming (music played, style and format, subject matter, themes) and specific content of advertising (products, presentation).
2. Analyse a news broadcast on commercial radio or television and a news broadcast on national/public sector radio or television. What similarities and differences are there in terms of approach, language choice, presentation and length?
3. Analyse two different news stories in (a) a broadsheet newspaper (b) a tabloid newspaper and (c) an online news source, for example the online versions of (a) or (b). What similarities and differences do you find? Consider using readability scores on language.
4. Take samples of news style and feature style text from a source. Now rewrite the news style piece in feature style, and rewrite the feature style piece in news style. What does this exercise reveal about story structure?
5. Using the clichés list provided in figure 8.6, create a parody news story, stringing together as many clichés as you can.
6. Tape a television news item or several items. Now create a storyboard explaining the structure.
7. Summarise the pros and cons of any health aspects when using new media technologies.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You edit the newsletter for Gigabank international. With a nationwide circulation of 30 000, it has a bigger audience than some suburban newspapers or mainstream magazines. You have previously worked as a mainstream journalist, and still have numerous friends in the big media, several of whom have been calling you to ask for the inside dope on Charlie Unsworth, the chief executive officer of Gigabank. Rumours are flying about how he may be involved in shady share trading and international currency deals. Louise, a friend at the national daily, phoned this morning to tell you that their investigative team is going to publish an exposé on Charlie in ten days' time. She wanted you to confirm a rumour that he is trying to pressure the board into giving him a bonus so he can resign, cash in and flee the country. You offer to try to check out the rumour and then hang up, just as Charlie himself walks in.

'Hi,' says Charlie. 'Say, could you run this for me, and juice it up a bit? The board meets the day after your next issue comes out on Thursday, and I want to impress them so they'll approve bonuses for all our staff. Our team has really been doing it tough lately, and I want to see everyone get a reward.' He hands you some writing that looks like a press release, already written. It's a piece of puffery praising Charlie's talents to the sky, and talking about results 'just around the corner' that will be spectacular – a highly unlikely prospect, according to the grapevine.

What will you say to Charlie?

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