



Journal Of Media And Aesthetics

Vol. 2 No. 3, 2009

I. The Imperative of Aesthetics in Broadcast News Writing Style

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Abstract

Every news copy, presumably, has a message to deliver to the audience. But not every news copy in broadcasting achieves this purpose, for the simple reason that the copy is unable to heighten the feelings of the audience during newscast. Simply put, such a copy has not been written in a way that can arouse the emotions of the audience. This article stresses that the nature of the broadcast medium dictates how news for broadcast is written. While highlighting some of the ways in which the broadcast news copy can be couched to appeal to the senses of sight and hearing, and thus deepen the experience of the audience, the paper maintains that only an appreciation of the nature of the broadcast medium would enable the broadcast journalist to prepare a news copy whose message will stimulate the emotions of the audience.

Introduction

The goal of every news reporter or editor is to communicate the day's intelligence to as many people as would constitute their audience. This demands, with all intensity, that the journalist, in their news story, share meaning with their audience. Communication, strictly speaking, only occurs when meaning has been shared between the message-sender and the message-receiver. This demand is very stringent in broadcasting where the nature of the medium makes extra exertions of discipline on the news writer.

The goal of communication enables the broadcast journalist to engage in "the selection, production, and transmission of signs in such a way as to help the receiver perceive a meaning similar to that in the mind of the communicator" (Akpan, 1987, p.1). Thus, the broadcast journalist must, with constancy, ensure that their message arouses the desired emotions (reactions) from their audience members (through the involvement of the sense of hearing or vision or a combination of both). In one word, the broadcast journalist should apply aesthetics to his news copy in order to appeal to the feelings of his listener or viewer. This may sometimes warrant the creation of reality.

The essence of creating reality in the broadcast news copy is to ensure that the messages in the news reach the audience member with a bang that forces him to pay attention to such sensations, "causes sparks in the mind of the receiver and compels the audience to feel what they behold" (Akpan and Etuk, 1990, p.31). Aesthetics in news writing implies emphasis on what is important; less emphasis on the less important; and the presentation of the message (through re-arrangement) in a certain way that can heighten the involvement of the receiver during the presentation. It concerns our senses and our responses to an object. If something is aesthetically pleasing to you, it is pleasurable and you like it.

This article outlines the necessary basics that are intrinsic in making the broadcast news copy to stimulate the imagination with almost the same feelings that the communicator had already experienced in writing the news.

The Nature of the Broadcast Medium

Stimulating the feelings of the receiver presents a daily challenge to broadcast reporters, editors and news producers. The weight of the challenge is increased by the very nature of the broadcast medium, and by the fact that writing for the broadcast media, more often than not, comes as a later activity, after one would have already been steeped in the art of communicating through other media. Writing for television or radio is dictated by the nature of the medium. It is not the journalist who determines how to write for the broadcast media. On the contrary, broadcasting already has a frame that determines how contents going into the frame are to be presented (McQuail, 2005). In other words, the seeming strengths and weaknesses of the medium of broadcasting dictate how news for the medium should be presented.

Broadcasting is fleeting. It is more or less a transient medium. The message comes and goes immediately. This attribute compels the broadcast journalist to adapt his message to a medium where retention is difficult.

In broadcasting, one writes for the eye and the ear. (This is unlike the newspaper where the production effort is aimed at the eye). This attribute challenges the journalist, or any broadcast scriptwriter, to adapt his content to appeal to the senses of sight and sound of the receiver. If the

news copy fails to accomplish this, the intention of communication may not be fully achieved.

Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored on the theory of Technological Determinism (also known as Media Determinism). It was propounded by McLuhan in 1964 when he told the world that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p.7). According to him, "the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance" (1964, p.18). Giving further explanation to McLuhan's theory, Severin and Tankard (1992, p.251) state that, "The most important effect of communication media is that they affect our habits of perception and thinking".

The theory states further that the physical nature of a technology determines its human consequences. There is no doubt that McLuhan was writing about the broadcast medium, particularly television. In effect, the technological characteristics of broadcasting affect how the medium is used. Head (1985, p.9) states with more certainty that broadcasting "technology does affect the form and content of its programme output and hence its ultimate impact on people". According to him, the universal attributes of broadcasting as a technology interact with the universal attributes of human beings as communicators and receivers of communication to produce form and content that fit into the medium of broadcasting.

In writing news for broadcast, therefore, the reporter must take into consideration the fact that although the five senses may be involved during communication, broadcasting, by its very nature, emphasizes sound and sight over the other senses. Conscious effort is therefore required to deepen the involvement of these two senses as communication takes place. Here lies the need for the used of aesthetics in writing the broadcast news copy.

Broadcast News Writing Style

Let us, then, examine some of the ways that the news can be artistically written to deepen the feelings of the radio or television audience.

Know the rules of grammar

Perhaps it is fitting to start by saying something about grammar and its rules. Writing a news story that is what the airwaves demand that such a story should comply with the rules of grammar. A news item couched in grammatically incorrect sentences and lacking in logic, leaves the news story incomprehensible and without sense. Such a poorly written item tasks the personnel involved in the process of delivering the news on the air as much as it tasks the receiver.

While the editor and others involved in the gate-keeping function may find it difficult to understand the news story and its very essence, the news reader, unless the poor grammar is rectified before hand, may find himself stumbling on the air, not knowing exactly what to read, particularly if and when his grammatical alertness comes in contact with a faulty expression in the script. Caught in this web, the newsreader is forced into an involuntary pause; attempts to read but stumbles; pauses again and stammers, before allowing dead air to give him a breathing space to go through the script. This is often followed by apologies for the 'mix up'. Though profuse, the apologies may not prevent a recurrence of the situation just described as the newscast continues. One can then imagine the agony of the audience who are lost in the wilderness of a disjointed news item, laced with grammatically incorrect expressions or sentences.

A news item that clarifies and intensifies the experience of the audience is founded on phrase or sentence constructions that help to drive home the message, rather than confuse the listener. To achieve this, news items should obey the rules and conventions that are the basis of the language of communication. It is imperative that the broadcast journalist stand on a sure footing in grammar, else he would constitute an unpardonable embarrassment to himself, his station and the public who may be forced to exercise their discretion of tuning to another station.

Listen first to what you write

Reading the copy aloud to yourself first, allows you to determine if the copy is pleasant to the ear. Those who write documentary and advertisement scripts are conversant with this, as they first read aloud to assess how the write-up sounds.

Mind your Language or Words

It is necessary that each word, phrase, clause or sentence used or to be used is well understood by the writer. Some words appear similar in meaning, but are not, although their pronunciations appear to be similar.

Examples are:

Altar/alter; aural/oral; bail/bale; breach/breech;
cannon/canon; compliment/complement; cord/chord;
counsel/council; curb/kerb; deserts/desserts; raise/raze;
lightening/lighting; collaborate/corroborate;
formally/formerly; forbear/forebear; discrete/discreet;
stationary/stationery; storey/story, toe/tow; way/weigh
(Hicks, 1993, pp.31-32).

The journalist should be careful to know exactly which of the words he actually intended to use. Failure to do that may result in semantic noise in the intended communication. This may be worsened, as the audience would not have an opportunity to ask the reader what he meant to say, or consult the dictionary to crosscheck the meaning of words used.

Be sure of your Spellings

Closely related to the point just discussed is spelling. There is the high probability that words correctly spelt would be correctly pronounced on the air by the newscaster. Good pronunciation is also central to the audience's understanding of the news. Sometimes a word that is wrongly spelt, though the writer intended another word, causes the newsreader to pronounce the word differently with the implied difference in meaning. Unlike in the newspaper where a reader can pause, think and conjecture a supposed meaning of a word, or possibly consult a dictionary or other reference books, broadcasting does not offer such

luxury. The receiver is guided by the newscaster, particularly in the way he pronounces and gives emphasis to some words. Spelling a word wrongly is the beginning of distortion in the message. On the contrary, correct spellings enable the newscaster to deliver the message as was intended by the sender.

Retain an Informal Tone

In broadcasting, it is only the newsreader who is with the script. The listener or viewer depends on him. The script should assist the receiver rather than confuse him. Therefore, words likely to confuse the viewer or listener should be dropped. In the words of Hilliard (1997, p.47), "the listener or viewer does not have the luxury of re-reading formal or intellectually challenging passages to better understand what is being presented".

Let the Logic be easily understood

Words or phrases that task the mental ability of the audience should be avoided. For example, the use of the word respectively is not allowed on the air because of the special demands of that word. It may be good for the newspaper. Consider the following sentence:

The Vice Chancellor of the University of Uyo, Professor Akaneren Essien; the Dean, Faculty of Arts, Professor Des Wilson; the Head, Department of Communication Arts, Dr Nkereuwem Udoakah; and the Dean, Faculty of Law, Professor Enefiok Essien, hail from Mkpato Enin, Eket, Etinan and Ibiono Ibom Local Government Areas respectively.

At the end of the sentence, the listener is confused as to who hails from where. Such should be avoided.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviations and acronyms should be handled carefully. Mayeux (1999, p.33) is very explicit on the use of abbreviations:

Eliminate most abbreviations from broadcast copy.
Abbreviations should be used only when they are likely to be

clearly understood when heard the first time and when the newscaster is not likely to stumble or hesitate on the abbreviation. When in doubt, don't abbreviate.

There are abbreviations that are common e.g. Mr., Mrs., Dr., etc. But an abbreviation such as 'Prof' could be a stumbling block. A newscaster may not immediately realise that the full meaning of 'Prof' is Professor and may therefore proceed to read 'Prof' (instead of Professor) just as it is written. Outside the common abbreviations already listed, as a rule, write the abbreviations or acronyms in the manner you intend them to be read. For example:

G-M, not GM; N-I-P-R, not N.I.P.R or NIPR; A-K-B-C, not AKBC; S-A-N, not SAN; U-N, not UN; P-D-P, not PDP; UNESCO, not U-N-E-S-C-O; UNICEF, not U-N-I-C-E-F.

The hyphens in-between the words tell the newscaster that he is to read out each letter. Notice the absence of hyphens in the examples of UNESCO and UNICEF: the abbreviations have become acronyms and must be pronounced as such. It is best to use acronyms that are popularly understood when read aloud. Sometimes, the news writer could mark multi-syllabic words with hyphens for ease of reading. He could divide up any complicated multi-syllabic words into their components to make sure the newscaster reads them clearly.

A newscaster on radio once read the electronic giants 'LG' as Local Government because the news editor wrote 'LG' which the newscaster thought was an abbreviation of Local Government, rather than 'L-G', which would have enabled the news reader to read letters of the word. It is best to write a word in full when its acronym or abbreviation may not be immediately understood. And it is also best to write a name in full at the first mention, before the abbreviation or acronym is used subsequently.

Identification of Personalities

It is a time-honoured practice in journalism that every personality mentioned in the news should be identified. The manner of identification in a broadcast copy is different from that of a newspaper. In broadcasting, it is necessary to prepare the mind of the audience before mentioning the personality. Hence, the designation of the person should come before his

name. For example:

The Vice Chancellor, University of Uyo, Professor Akaneron Essien; not Professor Akaneren Essien, Vice Chancellor...the Dean of Arts, Professor Desmond Wilson; not Professor Desmond Wilson, Dean of Arts...

In identifying the personality in the news, the first mention of the name should be in full with his title. Unfortunately, many reporters do not even know the full names of the personalities in the events they had just covered neither do they know their titles! How embarrassing for a reporter returning from the field to come and ask for the details of his newsmaker in the newsroom! Sometimes, a newsmaker is better identified with a sobriquet or nickname than his real or official name. In such circumstances, the real name of the personality should be used alongside his popular name so that the audience could better understand. Examples:

Austin Jay-Jay Okocha;

Edson Arantes Do Nascimento, popularly known as Pele;

Ronaldo De Lima popularly known as Ronaldo

The persons in the examples above are widely known with the names in bold type.

Capitalization

There should be great care in the use of upper- and lowercase letters when preparing the broadcast copy. The generally accepted rule in capitalization should be followed. As Mayeux (1991, p.24) has stated, by following the generally accepted rules on capitalization, "you can easily recognize the beginnings of sentences, proper nouns, street names and so forth".

Some broadcast houses type their copy 'all caps'. The problem in this format is that it does not aid readability. Examine the following examples:

- i) Governor Akpabio says the first phase of Iboim Airport project will be completed in December 2009.**
- ii) GOVERNOR AKPABIO SAYS THE**

FIRST PHASE OF IBOM AIRPORT PROJECT WILL BE COMPLETED IN DECEMBER 2009.

The former sentence is easier read than the latter. Of course, it is generally easier to read a text using upper and lower cases than FULL CAPS. The use of upper and lower cases also enables the writer to give emphasis where it is necessary.

Splitting Words and Sentences

This is one pitfall the broadcast copy can do without if reporters and editors are a bit more careful. While splitting words and sentences is acceptable in newspaper and magazines and other printed texts, it is most unwanted, hence unacceptable, in a broadcast copy. For example:

**President Umaru Yar'Adua is visi-
ting Uganda at the end of the mon-
th. While in the East African coun-
try, he will discuss bilateral issues.**

Such splits as indicated above also split the thoughts of the reader; the reader is forced to jump to the next line to complete the thoughts and sentences, for them to make sense. Jumps make reading aloud difficult and, without doubt, bring in hesitations and pauses that are in themselves distractions when news is being cast. As a rule, do not break a word between lines. If all the letters of the word cannot be accommodated at the end of one line, take the word to the beginning of the next line. The example above could have been written thus:

**President Umaru Yar'Adua is visiting
Uganda at the end of the month.
While in the East African country,
he will discuss bilateral issues.**

Similarly, do not allow one sentence to flow or spill into the next page of the broadcast copy. Complete a sentence on a page before starting the next sentence on a new page. This will ensure that the newsreader does not fall into the confusion of searching for the continuation of a sentence on the next page. The search could be an embarrassing exercise on the air.

Paragraphing, Typing and Spacing

For ease of reading by the newscaster, it is strongly encouraged that each sentence in a broadcast copy should be a paragraph of its own. Typing should be double-spaced and on only one side of the paper. On no account should the newscaster be made to turn overleaf for the continuation of the news. It could be a costly exercise on the air.

Punctuation

According to Eyoh (2000, p.60), "Punctuation denotes the employment of certain control devices in sentences in order to effect sense and clarity". Sense and clarity is of absolute importance to the broadcast copy: "It is the counterpart of the pauses and inflections that make speech understandable" (Hicks, 1998, p.38). Mayeux (1991, p.25) says, "Punctuation gives the newscaster clues about the meaning, emphasis, and interpretation of the copy. Correct use of punctuation avoids ambiguity and adds clarity". Punctuation gives help to the news anchor in reading, and, ultimately, the audience members in understanding what is read.

However, the use of punctuation in broadcast copy demands utmost caution, as there are pitfalls. The principle guiding the use of punctuation is smooth and effective delivery by the newsreader and better understanding by the audience. Effective and appropriate use of punctuation marks demands the broadcast journalist to first understand the punctuation marks as well as their different uses. Unfortunately, many neither know these control devices nor their uses in different situations. Not all punctuation marks are usable in a broadcast copy. These are semicolons (;) exclamation marks (!); brackets ([]); and parenthesis (()). Their use may end up confusing the newsreader, and consequently the listener. Question marks (?) should be used sparingly, and only to indicate where a newscaster should use a rising inflection or to indicate crucial copy interpretations. Ellipses (...) should also be used sparingly, and only "to add a brief phrase or clarifying thought to an already complete sentence or idea and to signal the newscaster to pause a moment and let vocal inflection drop as the additional phrase is read" (Mayeux, 1991, p.28). Let us consider the following example:

The police say they will use force against protesters...except the situation improves overnight.

However, ellipses are not a substitute for commas and should not be so

used. For example:

The Senate of the University of Uyo took action on a number of issues yesterday...final year students' results...a new academic calendar... and creation of a Directorate for G-S-T.

The sentence would be better presented thus:

The Senate of the University of Uyo took action on a number of issues yesterday. It approved the results of final year students, a new academic calendar, and a Directorate for G-S-T.

Punctuation marks that the broadcast writer should learn and strive to use effectively are full stop (.); commas (,); apostrophe ('); hyphen (-); and quotation marks ("").

Colons could mislead the viewer or listener or make him to be lost. Hence, it is best to avoid them when listing items, especially if the listing is long. For example:

The Governor mentioned his achievements to include: tarring of roads, provision of potable water, electrification of rural areas, building of new hospitals, creation of new local government areas, elimination of banditry and restoring hope to the hopeless.

In this long listing, there is a tendency for the listener to forget why the listing was done in the first place. The sentence could be rewritten into many short sentences to highlight the various achievements.

Basically, a full stop (.) indicates the end of a sentence. It must so be used to guide the newscaster. A comma (,) is used to separate words, phrases or clauses in a sentence. This use increases clarity and gives emphasis where necessary.

Apostrophes are used mainly to show contraction (combination of two words) or to indicate possession. For example:

The President's men are intact (possession).

He'll be in the state tomorrow (contraction)

joining pronoun and verbs).

When emphasis is needed, it is best not to contract the pronoun and verb.

E.g.

The Vice Chancellor says he will reduce school fees.

Contraction is acceptable in a broadcast copy as demonstrated above, as part of the informal, conversational tone of broadcasting. However, nouns and verbs should not be joined e.g.

President Yar'Adua'll fly home tomorrow.

Hence, care should be taken on the use of contractions.

Hyphens connect closely related letters, words or numerals, or make a combination of words easier to read. The major aim is to achieve clarity of expression by the newscaster and better understanding by the audience e.g.

A 55-year-old man is dying; anti-war efforts have ended;
a closely-knit band of men; a black-cab driver;
mother-in-law; a black cab-driver; semi-professional.

Use of Figures

Treatment of numbers in a broadcast copy is a headache to many a broadcast journalist. As much as possible, numbers should be eliminated. The less the use of numbers in a news story, the less the possibility that the newscaster will make mistakes concerning that. In writing numbers, as a rule, one to ten should be written in words, while figures are used for 11 to 999. It is advisable to use words for numbers 1000 and above, or a combination of figures and words, but with appropriate breaks. This is to aid reading:

Fifteen thousand; seven-million naira; 150-billion naira; fourbillion naira; 250 million, 30-thousand; etc.

Since the major task is to aid both news delivery by the caster and understanding by the audience, it is advisable that fractions be rounded up or down to the next whole number. For example, four-point-seven million could be rounded up to about/almost five million. Four-point-five million could be read as four-and-a-half million. The listener understands the half more than point-five. However, in sports scores, market statistics and election results, the exact figures have to be used. E.g.

Tigers of Uyo dethroned Dunkers of Lagos 44 to 42 as national champions in a keenly contested basketball game in Calabar last night. The Governor won by a vote of 58 to 54.

As a rule, symbols should not be used in the broadcast copy. The caster may forget their meanings in the heat of the action. Write the words for the symbols, associated with numbers. Examples include:

N naira; k - kobo; \$ - dollars; % - per cent; ft - feet; km - kilometres; min(') - minutes; hr - hour; Roman numerals; mathematical symbols; metric measurements, etc.

Fractions should be written as words instead of numbers e.g. $\frac{3}{4}$ becomes three-quarters; $\frac{1}{5}$ becomes one-fifth; 3.1 becomes three-point-one; 4.50 becomes four-point-five-zero. Never use figure to begin a sentence. For example,

43 tractors have been acquired by the state government.
should be written:

Forty-three tractors have been acquired by the state government.

Time and Day

Time should be made as clear and close to the people as possible. If an international event holding in another country is of interest to the Nigerian audience, the time for the event should be told in the time that the audience is familiar with. For example, if an international football match involving Nigeria and Ghana is starting in Accra, Ghana, at 17 hours G.M.T, the Nigerian audience should know that the game will kick off at 6pm, Nigerian time. This places some demands on the journalist to be conversant with international time zones. The failure of some journalists to understand international time often manifests in the misinformation, and consequent confusion, on the kick off time whenever Nigerian teams are involved in international games outside the country.

It is equally important that the days referred to in the news be

made as near as possible. If an event is scheduled for Thursday, and the news on it is carried on Wednesday, Thursday should be written as tomorrow. Consider the following two sentences:

The State Governor, Chief Godswill Akpabio, will inaugurate the Science Park on Thursday.

The State Governor, Chief Godswill Akpabio, will inaugurate the Science Park tomorrow.

The second sentence makes more sense to the audience than the first. By so doing, the writer has spared the audience the agony of thinking and trying to determine which of the Thursdays is being referred to. The same rule applies to the use of yesterday.

Summary and Conclusion

This article was concerned with a writing style that could make broadcast news to invoke emotions in the audience, that is, a writing style that makes the news aesthetically pleasing to the audience and they come away satisfied rather than being bewildered. It is when this occurs that the goal of communication - which is sharing meaning - is achieved between the sender (broadcast journalist) and the receiver (the audience). At all times, therefore, the news writer's goal should be the stirring of the emotions of his audience through his copy.

It is our position of this paper that the nature of the broadcast medium dictates how news for the medium is written. This is media or technological determinism, a theory propounded by McLuhan (1964) in his popular book, *The Medium is the Message*. For the broadcast journalist to achieve aesthetics in news writing, he should first appreciate the nature of the broadcast medium as well as how and under what circumstances people use the medium, particularly as the use of the medium is also technologically determined.

We have examined the various ways that the broadcast journalist can make his news copy to deepen audience understanding of his message through the involvement of the senses of sight and hearing, to the extent that both the journalist and his audience can share the same aesthetic feelings. We strongly recommend that the broadcast journalist should not

regard writing for television or radio as just any writing, but one that demands the understanding of the characteristics of the medium. They should, therefore, not be contented with just writing, but should take steps to ensure that the copy would be aesthetically pleasing to their audience. This should be a conscious effort, not a product of happenstance.

The mass media world is characterized by competition among radio and television stations to capture and hold the attention of the audiences. As Hyde (1995, p.284) has pointed out, "nearly every broadcast market now has, or can receive signals from one or more stations". Therefore, the broadcast journalist must rise to the challenge of making his news copy to appeal to the audience, intensify and clarify their experience as they listen to or view the news on radio or television. If the copy, arising from the manner it is written, fails to stimulate the feelings of the audience, the audience may exercise their discretion of tuning to another station that they may adjudge to be more satisfying. Whenever news is presented, it should be done with creativity; yet the audience members do not have to be in suspense before grasping the gist in the news. It does not imply that one must write down to a low level of intellect or understanding. But it does mean that one must write in a way that will reach and affect the audience.

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