

**ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: SUGGESTIONS FOR AN EDITORIAL POLICY  
ON POLITICAL NEWS FOR COMMUNITY MEDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In South Africa, the three spheres of government perform distinct functions in terms of the Constitution. By spreading the responsibilities of government across national, provincial and local structures, the Constitution ensures that government does not become too far removed from citizens. If local government is the closest level of interaction for citizens, then media at community level provide the link for that interaction. It is against this backdrop that this article views the quote widely attributed to American congressman Tip O'Neil: All politics is local. Political news has social importance for virtually everyone (Gelman 2011). On the flip side of the coin, people are what matter in terms of community media (Lauterer 1995: 9). This implies that even at grassroots level, media should have an editorial policy on political reporting if they want their editorial content to be relevant to the community they are serving. This loyalty to the needs of the community is the essence of media at grassroots level (Milne, Rau, Du Toit & Mdlongwa 2006: 3-4). This article reports on a qualitative content analysis of the existing editorial policies of community radio stations and newspapers in the Mangaung area in the Free State. Based on these findings, suggestions are made for a framework to draw up an editorial policy on political news for community media.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When people talk about democracy, the first thing they think about is government. According to The Institute for Democracy in Africa (Idasa), for most people democracy and government are inseparable. Ström (2009: online), in a paper published on the Idasa website, describes the relevance of local government as follows:

In South Africa, the three spheres of government perform distinct functions in terms of the Constitution. By spreading the responsibilities of government across national, provincial and local structures, the Constitution ensures that government does not become too far removed from citizens. Local government is the sphere of government that is closest to the people. In many ways, it is the most important sphere of government because it provides the basic services that determine the quality of South Africans' everyday lives. It is also easiest for citizens to interact directly with local government and to build democracy by becoming involved in solving local problems.

According to Moy *et al.* (2004: 535), “the more politically knowledgeable people are, the more likely they are to become actively involved in decisions regarding their communities”. These authors quote Galston (2001: 3) who opines that “competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which the ability to make a range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired”.

According to Leiter, Harriss and Johnson (2000: 13), “the press as an institution serving the people of a democracy was identified when journalists were designated as the ‘Fourth Estate’”. This title was given to the press at the turn of the nineteenth century by the British Parliament, recognising the fact that the press represents the people and has a strong influence on public opinion.” These authors (*ibid.*) suggest the Fourth Estate title is just as applicable today, for as the government grows more complex, it is difficult for an individual to grasp “even a small amount of what it does without the mass media as sources of information and interpretation”.

If local government is the closest level of interaction for citizens, then the media at community level provide the link for that interaction. The importance of community media is three-fold:

- Firstly, government and NGOs need the community vehicles of local media (Emdon in Duncan & Seleane 1998: 204);
- Secondly, community media as participants have the role of defining the terms of community interest and seeing how these are best served by government; and
- Thirdly, to educate readers/listeners on the inner-workings of government on all levels, but especially on municipal level.

According to Moy *et al.* (2004: 536), community media provide mobilising information that allows citizen to become involved in local affairs; and community media use “can set in motion a process of effects that begins with political knowledge”. This political

knowledge, according to these authors, can promote democratic behaviour “which in turn enhances one’s understanding of why politics is relevant and ultimately increased the likelihood of political participation”.

Myburg (2009: online), in turn, opines that community media have the potential to re-connect journalists with citizens, who need news they can use to make decisions about the public problems that confront them.

It is against this backdrop that this article views the quote widely attributed to former American politician Tip O’Neill: All politics is local (Gelman 2011). Although O’Neill was using the phrase to remind politicians of their responsibilities towards their constituencies, it could easily be applied to political reporting as well. Political news has social importance for virtually all people, and people are what matter in terms of community media (Lauterer 1995: 9).

The following quote from one of the fathers of the public journalism movement, James W. Carey supports this notion. Carey (1987: 5) said, “The god term of journalism – the be-all and end-all, the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense – is the public. Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public.”

To use the equation used to illustrate logical consistency where  $a = b$  and  $b = c$  then  $a = c$ : political news = important to everyone and everyone = central focus of journalism (especially community media) then political news = important to community journalism.

This implies that even at grassroots level, media should have an editorial policy on political reporting if they want their editorial content to be relevant to the community they serve. This loyalty to the needs of the community is the essence of media at grassroots level (Milne, Rau, Du Toit & Mdlongwa 2006: 3-4). Few beats covered by the community paper are more important (Lauterer 1995: 34). The community newspaper is there in proxy for the citizen who will not or cannot attend that city council meeting. Such coverage is one of a community newspaper’s main functions... as they directly affect the readers (Lauterer 1995: 34).

Media provide for debate and discussion. In fact, one can go as far as saying that media are the information vehicles for civil society and government (Duncan 1995: 209). On the other hand, media also play the role of watchdogs and educators.

Going back more than two decades, we find a good example of the power of community or grassroots media in what was called the alternative press (Tomaselli & Louw 1991: 8-9) in South Africa during apartheid. Although several commercial newspapers are credited for their role in creating awareness of the plight of the oppressed, there were many community newspapers that played a role in bringing about change. According to Tomaselli and Louw (1991: 9), community issues were central to the existence of the alternative press. Examples are *Grassroots*, formed in the Western Cape in 1980, and the Oudtshoorn-published *Saamstaan*, formed in 1984.

South African community media are still emerging from the struggle era where they served predominantly as “a tool to counter state propaganda, inform, mobilise and

educate the masses about their rights to facilitate and the building of strong community organisations” (Berger in Rau *et al.* 2006: 95). Since democracy, the “activist” role or just a simple, clear purpose of community media has begun to diminish. Tomaselli and Louw (1991: 168) state that the apartheid government viewed community newspapers as knock and drop news-sheets which informed housewives of local shopping centre activities. Unfortunately, this is still or again the case in many instances.

To address this, the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) established the Community Media Policy Research Unit in 2002 to remedy the situation where the community media sector tends to survive attending to day-to-day operational issues, leading to policy, lobbying and advocacy efforts being seen as external activities that are not integrated into the day-to-day struggles of the sector.

Despite these efforts, little has changed. Few community media organisations have a formal editorial policy in place; while even fewer enforce it.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The media’s firmly entrenched role as the Fourth Estate in a democracy, and especially the mutually dependent relationship between local government and community media, serves as the focus of this article.

The primary objective is to provide a framework for an editorial policy on political news for community media. This will be achieved by:

- highlighting the importance of community media in a democracy by way of a literature review;
- analysing community media in the Mangaung area’s approach to an editorial policy on political news by way of a qualitative description;
- providing guidelines for the principles on which an editorial policy for political news could be based; and
- providing strategies for implementing such a policy.

## **Key terms**

Defining “community media” has proven to be rather difficult. Mkhonza (in Rau *et al.* 2006: 96) states that “...the concept ‘community media’ has come to be understood in varying and often contradictory ways, even by people who operate in the sector itself”. One of the main disagreements surrounding a comprehensive definition is the distinction between community media that are independently owned versus community media owned by large media corporations such as Naspers.

Carpentier, Lie and Servaes (2001: 5) quote Berrigan (1979: 8), who says “community media are media to which members of the community have access to for information, education and entertainment, when they want access”. According to Franklin (2006: xxi), community, or “local media” as he calls it, “report local concerns of consequence” and are consumed by the local community.

In terms of this study, “community” refers to either a community of interest (meaning a group bound by shared values or interests) or a geographic community (e.g. the Mangaung area) (Duncan & Seleokane 1998: 15). The issue of ownership does not come into play.

A radio station is viewed as a community station when classified by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) as such according to licensing requirements. A succinct definition for a community radio station is offered by Carpentier, Lie and Servaes (2001: 5) According to these authors, it is “a non-profit station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio”.

Newspapers are less regulated in South Africa and therefore not that easy to classify. In terms of this study, a community newspaper is a newspaper serving either a community of interest or a geographic community. This includes newspapers owned by for example Media24 as well as independently owned newspapers.

A definition of political news is as elusive as a unifying definition for the concept of communication. For the purpose of this article, political news is used in a broad sense and refers to news reports about any of the three levels of government as well as party politics, but with a specific focus on municipal news.

Definitions found for a policy are amongst others:

- the rationale behind what shapes decisions made with regard to laws and regulations;
- a guide to decision-making;
- a course or line of action adopted and pursued; and
- sets of principles and norms.

For the purposes of this article, an editorial policy is defined as a set of principles and strategies to uphold those principles.

## **THE FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY**

According to Fourie (2001: 218), one of the media’s main tasks is to make information public. Thereby, says Fourie, “the media claim to contribute to democracy and even to be a pillar of democracy. The media provide a platform for public debate and the formation of public opinion.”

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007: 5-6) provide what they refer to as the elements of journalism. The first of these elements is that “the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing”. According to these authors (*ibid.*), to fulfil this task:

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- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth;
- Its first loyalty is to citizens;
- Its essence is a discipline of verification;
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover;
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power;
- It must provide a platform for public criticism and compromise;
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant;
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional; and
- Its practitioners should be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

In similar vein, Belsey and Chadwick (1992: 1) state, "Journalism remains an honourable profession, because it has an honourable aim, the circulation of information, including news, comment and opinion. This is an honourable aim because the health of a community – especially a community that has any pretensions to democracy – depends on it."

The media is defined by Parsons (in De Beer & Merrill 2004: 51-52) as a "means of communication and comprises the technology for sending and receiving messages and the organizations for gathering, processing, and transmitting news and information to a mass audience. Global news agencies, newspapers, magazines, broadcast stations, and satellite networks are commonly identified as the media. Taken together, these mechanisms supply the informational needs of a society."

According to Parsons (in De Beer & Merrill 2004: 52), an important factor in this process "is the ability of the media to identify, create, manipulate, and spread public opinion. The media are the institution in society that not only informs the public but also can help move the masses in collective, purposeful, and productive action."

Democracy is defined as "a form of government in which political power resides in all the people and is exercised by them directly or is given to elected representatives" (Brits 1995: 67). Glasser and Craft (1998: 207) offer a broader definition of democracy. For them, democracy represents "a way of life and not merely... a form of government".

Van Cuilenburg, Scholten and Noomen (1992: 317, in Fourie 2007: 188) opine that in a democracy the media has the following political functions:

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- to inform about political developments;
- to guide public opinion about political decisions;
- to express different views about political developments and decisions; and
- to criticize political developments and decisions.

A UN document emphasises the importance of the link between the media and democracy. Titled *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, the report states that “democracy lies at the centre of human development and the media is considered a vital component of democracy”.

The report adds that free media play three crucial roles in promoting democratic governance:

- as a civic forum, giving voice to different parts of society and enabling debate from all viewpoints;
- as a mobilizing agent, facilitating civic engagement among all sectors of society and strengthening channels of public participation; and
- as a watchdog, checking abuses of power, increasing government transparency; and holding public officials accountable for their actions in the court of public opinion (2002: 75-76).

Retief (2002: 5-6) quotes Jan Larsen of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, who states: “What journalism and journalists should be about is upholding the democracy. What we report, what we write about should be the stuff that helps people participate in and contribute to daily public life”. According to Altschull (1984: 189), “... journalists help protect political liberty by providing information that a democratic society requires if it is to govern itself”.

### **The municipal beat**

The obvious importance of the media’s function in a democracy is not always apparent in news coverage in South Africa, especially on local government level. According to The Southern African NGO Network (SANGONeT n.d.: online), “local government is not a sexy topic across the newsrooms of the nation”. The author of the article, Ruth Ritchie, succinctly summarises journalists’ dilemma as follows:

Producing readable municipal news that fits in the limited space, time and financial constraints that most of the media work under is no mean feat. This complex juggling act requires vast skill, knowledge, creativity, and indeed restraint. The editorial pressures to resort to stories of scandal and corruption are strong and some publications succumb easily.

The Institute for Democracy in Africa (Idasa) has identified this as a potential threat to the country’s vision for participatory democracy. Idasa’s 2005 research into municipal journalism indicates that “citizens feel the local media do not provide them with enough relevant or useful information about municipal issues” (Davidson 2005: online).

The municipal beat has always been a problematic one in most South African newsrooms. In an effort to improve municipal journalism, the Municipal Journalism Project was launched in 2005 as a joint venture between Idasa and the Consolidation of Municipal Transformation Programme (WordontheStreet n.d.: online).

Before 2005, Idasa's Media Programme had worked with local media – community radio and small commercial newspapers – in dealing with the challenges of reporting the story of South Africa's local democracy. Idasa then conducted a needs assessment to establish the situation with respect to coverage of municipal issues by the media. This revealed, among other things, that the relationship between municipalities and the media was often affected by issues such as the lack of understanding of the role of the media by councillors and municipal officials, and lack of understanding of how municipalities operate and how to read municipal budgets by journalists. As a result, Idasa proposed an intervention consisting of a training component and a public discussion component, and out of this the Municipal Journalism Project was born (WordontheStreet *ibid.*).

The Municipal Journalism Project was aimed at improving and strengthening the capacity of the media to report on municipal issues and to promote local government accountability among citizens. The key activities were training workshops aimed at journalists and a seminar on municipal journalism and local government accountability aimed at the main stakeholders, i.e. civil society, media professionals, and councillors and municipal officials (WordontheStreet *ibid.*).

The project was based on the assumption that citizens who are well-informed and aware of local government operations and processes are likely to exercise their rights and responsibilities effectively and expect and demand greater accountability from those they have elected to represent them. The improvement in municipal journalism and reporting, it was assumed, would contribute to an informed citizenry, which is an essential element of active citizenship and promoting accountability of local government (WordontheStreet *ibid.*).

The main objective of the project was to strengthen the capacity of local media in covering municipal issues so as to empower citizens with information and promote local government accountability. This was to be achieved through providing specific training in three areas:

- understanding local government operations and systems;
- understanding local government budgets and finances; and
- community mapping (WordontheStreet n.d.: online).

It was also done through initiating dialogue between the media, councillors and municipal officials, and civil society by means of a half-day seminar in each municipal area (WordontheStreet *ibid.*).



Some of the noteworthy feedback and comments which were received at the seminars, and which are of particular relevance for this article, include the following:

*To create a more participatory democracy requires a healthy representative democracy at local level. It also requires citizens to understand the role of central and local government and to know who can be held responsible for the decisions and services that affect their lives. The media and local government should not be at war with each other. They should work closely together to the benefit of the people. Local government needs the media and the media needs local government as an important news source. (Louise Mouton, journalist).*

*IDASA is concerned about democracy – sustainable democracy and participatory democracy, in which citizens participate in government. The political setup in South Africa is designed in such a way that local government should be participatory; for IDASA this raises questions about the role the media could play in that process. First, citizens at local level need access to the media. Second, the media should inform and educate citizens. Third, the watchdog role of the media is important. The media should provide a way for citizens to monitor the government and hold their politicians to account. Reporting on issues often seems to be the only role of the media, but there are a lot of other roles the media needs to be play. It is critical that the media should provide space for citizens to participate in public debates. (Brett Davidson, Idasa).*

*I believe that the education and training of journalists covering local government should not only develop their skills and provide ongoing support. It should also include:*

- *an understanding of the legal and institution framework of local government;*
- *an understanding of the importance of using multiple sources; they cannot rely on one source only, e.g. press releases from local government; and*
- *an understanding that journalists should be wary of getting involved in power struggles and of becoming the tools of factions or parties. If journalists want to keep their credibility as neutral commentators, they must be objective and talk to all parties involved. (Derrick Luyt, Journalism Lecturer and Coordinator of Investigative Reporting Course, Rhodes University) (WordontheStreet n.d.: online).*

Fourie (2001: 276-277) offers a possible solution to this dilemma. He suggests that civic journalism (also known as public journalism; not to be confused with citizen journalism) can provide people “with the news and information they need to allow them to function as citizens, to make the decisions they are called on to make in a democratic society”.

Foulty (in Fourie 2001: 276-277) explains the aims of civic or public journalism as follows:

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- It is an effort to reconnect with the real concerns that readers have about the things in their lives that they care about;
- It takes the traditional five Ws of journalism and expands them to ask why is this story important to me and the community in which I live;
- Civic journalists are trying to reconnect with their communities, to cross the gap that has opened and widened between the news media and their constituents – their readers and viewers;
- Plugging into the community is hard. It's much harder journalism than dealing with the same old sources, the experts, the media-savvy advocates of the same old tired points of view, the self-serving talking heads;
- Civic journalists broaden their agenda from the usual overwhelming focus on political and governmental news to aggressively ferret out issues of interest to citizens who are not members of the elite. This means covering an agenda that is set more by the citizens, by the people, and less by those who would manipulate them; and
- That means thinking about the news, from not only the standpoint of conventional journalistic practices, but taking it a step further and thinking about a subject from the standpoint of the public and public interest.

Haas (2007: 3) quotes Glasser and Lee (2002: 2003) who say: “Public journalism rests on the simple but apparently controversial premise that the purpose of the press is to promote and indeed improve, and not merely report on and complain about, the quality of public or civic life.”

According to Haas (2007: 4), journalists must change the way in which they see the public: “instead of considering them as ‘thrill-seeking spectators’ who only pay attention to the news to be entertained by a political spectacle, or as ‘consumers’ who use the news to be informed about the actions of government officials, journalists should consider the public as engaged and responsible ‘citizens’ who are capable of active democratic participation”.

Ward and Wasserman (2008: 52), writing on public journalism, argue that for journalists to “serve the public” these elements must be present:

- A notion of “serving the public” that cannot be reduced to the interests of the current government;
- The adoption of an independent, impartial stance by journalists which creates a critical distance between the journalist and the story, and between the journalist and the government official; and
- The use of the media to create a critical, deliberative, public sphere.

## METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this study was to provide a framework according to which community media can draw up an editorial policy for reporting on political news. This need was identified following a small study conducted in the Mangaung municipal area (including Bloemfontein, Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo) in the Free State. It involved semi-structured interviews with editors, news editors and/or owners/managers at community media in order to analyse existing editorial policy.

The sample consisted of five community newspapers and five community radio stations. The latest available audited readership (ABC) and listenership figures (RAMS) were obtained, although some were not that recent, and in some instances not available at all.

The community newspapers included in the sample were (the circulation figures indicated are the ABC figures for the period July-December 2010):

- *Bloemnuus/Bloem News*: Owned by Media24, English/Afrikaans, geographical community, weekly, 42 000
- *Ons Stad*: Owned by Media24, English/Afrikaans, geographical community, weekly, 36 500
- *Express*: Owned by Media24, English/Sesotho, geographical community, weekly, 50 000
- *Krant*: Owned by Mahareng Publishing, English/Afrikaans, geographical community, weekly, 120 000
- *Mangaung Issue*: Owned by News Alive cc, English/Sesotho, geographical community, weekly, 30 000 (ABC, 01 July 2010 – 31 December 2010)

The community radio stations included in the sample were (the listenership figures indicated are the RAMS for the period March-June 2011):

- Motheo FM: Mostly Sesotho, geographical community, 227 000
- Kopsie FM: English/Afrikaans/Sesotho, geographical community with the core being the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State, 29 000
- Med FM: English/Afrikaans/Sesotho, community of interest (health), 27 000
- Radio Rosestad: Afrikaans, geographical community, 38 000
- Mosupatsela FM: Sesotho, geographical community, 148 000

Respondents were asked to define “political news” from their publication/radio station’s perspective. Answers varied from “general” to “we cover national and provincial government, but not local government”. However, not a single respondent had a clearly defined description. None of the media covered in the study have a formal, written editorial policy on political news. In fact, the general description of the beat would be “haphazard”.

The fact that none of the ten community media in the Mangaung area had a formal, written editorial policy on political news illustrates that – despite the importance of community media’s function in participatory democracy – few community media outlets currently fulfil this function in an organised, focused manner. Many of the news editors claimed that their readers or listeners are “not interested in politics”. While this might show some consideration for the audience, it neglects that well-known fact that media should not only give their audience what it wants, but also what their audience need to live their lives.

Motivated by the lack of an editorial policy on political news at most community media outlets, and based on guidelines from literature, the authors suggest the following framework for community media in terms of developing an editorial policy for political news.

## **SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK**

As mentioned earlier, the operational definition of an editorial policy for the purposes of this study is a set of principles, as well as strategies to uphold those principles. The set of principles defines the borders within which the publication or radio station may operate in terms of covering political news. The strategies provide an action plan for achieving goals and upholding principles.

### **Principles**

This section of the framework can be divided into two parts. The first is legislative principles, which include all formal statutory and regulatory aspects that influence or apply to the specific radio station or newspaper. The second part refers to self-regulatory principles, which are set by industry-representative bodies, voluntary codes of conduct, etc.

#### *Legislative principles*

These principles are determined by the legal framework within which the particular industry operates. Included are all general legal requirements for the media and communication industry in South Africa. Some of these are discussed briefly below, with reference to how compliance to the regulations and stipulations set out by these bodies, acts, etc. should be taken into account in editorial decision-making.

- The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa

Icasa regulates, amongst others, community radio broadcasting (Icasa nd: online). Community radio stations in South Africa cannot operate without a licence from Icasa. Licensee compliance with licence terms and conditions is monitored, and breach of conditions could result in a licence being cancelled. Terms and conditions include the percentage of local content that must be broadcast, which has a direct influence on decisions regarding political news.

Icasa’s mandate is derived from various acts, including the Broadcasting Amendment Act 64 of 2002. This Act stipulates that “programming provided by a community

broadcasting service must reflect the needs of the people of the community ... dealing specifically with community issues which are not normally dealt with by the broadcasting service covering the same area” (Broadcasting Act 2002: online).

One of the Authority’s functions is to receive and resolve complaints. This is facilitated by the Complaint and Compliance Committee (Icasa nd: online).

- Media Development and Diversity Agency

The MDDA was created in terms of the Media Development and Diversity Act 14 of 2002 (MDDA Act 2002: online), and falls under the executive authority of the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS About us nd: online). The MDDA is primarily focused on channelling resources to community and small commercial media. Community media who receive support from the MDDA have to adhere to specific regulations set out by the MDDA (MDDA Act 2002: online). Breach of these conditions could lead to the withdrawal of support from the MDDA. These regulations include an evaluation of the station or publication’s adherence to media law, which in turn will influence editorial decisions.

- Freedom of expression and access to information

Section 16 of the Bill of Rights (1996: online) provides for the following rights: a) freedom of the press and other media; b) freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; c) freedom of artistic creativity; and d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research. However, it does not extend to a) propaganda for war; b) incitement of imminent violence; or c) advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

The relevance of subsection (2) in terms of editorial decision-making is clear. Given how easy it is to be biased in political reporting, and the resulting consequences of biased reporting, it is every community journalist’s responsibility to understand and apply these rights.

Closely tied to the right to freedom of expression is Section 32 of the Bill of Rights, which provides for the right to access to information (Bill of Rights 1996: online). (At the time of writing, the proposed Protection of Information Bill had been referred for further consultation, and is therefore not discussed in this article.) The importance of access to information in a democracy cannot be emphasised enough. If citizens are to make informed decisions they need access to all relevant information. As has been illustrated earlier in this article, community media is ideally positioned to fulfil this role.

Community media’s editorial policy – and training – should make provision for this right, specifically in how it pertains to the community journalist. This includes how to gain access to information regarding local government (city council or municipal records), and how to interpret and report on situations where access to this information is not allowed, whether legally or illegally.

- Other laws that influence media

The editorial policy of community media should also include clear guidelines for reporting on, amongst others, elections. Of significant importance in terms of political news would be the stipulations of the Electoral Act 73 of 1998 as amended by the Municipal Electoral Act 27 of 2000 (Municipal Electoral Act 2000: online). Regarding an editorial policy, this act is relevant in terms of specific stipulations that have bearing on the community journalist, such as undue influence, access to voting stations, prohibition on publication of exit polls, and the role of the media as explained in Schedule 2 of this act.

Examples of other laws that should be reflected in an editorial policy include the extent of a person's right to privacy, defamation laws, copyright, etc.

### *Self-regulatory principles*

These principles are determined by the various industry-representative bodies that the radio station or publication belongs to, as well as codes of conduct. For example, community radio stations are legally required to adhere to Icasa's Code of Conduct (Community Sound Broadcasting Services Regulations 2006: online).

An editorial policy for political news could also be informed by:

- Industry-representative bodies (Print Media SA, Forum of Community Journalists, Association of Independent Publishers, South African National Editors' Forum, National Association of Broadcasters, etc.)
- Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA)
- The radio station or publication's parent company's charter
- The station or publication's own vision and mission
- The station or publication's general editorial policy

### **Strategies**

Strategies can also be divided into two parts, namely a) general strategies that focus on the functioning of the newsroom and the utilisation of human resources; and b) specific strategies that focus on reporting and writing the news.

#### *General strategies*

The first focuses on the newsroom and human resources.

Examples include:

- A formal beat system

In order to prevent "haphazard" reporting on any topic, but specifically political news, a formal beat system is not negotiable. However, keeping in mind that most community media are seriously under-staffed, and in many cases a one-person operation, covering beats could include utilising area-based freelance reporters, stringers and a well-

developed network of contacts. A detailed description of each beat is necessary in order to set borders to assist in determining whether information qualifies as a story for a specific beat. This system could be enhanced by harnessing technology. The station or newspaper's website could be used to invite listeners/readers to send in news tips. Bull (2010: 29) explains, “[r]esponses from readers to news items – via comments on stories, blog posts, emails and letters – can include new information that pushes a story forwards and gives something new to write about”.

- Newsroom regulations on sources

Closely tied to the beat system is regulation on sources, or commentators. Here the importance of an extensive and in-depth knowledge of the community is illustrated (Turner & Rabe 2008: 66-67): Credible local sources for the various beats have to be identified, and a professional relationship with these sources has to be built. Creating a database, and keeping that database up to date, will save a lot of time when, for example, the journalist is looking for a local expert on financial matters who can comment on the municipal budget.

- Understand the target market

Knowing who your listeners/readers are will enable a community journalist to report on topics that are relevant to the community (Bull 2010: 14-15). Based on information obtained from formal sources such as RAMS, AMPS, LSM categories, etc. as well as first-hand knowledge of the community, a profile of the “average listener/reader” could be created against which to measure the news value of information.

- Regular training for the news staff

Having an editorial policy is not worth the paper it is written on if the people who are to execute it are not informed. Training as a strategy is very broad and includes formal training courses on the one hand and informal newsroom mentoring on the other. Training should focus on broader journalistic principles (such as understanding what the right to freedom of expression entails) as well as specific instruction (for example how to localise a national story, or how the city council functions). Once an editorial policy has been created, and explained to newsroom staff, regular monitoring of the implementation is important, not only for identifying areas where further instruction or training is needed, but also to identify sections of the policy that need to be adapted and/or removed/improved.

- Community-connectedness

The news staff must be firmly rooted within communities served in order to judge what information is relevant and meaningful to the community, e.g. ideally journalists should live in the communities they report on. Added to this is a passion for the community as well as an understanding of how this community is served by the station or newspaper (Turner & Rabe 2008: 66).

### *Specific strategies*

The second part of the strategies focuses on the news stories. Here the guidelines from the literature have been divided into three distinct areas of focus, loosely based on the functions of community media.

- Strategies to personalise

Making the story relevant to the listeners/readers can be achieved by:

- Asking why the story is important to the community, thus showing the impact or consequences of the story for the community;
  - Writing to the readers – create a sense of community by using “us”, “we”, or “our”; and
  - Making the news story useful, thus news the audience can use (e.g. Mangaung is experiencing a water shortage – suggest ways in which the community can save water).
- Strategies to analyse

Helping the listeners/readers understand the news can be achieved by:

- Unpacking complex issues for the readers/listeners (e.g. when news legislation is passed in Parliament, explain to the audience what it involves in terms of their lives);
  - Interpreting a story against the background of the community’s context, beliefs, values, and needs;
  - Stimulating debate, e.g. by means of letters to the editor;
  - Educating: e.g. explain to the readers/listeners the election process of school governing bodies or the election process in a by-election; and
  - Explaining information in “reader-sized” terms, e.g. make use of graphs.
- Strategies to localise

Bringing provincial, national or international news closer to the reader (and thereby enhancing the news value) can be achieved by:

- Getting a local expert to comment on national or provincial issues, thus making the news relevant to the specific community (e.g. service delivery protests nationally – keeping an eye on the local community by reporting whether protests have spread to this area);
- Getting comment from local residents on how certain issues have impacted on them (e.g. how rising electricity tariffs are affecting local residents);



- Finding locals who were involved in a national issue;
- Identifying local examples of a national trend (e.g. corruption in awarding national tenders – find out what the situation is locally); and
- Placing numbers/statistics/research findings in a local context (e.g. national Aids figures versus Mangaung figures).

## CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, the importance of community media with regard to the functioning of a democracy cannot be emphasised enough. Both community media and local government function at grassroots level. It could be seen as the bridge that links the ordinary citizen with his/her government, and vice versa. The watchdog, information and education roles of journalism are at their most important here. The national government's "strategic objectives" remain abstract concepts unless it is interpreted and explained to ordinary citizens. The best way to achieve this shared meaning is to take a concept, for example "accountability", and put it in the person's backyard by measuring it against the conduct of the local ward councillor.

This article suggests a framework for an editorial policy for community media with a specific focus on political news. The framework consists of two sections, namely 1) principles that define the borders within which the publication or radio station may operate in terms of covering political news; and 2) strategies that provide an action plan for achieving goals and upholding principles.

The section on principles can be divided into two parts. The first is legislative principles, which include all formal statutory and regulatory aspects that influence or apply to the specific radio station or newspaper. The second part refers to self-regulatory principles, which are set by industry-representative bodies, voluntary codes of conduct, etc.

Strategies are divided into general and specific strategies, and could be seen as the application or execution of the principles. General strategies include establishing a formal beat system, regulations regarding sources, training for newsroom staff, understanding the target market and creating community-connectedness. Specific strategies include ways and methods to personalise, analyse and localise information in order to bring it closer to the listeners/readers, and to enhance the news value of the information.

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