

## ON STARTING OUT AS A NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2003 8: 114 - 116

**Edmund Beukes\***

---

Journalism is storytelling. As a journalist you need to find that story which is worth telling and which will interest your audience.

The quest for telling something different and worthwhile is a long journey and will only come to those that live for journalism.

A journalist should know everything. Since that is rather difficult, know something of everything and everything of something!

The first thing every journalism student should know is that the profession is not as it is depicted in the movies. Movies like "Ten ways to lose a guy" and "Never been kissed before" give a glamorous look of journalists that are rarely true. For most journalists in South Africa the reward lies in informing the people of the country and to know that it is a job well done. Top stories will not come your way automatically; you will have to earn it.

Students/learners need to know that almost all the magazines prefer prior experience at a daily newspaper. Rarely does one start one's journalism career at a magazine.

In studying and practising journalism, you should first of all be a master of language. This is important because you cannot tell a story or report on an event without the proper vocabulary and grammar. In South Africa it is recommended that you can write in at least two languages. Currently the largest companies in the printed media are Afrikaans and English.

People sometimes have the idea that journalists are of the rude type. Often they are, but people skills are very important in journalism. Respondents must feel comfortable talking to you. And always listen. Someday somebody might call and have something interesting to say. While people tend to look down on secretaries and other "at the bottom of the pile" workers in a company, those are the ones who will

---

\* Edmund Beukes is Editor of *Kroonnuus*, a community newspaper in Kroonstad, and a Master's student in Media Studies in the Department of Communication and Information Studies at the UFS.

phone you and give you a story - if you are nice to them from the start. You can always count on those secretaries just to confirm a story or to give you a lead. Always be humble; it will help get you very far.

Journalists need to know how their media companies work. It is important to understand the deadlines. Many times students complain about writing an article in class, stating that there is not enough time. In reality that hour they have, is sometimes the only time a journalist has at his/her disposal. One must be able to produce a story under pressure. If you are not able to work under pressure, this line of work will not be for you. Not even for a good writer.

Barring Communication Science, Political Science is a subject that I recommend for prospective journalists. It will help you to understand why some political parties do one thing, which might seem wrong to some people, but when studied closely and given the party history, will make perfect sense. It is also useful to understand the government structure: local government, provincial government and Parliament, and how they all work together. It is also very important to understand the idea of democracy and the manner in which it is implemented in South Africa.

A journalist should know the law. An important part of the law is media law. What is defamation? This is only one of the many important questions you need to know the answers to. One should know, when doing court reporting, when you are allowed to publish names and when not. When a journalist knows bits and pieces of the law, reporting on cases will be a lot easier. Not only should you know the law system, but also the path for appeal a person can take. Knowing the law will not only help you to stay out of trouble, but you will be able to predict in some cases the outcome of the proceedings, saving you time. Then again, you might be wrong, and sometimes miss a very big story.

Know your history. People will refer to events and people in the past and it is of course a lot easier if you know what they are talking about. It also provides food for appropriate news angles, especially when doing an investigative story.

The media give people what they want. Therefore your story on endangered spiders might be very interesting and even newsworthy, but the question always remains: Who cares? Do enough people care to publish it or even buy the paper? You will have to write what the people want to read. Many times sex sells. Even if you get loads of

letters stating that the writer of the letter is appalled by the story, just have a look who is secretly reading it.

Ethics should be top priority for every journalist. You can't go around writing and ruining peoples' lives. The key phrase here is maximum information, minimum damage. You are not there to make or break somebody, but merely to inform. As an informant you are not allowed to have your own opinion when writing. Many forget that when they are on to a story. One should approach it objectively, with an open mind. If you already know the way you are going to write your article, don't even bother to go any further, because you have ruined the story.

As editor of a community newspaper you soon realise what is important to the community. They don't always want to know about all the court cases or the city council not doing their job. They want to see their children in the newspaper (or themselves).

This brings me to my last point. You must be flexible, but firm. Journalists also have an educational role to play. It does not help to discard all the court cases and city council stories, because you are also the watchdog of the community.

My worse experience till now is a story I did about a man that appeared in court for the third time for public indecency. One of the staff members of the newspaper wanted to go with because she was never in a court before. Excitedly we sat through the proceedings and she was on a natural high because of this "journalism thrill". As we went out of court a woman, with a-month-old baby, stopped us and asked: "Are you going to publish his name?" It was the man's wife with their first child. Now, will you publish his name after he had pleaded? Yes? No? Hopefully you answered yes, because you must be able to put your emotional feelings aside. You are there to do a job of informing, and hopefully a good job as well.