



## Writing in Broadcast Media: An Important yet neglected skill

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### ABSTRACT

Since the publication of Roger Fowler's (1991) seminal text, the study of the language of journalism has increased dramatically. Broadcast Journalism is perhaps the most sought after and the most challenging of professions worldwide. The form, function and politics of the language of Broadcast journalism has attracted scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines, including linguistics, discourse studies, media studies, sociology and others. It goes without saying that such work has developed sophisticated and intricate analytic tools in order to describe the form and content of the news, and has produced detailed and frequently astute readings of the products of journalism. Nevertheless, such approaches often said more about the views and methods of the analyst than the language of journalism qua journalism - that is, about the specific dialectical relations that exist between journalists and their text genres, these texts and their audiences, and between journalism and the wider social formation. Of course, broadcast journalism produces texts - texts that can be analysed using the same linguistic categories, tools and concepts that can be used to study any other type of text but always remains neglected as the focus is always more on the oral context of broadcast journalism. As Fairclough (1995, p. 204) puts it, journalistic texts are 'the outcome of specific professional practices and techniques, which could be and can be quite different with quite different results'. It is applicable to Broadcast Journalism as well. On the contrary, writing for Broadcast Media is even more challenging as it has to be tailored to suit a particular broadcast audience. In any medium, it is inevitable to be a good writer and this paper therefore is an attempt to look into the Written Context in Broadcast Journalism as it has to capture the immediacy of the spoken word in the scripts to make it more interesting for the audience in general.

### KEYWORDS : Broadcast Journalism, Writing Skills

English today is a language, which though it may not seem to be in demand, is a need as it provides for as a single resource for many purposes. Therefore, the use of English language varies from one area to another. English language has transformed itself into a need for each and every specified area of specialisation. Thus, to my mind, it is no longer in demand but has become an inseparable part of our being successful at the highest level. One cannot imagine a world without English language. In the competitive era of today, the specificity of the things used is of prime importance and English falls in the same category which has many layers for different purposes.

One cannot ignore the role the broadcast media has played in transforming our perception towards the importance of English language. Most of us today are media addicts and we almost religiously follow it and have accepted it as a part and parcel of our lives and, therefore, how they use the language has to be discussed in detail. I have deliberately kept away from the print media because we are more inclined toward the broadcast media ('we' here relates to many people who are not interested in reading). My paper would focus on why broadcast media has overshadowed the print media and the reason for its being so very successful

#### News director with the BBC once observed:

The basic principles of writing for broadcast news haven't changed for a long time. They are the same as when it came into business 25 years ago. You have to write conversationally; you have to write as you would speak to someone.....

The above mentioned quote is suggestive of the fact that the writing in broadcast media should be lucid and viewers watching around the world should be able to relate with what is being said and understand it without putting any extra effort of stressing their mind in order to appreciate and comprehend it. In short, the content written has to appear to be extremely natural and acceptable.

Media is for the people and, hence one should always have audience at the back of one's mind in order to satisfy their needs and tastes accordingly. The language used should not be offensive and should be extremely easy and pleasing to the ears of the listeners.

Writing in broadcast media is, in many ways, unlike print media and to an extent contrasting as it is more related to normal conversation without extensive use of any ornamental words and this is where the major difference lies between broadcast and print media insofar as the use of English language is concerned. Unlike print media wherein one can read and reread a news item/report several times by taking

breaks and revisiting it again in order to understand it in a better way, broadcast media allows the audience only a single chance to listen to any particular information and interpret it. If the language used here is difficult then the information is lost, and we, as listeners remain uninformed about the situation, and consequently would not be able to understand what we listen to completely. For this very reason, language in the broadcast media ought to be highly informative as well as easy to understand. *Anthony Burgess* once remarked:

There is nobody to tell us where true English is to be found... but to most people, good English means the language of television news-readers

An example of this is to be found in the 1960s when *BBC* came to be considered as arbiter of good language use. This shows the impact and popularity that the broadcast media enjoys and, therefore, writing in broadcast media is of prime importance today.

#### In an article in *The Sunday Times* in the year 2003 Melvyn Bragg wrote:

English is understood by an estimated 2 billion people. It is the language of international finance, diplomacy, sport and entertainment. The rise and reach of English is a breathtaking adventure.

The punch line there is the last line, which is very significant. It talks about the rise and reach of English language which has gained more momentum because of the rise of broadcast media.

The standard of broadcast media is full of uncertainties. The pressure on broadcast media has increased courtesy digital revolution which has brought about extreme competition, thanks to the channels telecasting news 24 hours.

Now, I would like to highlight the major features which define and differentiate between the language used in print and broadcast media.

#### Conversational writing

Any good writing in broadcast media is as smooth as a conversation with a person you know. The more one is at ease, the easier it will be for the viewer and the listener to understand. In *The Television News Handbook* Vin Ray argues

Think how you would tell a friend what the story is in one sentence and bear that in mind as you put the piece together. Too much information will make your writing tortuous and cramped... bear in mind

the subject of the story and your treatment of it.

When one writes something in broadcast media he/she should give importance to the treatment of it and not the subject, for it is 'how?' that matters and not 'what?' That is the reason for writing it in an expected way. In short, it has to be written in way which is completely different from a normally written text.

### **Jargon-free language**

Each and every field has its specified set of jargons but when it comes to broadcast media, it is kept away from the extensive use of jargon unless when inevitable. Extensive use of jargon may not help the audience to understand the context in a complete way because not all of them are very familiar with political and diplomatic language. Jargon has to be used only when the information has to be passed on to a limited set of audience to which that kind of a language relates. CNBC is a key example of the use of jargoned language, but it is for a specific set of audience. On the other hand, when one has to give news to the general audience, the language should largely be jargon free. If the language is full of jargon, then the audience is likely to feel out of place and fail to understand it. This will eventually lead to the downfall of the concerned media house.

### **New techniques for effective writing needs to be developed**

Since there is no visual of the kind which we associate with the electronic media, the style of writing should be crisp enough and eye-catching. The appeal should be such that it would satiate popular hunger for information, data etc, and readers get interested in reading and presenting the piece. Sensationalisation does not really help. Otherwise, the media houses that have had to discontinue with their newspapers, magazines etc would not have had to do so.

### **Brevity in writing**

The writing in broadcast media should be concise and clear, and only essential information should be given importance. Thus, what is written has to be brief as well as effective. The writing should be direct and edited tightly with no unnecessary information finding its place in it. Even excessive use of superfluous words need to be avoided as it will have more of a negative impact than a positive one. Harold Evans makes a telling comment in his book *Essential English*:

### **A sentence is more likely to be clear if it is a short sentence communicating one thought, or a closely connected range of ideas.**

Evans' argument is clear. He justifies the importance of brevity in writing. Another important point to note is that brevity in writing is seen in evidence when one speaks in short sentences because these are far easier than the long ones. Brevity in writing is, perhaps, the most important difference between broadcast and print media. One has to be precise because it saves a lot of the time and is more impactful given its pleasing appeal.

### **Good hold on the subject matter**

One has to have a very firm grip on the subject matter and should be exact in his/her information in order to write the story in a much better way and in a precise manner. Precision in writing comes from the clarity of thoughts in the mind. If a person is not clear enough on his/her own what the subject is, then he/she would not be able to write something on it successfully.

### **Identifying the story and interpreting it in the best possible way**

Simplicity in writing calls for the ability to identify the story and know at once what a writer wishes to convey. There is a lot of difference between the stories and the events. If one were to confuse events with the stories and vice versa, then interpreting them would be very difficult. The end result would be disastrous. A story is one in which something new happens, and is highlighted, the event is something which has nothing new in terms of its subject itself. Unless one identifies it in a proper way, the interpretation will be vague and not up to the mark by any means. Anything presented in the form of a story appeals to the audience much more than merely the passing on of information in a routine manner. The story has to be factual and should convey only appropriate information to the audience. Identifying the story is the essence of broadcast media. If there are a lot

of things to be said, then one needs to identify the factor that highlights it in the best possible way. The presentation of the facts has to be informative in the first place but should also be made interesting in order to attract more viewers. To make a story interesting, a good arrangement of information/data in it is very important. If it is avoided, then the viewers would lose interest in the story. First of all, the introduction itself has to be eye-catching and summarise in itself everything with regard to the story. Later on, it has to be followed by a longer narration of the same. The first sentence should be of a kind which interests and the ones that come thereafter it should be more information oriented.

### **Avoiding presentation of hanging ideas**

Information that one is not sure about are to be avoided. Presenting loose ideas creates a very bad impression on the minds of the viewers which results in failure of communication. One should cross-check the information again and again to be sure about the story, and only then should be given a concrete form for presentation.

### **Presenting ideas in isolation**

Many different ideas pass through one's mind when one thinks of writing a report for presentation to one's viewers. Good story writers avoid the pitfalls of juggling up all the ideas into a confusing hotch-pot which leaves the viewers all at sea. Creating confusion makes a direct negative statement on one's own understanding about the subject. Each idea should be dealt with in isolation and given importance to make it more clear and uncomplicated.

### **Time factor**

Time factor is very crucial. Good news items and reports are brief and to the point so that the viewers and news readers do not suffer due to excess of information or its paucity.

### **Accuracy**

Accuracy of language creates a good impression on the viewers which is everlasting. It is an issue which bothers most of the broadcast journalists. The risk of committing a mistake in the broadcast media is much more than in the print media. The main reason behind it is that it is telecasted live everywhere. A good writer always tries to be accurate with his/her information rather than a careless one! Verification in broadcast media is one of the major factors which are being given special attention. Accuracy in language also is an issue which cannot be avoided. If the English used is of the highest order, then it would help the media house in gaining lot of respect and credibility which would make the viewers rely on the facts and figures shown by the media house which takes care of the issues.

### **Grammatical as well as acceptable**

In order to write what a writer wishes to, he/she would like to be equipped with English grammar. This helps in writing without ambiguity. If grammar becomes a casualty, there would be break down of communication, eventually leaving the viewers high and dry. They would not be able to access the information systematically. Language used by media persons is usually of the kind that is acceptable to the viewers in general, be they of whichever generation. They take care not to cause offence, by using insensitive and inappropriate language. Good writers are particularly cautious in not insulting their viewers on any issues related to religion, sex etc.

### **Clarity in speech**

Success in the broadcast media depends much on the way the news reader/presenter speaks. Those who fail to do so, fall by the wayside in this profession. Newsreaders have to have their skills of expression and to maintain appropriate body language along with excellent pronunciation. In order to do so one has to avoid using ornamental words which are difficult to pronounce at one go. Media professionals are rated very high when it comes to the use of English language and their committing mistakes cause them the loss of reputation and even their jobs. If one commits a mistake he/she will be taken as ignorant which is extremely negative when it comes to professionalism.

These were a few areas, which to me are indispensable when it comes to the use of language in broadcast media both, in oral and written contexts. Let me not be seen as pontificating, but let me end by quoting *Dr Samuel Johnson* from his preface to his *Dictionary of English Language*

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