

THE  
ELECTRONIC  
REPORTER

BROADCAST JOURNALISM  
IN AUSTRALIA

BARBARA ALYSEN

THIRD EDITION

# THE ELECTRONIC REPORTER

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# Abbreviations

AAP	Australian Associated Press
ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABT	Australian Broadcasting Tribunal
ACCC	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
ACMA	Australian Communications and Media Authority
AJA	Australian Journalists' Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BGAN	Broadband Global Area Network
CK	chroma key
CNN	Cable News Network
COS	chief of staff
CRA	Commercial Radio Australia
CTVA	Commercial Television Australia (also known as Free TV Australia)
digicam	(small) digital camera
DV	digital video
DVD	digital video disc
EDL	edit decision list
ENPS	Electronic News Production System
FTP	file transfer protocol
FTVA	Free TV Australia
HDTV	high definition television
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
intro	introduction
ISDN	integrated services digital network
ISO	International Organization for Standardization

LCD	liquid crystal display
LED	light-emitting diode
MEAA	Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance
mic	microphone
MPEG	Motion Picture Experts Group
NTSC	National Television Standards Committee (US)
PAL	phase alternate line
PR	public relations
PTC	piece to camera
Q&A	question-and-answer
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SECAM	système électronique couleur avec mémoire
sot	sound on tape
super	superimposition (caption)
TAM	Television Audience Measurement
USB	universal serial bus
VJ	video journalist
VNR	video news release
VSV	vision-sound-vision

# Acknowledgments

One of the difficulties in writing an Australian textbook on broadcast news is deciding just where to draw the boundaries. The electronic news media are very diverse and the way journalism is practised varies widely between different sectors. I have tried to represent all the main styles in this book. This edition also reflects the main changes in the practice of broadcast journalism in Australia since the second edition, in particular the growing influence of social media on news gathering and delivery.

This book could not have been written without the generous assistance of two groups of people. There are those who were interviewed and quoted. They represent a range of experience in the industry – covering radio, television and online and social media journalism, the public and commercial sectors, metropolitan and regional broadcasting. Many other people provided logistical help, information and advice.

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Section 4 of the Free TV Australia Code of Practice is published with consent of FTVA. The full Codes may be found on the FTVA website <[www.freetv.com.au](http://www.freetv.com.au)>.

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It goes without saying that any errors are entirely my own.



# ①

## Introduction

### **A changing profession**

No profession stands still. But the forces of change and the way they take effect are not always the ones we expect.

When the first edition of this book was in production, the biggest influence on broadcast news was the imminent introduction of digital transmission. The second edition coincided with changes to regulations governing media ownership. This third edition is being produced at a time when the biggest new influence on news generation and consumption is social media. Yet journalism's core skills remain as important as ever.

This book is about the practice of journalism in what are often termed the 'electronic media' – those delivered by broadcast or online – and it details what journalists do and how they go about it. It also tries to set that practice in the context of the broader operations of the electronic media so that students will understand why newsrooms function in a particular way. Some of the key moments in the evolution of Australia's electronic media are set out in the timeline on pages 7–8. The big picture changes naturally weigh on the workaday world of journalists, but smaller changes are often at least equally important.

Many forces shape the work of electronic reporters. They include the technologies used, the revenues and expenses associated with running a newsroom, and the number and type of people who tune in and whether that number is growing or shrinking. So those who work in today's electronic media will be influenced by a series of factors, some of which are discussed in this section.

## The relationship between journalists and audiences has changed

Not every viewer or listener wants to ‘like’ a broadcast news outlet on Facebook or respond to its Twitter stream. Not everyone wants to text information to a newsroom and contribute audio or video from their smart phone or other mobile device. Some people can read news online without wanting to add comments at the end. But so many members of the audience *do* now want to do those things that they have changed news production from the one-way transmission of information to what some analysts regard as more of a conversation between journalists and their audiences. The conversation can be positive. Journalists can find their audience ‘liking’ them on Facebook and tweeting back warmly. On the other hand, errors will be noticed and remarked on and when audience members disagree with what they read, hear or see they now have more forums than ever before in which to voice their opinions. Journalists now face an unprecedented level of scrutiny from an informed and vocal audience. One enduring reminder of that is the closure, in July 2011, of Britain’s infamous ‘red top’, the *News of the World*, brought down in part by public use of social media to target advertisers and demand a boycott of the title after revelations of the extent of its phone-hacking activities.

Relationships between journalists and news organisations have changed as well. Many reporters use their personal social networking sites as part of their professional lives, creating a personal brand alongside the organisational one. This has raised ethical and legal issues, as some journalists have discovered.

## There’s an app for that

The release, in 2010, of the iPad was widely seen as a game changer for the news media. By the end of that year, many broadcast services had developed apps to deliver their content over tablets just as they had for smart phones.

Perhaps more importantly, in the long term, tablet delivery offers a mobile platform in which in-depth newspaper journalism can sit next to high-resolution video along with graphics and interactive elements, which may point to the future of both print and television.

News consumers can use apps to read, listen to and view the news as well as to send text, images and video to news organisations and for purposes we probably cannot yet imagine. The same goes for journalists, for whom tablets might be the all-purpose tool on which they can record, edit, write and file their stories.

## News (and current affairs) on demand

Gone are the days when broadcast news conformed to a rigid schedule of hourly, half-hourly or set time broadcasts. Now there are 24-hour news services on radio and television and news updates via online sites and social media. Twitter is the fastest, if not always the most reliable, way of finding out what's happening. If you miss a program, you can probably catch it online or subscribe to a podcast. Journalists work in a news cycle that has no down time. And so do news-makers, which may not be good for us. There are some who argue that politicians and journalists are now so focused on the short-term news cycle that they are losing sight of the long-term one. For journalists, one of the criticisms of the 24-hour news cycle is that it puts so much emphasis on coverage of events and too little on reflection about their meaning.

## One story, many versions

Not only is news work round-the-clock, it is multi-platform. Writing or constructing stories for more than one delivery system is now the norm rather than the exception. Broadcast journalists can expect to contribute to online and/or social media. Some write for print too. Being able to switch between writing and reporting styles is no longer an option for young journalists.

## One story, many tasks

As well as needing to generate content for more platforms, broadcast journalists – and television journalists in particular – are having to take on more of the technical work of production. Some shoot video, at least some of the time. More are editing their stories, at least to rough-cut stage, now that desktop video editing systems are so user-friendly.

Radio journalists have been doing all their technical work for many years. Moreover, technical and presentation skills are now increasingly important for reporters in general, regardless of their main medium.

## Doing more with less (or the same)

When the Australian journalists' professional association, the MEAA (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance), surveyed journalists for the second edition of its report on the future of journalism, *Life in the Clickstream*, it found that 'broadly speaking, their employers are asking them to do more with less and, in many cases, to learn a whole new set of tools and techniques, while maintaining

(or in most cases, increasing) their output' (MEAA 2010: 19). About 60 per cent said they were not being compensated for the extra work and hours. Even so, most were optimistic about the challenges of the future.

### **Can we do that live?**

Watch any television news bulletin and you will see journalists reporting live from the scene; talking to the presenter and sometimes interviewing live-to-air. It used to be rare for a reporter to be required to do a 'live cross'. Now it's commonplace and live-to-air skills, including an ability to ad lib, are essential for anyone wanting to work on camera. Live reports keep audiences updated with fast-moving events. However, critics note that some live-to-air work is more a matter of conveying an image than of necessity.

### **Distance is no barrier**

As we will see in later chapters, social media have made it easier to develop contacts and source information and comment from anywhere in the world, as long as appropriate standards of checking and verification are applied. New media technologies have also created a global audience for Australian broadcasters (and webcasters) at every level.

The use of voice over Internet software such as Skype has made it possible to get television interviews with people anywhere in Australia or overseas. And these technologies can only improve in the quality they can deliver, raising questions about the ways in which the practice of television journalism may change in the future.

### **News is just another program**

Long-term news industry staff can probably remember a time when news was the linchpin of any broadcaster. In part that may have reflected different times and a greater public interest in information rather than entertainment. In television, it also reflected the ethos that, if you could attract viewers to the mid-evening news, inertia would probably keep them tuned to the same channel for the rest of the night. The introduction of the remote control in the early 1980s saw off that level of viewer loyalty. But changes to the financial operations of stations, where a program's budget is dependent on its earnings, and the increasing influence of ratings figures, have also played a part. Data from the Australian Communications and Media Authority indicate that, in the five years

to 2009, spending on news and current affairs programs in Australia declined by nearly 34 per cent. Over the same period, stations spent more on almost every other type of program (ACMA 2010: 124).

### News resources are shrinking

The status of radio news is particularly interesting because most bulletins are so short they can't attract an identifiable audience. That means news bulletins, unlike other programs, can't be 'sold' and don't add to a station's bottom line. The way in which economic forces have affected radio news over the past two decades or so was summed up by one radio news executive interviewed for this book, who recalled that when he started at one of Australia's largest commercial newsrooms, in the early 1990s, there had been a traffic helicopter, and 'rounds people for just about everything you could imagine'. Since then rationalisation in the industry had led to fewer staff and particularly fewer specialist staff. The changes have been even more dramatic in regional radio news, particularly in the commercial sector, where newsrooms comprising a single journalist are now commonplace and often that one journalist will prepare bulletins for AM and FM stations within a service area or two separate geographic markets, or both. Some regional commercial radio newsrooms are staffed only till midday, five days a week. The repercussions for covering breaking news are self-evident and in time of rural emergencies, such as bushfires or flooding, only the ABC still has the staff to provide the service listeners rely on in many places.

### Talk is cheap

The number of commercial television current affairs programs based around packaged stories (that is, stories narrated by a reporter and incorporating interview segments from a range of people) declined in the first decade of the 21st century and, given that this is the most labour-intensive and expensive form of production, this trend may continue long-term. That does not mean that current affairs (in the widest sense of the term) are not being covered across the networks but rather that programs are now more likely to be talk-based, and might feature panels, a live audience and interaction with the audience at home. One way of looking at this is to consider that television information programs are moving away from the buttoned-up, highly packaged formats towards a more freewheeling, live and discussion-based form of production.

## Chasing the market downhill

On the other hand, many worry about the future of *quality* news and current affairs production and the potential for television as a vehicle for the transmission of serious ideas and debate. This is not a new argument. It was put, most famously, by US media critic Neil Postman in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Among the prominent voices to have argued the point more recently are former Labor politician Lindsay Tanner and senior ABC journalist and presenter Kerry O'Brien (Dick 2011b: n.p.), both of whom pinpointed the interdependent relationship between politicians and the news media as the greatest cause for concern. But the question that remains is whether a news media concerned about its survival will see the solution as going 'upmarket' and hoping an increasingly fractured audience will follow.

## The future

Today's news audience has a larger choice of sources than ever before, both formal and informal, and mainstream news providers are tapping into those informal channels to try to hold their viewers and listeners. With so much effort being put into keeping the audience 'involved' with news, it is clear that when the electronic news industries look to the future they see one that will be overwhelmingly influenced by audience tastes and demands, while driven also by developing technologies and the need to contain costs. As you would expect, different sections of the electronic media see the future in different ways. But among the assumptions about the influences that will drive their future are that more news consumers will access their news on multiple, often mobile, platforms, that audiences will become more fragmented and more focused on specific news genres (such as sport, entertainment, health and so on), and that they will expect news to be delivered fast, from anywhere in the world. This is the environment into which many of the readers of this book aspire to move.

Figure 1.1

### Timeline of key events in the Australian electronic media

- 1923 First Australian radio station goes on air.
- 1932 Australian Broadcasting Commission (now Corporation) established.
- 1944 Start of radio ratings.
- 1947 ABC begins independent news service.
- 1953 Passage of the *Television Act 1953*, providing for both publicly funded and commercial television stations.
- 1956 Formal start of television transmissions – by TCN 9, Sydney. Channels 7 & 2 follow later that year.
- 1957 Start of television ratings.
- 1965 Channel 10, third commercial service, goes on air.
- 1974 First community radio licence granted to 5UV, Adelaide.
- 1975
  - Formal start of colour television broadcasts.
  - Start of satellite delivery of foreign news feeds to Australia.
  - Launch of ABC youth station, 2JJ.
  - Ethnic radio stations 2EA & 3EA licensed.
  - Launch of first FM station, 2MBS-FM.
- 1977 Australian Broadcasting Tribunal replaces Australian Broadcasting Control Board.
- 1980
  - Start of commercial FM radio.
  - Formal launch of SBS TV.
- 1991 Data collection for TV ratings changes from diaries to people meters.
- 1992 Australian Broadcasting Authority replaces Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.
- 1995 Start of pay TV – by Australis Media's Galaxy service.
- 1996
  - ABC launches online news site.
  - Launch of Sky News, first pay TV news channel, first Australian, 24-hour news channel, first to be fully digital.
- 1999 Ratings figures begin to include pay TV.
- 2001 Formal start of digital TV in metro areas.
- 2003
  - Start of test broadcast of digital radio in Sydney.
  - Start of 3G news services – by Hutchison.
- 2004
  - Digital TV extended to regional areas.
  - Launch of Sky News Interactive with 8 channels.
  - Trials begin of datacasting and digital radio.



- 2005
  - Review of digital television.
  - ABA merges with ACA to form ACMA.
- 2006
  - Moratorium on new commercial FTA TV licences expires.
  - ABC first network to begin podcasting – the start of on-demand broadcasts.
- 2007
  - The three commercial networks launch HD channels.
  - Launch of National Indigenous Television (NITV)
- 2009
  - Launch of digital radio broadcasts.
  - Broadcast newsrooms start building a presence on Facebook and Twitter.
- 2010
  - ABC launches News 24, Australia's first free-to-air 24-hour news channel.
  - Switch-off of analogue TV signal begins.
- 2013
  - Switch-off of analogue TV signal due to be completed.

## ②

# The newsroom

To understand how broadcast news is put together, it is important to first have an understanding of the structure of broadcast newsrooms and the flow of authority within them.

Of course, broadcast newsrooms vary considerably from radio to television, from regional to metropolitan and from community to public to commercial broadcasters.

Regional commercial radio newsrooms can comprise just a single reporter. Even a capital city radio newsroom will have quite a simple structure compared to its metropolitan television counterpart, which is likely to boast not just reporters and crews, but also editors, administrative and technical staff, librarians and a helicopter pilot. Since television news has the more complex administrative structure, it has been used as the basis for most of this chapter.

Despite their differences in size, and the number and types of personnel, most broadcast media newsrooms follow the same basic pattern.

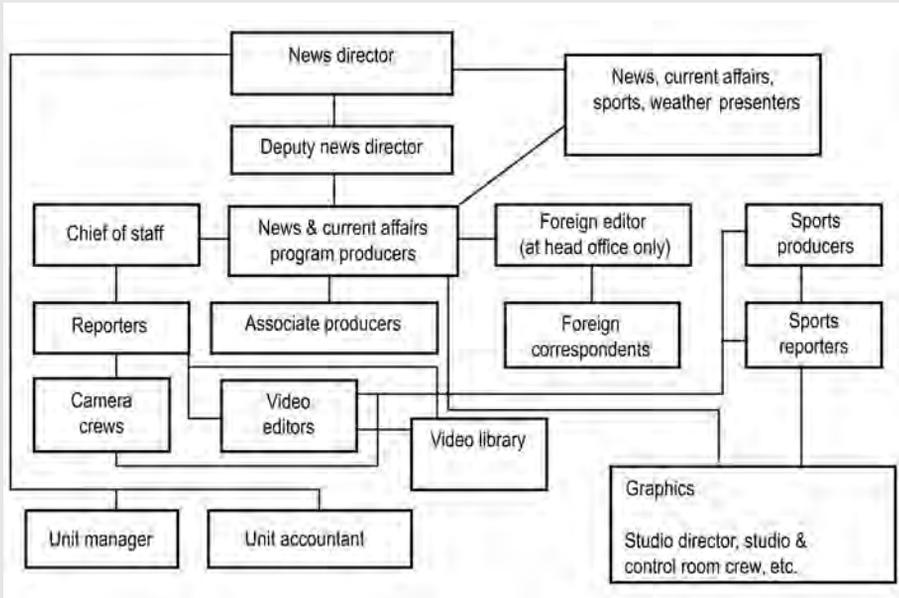
The structures of a typical metropolitan television newsroom and a metropolitan commercial radio newsroom are outlined in figures 2.1 and 2.2.

As we have seen already, these are merely typical structures. In the diagrams, the director of news and head of sports function independently as departmental heads even though sports reporters will often contribute up to one-quarter or more of the news. But in some organisations the sports area comes under the broad umbrella of news and current affairs and the lines of authority will differ accordingly.

The duties of the various management and staff positions outlined below also may vary from one newsroom to another. But, in general, their responsibilities are as follows.

**Figure 2.1**

The structure of a metropolitan television newsroom



This diagram shows the typical lines of communication in daily news. But the authority structure of a newsroom is more complex and varies from one organisation to another.

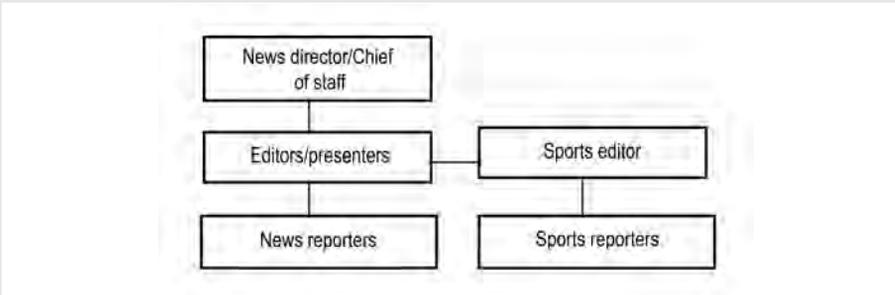
## Newsroom staff

### News director

The news director (also known as the news editor, managing editor, etc.) has overall responsibility for the newsroom and its budget, for editorial policy and for hiring and dismissing staff. There have been female news directors in radio since the early 1980s, and in television since 1993. Some of Australia’s largest radio newsrooms are now run by women and female news directors are no longer unusual in television, though TV newsrooms are still more likely to be headed by men.

Figure 2.2

The structure of a (commercial) metropolitan radio newsroom



Radio newsrooms have a much flatter structure and in some, one or two people will fill all the roles.

## Chief of staff

The chief of staff (COS) and bulletin producer usually have parallel authority and deal with different ends of the production process at different ends of the day. Essentially, the COS handles program *input*, while the producer handles *output*.

The chief of staff will start work at 6 am or earlier, and decide on those stories the newsroom can afford, in terms of staff and money, to cover that day. The COS will assign reporters and camera operators to stories as they come up and liaise with interstate offices before compiling a list of the day's anticipated news stories for the bulletin producer. Throughout the day, this list will undergo revision as some stories are found to be less newsworthy than first thought while others crop up unexpectedly. The main sources of breaking news include the emergency services – the police, ambulance and fire brigade – which will alert newsrooms of newsworthy stories where they see fit. Journalists will also stay across trending topics on social media sites because, sometimes, those can offer the first indication of an event – including accidents, fires and other emergencies – which might require coverage.

Usually, the chief of staff will leave work around mid-afternoon, handing over to another reporter who will tie up loose ends and look after any late-breaking stories.

## Bulletin producer

The producer will start later than the COS but work through until the bulletin ends. A producer is responsible for the running order of the program, for ensuring it runs its allocated time, for supervising story introductions (intros) and sometimes scripts, for supervising the graphics and for the style of the bulletin or program within the general 'house style'. A producer also takes primary legal responsibility for a program.

At some point in the morning, the producer will receive lists of expected stories from both the COS and the foreign editor. They will then begin to draft the bulletin rundown, which is likely to undergo constant revision as the day progresses.

## Associate producers

Associate producers work to the producer. Their functions can include scripting foreign news from satellite feeds, writing short stories, writing newsbreaks and copy for the news bar, which scrolls across the screen.

## Foreign editor

Television news services usually have a foreign editor who works from the network's head office. The foreign editor liaises with any reporters stationed overseas and also supervises the selection of material from the daily incoming satellite feeds and file transfers. Stories sent by foreign correspondents and items packaged from satellite vision are usually edited at the network's head office and then distributed to affiliated stations.

## Reporters

Television reporters work to the chief of staff at the beginning of their day and to the producer at the end of it, although some high-profile reporters may enjoy better pay and status than either. Some reporters in large television and radio newsrooms may have a specific 'round'; that is, a particular area such as state parliament, courts, the police, health or finance, that they cover. While news rounds are common in all but the smallest newspapers, they are much less so in electronic media newsrooms where there are fewer reporters and where most are expected to be generalists.

Like television reporters, those in radio will take their assignments from the COS and present completed stories to the producer. But in smaller newsrooms the distinction between these positions is blurred or



Metropolitan television newsrooms are large and well resourced by comparison with their radio and regional television equivalents. This is Ten News in Sydney.

non-existent and sometimes the same person will assign, write, produce and read.

Large news organisations will also have reporters in federal parliament, while smaller ones will take a syndicated parliamentary service.

The composition of reporting staff in the Australian electronic media has undergone a number of changes over the last three decades, none more obvious than the shift in the gender make-up of newsrooms. While women once had difficulty finding broadcast jobs, because their voices were said to lack authority, they now often outnumber men. The reasons for this are complex. One reason may be that many journalists now come from university courses where female students are in the majority. Whatever the reason, the imbalance concerns those who hire and fire because they prefer to have a mix of male and female voices and faces in their programs.

Reporters are expected to have listened to several radio news and current affairs bulletins and have read at least two of the day's newspapers by the time

they arrive at work. They may already have in mind a story they want to cover that day and will discuss it with the chief of staff. If not, they will be assigned a story from the COS's list or may wait in the newsroom in case of a late-breaking story.

Roundspeople are expected to generate their own stories, although these also need to be discussed with the COS.

The duties of a broadcast reporter vary according to a number of circumstances:

- whether the newsroom is metropolitan or regional
- whether the newsroom is single medium (that is, radio, television or online) or whether it is bi-media or multimedia. In 1996, the ABC began integrating its radio and television arms and its reporters may be expected to file for radio or television or both and their material is also fed to the ABC's online service. At other organisations, including Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) TV and radio and Sky News, journalists file for broadcast and online delivery
- whether the newsroom services fixed bulletins or round-the-clock programming.

In radio, which has a large number of daily bulletins and a high rotation of stories, reporters will spend much of their time rewriting and updating material by gathering a range of actuality to carry a story from one hour to the next. Online news also accommodates a large number of stories, many of which need to be refreshed throughout the day. The same is true for 24-hour television news. The flow of work in most TV newsrooms is different. A service may have a main mid-evening bulletin with a series of earlier and later newscasts. In between there might be news updates, which function primarily to promote the next main bulletin. In both radio and television, many reporters also post précis of their stories to social media sites.

### Camera operators

Camera crews used to consist of two people, one shooting the pictures and the other assisting and recording sound. Nowadays, the one-person crew is the norm, though most large metropolitan newsrooms maintain a small proportion of two-person crews for jobs where a separate sound operator is necessary. The camera operator or crew is responsible for recording the pictures and sound for a television story and handling other technicalities, such as transmitting material to the station when required. Crews usually look after the driving too.

In addition to staff crews, a station will also draw on freelance or stringer operators who generally cover areas outside the main news centres, including the outer suburban areas of some cities, and also the overnight shift.

The main metropolitan services will also have use of the station's helicopter and pilot.

Helicopters have three uses in news:

- They transport reporters and crews to stories too far away for easy access by road.
- They are used as a shooting platform when aerial pictures are needed.
- They are used to bounce signals from news vans to the station so that crews can send back their pictures.

## Editors

Editors are responsible for assembling or finessing stories from pictures and sound supplied by the camera operator and a narration script or rough edit supplied by the reporter. In some regional newsrooms and foreign bureaus, the camera operator will also edit the stories. As with camera crews, editors play a vital role in the quality of finished stories, which is not always given adequate recognition.

Radio reporters do their own technical work.

## Graphic artists

The graphics team produces the backgrounds that are keyed electronically behind the news presenters and any graphics and animation required for insertion into reporters' stories.

## Library staff

News programs and stories are archived after broadcast, in case the material is needed again. The amount of library vision that finds its way back into television stories and the issues this raises is dealt with in chapter 8. Radio bulletins also draw on their archives, although to a much smaller extent than is the case in television. Only large news organisations still have library staff.

## Unit manager/accountant

News is a business and newsrooms operate to a budget, supervised by an accountant or financial manager. If an important story happens outside regular news-gathering areas – such as a natural disaster in any of the South Pacific island nations – newsroom executives must decide the level of coverage the

organisation can afford, and for how long. Extensive coverage of one particular story may cost so much in airfares, accommodation, transmission costs and so on, that it will affect the coverage of other news in that financial year.

### **Studio director**

Studio crews work on any programs that require studio facilities, so news and current affairs programs may occupy just a part of their working day. But the studio director has a large role in a news broadcast and in some organisations a director may spend the entire day working on news programs. Ideally, a director will see all the stories in a bulletin or current affairs program before they go to air to ensure that they are presented smoothly, though this is not always possible if stories are filed late.

### **Newsroom automation systems**

Computerisation of Australian broadcast newsrooms began in the early 1980s and now almost all use one of the specialist automation systems designed for radio or television news. These include NewsBoss for radio and Electronic News Production System (ENPS), Quantel, iNews and Dalet for television. Automation systems allow users to monitor incoming agency copy, write stories, work on a rundown, access the Internet, and access audio or video clips and their network's archives from their desktop.

### **The news day**

The way in which the news day unfolds in radio and television is quite different. Free-to-air television newsrooms are focused on one main bulletin per day, in the early evening, often with subsidiary bulletins at breakfast, mid-morning, afternoon and late night.

By contrast, a radio newsroom has peaks of activity every hour or half-hour, though radio reporters, especially those at news-talk stations, can also be expected to file live into other on-air programs when there is a breaking story. Radio stories can be produced with much less effort than television ones, which involve more people and more expensive technology. Mainstream television news puts a great deal of effort into a relatively small number of stories. Radio will cover an incident, which would be a single story on television or in a newspaper, as a sequence of smaller, unfolding ones. Online and round-the-clock television news services have the same approach.

Since free-to-air television has the most formal and highly resourced production process, it has been used as the focus of the following description.



Even the largest commercial radio newsrooms – such as 2GB in Sydney – have only a small number of reporters compared to newspapers.

## Assigning stories

As the chief of staff begins work, some aspects of the news day will already be taking shape. Sometimes a story, usually an accident or some type of emergency, will have occurred overnight and a reporter or camera operator will have left material for the morning team to assess. Metropolitan newsrooms generally maintain very basic overnight coverage where they share the cost of a stringer, just in case something happens. The chief of staff will go through the day file and decide which items warrant coverage. The COS will also comb through the morning newspapers for potential stories and monitor morning radio and television programs for the same reason. As reporters begin arriving, the COS will discuss any ideas they might have and then confirm their assignment and allocate a camera operator or crew.

At the same time, the foreign editor will have begun work in the network's head office. Depending on the dictates of international time zones, the foreign editor will liaise with the network's foreign correspondents, of whom there are increasingly few, about potential stories. Some of the day's overseas feeds will have been recorded or downloaded already. The foreign editor will make an initial selection of which items are worthy of inclusion in the day's bulletins.

### News conferences

Around mid-morning in most large newsrooms, the principal decision-makers, including the news director, the producer and the foreign editor, will convene for a news conference. The interstate or Canberra bureaus will have been consulted about the material they have to contribute and they may also take part by phone. At this meeting the stories on offer will be discussed and a tentative list of priorities will be made.

### Shaping the rundown

Soon afterwards, the producer will draw up a draft rundown of the news bulletin, drawing on lists of likely stories supplied by the COS and the foreign editor. The first draft of the rundown, and all subsequent versions, includes not just the running order of stories but also the anticipated or allocated length of each item and whether it is a full package, a reader voice-over, a live read and so on. (For an explanation of these story formats, see chapter 4.)

The planned bulletin rundown is likely to change throughout the day as some stories fail to live up to expectation and are either dropped or downgraded to reader voice-over or live status while others, not anticipated early in the day, develop.

While the producer shapes the rundown, the reporters prepare their stories. The first dictate of broadcast news is that you cannot have 'dead air'. The entire duration of the bulletin must be filled. So there's considerable pressure on reporters not to 'kill' stories once they have been assigned.

Wastage is a particular problem for television because the cost of preparing stories is markedly higher than for the press, usually involving more time on the part of the reporter plus a camera operator, vehicle and perhaps helicopter costs and an editor as well. On the other hand, wastage is not much of an issue in radio news since the number of bulletins each day and the high rotation of stories means that few have to be dropped.

Figure 2.3

## Morning rundown

Item No	Story Slug	Segment	Presenter	Final Appr	Est Duration	Actual	Front	Back	Cume	Last Mod By	Camera
	TENBUG	VTR				0:00	5:00:00 PM	5:26:42 PM	0:00	Angela Murphy	
	OPENER STANDBY	VTR			0:10	0:00	5:00:00 PM	5:26:42 PM	0:00	Angela Murphy	
	OPEN	INT			0:30	0:13	5:00:00 PM	5:26:42 PM	0:13	Angela Murphy	...L
		VTR				0:00	5:00:13 PM	5:26:55 PM	0:13	ATVPA1 ATVPA1	
	INTRO PLAYON	LIVE			0:03	0:03	5:00:13 PM	5:26:55 PM	0:16	Angela Murphy	C5/WS
	POINTER	LIVE			0:05	0:00	5:00:16 PM	5:26:58 PM	0:19	Angela Murphy	C2/2S
	SHOTS	INT			0:10	0:00	5:00:19 PM	5:27:01 PM	0:29	Heather Loomes	
		VTR			1:30	0:00	5:00:29 PM	5:27:11 PM	1:59	James Sutherland	
	SEARCH	INT			0:10	0:00	5:00:59 PM	5:28:41 PM	2:09	James Sutherland	
		VTR			1:30	0:00	5:02:09 PM	5:28:51 PM	3:39	James Sutherland	
	ALYSSIA LL	INT			0:10	0:00	5:03:39 PM	5:30:21 PM	3:49	James Sutherland	
		VTR			1:10	0:00	5:03:49 PM	5:30:31 PM	4:59	James Sutherland	
	ASSAULT	INT			0:10	0:00	5:04:59 PM	5:31:41 PM	5:09	James Sutherland	

The first draft of a mid-evening news rundown is drawn up mid-morning. This example – from Ten Melbourne – was broadcast at a time when there had been a series of shootings around Melbourne and the projected lead story was about the latest incident. Note that every item has an estimated duration and the bulletin is already fully timed from its on-air to its off-air time. INT indicates intro and VTR the video. You can see how the news day developed by looking at the rundown for the bulletin that went to air in chapter 13 (figure 13.1). Rundown courtesy Ten Melbourne.

## Approaches to stories

This pressure on time and resources means a TV reporter will usually have a strong idea of the angle and construction of their story before they leave the newsroom with the camera operator to shoot the overlay and conduct the interviews. Casual observers of the television news process can be critical of such a predetermined method of news gathering, but a combination of the relatively limited pool of reporters and camera operators, plus the complexity of the production process, does not leave much room for a ‘fishing expedition’ approach.

Of course, the way in which a broadcast reporter approaches a story will depend on the nature of the story itself. Some items require the reporter and

crew to think of ways in which to illustrate the topic. Stories about *issues*, such as economic items, tend to fall into this category. Other stories are driven by the pictures and require the camera operator, at least, to be on hand to capture those images. Stories in the first category can usually be shot in a time frame decided on by the reporter and camera operator. Stories in the second category set their own time frame.

## The news day in smaller newsrooms

While on-camera reporters in metropolitan television will usually work on one story a day, it is a different picture in radio news and in regional television, where reporters routinely prepare two or three stories – though some of those will often be softer items than would routinely make the cut in the metros. Travis Parry, who worked for several regional networks before moving to metro then international news organisations, says that level of output means regional reporters need to be highly organised. It means they can't travel as far to get vision as they might want to and they record fewer interviews on video than their metro colleagues:

You do have to work very fast, even out on your jobs. You don't have a lot of time to be mucking around waiting for people to interview. And it's not just the journalist who's under a lot of pressure but also the camera operator, because regional newsrooms don't usually have spare operators the way metro newsrooms do.

But he says regional reporters don't have to let their workload affect the amount of information they can put into their stories, since *information* can be gathered quickly by phone.

Many smaller commercial, regional radio newsrooms have only one journalist. Victorian sports editor Steve King (who broadcasts as Tom King to avoid confusion with another sports identity) says regional radio calls for self-starters with impeccable time management skills because 'you're as good as on your own. You've got your program director for guidance, but in the end, their main interest is the on-air product of the announcers'. He says attention to planning is vital:

Have a structure for your day. I know it might sound boring, but you've got to be just clinical in the way you structure your day. You've got to get into a habit of doing the same thing every day at the same time. The first thing to do when you walk in the door is get straight on the phone for emergency service rounds, and back up and do it again at 11 o'clock

and do it every day without fail. If you can't get into a routine, you'll just be chasing your backside for the rest of that week. You'll miss stories because you haven't got the time because you've done something wrong somewhere.

Planning ahead is important in all newsrooms, but it is critical in smaller ones. As broadcast journalism lecturer and former network news director Samantha Blair points out, the reporter in a regional newsroom is responsible for their local service and that means working beyond rostered shifts, being on call and available most of the time:

General news doesn't stop on weekends. There are sporting competitions and festivals, launches, all those sorts of things. Politicians from the city occasionally visit country areas on weekends. But there will also be spikes in crime and other unpredictable events. Weekend stories are invaluable to the building of content for Monday's early shift.

Steve King makes much the same point when he says some stories for Monday's news can be prepared in advance out of courtesy to your sources because:

Nobody wants to be rung at 4 o'clock on a Monday morning to be chased up for a comment. They prefer to be rung on Sunday afternoon. Also, that's when you do your best police rounds because that's when you've got your senior police on after a Saturday night.

## Competition for news

News is a competitive business. Station promos stress the superiority of their news presenters and reporters and their ability to deliver the news first and best. Rival stations' executives rarely have a nice word to say about each other, at least in public. Behind the scenes, though, it is a different story. Many newsrooms find that one way to stretch their budget to fund the service they want to provide is to share resources with rivals. It is not uncommon for a crew from one channel to shoot material for one or more of the other services on a favour-for-favour basis. This type of shared coverage is most common between services that are not direct competitors – such as between either of the public-sector broadcasters and any of the commercials. It is all but unknown between direct rivals Seven and Nine. When it comes to organising expensive coverage, such as flying a team to a remote location to cover a natural disaster, stations will sometimes share a camera operator to save costs and all stations usually pool on shoots where it would be undesirable or impossible to accommodate more than

a single camera team – such as medical operations and some funerals. Keen observers of television news will notice that the pictures on different channels sometimes seem to be the same. That's because they are.

### The presenter

Radio still has 'newsreaders', but 'presenter' and 'anchor' are increasingly common terms for the women and men who front television news, current affairs and infotainment programs. This is partly due to American influence and partly because the role of television news presentation has changed from one of reading the prompter to one that requires an ability to interview and ad lib. News presentation jobs are now filled by journalists rather than people with purely presentational skills. One reason for this shift has been the introduction of continuous news, which appears on ABC News 24, pay TV and occasionally on free-to-air television during events of international significance when stations suspend their regular programs, as they did during the flooding in Queensland in 2010–11 and the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, to cite just two examples. The person in the presenter's chair during these events needs to be able to interview, and comment knowledgeably on fast-moving events, but even day-to-day newscasts now require these skills.

However, one of the anomalies for Australian journalists who present news is that they will probably earn less than the non-journalists who preceded them in the role. Speculation about the salaries paid to TV newsreaders reached its peak in the late 1990s. *Business Review Weekly* (Shoebidge and Ferguson 1998: 40–55) suggested that in 1997 Nine Network's Sydney presenter, Brian Henderson, had commanded \$1.5 million and the network's Melbourne presenter, Brian Naylor, \$900 000. What drove these salaries was the assumption that certain individuals were uniquely placed to deliver audiences and the fear that viewers would desert if the occupant of the presenter's chair changed. Today's news presenters work in a more crowded marketplace. The number of available channels is growing and there are early-morning and late-night bulletins as well as prime-time ones, so the audience for individual news programs is shrinking. The 2010 edition of *Business Review Weekly's* list of top-earning Australian 'entertainers' featured no newsreaders. In fact, only two representatives of the information media were featured – radio announcers Alan Jones at 22 and Ray Hadley at 46 on the list, with estimated annual earnings of \$5 million and \$2 million respectively (Brentnall 2010: 34). Speculation about presenters' salaries in mid-2011 suggested Seven's David Koch was ➔

receiving \$1 million to co-host *Sunrise*, while fellow presenter Melissa Doyle was on \$700 000. The station's main news anchor, Chris Bath, was said to be receiving \$900 000. (Sharp 2011: n.p.).

Australian news bulletins are either two-header (most commonly at Network Ten) or fronted by a man or woman alone. Networks generally considered prime-time newsreading a job for a man until 1988, when SBS appointed Mary Kostakidis as its chief newsreader. Jennifer Keyte became Australian commercial television's first female chief news presenter, at Melbourne's HSV 7 in 1991. In 2004, ABC Sydney appointed Juanita Phillips as the sole reader of its 7 pm bulletin, making her one of the few women and the first journalist from a commercial news background to front the ABC's Sydney service.

Although stations invest both money and promotional effort in their main newsreaders, the weekend bulletins, which are read by the second-string reader, often draw a bigger audience than weeknights because more viewers are home then. The publicity machines at television stations sometimes imply that newsreaders oversee their bulletins and even write them. However, the level of editorial input among presenters of the main capital city bulletins varies considerably depending on each individual's background and inclination and the structure of the newsroom itself.

# ③

## Sources of news

### What makes news

Information and opinion are the raw material of news, but clearly only some of this raw material will find its way into the product we call ‘news’. Distinguishing between something that is a good story and something that is no story at all is an imperfect science. Reporters may not always be able to explain the way they know something is news, but all are certain they can recognise it when they see it.

The qualities that make an event or set of facts news are called ‘news values’ and while they have different meanings in different news environments, they are generally agreed to include:

- Interest
- Timeliness
- Consequence
- Conflict
- Proximity
- Human interest
- Novelty
- Prominence

These are the main determining factors for whether information can and will become news.

- *Interest* requires that a story has audience appeal. It is not enough for information to be ‘worthy but dull’. To become news it has to be of interest. Of course, not everything is interesting to everyone and news services choose stories on the basis of their interest to their particular audience.
- *Timeliness* is particularly important in broadcast and online news, which promote their ability to deliver news as it happens. A radio news promo put it neatly when it urged listeners to ‘See it *tonight*. Read it *tomorrow*. Hear it *now*.’ To be timely, a story must be new, or have a fresh angle. As British writer Andrew Boyd once noted, ‘news is only news while it is new’ (Boyd 1997: 5).

- *Consequence* could also be described as ‘impact’ or ‘importance’ and refers to the effect a piece of news will have on people’s lives. Political and economic stories are typically high-impact items.
- *Proximity* reflects people’s desire for information about events in their own sphere of interest. This can be a geographic area, but it can also be defined by cultural, religious, age or gender boundaries and so on. For many Australians, news from an overseas country can have greater proximity than that from another Australian city, because they have family or cultural roots abroad.
- *Conflict* – in its widest meaning – is fundamental to the western model of news. But, as US journalist Al Thompkins has pointed out, this should not be seen simplistically. The conflict can be physical or philosophical, it can be between individuals or groups, between people and their surroundings or the past and the present:

To make a story it seems to me you have to have a conflict. I don’t mean two people shooting at each other ... Sometimes it can be an internal conflict. Or it can be a conflict of today versus what it was ... But a story is essentially a conflict. You don’t do a story on the status quo unless the status quo isn’t good or isn’t there any longer or is in danger ... Something that *is* is not the story ... If you can identify the conflict you’ve identified the story. (Poynter Institute 1992: n.p.)

- *Human interest* is hard to pin down, but one definition is that we are all interested in other people (and their pets, gardens and so on) and ‘human interest’ news appeals to the voyeur in all of us. One reflection of this is that issues in the news – such as changes to the cost of living – are commonly presented through their impact on an individual or one family. Human interest includes *self-interest*, which has contributed to the level of lifestyle reporting in today’s electronic media.
- *Novelty* means that an event needs to be out of the ordinary or unusual in order to be considered news. It also means that news organisations place a special value on any item that is exclusive to them, and will lift its news value accordingly.
- *Prominence*. Finally, actions or statements by people or organisations who have some prominence in society will be reported even when these actions (such as weddings and divorces) are themselves routine. Audiences are interested in celebrity, so lobby groups and commercial organisations will often use prominent people to front their campaigns, thus perpetuating their prominence. Ordinary people can be elevated to celebrity by force of circumstance, even when this is unwanted, as happens to people caught up in crime stories, to cite just one example.

## **News suppliers**

If a small group of commonly agreed news values influences what makes ‘news’, the means by which potential news comes to the attention of those who shape it is no less predictable. The news production process demands a certain continuity of supply, without which the construction of bulletins would be a precarious affair.

The main sources or suppliers of news are discussed below.

### **The day file or diary**

Newsrooms forward-file all potential news stories that are known of in advance. That includes media releases, regular events (such as the release of important statistics, sittings of parliament, councils, sports events and so on), and details of running stories (such as court cases or official inquiries that stretch over a series of dates). These items are filed according to the day on which they need to be checked and possibly reported. The news agency Australian Associated Press (AAP) also issues a daily diary of events, and additional lists of what’s coming up are available from a range of other sources, including local papers.

### **Official proceedings**

These include parliaments (state and federal), council meetings, official inquiries, and court cases. Either the COS or the court reporter will check the Law Notices or Court Lists which can be found in some newspapers and online. If a case seems to be worth covering, a reporter can phone the court registry office or the associate of the relevant judge to check the details. Some courts have media officers to field these inquiries.

### **Wire services**

These owe their name to the fact that they were originally distributed by telegraph wire, though now they are accessed via the newsroom’s computer system. Most Australian broadcast newsrooms subscribe to the service produced by AAP, a telecommunications company jointly owned by News Corporation and Fairfax and some minority interests. AAP copy can be run as provided or used as part of the raw material from which journalists write reports. It is often identified with the AAP byline.

## Newspapers

All media monitor other media. More of that shortly. But broadcast newsrooms pay more attention to the papers than the reverse.

One of the first jobs at the start of the first shift each day is combing through the newspaper(s) to identify potential stories. There are several reasons for broadcast news' reliance on the press. One is that broadcast newsrooms generally have fewer staff than newspapers, giving them less time to pursue individual stories. But another reason that receives little attention is because of the nature of scheduled television news bulletins, which can accommodate only a relatively small number of stories, which viewers must watch in the order and at the length at which they are presented. That puts great pressure on producers to deliver a sequence of stories that the audience will recognise as 'news' that matters. In the case of some items, this will be self-evident. But where stories are less consequential, the fact that they have appeared in the paper means they have in effect, been 'road tested' and this offers broadcasters a safety net when it comes to audience perception, even if it also contributes to journalism's 'herd mentality'.

Radio newsrooms regularly rewrite newspaper stories for their breakfast services. But it should go without saying that stories found in other media should be treated with caution and checked carefully rather than just rewritten and broadcast. As Masterton and Patching noted, 'Stealing stories originally published by someone else is unethical, sometimes illegal and always dangerous. Poaching ideas from others is accepted and encouraged' (Masterton & Patching 1997: 35).

Radio and television newsrooms in regional areas have to be particularly careful about becoming overly reliant on the local paper simply because the reporters will know each other and, as Geelong sports editor Steve King notes, those at the paper will 'get upset with you very quickly if they feel you're stealing their stories'.

It's not just the news pages that are worth scanning for stories. Ideas can often be gleaned from the ads, the opinion pages, and letters to the editor, especially if the writer is a figure of authority. As well as checking the metropolitan dailies, large newsrooms may also look through suburban and sometimes regional papers for items of interest.

## Other radio and television

Chiefs of staff spend a good deal of each day worrying that rival newsrooms know something that they don't. This is one reason why broadcasters monitor each other. Radio news staff listen to competing bulletins and watch television services for news updates. Television news staff listen to the main radio news services and

also keep a watch on their television rivals, checking news updates for breaking stories and also for tips on their rivals' rundowns for the main nightly bulletin. Commercial stations often record each other's news updates and bulletins and sometimes pinch pictures they missed out on. Stations with an exclusive usually watermark the vision with their station logo to try to discourage this.

As already mentioned, stories on other news services, even those of affiliated stations, should be treated with extreme caution and checked before being used. In an era when many stories originate on social media sites before being picked up by mainstream news organisations, the speed with which information is retrieved and disseminated makes errors more of a risk than ever before. Some analysts take the view that the two-way exchange between news media and their audiences that is fundamental to today's media means that the risk of mistakes is offset by the speed with which they can be corrected. But it can also be argued that the gravity of some errors belies rapid correction. One example occurred in November 2010 when a Qantas A380 lost part of an engine over Indonesia. As the ABC's investigative program *Four Corners* reported later:

While the plane was still in the air, pictures of large pieces of the aircraft on the ground began appearing on television. Twitter messages spread claiming that a Qantas plane had crashed. The mistaken tweets were quickly reported as news. (Ferguson 2011: n.p.)

The program interviewed the airline's CEO, who noted the impact of these reports on its share price. Less quantifiable was the distress the incorrect reports must have caused within the company and to relatives of anyone flying with the airline that day in that vicinity. Errors predate the use of social media sources, of course. One celebrated example occurred in 1993, when several Australian radio and television stations reported the death of senior member of the British royal family, the Queen Mother, who lived for another decade. It began with a single error, compounded by pressure not to miss a story and failure to adequately verify information.

As well as monitoring each other's news programs, reporters at rival organisations will also monitor other information or talk-based programs, including ABC radio's current affairs programs *AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*, the breakfast television programs, Sky News and radio talkback shows. They listen to hear what issues are resonating with the public and also what the guests have to say. The appearance of high-profile guests, usually senior politicians, on interview programs is generally structured so that other media outlets can use any newsworthy material in return for a plug for the host program.

## In-house programs

Newsrooms often have a symbiotic relationship with programs on their own stations and networks. This is particularly true of talk radio, where news stories generate issues about which people call on-air programs and where those comments, especially when they are from politicians or other high-profile interviewees, will find their way back into news. In television, the process is often less organic, especially now that cross-promotion is so shameless. So news may be expected to carry stories about other network programs. Programs such as *MasterChef*, *The Block*, even the drama *Underbelly*, have been just a few beneficiaries of this type of reporting, where the line between genuine audience interest in events and corporate spin veers heavily towards the latter.

## Follow-ups

‘Follow up’ has several meanings in journalism. Sometimes it is simply a synonym for pinching a story from another medium. But many stories demand further investigation, and approach from new angles. Radio newsrooms are particularly adept at this, developing stories throughout the day by chasing one angle and interview after another. Some follow-ups are now routine. For instance, a policy announcement by government will be followed by the opposition’s and minor parties’ reactions and by comment from interested lobby groups and so on. To give another example – if a well-known person is revealed to have a particular medical condition, there will inevitably be stories in the following days backgrounding the condition, the percentage of citizens affected and its implications.

## Niche media

Specialist publications are a regular source of news for the larger media. American analyst Larry J Sabato (1993: 102) calls this journalism’s ‘food chain’. For example, it is quite common for the mass media to run stories that originated in *The Medical Journal of Australia* or reports issued by the Australian consumers’ organisation, Choice, to take two examples.

## Media releases

Like it or not, a great deal of what appears as news in or on our broadcast media is generated by the public relations (PR) industry. When the online news site *crikey.com*, together with students from the University of Technology in Sydney, looked at the influence of PR on news in 2009 they concluded that, on

average, a little over half the news content had been derived from media releases or other promotional activities. Their study was based on analysis of ten newspapers; the main metropolitan and national mastheads (*Crikey* 2010: n.p.). An earlier study, by PR practitioner and academic Clara Zawawi, focused on three of the country's leading broadsheets over a one-week period and concluded that nearly half the stories had been influenced by PR activity (Charles 2001: 14). Findings of this kind are greeted with some scepticism within the news industries, in part because many legitimate stories, such as government and corporate announcements, originate as media releases. (For more on the influence of PR on news, see page 37.)

Public relations operatives increasingly provide not just the information for stories but also the comment. Journalists wanting to speak to an executive of an organisation will often find that they are instead directed to a media relations officer and that there is no other choice of interviewee.

### News conferences

When someone in the news wants to speak to the media as a group, they call a news conference. These can range from very formal indoor affairs to less formal 'doorstops' conducted outside and often at short notice. Doorstops are often arranged for the benefit of the broadcast media and take less time than indoor conferences. The television images of media conferences often show the interviewee surrounded by radio station logos that are fixed to the top of radio reporters' mics. Radio news takes this form of free publicity very seriously and reporters who don't push their station's logo into as many shots as possible are likely to get a 'please explain' from their boss. Television crews deplore the practice because the mic signs intrude on their pictures. Organisers of media conferences sometimes arrange to have the proceedings recorded for those stations that didn't have the resources to turn up themselves.

### Stakeouts

When someone in the news tries to avoid the media, they may find themselves the subject of a stakeout where the media will camp outside their premises hoping for an 'ambush' interview. Stakeouts have a dynamic all their own. If nothing happens and the subject fails to appear, reporters will sometimes file stories consisting of reporters and crews standing around and interviewing each other.

## Reporters' contacts

Everyone with whom a reporter comes into contact is a potential source of information and their contact details will be stored for future use. Reporters and contacts have a mutually dependent relationship. The reporter uses the contact for information and the contact has access to the media when they want to promote an issue or position.

The *Financial Review*'s Tom Burton once told how then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, had presented this two-way process to him, in uncommonly blunt terms:

He walked up ... and he said now look, this is the way it works ... You do the right thing by us we'll look after you. We'll put you on the high-grade drip. Understand it. Get serious about it. Follow the serious stuff, not that crappy personal bullshit and we'll put you on the high-grade drip. And you'll be right. Don't look after us. Muck around. Get into all that personal garbage. Don't take it seriously, and we'll cut you off at the knees. And then he just walked off. (Jakubowski & Nehl 1996: n.p.)

Reporters need to maintain a level of independence from their contacts, because what the journalist writes may not suit the source. An overly personal relationship can get in the way.

## Emergency services

The emergency services have traditionally been a key source of news for the broadcast media. As noted in the last chapter, the emergency services use audio alerts and email to let newsrooms know about breaking news (in cases where they want the media to be kept informed). The media supplement those alerts with information from the public, often via social media sites. While some police sometimes treat the media as pests, the two groups have a relationship based on mutual need. The media need stories and the emergency services often want to call on media assistance and will trade information and access to their operations for the chance of positive coverage.

An emergency round story can often lead the nightly commercial television news bulletins but rate only one or two paragraphs (pars) in the next day's papers.

Reporters rostered to the first shift of the day will usually be expected to call the police, fire brigade and ambulance to see what, if anything, happened overnight and this information is often also posted on the services' websites and social media sites.

## Tip-offs, social media, amateur vision

Newsrooms encourage tip-offs from the public and requests for newsworthy information and images can be found on most news sites. However, the public's role as a news source extends far beyond those who make a point of calling, texting or emailing with tips. Newsrooms monitor social media sites and mine them for information, stills and video. Video posted to YouTube is often the first from natural disasters and provides a unique, personal perspective for inclusion in news stories. YouTube is also a source of 'weird and wonderful' type stories. Devices capable of recording video are now so ubiquitous that it is hard to imagine any newsworthy incident going unrecorded, and if the pictures are sufficiently compelling, television news services will accept even shaky, low-resolution video taken on a mobile phone. Where pictures shot by non-professionals are especially newsworthy and unique, stations will sometimes pay to use them, with amounts ranging from \$300 or so for non-exclusive use to more than twice that for an exclusive, depending on the news outlet.

Facebook and other personal sites are searched for pictures and sometimes used to contact potential interviewees. Twitter is scanned for updates on people in the news, including celebrities, who maintain accounts as a direct conduit to their followers. Twitter and other social media also yield the occasional newsworthy gaffe by people who should know better. But its most valuable role is as a source of information on breaking news as witnesses share what they've seen or heard. The issue of the reliability of social media as sources is addressed elsewhere in this book. But that notwithstanding, Twitter moves news – both professional and citizen-authored – faster than any other medium.

## Foreign news

The term 'foreign news' invokes contradictory images. On the one hand, 'foreign desk' and 'foreign correspondent' suggest Australian-based nerve centres coordinating the work of intrepid reporters and crews in remote locations. In reality, news from overseas is usually only a small part of radio and television bulletins, other than those on the ABC, SBS, and Sky News, and while satellite fibre and file transfer delivery has ensured that the amount of foreign news available is greater than ever before, the amount used is comparatively small. On the other hand, subscribers to pay TV have a choice of leading international news services, and a wide selection of bulletins from around the world is available on SBS each day. Audiences for international news can also turn to the web.

With the exception of the ABC, most Australian television news bulletins draw most of their foreign vision from syndicated services. This material may be repackaged in their overseas bureaus, or once it reaches Australia.

The main suppliers of syndicated global news are the big British and US networks, particularly the BBC and CNN, and two international agencies – Reuters (formerly Visnews) and APTN (Associated Press Television News). AP has a separate sports service, SNTV.

The main international news suppliers and their Australian subscribers are detailed in figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1**

Foreign news suppliers to Australian television (at 2011)

	ABC	Ch. 7	Ch. 9	Ch. 10	SBS
APTN	•	•	•	•	•
SNTV (sport)	•	•		•	•
Reuters	•	•	•	•	•
BBC (UK)	•				•
BBC World	•				•
ITN (UK)		•		•	
CNN (US)		•	•	•	
ABC (US)	•		•		•
CBS (US)				•	
NBC (US)		•			
BSkyB (UK)			•		
TVNZ (NZ)	•				
Metro TV (Indonesia)		•			
Al Jazeera					•

SBS also receives bulletins from around the world that are aired on SBS One and SBS Two, mostly as part of the morning schedules. These are language-of-origin bulletins. They can be accessed by the newsroom if required. Among these programs is the highly-regarded *PBS NewsHour* from the US.

The news feeds listed above fall into two distinct categories. Some – such as CBS, NBC, ABC (US), CNN and the BBC, are full news bulletins. Australian subscribers may use complete stories from these bulletins or they may strip the stories for pictures and information to be repackaged by an in-house reporter, either based in an overseas bureau or in a local newsroom (usually in Sydney). At times when there are compelling and breaking international stories, Australian networks will suspend their normal programs and instead relay live broadcasts from English-language overseas networks, as they did during the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch and the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge later that year.

The agency feeds – APTN, Reuters, SNTV – are largely made up of ‘wild’ (that is, rough-cut) vision and natural sound with no reporter’s narration. These feeds may also include some packaged stories.

International news services draw in material from all over the globe, but the organisations themselves are based in Britain or North America and inevitably reflect the interests of their primary audiences. On the other hand, the Qatar-owned network Al Jazeera, an increasing force worldwide, provides a different perspective on events.

Despite their limitations, the news feeds currently available to Australian broadcasters offer a much wider range of stories and sources than was the case in the past. Initially, Australian television news services had just one supplier, the London-based company Visnews, and its monopoly continued for more than two decades. At first, stories were delivered on film and by plane. Satellite delivery to Australia began on 13 May 1975 when Visnews started transmitting ten minutes of material per night from London to Sydney, arriving at 7.30 am eastern Australian time. Comparing figures from 1974 and 1975, Visnews estimated the faster delivery had tripled the number of overseas stories shown on Australian television news services (Tiffen 1977: 31).

## International news feeds

Some four decades after that one, ten-minute feed in 1975, Australian stations could select from a non-stop stream of international material arriving by a variety of systems.

For instance, in 2011 the ABC was receiving up to 60 scheduled satellite feeds each day, coming in around the clock and ranging in size from a couple to a dozen or so stories, to entire bulletins. However, that figure did not include one of the largest suppliers, Reuters, which had already moved to file-based transfer, a system expected to be adopted by other agencies.

News feeds can include material from specific geographic zones such as Europe, North America, Latin America, the Middle East and the Asia–Pacific region as well as feeds devoted to sports and financial news.

The volume of foreign material available raises the question of how it is possible to adequately view and process it all. One answer is that there is a considerable amount of repetition between some feeds, for reasons outlined above. Another is that foreign desks will use other news sources – including wire copy – as a guide to the most useful stories. Each service’s foreign correspondents will also contribute to decisions about what should be run. Finally, newsroom staff skim the feeds for items of special interest.

News feeds that contain ‘wild’ vision with no narration are accompanied by written advisories containing a sequential list of the shots in each story and the date on which the pictures were recorded plus information on the material to assist a reporter in compiling a story.

The journalists who prepare these items will not have been at the scene of the stories and this is a frequent criticism of this form of news packaging. But news stories, both domestic and foreign, often draw on events or comment from a number of different geographic locations, making it impossible for any single reporter to have direct knowledge of all of them. In each case, the quality of the end result will depend on the reporter’s background knowledge, analytic skills and the amount of time they have to produce the story.

## Foreign correspondents

Of course, not all foreign news on Australian television networks comes from the news agencies. Other than SBS, all maintain some foreign bureaus (see figure 3.2), although their foreign-based reporters may also draw on agency vision and soundbites for some of their reports.

The commercial channels maintain bureaus only in North America and sometimes Britain. The North American bureau will be located in Los Angeles rather than on the east coast, reflecting the importance of show business news to the commercial agenda. The use of the US and Britain as the bases for commercial networks’ foreign correspondents reflects geographic as well as cultural considerations. London is a gateway to Europe and reporters based there cover more than just the UK. Nevertheless, the level of attention given to Britain and North America is undoubtedly out of step with the relative importance of other regions to the global news agenda. One reason this still occurs is that it is still easier to send a reporter without specific language or cultural training to London or Los Angeles than to other parts of the world. Another is that these

**Figure 3.2**

Australian networks' foreign bureaus (at 2011)

	Asia-Pacific	Europe	North America	Other
ABC (TV & radio)	Auckland Bangkok Beijing Jakarta New Delhi Port Moresby Tokyo	London Moscow	Washington	Amman* Jerusalem Johannesburg (* Amman operates as a subsidiary of Jerusalem office) Kabul
Channel 7	Contract reporter in Hong Kong		Los Angeles	
Channel 9		London	Los Angeles	
Channel 10		London	Los Angeles	
SBS	Reporters and crews sent overseas for specific stories as required.			

centres deliver stories (including celebrity news) that appeal to commercial news bulletins.

While broadcasters around the world draw from the same pool of material, they like to put their own stamp on stories, particularly for the prime-time evening television bulletins. Australian correspondents working in the larger global news markets, such as North America and Europe, commonly use some syndicated pictures and soundbites in their reports even when they are on the scene and accompanied by a crew. In these circumstances, reporters can pick and choose the shots and 'bites' they want and the pictures and interview segments from syndicated services offer a breadth of coverage they would not be able to manage on their own. This is far less likely to be the case in areas less well covered by international news services.

## Sending stories from remote locations

As with so many other areas of news gathering, computers and advances in telecommunications have changed the way stations get stories from overseas and remote parts of Australia. The most cost-efficient method is via high-speed Internet connection.

They can also use satellite links either from feed points or using BGen (Broadband Global Area Network) portable broadband satellite devices. Stories can be edited, or rough edited, on a laptop on location, so that only essential material needs to be fed back to base.

## The role of foreign news in different services

Foreign news is the mainstay of SBS *World News Australia* and of considerable significance to the ABC. It is much less important to the commercial networks, a point that is clear from the fact that they maintain relatively few foreign bureaus, and – unless there is a story of major global significance and interest – they invest less bulletin time on foreign news than the public-sector services. Commercial services in particular can't exercise the same control over their foreign coverage that they can over their domestic stories and compiling their international news is largely a matter of selecting what of the available material each day to run and at what length. Their decisions are also swayed by the perceived indifference of much of the commercial news audience to foreign news.

### News and PR

The preamble to the Code of Ethics (see page 241) observes that journalists have a 'privileged role' because they 'convey information, ideas and opinions'. Since journalists have power that comes with access to an audience, they are inevitably courted by vested interests wanting to tap into the media's pipeline to the public. Sidestepping the influence of public relations to report news that is fair and balanced is a continual challenge for journalists, a point made by former ABC Victorian News Editor, Marco Bass:

We train our reporters to be ever more vigilant about how to avoid and combat spin, and we do that both formally and informally. I think the reporters are very conscious of being embarrassed about being sucked in by spin and it is an understood and known obstacle, particularly in political reporting, that our people confront



every day. It's a great frustration for many journalists and one we talk about constantly to find ways to outflank it.

So sophisticated is modern public relations that it can be difficult to separate an item's genuine news value from its commercial value. Some cases are more clear-cut than others. To take one example, the ABC's *Media Watch* chastised Sydney's three commercial networks and some newspapers for running a story, in March 2011, supposedly about the renaming of women's body types as a result of an 'international study'. Of course, there were pictures of women modelling underwear in the streets which would have made it hard for some media to resist. The 'study' was a promotion for a well-known lingerie company which had used the same PR stunt overseas (*Media Watch*, 14 March 2011: n.p.).

While some PR-driven stories are mere fluff, others raise more problematic issues. For example, in late 1998 Channel Seven's *Today Tonight* reported on the local release of a drug that, it was claimed, could get rid of cellulite. The next morning, shops selling the capsules sold out within hours and there were long waiting lists for supplies (*Sun Herald*, 27 December 1998: 24), even though the product had no shortage of detractors.

A great deal of spruiking for corporate concerns also appears in uncritical human interest stories. British entrepreneur Richard Branson is one business person who has used media fascination with the unusual to promote his corporate interests. In 1997, he told a reporter how this worked for Virgin Airlines:

If my turning up in a captain's outfit to promote our airline gave photographers a better picture, then I'd turn up in a captain's outfit. I'd feel a kind of goofiness sometimes and I'd think: 'What the hell am I doing this for?' But if it got on the front-page of newspapers across the world that's millions of pounds of advertising. (O'Reilly 1997: 5)

Social media have generated new ways of tapping into news to promote commerce, not least by the creation of campaigns designed to go viral. One of the most successful examples dates from mid-2009, when animation of rollerskating babies, produced to promote Evian water, was delivered via YouTube and attracted international news attention for its wit and technical innovation. The promotional aspect of news becomes even more apparent in sports reporting since so many significant events are now named after the sponsoring company. The Geelong Football Club took this one step further in June 1999, when the captain of the team called 'the Cats' temporarily, but legally, changed his name from Garry Hocking to 'Whiskas'. In return, the cat food maker paid up to \$200 000 to the financially troubled club. The



story received extensive news coverage and more on sports programs. The *Australian* reported that Channel Nine's *The Footy Show*, which normally charged upward of \$14 000 for a 30-second ad, had given Hocking's transformation 13 minutes of coverage, worth an estimated \$400 000. 'With that kind of publicity, who needs to advertise?' it asked (Dalton & Towers 1999: 3).

The corporate branding of sports events (and sometimes players) is rarely an issue in the commercial media, but it's an ongoing concern in public broadcasting. The ABC's Editorial Policies require that 'commercial references' should be 'editorially relevant in the context' and not undermine the corporation's 'independence or integrity' (ABC 2011a: n.p.).

The question of how journalism should respond to the pervasiveness of modern PR is so complex it is impossible to do it justice here. But journalists need, at the very least, to consider the source of their 'news' and the beneficiaries and to remember that it is not their job to spruik for corporate, political or other interests. Sometimes, the difference between a legitimate news story and an 'advertorial' is not the story per se but the way the item is written, the selection of interviewees and soundbites and, sometimes, a 'gee whiz' tone in the reporter's voice. These are all things within your control.

### Video news releases

Corporations and lobby groups have long supplied newsrooms with certain kinds of moving pictures and their use has caused little debate. For instance, airline companies provide pictures of new jets in new corporate colours, in mid-air. Video handouts of this type have been accepted because the context in which they are used generally makes their source obvious and the pictures themselves are uncontroversial.

But VNRs are of a different order. In their critique of PR practice, US authors John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton claimed that radio and video news releases 'took hold during the 1980s, when PR firms discovered they could film, edit and produce their own news segments ... and that broadcasters would play the segments as "news", often with no editing' (Stauber & Rampton 1995: 184).

VNRs originated in North America and their use spread slowly. One large supplier, Media Link, opened its London office in 1991 and an Australian and New Zealand operation in 1995. Its director, Jonathan Raymond, explained to the ABC's *The Media Report* how cost pressures in newsrooms opened the way for use of VNRs because stations no longer had enough crews to cover all the stories they might want to. They were already accustomed to accepting background material on video from corporations and a VNR simply took things one step further, giving news editors all the raw material they might want to make a story.



Of course, the suppliers of VNRs will provide overlay and interviews but they are not likely to put the tough questions to their interviewees, or demand answers. A prepackaged interview will obviously put the corporate spin on an issue and denies newsroom reporters the chance to put their own follow-up questions. VNR producers counter that their product sometimes offers newsrooms access to interviewees who would otherwise be unavailable, such as medical researchers based overseas, which might be true, but begs the question of whether the trade-off in news judgement is worth it.

While the term 'VNR' remains in use, they are more realistically seen and described now as 'multimedia news releases' and will commonly comprise text, photographs and video in a variety of formats from broadcast to web quality, all delivered online.

VNRs are commonly produced to introduce new drugs and medical procedures, which raises issues of news management in a particularly sensitive area of reporting. Corporate spin in stories about new drugs or new medical procedures can give false hope to people and their families at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Commercial TV news director, and author of a book on news writing, John Rudd, set out six rules for coverage of medical stories. They include:

- asking who paid for the research
- asking whether a drug company funds the hospital or research team
- asking whether the research has been 'peer reviewed' for publication in an academic journal and, if it has, the name of the journal and date of publication
- asking 'when the product's going on the market'
- asking if the research team, their institute or 'their backers are about to float a company on the stock exchange. Or whether they are involved in any way with a business listed on the stock exchange' (Rudd 2000: 77).

### Lobby groups and PR

Corporations are not the only organisations to make use of VNRs. Lobby groups, including environmental campaigners, also circulate video and can employ PR strategies as sophisticated as that of any large corporation.

It can be tempting for some reporters to treat non-commercial groups pushing a cause as in some way different from commercial organisations. But material originating from any lobby group should be treated with the same scepticism that would be applied to information from companies and checked for accuracy. The same goes for material supplied by official sources, such as government departments and politicians. Anyone needing to be reminded of this should recall the government's distribution, in 2001, of cropped pictures of asylum seekers and their children in the water →

to bolster claims that people seeking refuge in Australia had thrown their children from a refugee boat as part of their strategy to enter the country. The uncropped pictures of a sinking boat, and the subsequent testimony of some observers and officials, told a very different story. At the very least, images from corporate or government videos, or from lobby groups, should be acknowledged as such, although this is not often the case.

### Hoaxes

Attempts to sway the media to cover specific stories, or to cover them a certain way, are commonplace. Attempts at outright deception for the sake of it are much less so. But every so often, an individual or group will attempt to 'set up' the media, often just to show how easy it can be. A San Francisco computer expert with an appalling lack of sensitivity set out to fool the media in mid-2004 by posting on the Internet a video clip purporting to show the beheading of a US hostage in Iraq. It took several months, but eventually the staged video was picked up by the website of a Middle East political organisation and from there by an international news agency that circulated the 'story' worldwide. It was only then that the tape's origins became clear (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2004: 13). The youth-oriented ABC current affairs program *Hungry Beast* set out to show up the established news media when it debuted in 2009. It fabricated a research institute, complete with website, and issued a fabricated report, the title of which, 'Deception Detection Across Australian Populations', should have been something of a giveaway. The supposed study on gullibility was widely reported, allowing the hoaxers to clamber up the moral high ground and argue that the news media should be more vigilant about checking. Fair enough. However, less than two years later *Hungry Beast* joined media outlets around the world in airing as fact reports on the democracy protests in Syria that appeared on the blog of the so-called 'Gay Girl in Damascus', who was soon revealed to be a straight American man living in Scotland (*Media Watch*, 20 June 2011: n.p.). Incidents such as these are a reminder that one of the skills a journalist needs is a healthy level of scepticism and to be prepared to back it by thorough checking.

# ④

## News packaging

The way in which news is gathered in broadcasting depends not just on the medium, but on the type of story being produced. So before we look at reporting and writing, it is worth considering the various ways in which news is packaged for radio and television and the ways scripts are set out.

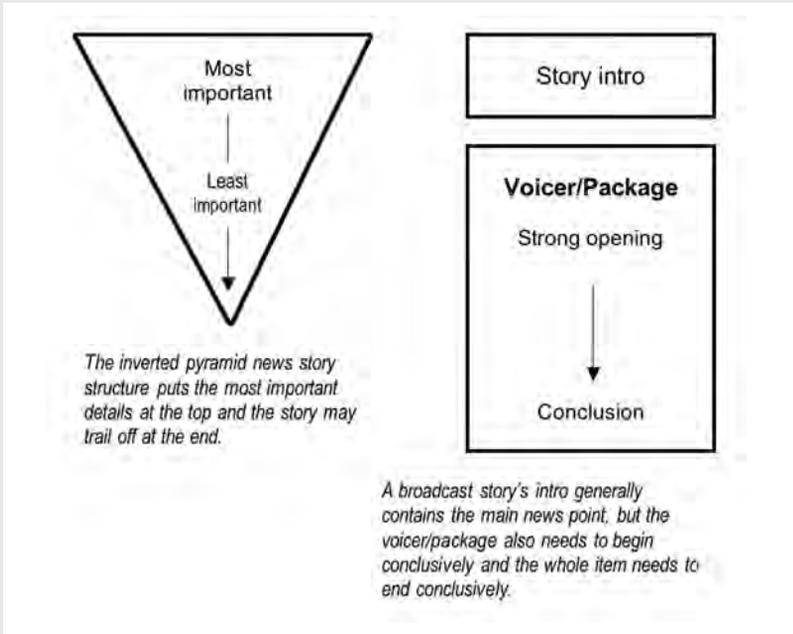
### Story formats

At some time in their training, most reporters will have been introduced to the ‘inverted pyramid’ model of news writing. The rationale for the inverted pyramid is that a story’s most ‘newsy’ or important elements must appear at the top to ‘hook’ the reader and the remainder of the information should then appear in descending order of importance. The model works if you are writing for newspapers, especially tabloid format, and for online delivery. But it doesn’t work in broadcast writing, except for the shortest stories read by a presenter. This is because of the structural shift that occurs when the task of relating a story switches from the presenter to the reporter or interviewee, and also because a broadcast story needs to end conclusively. Expressed as a diagram, the broadcast news model would involve two blocks, in order – the intro and the audio/picture story, as shown in figure 4.1. Each segment has its own beginning and the second segment needs a strong conclusion rather than being allowed to taper off at the end as in the print model.

Of course, this diagram illustrates the more complex models of broadcast news story, the voicer and the package, or ‘donut’, which combines reporter’s narration with soundbites and, sometimes, ambient sound or effects. Many broadcast stories are shorter and less complex, with the shortest being no more than copy for the presenter.

Figure 4.1

## Sequencing material in broadcast writing



## Types of broadcast news story

There are five main story formats in radio and television news, one of which is specific to TV. The names given to these formats vary from one newsroom to another, but the ones here are the most common. Starting with the simplest one, these story formats are:

- *Live or reader copy.* A short story, read by the presenter. Generally two or three pars or ten to 20 seconds.
- *Intro with audio cut/soundbite.* A presenter's intro of between one and three pars plus an audio bite usually ranging from four to 20 seconds in radio and from seven to 15 in TV. (This format is rarely used in Australian television news bulletins.)
- *Live voice-over or reader voice-over.* A short presenter's intro, often only a single par, followed by two or three more pars of copy read by the presenter and

covered by video. Some live voice-overs have no intro and are part of a string of short items separated by an effect such as a wipe across the screen. This format is specific to television.

- *Voicer*. A presenter's intro of between two and three pars followed by a pre-recorded story narrated by a reporter. Television news rarely uses this format. Almost all narrated television reports include soundbites. Radio voicers are usually not longer than 25 seconds. The ABC runs longer voicers than the commercial services and they are shortest on commercial FM bulletins.
- *Package* or *donut*. A presenter's intro of between one and three pars followed by a pre-recorded story comprising reporter's narration wrapped around soundbite(s). In radio, these stories are generally 30 to 40 seconds and usually include one, and sometimes two, soundbites. In television, they range from about one to one and a half minutes (sometimes longer if the story is sufficiently significant or there are other considerations that require it to be longer) and the number of soundbites will vary from one to six, but more generally three or four.

These descriptions are broad outlines of the story formats, but they are applied in different ways by different news services.

## **The building blocks of broadcast news**

Journalists writing for print work with three components: their own words, direct and indirect quotes and, sometimes, photographs or graphics. By contrast, radio reporters work with their own words, interview segments – called 'soundbites', 'grabs' or just 'audio' – ambient sound, silence and sometimes, music (though music is rarely used in news items). Television reporters construct their stories out of even more of these building blocks, having all of the above plus pictures and the reporter's piece to camera (PTC). The different components available to reporters in radio and television generate differences in story construction, particularly when it comes to 'packaged' stories.

Examples of the different story formats are set out below. The writing styles for radio, television and online news share much in common, though there are obvious differences. We will come to writing styles in chapters 7 and 8; for now, it is important to note the way stories are constructed. The Macquarie Network's Erin Maher points out that the brevity of broadcast stories is because services want to fit a lot of news into their bulletins and because radio has a high rotation of items over a day:

We have four and a half minutes to tell the news and sport, so we want to tell as many stories as possible. To do that we try to keep our voice

reports to about 30 seconds plus the lead. A donut with a bit of audio in it goes for about 40 seconds. Grabs I like to keep to about seven to 15 seconds. I think once they're getting up to 20 seconds it's taking too long to get a message out. And I think we would probably lose our audience a little bit. Basically, in a normal copy and grab story we're looking for about 35 secs. I like copy stories of two to three pars to be about ten to 15 seconds. Sometimes they need to be longer because you need to include more information, but ideally if you can't tell the story in that amount of time you're probably not telling the story particularly well.

There's no doubt we don't go into the same detail as a newspaper or current affairs shows like *AM* or *PM*. Radio news is a headline service with a bit of detail. But over the day we're able to tell the entire story with all the different angles and give all those different angles equal time. If it's a political story, we might have the government one hour, the opposition the next hour, a lobby group or special interest group the next hour and so on. So we can give the whole picture, but it is a longer process for us to do it.

And in some respects we also work with the programs. They can go into a lot more detail with reporter crosses and interviews. News shouldn't be seen in isolation.

## Script layout

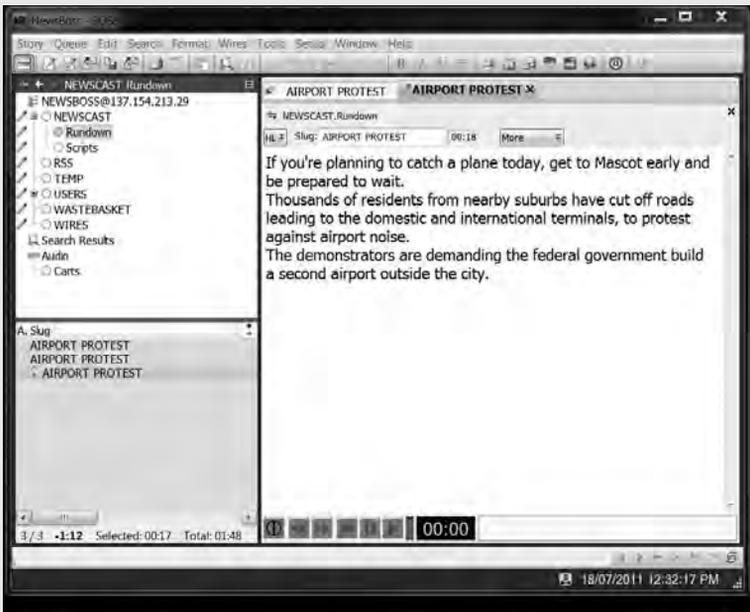
Radio and television scripts are intended to be read aloud. They may also carry cues for inserting soundbites and editing picture overlay. So the way scripts are set out is particularly important. Broadcast newsrooms use software that formats the copy, and this varies a little from one system to the next. But, in general, radio scripts use the full width of the page after allowing for wide margins on either side in which to make corrections. Television scripts are usually formatted into two columns. The *right-hand* side of the page is reserved for the *audio* part of the story – the presenter's intro, the reporter's narration, soundbites and so on. The *left-hand* side is for the *video* component, including picture cues to assist the editor, and the text for the captions (called 'supers') that are superimposed on the screen to identify interviewees, locations and so on.

In both radio and television it is important to distinguish between the reader's intro and any subsequent report. In radio this can be done by changing the typeface from medium to bold or from sentence case to upper case.

All scripts should carry basic identification – including the reporter’s name, the date and the story slug (also known as the ‘catchline’) and, where appropriate, details of the running time, incue and outcue plus cues for supers on television stories. Television scripts also usually carry details of which studio camera will be used (which may also indicate whether or not the story will have a background graphic) and the way the presenter will be framed.

**Figure 4.2**

Radio copy story



The story above is formatted using NewsBoss software, which, like other newsroom automation systems, inserts key details such as the reporter’s name and calculates the running time. The ‘slug’ is the name of the story. A slug should be a short, self-evident, description of the story. It appears on the script, and the bulletin rundown. The story is text only, so there are no audio details. Image courtesy of NewsBoss.

Figure 4.3

## Television copy story

Name: (Reporter)	<i>AIRPORT PROTEST</i>	Date:
Reader camera 1 MCU CK 100	Thousands of protesters blockaded Sydney airport for several hours today, as part of their campaign against increased aircraft noise. Some flights were delayed. Others had to be cancelled. Organisers have threatened more protests unless Canberra agrees to start construction of a second airport, west of the city.	
		Dur: 0.17

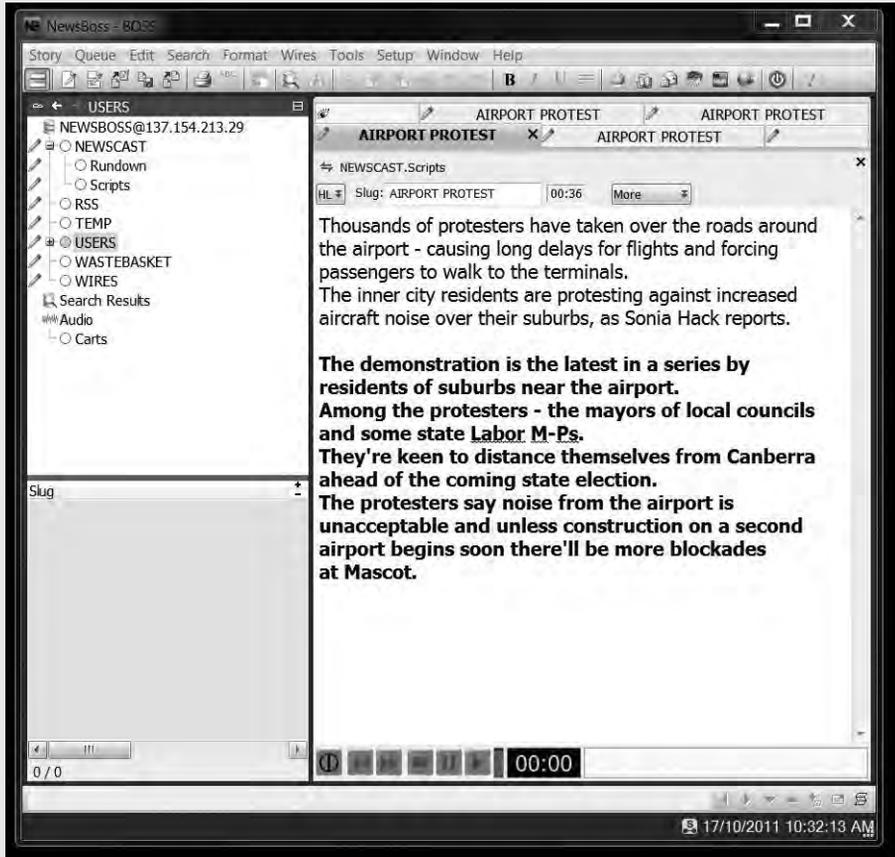
The convention in scripting for television news and current affairs is to set up the scripts in two columns, though different newsrooms, and different software systems, format in different ways. In this example, the presenter is to be framed in medium close-up (MCU) using camera 1 of those available. CK means chroma key and refers to the graphic background, which will be keyed behind the presenter.

A typical radio or TV news copy-only story will comprise just two or three sentences (see figures 4.2 and 4.3). If the story warrants it, it may be extended to a full ‘voicer’, with the intro followed by a story narrated by a reporter (see figure 4.4). Commercial radio bulletins prefer to keep stories to 30 seconds. Stories narrated by reporters are still common on AM radio news services but are heard infrequently on FM bulletins, where the intro plus bite format is preferred.

‘Voicer’ stories (narrated by a reporter, but without the inclusion of interview segments) are used in radio news and can occasionally be seen on television. But wherever possible both radio and television news like to include interview segments of people in the news. In radio, these ‘grabs’ or ‘soundbites’ are often run on their own after a presenter’s intro (see figure 4.5). This format occasionally appears in television bulletins.

Figure 4.4

## Radio voicer

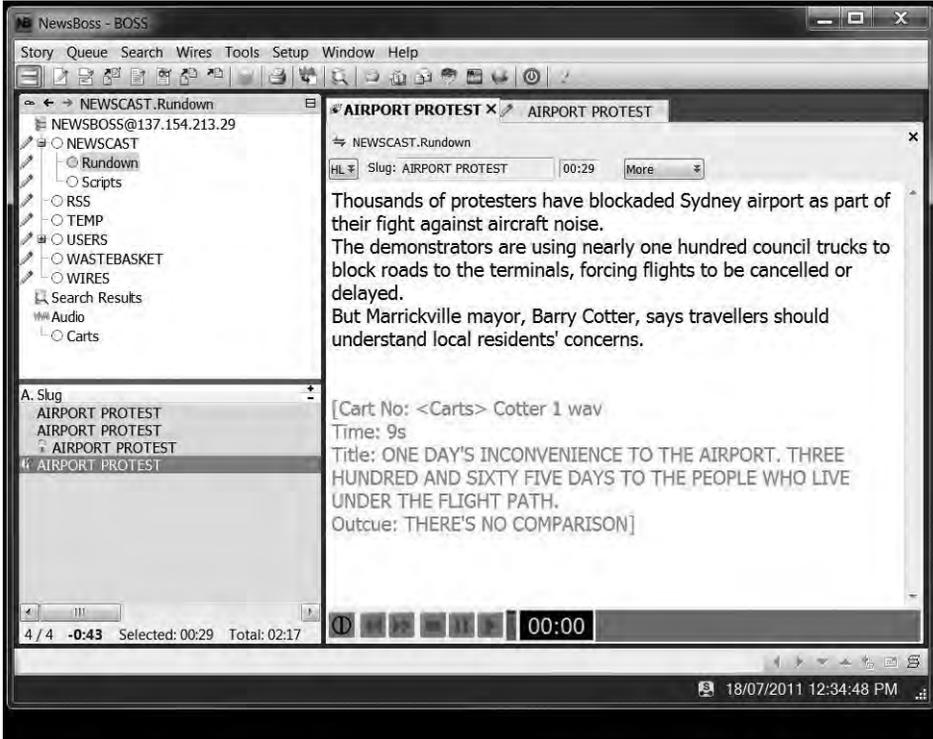


We have formatted the copy to make it completely clear where the intro ends and the voicer begins, to avoid any mix-up on air. This example has yet to be recorded, so the software has not added audio details. Image courtesy of NewsBoss.

In television news, the most common story format is the package, comprising an intro and then a story narrated by the reporter and including soundbites. The same story format is used in radio, although, because it tends to be longer than other stories, it will be heard more often on the ABC or on 'news radio' commercial stations than on the much shorter bulletins heard on music stations.

Figure 4.5

## Radio intro plus audio cut



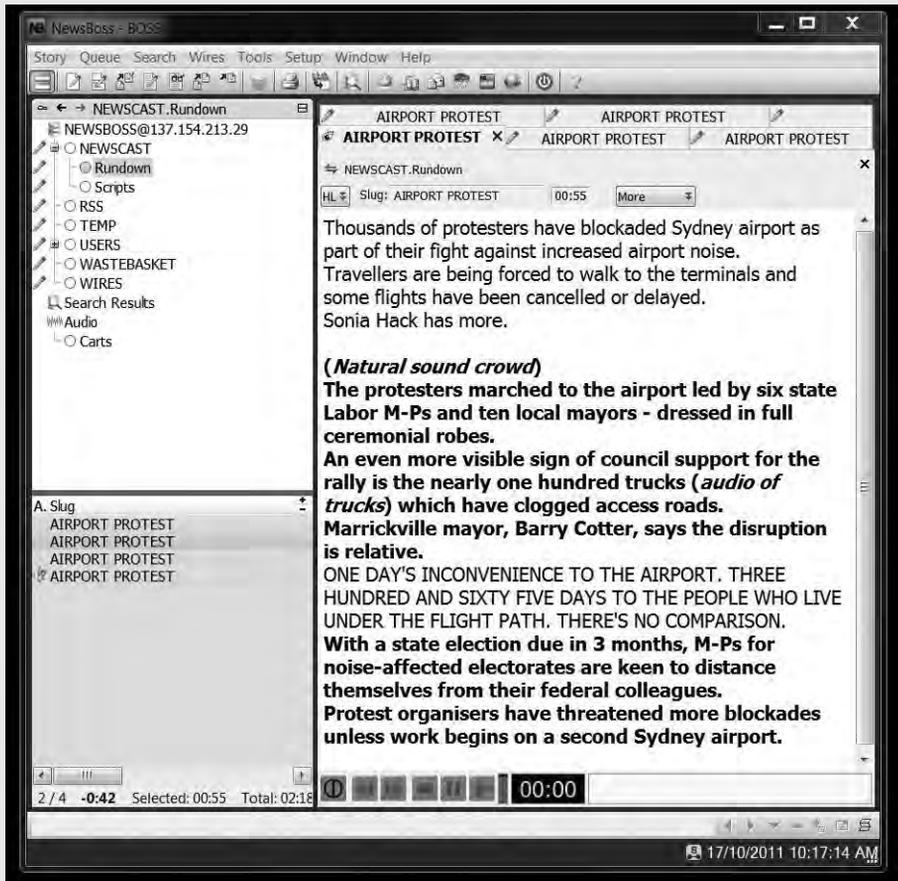
In this example, the audio has been edited and is displayed ready for replay. Image courtesy of NewsBoss.

A package report on the same story will be constructed differently for television than for radio, in part because of the need to write to pictures for television.

The television package version of the story is shown in figure 4.7. This was the original story in this sequence and all the variations have been drawn from it.

Figure 4.6

## Radio package or donut



This example has yet to be recorded, so the software has not added audio details. Image courtesy of NewsBoss.

Reader voice-overs are used in television for stories that have good pictures but are not deemed to be worth the running time of a full package. Australian news services, particularly the commercial ones, sometimes use a string of three reader voice-overs to cover the bulk of a day's foreign news. Reader voice-overs also increase the news presenter's role in the bulletin (see figure 4.8). Reader voice-over stories usually consist of a single sentence intro and 15 to 20 seconds of vision. Anything longer tends to slow the pace, which defeats the purpose of a reader voice-over.

Figure 4.7a

## Television package – intro page

Name:	AIRPORT PROTEST	Date:
<p>Reader camera 2 MS</p> <p>Super: Ursula Malone reporting Sydney (at head)</p> <p>(name) Labor spokesman (00.14)</p> <p>(name) Marrickville mayor (00.46)</p> <p>Vox pop (no super) (1.05)</p>	<p>Thousands of demonstrators blockaded Sydney's international airport for several hours today, to protest against increased aircraft noise.</p> <p>Passengers had to walk the last few blocks to the terminals. They then faced long delays as many flights were rescheduled. Ursula Malone reports.</p> <p>Take video</p> <p>Runs: 1.33</p> <p>Outcue... tag.</p>	
		Dur: 0.14

In this script, the material to be read by the presenter is on the right-hand side, while the instructions for supers (or captions) appear on the left.

The instructions that appear immediately underneath the intro tell the studio and control room team to run the story immediately after the intro, that the story has a duration of one minute and 33 seconds and that it ends on a tag (a reporter's sign-off).

The supers on the left-hand side of the page identify the reporter and the story's location plus any interviewees in the story. Note that vox pop interviews are generally not captioned, but it is wise to insert an instruction for no super into the list rather than simply not mention them, because control room staff expect to key a caption whenever they see someone speaking and, unless they are instructed not to, they may bring up the next super in the queue and put it over the wrong person.

**Figure 4.7b**

**Television package – narration script**

Name:	<b>AIRPORT PROTEST</b>	Date:
Crowd	They marched in their thousands on Sydney airport, led by the mayors of the ten local councils, solemnly dressed in full ceremonial robes.	
Mayors		
MPs in crowd	Six State Labor M-PS also headed the march, signaling a growing split with their federal colleagues.	
SOUNDBITE	41.44 THIS IS WAR. WE ARE NOT GOING AWAY. WE ARE STAYING HERE. WE'RE COMING BACK TIME AND AGAIN UNTIL THIS NOISE IS STOPPED. 41.53	
Trucks	(NATSOT ... horns)	
Trucks and crowd	Roads to the airport were blocked by a convoy of more than a hundred council trucks. For hours no one entered or left the airport, the roads strangely deserted on what should have been one of the busiest days of the year.	
Guards and passengers	Security guards allowed only those with airline tickets into the terminals.	
Guards at door	Many other passengers had been told to stay away, their flights rescheduled to avoid the blockage.	
SOUNDBITE	38.28 ONE DAY'S INCONVENIENCE TO THE AIRPORT. THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY FIVE DAYS TO THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE UNDER THE FLIGHT PATH. THERE'S NO COMPARISON. 38.34	
Boats and jet		
Boats and sign	They came by sea as well. Fishing boats and small pleasure craft heading out to the end of the runway in Botany Bay to register their protest at what they say is intolerable noise.	
VOX POP	04.51 STOP THE AIRPORT. STOP THE NOISE AND BUILD A SECOND AIRPORT. 04.55	
Passengers at door	Tempers occasionally threatened to flare, one group of confused visitors finding themselves caught in the middle of a protest they knew nothing about. But despite fears public anger could erupt into violence, police reported no arrests.	
PTC (piece to camera)	IT'S AN UNPRECEDENTED DISPLAY OF PUBLIC ANGER OVER AN ISSUE MANY BELIEVE COULD ROB LABOR OF VICTORY AT THE NEXT STATE ELECTION. SUCH IS THE STRENGTH OF FEELING IT'S UNLIKELY THE FEDERAL LABOR PARTY WILL ESCAPE THE POLITICAL BACKLASH EITHER.	
Marchers dispersing	The organisers have warned there'll be more blockades unless the federal government agrees to their demands for a second Sydney airport. Ursula Malone, SBS News.	
		Dur: 1.33

The numbers alongside the soundbites are the time-code references from the original camera recording. These time-code references make it easier for the video editor to locate the soundbites and compile the story.

Typing out the full soundbite means you can get a running tally of the story's length as you are writing and it is also essential if the story is to be rewritten for online delivery.

Note that the reporter went through this script and deleted some unnecessary words to save time. Seconds matter in broadcast news.

This story ends on a reporter's sign-off (also known as a 'tag'). This is indicated on the intro page so that the studio and control room staff will know when the story ends. Where a story ends on something other than a sign-off, the last three words of the story need to be noted as the outcue on the intro page.

Figure 4.8

Television reader voice-over

Name:	<i>AIRPORT PROTEST</i>	Date:
<p>Reader camera 1 MCU</p> <p>Super: Sydney</p> <p>Video runs 30 secs.</p>	<p>Thousands of demonstrators blockaded Sydney's international airport for several hours today to protest against increased aircraft noise.</p> <p>Take video.</p> <p>Live v/o</p> <p>More than one hundred council trucks led the march to the airport. Among the protesters – the mayors of ten local councils and six state Labor members with electorates under the flight paths. With access roads cut off, travellers were forced to walk to the terminals. Some flights had to be cancelled, others rescheduled.</p>	
		Dur: 0.25

In this story, the presenter will read the entire script but they will appear on camera only for the first sentence. At the start of the second sentence, the director will roll video and the pictures will cover the rest of the story. The instructions at the end of the first sentence tell the control room to roll the video and switch it to air but to leave the presenter's microphone open as well. The location super for the video will appear as soon as it begins. Note that the amount of video required to cover this story is only about 20 seconds, but the available video is ten seconds longer. Live voice-overs should ideally be read to video that is a bit longer than the words would indicate to prevent the screen from going black if the reader stumbles or reads more slowly than expected. Ten seconds is a safe margin. To ensure smooth on-air presentation, the presenter should rehearse live voice-overs before the broadcast to check that the narration and pictures are in sync. It is also advisable to avoid any edits in the video close to the end of the section expected to go to air so that there is no risk of an ugly jump that occurs when the last shot changes immediately before the cut from the video back to the presenter.

**Figure 4.9**

Television reader VSV

Name:	<b>AIRPORT PROTEST</b>	Date:
<p>UP SOUND Super: (Name) Labor spokesman (00.07)</p> <p>Cue reader at 15 seconds</p>	<p>Take video – wipe Take live v/o</p> <p>Thousands of inner city residents blockaded Sydney’s international airport for several hours today to protest against aircraft noise. THIS IS WAR. WE ARE NOT GOING AWAY. WE ARE STAYING HERE. WE’RE COMING BACK TIME AND AGAIN UNTIL THIS NOISE IS STOPPED. (8 seconds)</p> <p>More than one hundred council trucks cut off access roads. Travellers were forced to walk the last few blocks to the airport. Some flights were cancelled or rescheduled to help airlines cope with the disruption.</p>	
		<b>Dur: 0.26</b>

Many VSVs begin with a presenter’s link, but some, like the above example, follow immediately after another live read with no presenter’s link. So this example begins with an instruction to roll the video and key it to air. It will be separated from the previous item by the effect of a wipe across the screen.

This story has a soundbite sandwiched between segments of narration. The ‘up sound’ instruction tells the presenter to stop reading and the control room to increase the audio level on the video for the duration of the soundbite. Different newsrooms have different ways of expressing these instructions. Variations include ‘go to audio’, ‘take VSV’ and so on.

The duration of the soundbite is written on the script to remind the news presenter how long to wait before resuming reading. A command to cue the presenter to read the last section of the story appears on the left-hand side. As noted already, this type of story requires meticulous attention to timing to avoid either a gap or an overlap between the narration and soundbite.

All reader voice-overs require meticulous attention to timing, so that the news-reader's voice remains in sync with the pictures. In general, scripts are counted at three words per second. But it is more realistic to count reader voice-overs to a slightly more generous formula, counting the first word as one second, then three words to the second thereafter. Full stops can be counted as one word.

Reader voice-overs that include a soundbite require the greatest level of precision, otherwise there will either be an ugly gap between the end of the reader's words and the start of the soundbite or, alternatively, the presenter will still be reading the script as the soundbite begins. These stories also require precision in the way the instructions for cues are listed.

A VSV (vision-sound-vision) is a television format in which a soundbite is included in a reader voice-over (see figure 4.9).

Figure 4.10 shows the airport protest story rewritten for online delivery. Such a story might include a video clip, links and other interactive elements.

Presentation styles vary according to the site. In this example we have used a quote in the same way in which a newspaper would. But you could also turn the quote into a breakout, using a larger typeface and replace the newspaper style attribution to the mayor with his photo and caption-style attribution.

Some particularly significant stories might warrant separate pages of background material linked to the main story page. This background material could include transcripts of interviews conducted for the story or historical notes on an issue. Some stories lend themselves to a photo gallery of key images and these will be linked to the main page. Online news didn't invent the practice of trying to involve the reader in the news-gathering process, but it elevated it to a new level and social media have further increased audience involvement in news. So an online news story might also be accompanied by a reader-poll such as the one below. Journalists will use social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter as pointers to their broadcast and online stories and also to canvass their followers for responses that can be used to generate new stories. This is more applicable to some stories than others. It works particularly well for stories with a very emotional angle, such as: Have you or a relative been affected by surgery delays at hospital? Did you or your child miss out on a place at university this year? Were you in city X during the bombing? And so on. Naturally, the responses have to be checked as thoroughly as any other information you would use as the basis for a story.

Readers with a digital camera or a camera phone are also a potential source of pictures and video of news events.

## Figure 4.10

## Online news story

**Anti-noise protesters blockade Sydney airport**

Sonia Hack

11.30 AEST

Thousands of inner Sydney residents blocked the roads to Sydney airport this morning as part of the fight against airport noise.

Travellers were forced to walk to the terminals. Some flights were cancelled and others delayed.

The march to the airport was led by ten local mayors, all dressed in full ceremonial robes, and six state Labor MPs. With a state election just three months away, MPs for noise-affected electorates are keen to distance themselves from their federal colleagues.

Local councils also contributed nearly 100 trucks which clogged the access roads.

**Travellers affected**

Marickville Mayor, Barry Cotter, acknowledges the stress the action has caused for people using and working at the airport. However, he says the disruption has to be put into perspective. There's no comparison between 'one day's inconvenience to the airport (and) 365 days to the people who live under the flight path,' he said.

Would-be travellers had been warned to allow extra time to get to the airport and be prepared to walk the last few blocks. While some were clearly angry and shouted abuse at protesters, police said there had been no violence.

**More protests threatened**

Protest organisers have threatened more blockades unless work begins on a second airport. The favoured site is in the city's outer west. However, residents there have also held protests to try to block construction of an airport in their area.

- Video of rally
- Links: Sydney Airport Authority  
No Airport Noise Coalition
- Related stories: Western Sydney residents oppose second airport site
- Poll: Do you support the construction of a second Sydney airport in the city's west?
  - Yes
  - No

Email: Is your home, school or workplace severely affected by noise from Sydney airport? Email your experiences. [newstips@electronicreporter.com.au](mailto:newstips@electronicreporter.com.au)

Journalists who work in an online environment usually write their own headlines and subheads and select images and video or audio to accompany their stories. They may add internal links to past stories on the same or similar topics and external links to sites relevant to the story, as long as these links are editorially justified and not just a 'free plug' for a cause or product and not likely to offend readers.

### **Social media**

A rally such as this would warrant a series of updates, both text and video, on the organisation's (and also the reporter's) tweet streams.

# ⑤

## News gathering

Radio news is now increasingly gathered by phone. But there are some stories – such as rallies, public speeches, accidents and emergencies – where the reporter still has to be on the scene to conduct an interview, to record the atmosphere and, in the case of some breaking news, to broadcast live-to-air. Television, of course, needs to be on the spot to record pictures.

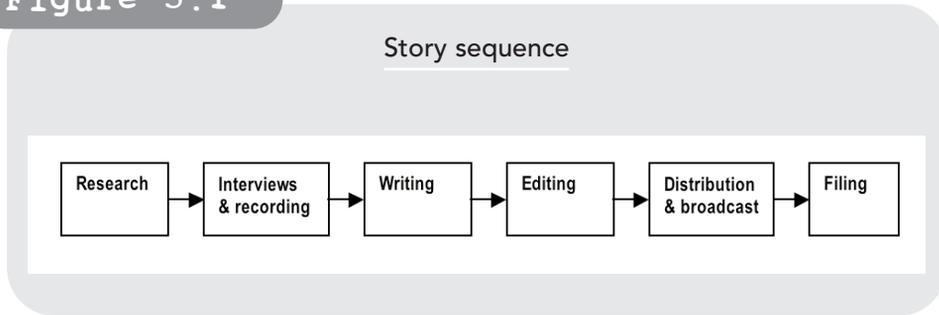
From the time a story is assigned, its construction will follow more or less the following sequence:

- research (which may involve no more than reading the wire copy and anything on the topic in the day's papers)
- interviews and, in television, shooting the picture overlay and piece to camera
- writing the intro and any narration required
- editing (which may involve no more than topping and tailing the audio or be as complex as assembling a full television package)
- distribution to affiliate stations and broadcast
- filing.

Stations are also required by law to keep copies of their broadcasts for at least six weeks.

Some stories involve no more than rewriting wire copy or other material. This is particularly true in radio news. Where the story is more complex, reporters employ a strategy that allows them to produce their work to the very tight deadlines imposed by broadcast and online journalism. That strategy usually means reporters will:

Figure 5.1



- have some idea of the angle or approach they will be taking to the story before they begin gathering audio/video or interviews. Of course, the angle may change as the story progresses. But it's easier to change direction than start recording material with no direction at all
- know the range of interviews they want
- know the range of pictures/audio that will be needed to compile the report.

Interviews and locations for video recording will often be organised in advance. It's legal to shoot pictures of people in public or from a public place, bearing in mind the need to respect privacy, but some locations that might seem public are in fact private property and crews need permission to shoot overlay and interviews there. These include airports, shopping centres, sports grounds and, of course, schools. Schools are a special case because of the sensitivities involved in taking pictures of children and while permission is required to shoot inside school grounds television stations will generally seek permission or have a standing arrangement for video recording just outside the school grounds as well. City councils also may require professional or semi-professional crews to obtain permission to shoot in their areas and while television stations will have a standing arrangement, this is something others may need to check.

## Gathering information

The technical requirements of compiling a broadcast report are dealt with later in this chapter and in subsequent ones. But in addition to liaising with the camera crew and sometimes recording pictures and/or sound, a reporter must also gather the information required to script a report. This means they need to do the following:

- Take effective notes. You might need to ad lib from your notes, so they need to be neatly written in a notebook or mobile device. Don't expect to rely on your memory. Radio reporters should record only what they will need for audio inserts and not use the recorder as a notebook.
- Take great care to record details accurately. Some broadcast reports have to be prepared so quickly that there is no time for extra checking. But broadcast news is also the news to which people will turn in cases of rapidly developing stories, such as bushfires, storms or accidents. In these kinds of stories, errors in a report can cause alarm, confusion or worse. If you're not sure of a piece of information, leave it out.
- Note colour as well as facts. Short news reports, especially on radio, don't leave much room for anything other than the facts. But in longer reports, details can be the difference between a story that is dry and one that is memorable.
- Note the name of each interviewee and the way in which they should be described (for example, 'company director'). If there are several interviewees or speakers, make sure you will be able to identify each one. For radio, take note of the counter settings or mark a separate track for each speaker. For television, make a note of what they are wearing or what they look like or the seating plan. Take note of the pronunciation of the names of interviewees and speakers.

For radio, you need to describe what the audience needs to see and also what it might hear but not understand. This can be done in questions to interviewees (for example, 'Where are we now?', 'What does this do?') or in the commentary:

#### Example

*(crowd noise and cash register beeps)* Retailers say they've had a bad year – that rising interest rates have left people nervous about spending. They say they need these sales to bring out the buyers and – if the crowd in this mid-city store is any example – they may be in luck.

The nature of radio means its journalists need to be the eyes of their audience. A reporter's descriptions must give enough detail to allow listeners to see in their minds what the reporter is experiencing.

## Prerecorded reports

If you are recording a report from the scene for radio, you may want the location sound to form the background to the report. This isn't always the case. Some sounds are indecipherable, or too noisy, or annoying – in which case, the report might as well be recorded in the studio. But where the ambient sound is important as background, you will have two ways of including it. The first is to write and record the narration at the scene. You should try to record the voicer

in a single take, otherwise there will be awkward jumps in the background sound if you try to edit the narration.

The alternative is to record some ‘atmos’, which can then be mixed behind your voice in editing. The danger of mixing in effects rather than recording on the spot is that if the events are dramatic the edited recording will lack the spontaneity and urgency of a report from the scene.

## Recording at locations with background music

While the natural sound of many locations can enhance a report, one sound that requires particular care is music. The problem with music in the background is that if two or more segments of the foreground sound are joined together, there will be a jump in the music, making the edit awkward and obvious. Background music is ubiquitous in areas such as shopping centres. If you can’t avoid it, at least record your interview or voice report knowing that segments will have to stand independently and can’t be edited together.

## The piece to camera

The piece to camera, or ‘stand-up’, gives a television reporter a physical presence in the story. In fact, in most cases, the use of a stand-up has more to do with ‘branding’ the story for a particular reporter and news service than anything else. One exception to this is court stories, which, even with the services of a good court artist, often suffer from a shortage of pictures, making a piece to camera an essential part of the narrative.

## Presentation of the PTC

In news items, the piece to camera is usually about two sentences long. It is delivered by the reporter looking into the camera lens and talking directly to the viewer. Like so much else in broadcast news and current affairs, the tone will be conversational, but that doesn’t mean reporters ad lib their pieces to camera. In most cases, they work out the sentences and memorise them. Some reporters prefer to record the script for their piece to camera on a hand-held recorder and cue themselves from an earpiece concealed under their clothes and hair, though this technique is not commonly used in Australia.

The piece to camera is usually placed somewhere near the middle or at the end of a story. It’s unusual to begin a prerecorded story on an Australian news bulletin with a piece to camera, though many stories are preceded by a live cross from a reporter at a scene.



The background behind the reporter in their piece to camera should be related to the story. Reporters either memorise their PTC or can use a smart phone or tablet device as a portable teleprompter.

Students learning to report for television often ask how it is possible to do a piece to camera at a news scene when they haven't written the rest of the narration. The answer is that reporters usually develop a mental template for the story either before they leave the office or – in the case of an emergency rounds item – when they're on the scene. This allows them to script and deliver a stand-up confident that it will fit into the completed story. But one reason this works is that the piece to camera generally contains quite basic material that is bound to form part of the narrative.

Figure 5.2 shows two reporters' PTCs on the same topic, the first day of a visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to Canada, for which Australian networks sent reporters.

PTCs allow viewers to forge an image of the people who report the news and it's assumed they enhance viewer loyalty to a particular service. They also give reporters a public identity, which can be useful when they are chasing stories. Sources are more likely to ring back if they've seen you on TV.

The framing of stand-ups is a matter of fashion and varies over time. It's currently quite common to see the reporter standing still and framed in

**Figure 5.2**

**Two reporters' PTCs  
on the same topic**

<p><b>Scene behind reporter:</b> Royal couple laying wreath (shot pulls back from that to reporter).</p>	<p>And the visit here is timely as at the moment Canada is pulling all its combat troops out of Afghanistan and like Australia there's been a cost, so far 157 Canadian soldiers have died there. (Channel 9, 1 July 2011)</p>
<p><b>Scene behind reporter:</b> Royal couple and cheering crowd (shot pans from that to reporter).</p>	<p>When the royal couple were married more than two billion people around the world tuned in to watch and what's clear from the reception they've received here today is that that enthusiasm is showing no sign of dying off. (Channel 10, 1 July 2011).</p>

mid-shot or close-up, positioned to one side of the frame with their body turned very slightly away from the camera but looking straight into the lens, as shown in figure 5.3.

## Working to tight deadlines

Not all stories can be planned, recorded, scripted and edited in a logical sequence. Some stories – accidents, unexpected announcements and so on – happen without warning and sometimes close to the time of the broadcast. In other cases, you might already know the gist of the story, but finding its outcome may involve hours of waiting – for a jury to announce its verdict, or an organisation to announce a decision and so on. Then there are those television stories where the reporter has the necessary information to script most of the story, but the pictures need to come from interstate or overseas, delaying production of the edited item.

In all of these circumstances, good planning can make the difference between a reasonably polished story going to air in its allocated slot and a missed deadline or the broadcast of something that looks or sounds ‘thrown together’.

**Figure 5.3**

### Typical framing for a piece to camera

If circumstances demand it, the stand-up might also:

- begin on a shot of a scene without the reporter in frame. The reporter begins talking over this shot and then walks into the frame while continuing to deliver the PTC
- feature the reporter engaged in some activity related to the story. The problem with this form of PTC is that, while it’s sometimes clever, it often looks fairly silly, especially to those in the know
- feature a reporter framed in a very long shot to show their extended surroundings and then zoom in close (or conversely start with a close-up and then zoom out). This requires use of a radio mic.



The rule here is to write what you can as soon as you can. It can always be changed later. But it can be much harder to script an entire story very close to deadline.

- In cases where you know the background to the story but not its outcome, the background material should be scripted, and even edited, as early as possible. That way, only the intro and perhaps the top part of the story itself will need to be added once you have all the information you need. Even if the preproduced material needs changes, it is still easier to work from existing material than start from scratch late in the day.
- Some stories have two possible outcomes – a union will strike or it won't, a project will be approved or not, and so on. If the outcome of a story such as this won't be known until very close to the broadcast, you have the option of writing and editing two or even three different versions of the item and then running with the version that is correct. In these cases, it goes without saying that each version needs to be correctly labelled and that it is critically important that the right one is broadcast and archived.
- Sometimes you can write part of a story but you don't have key details. In these cases, anything that might change before air time, or won't be confirmed until close to your deadline, can be left to the intro. That way, you can still write and edit the package. The intro is the easiest part of the story to update close to the broadcast. Updates are also provided in the live crosses from studio to on-scene reporter that are a regular feature of news bulletins. The cross can appear before the video package, or after it, or both.

Stories don't always turn out to be what the COS or producer had expected. But this can be less of a problem than it might be if the reporter calls in and keeps the newsroom informed. If a story has to be dropped from the line-up, the producer needs to know as soon as possible. If the story has changed direction, this may affect its place in the rundown and production of the background graphic. Once again, the producer needs to know. If the reporter on the road requires library vision, a call will ensure that it is waiting and cued when they return to the newsroom, saving valuable time at the end of the day.

The need to avoid unnecessary panic close to airtime means that reporters will try to reschedule any essential events organised for the late afternoon. News sources who understand the power of television can be surprisingly compliant.

## Reporting live

Live broadcasts of news as it is happening are one of radio's traditional strengths, though one now increasingly shared by round-the-clock television, online and mobile services.

An ability to report live with just a few notes as prompts, or to ad lib an entire report, is an extremely valuable skill in broadcast journalism. Reporting live means working without a safety net and requires confidence and an ability to organise information mentally without needing to have it all written down. Reporters who can do this often find that it makes them faster writers as well.

Some live reports are relatively structured with plenty of preparation time. Others are spur-of-the-moment and driven by rapidly changing events. Natural disasters, in particular, can demand days of live broadcasts. In early 2011, reporters covering the Queensland floods, the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the tsunami and subsequent nuclear crisis in Japan, all had to spend much of their time reporting live to air. For Australian journalists, one of the touchstones of live reporting remains a radio broadcast in 1983, by 5DN reporter, and volunteer firefighter, Murray Nicoll as he covered bushfires which devastated the Adelaide Hills. As *The Australian* noted when reporting Murray's death in 2010, 'some stories live on in people's memories, long after the events have passed into history' (Murphy 2010: n.p.).

Nicoll had been among a group of firefighters and local women and children taking shelter at a stone farmhouse when 'the wind changed direction' and a wall of fire '30 metres high' engulfed the village (Hurst 1988: 384). As Nicoll explained later, the rafters of the house began to burn:

I've been in some bad fires but this was unbelievable ...

I thought we were all going to die. I knew we'd be bloody lucky if we survived and I thought if we're going to die people are going to hear about it so I turned on the two-way radio handset and started broadcasting. After all, I thought, that's my job ...

Above the sounds of the searing wind, the roaring fire and people moaning in their distress, Nicoll could be heard saying:

*The fire has jumped straight over the top of the Greenhill Road. We are in deep trouble. We cannot see any houses. There are a dozen people here with me. There are women crying and children here and we are in trouble. This is just too much. I really can't believe it ...* (Hurst 1988: 384)

Later on, listeners heard Nicoll's distress as he watched the fire consume his own home.

Fellow journalists awarded Murray Nicoll the Walkley Award for radio news for his broadcasts that day. But perhaps more importantly, his stories gave listeners across the country an understanding of the terrible impact of bushfires that still rank among Australia's worst, and many who heard him would remember his reports to this day.

## Working safely

Reports such as these are also a reminder of the physical dangers that reporters sometimes face in delivering the news. That danger is most commonly associated with war zones, where the correspondents will be senior reporters who will almost certainly have been given special training in working in hazardous areas before the assignment. But in Australia, even quite young reporters can find themselves covering floods or fires or even a violent confrontation. Hugh Riminton, who has reported from dozens of wars and conflict zones in a 30-year career, believes reporters should be thinking about safety from the start of their working lives. Television reporters have a particular responsibility because they usually work as part of a crew, who have a mutual responsibility for each other:

Whatever happens, if things get dicey – and they can sometimes get dicey very quickly – the team that you're with is your first best friend. You have to develop trust with that team right from the start, look out for each other, make decisions together. When nasty things happen one of the first effects is confusion. If you are not 'tight' with your crew there can be a sudden loss of cohesion, a panicked response that often leads people in different directions. So you have got to look after your team and your group safety. The paradox, of course, is that the more alert you are to safety, the more risks you might feel you can intelligently take on.

Riminton's advice to journalists who find themselves in a potentially dangerous situation is always to look for a:

... line of retreat. If it is being closed off start to retreat down it even if you don't feel in immediate danger. If you see that it has been closed off, look immediately for another line of retreat – always have a plan.

## Conducting a 'live cross'

Most live-to-air broadcasts from a scene – or 'live crosses' as they are known – are routine rather than dramatic and are used either because a story is late breaking, to update a recorded item or simply to show that the reporter is at the scene.

A live cross requires a throw (which is usually scripted) from the studio, after which the reporter either:

- presents a report
- answers questions from the news presenter, or
- conducts an interview with someone at the scene.

These inserts into the bulletin are always acknowledged as 'live' – not least because it lends an air of immediacy to the program – so you can afford to sound unscripted though your delivery needs to be as fluid as possible. If you need a prompt to remember the facts, consider holding a notebook or tablet computer. It's permissible to glance at notes occasionally during a television cross, but not to become glued to the page or screen. Holding a notebook or tablet device also gives a television reporter something to do with their hands.

To prepare for a live report, you should do the following:

- Check with the producer about how long the cross will be.
- If the report is for television, it may include picture overlay rolled from the studio control room. Your crew may need to feed in vision before setting up to go live.
- Know the cue for you to start talking (usually a straightforward throw from the presenter).
- Know what you're going to say. This means running through the main elements of the story and working out the sequence in which you want to tell them. If you have time, make some notes. A radio reporter can work from notes, but a television reporter needs to maintain eye contact with the camera as much as possible, which means notes can only be used as prompts.
- Relax. You need to appear confident and in control.
- Many live reports need to start on a description of where you are and what is happening. Television viewers will see a little of the location in the picture – but the reporter still needs to describe what the audience can't see.

### Example

This is the main street of Oldtown. If floodwaters from the river behind us keep rising the way they have all day, these shops will be underwater by midnight.

- If you don't know, admit it. A live cross can be a high-tension affair and the details of the story may be far from clear. The audience will be relying on news reports for *reliable* information. So reporters need to set aside rumours and speculation and confine their reports to information they are confident of, which may be simply a description of what the reporter can see at the time. It might also include that the situation is confused or that authorities are still trying to find out certain details, as in the following examples.

### Examples

Fire officers still can't identify the fumes leaking from this factory – but they're evacuating every house within a five-street radius ...  
It's not clear how the fire started ...

- Studio presenters sometimes throw questions that call for specific information a reporter doesn't have. In these cases, say you don't know, or that authorities are still seeking the answer to that question and so on. An honest admission that you don't know something is infinitely preferable to bluster or spreading what might be false information.
- Know the throw back to studio. It's important that everyone involved knows how a live cross is going to end. If the reporter is wearing an earpiece, the studio can use it to give a wind-up cue. Otherwise, that command goes to the camera operator, who gives the reporter a visual signal. The reporter and studio either need to agree in advance on the words that will be used to end the piece or the reporter will use some glaringly obvious throw, such as 'back to you (name)'.
- With any luck, nothing will go wrong. But if it does, and you can't hear the studio, keep talking calmly and let the control room work on the problem. Dead air is worse than the alternatives.
- Finally, stay in position and don't change your expression until you *know* the control room has switched you off air. Reporters who smile with relief without realising they are still visible look silly at best and uncaring at worst.

## Our reporter on the scene

As well as being used to present the latest information in an ongoing story, live crosses also serve to establish the presence of a reporter at the scene of the event. This technique started when microwave link vans were first introduced and is now a standard feature of metropolitan bulletins since advances in technology (including over-Internet delivery systems for use from remote areas) have made the technique easier and cheaper. The use of live crosses has also been driven by the belief that audiences like the sense of immediacy they convey.

Not everyone is impressed. Sydney's *Sun Herald* newspaper cast a sceptical eye over the practice in early 2011, suggesting crosses were often gratuitous, but Nine News Director, Mark Calvert, told its reporter 'the days of everything being pre-packaged are long gone. News is – or should be – happening now' and that live crosses had 'an energy' that added 'pace to a bulletin' (Browne 2011: 14).

Being where the action is is important to all broadcast reporters and particularly so for those in television. So establishing a reporter's presence at a scene gives a story increased credibility, though this is sometimes more assumed than real. Anyone who has ever been at the scene of a big accident, fire, siege and so on, will know how confusing it can be and how accounts of what has happened or is happening can vary from one witness or official to another. One indication of this is that death tolls from such events are often revised *downwards* in the following days, as a clearer picture emerges of what happened.

If this is true of crises within a small geographic area, imagine how much greater is the difficulty of making quick assessments from the scene of a large-scale disaster, or war. Yet as technology has made it possible to transmit live from anywhere in the world, broadcast news has expected its reporters to provide instant analysis. Moreover, correspondents covering constantly developing stories in which there is intense public interest, such as wars, will be expected to file very frequently, for a variety of programs, which means it becomes increasingly difficult to venture far from the satellite dish or sat-phone to gather the information needed to craft the reports. Journalists have a term for this – 'dish monkey' – and it sums up the contradictions facing those who deliver the news in a highly competitive, increasingly high-speed environment.

## ⑥

# Interviewing for broadcast news and current affairs

Interviewing can be one of the hardest tasks for a reporter at the start of their career. They can be sent to talk to people in distress or to quiz powerful political or business leaders. They face the challenge of getting succinct comments from people as varied as experienced media talent with an agenda to push to complete novices uncertain of how best to put their case. Television reporters still have to front up in person, but a lot of news gathering in radio and newspapers these days is done by phone, which imposes pressures of its own. For one thing, you need to quickly cut through the distance that comes with a phone connection and since radio's peak news period is at breakfast, reporters often have to call very early in the morning when people are rarely at their most affable. It's understandable that novice reporters might feel nervous, but understanding the purpose and process of broadcast news interviews is a good antidote.

### **Different outcomes, different styles**

The radio and television interviews that attract the most attention are the question-and-answer (Q&A) segments conducted by television current affairs presenters and radio talkback hosts. But the interviews most broadcast journalists do most often are quite different and less complex. In general, they are short interviews – often just a few minutes long – in which the reporter will be asking someone to comment on, react to, or explain something with a view to getting a soundbite or two plus enough background information to write their story.



Electronic media news interviews may be done one-on-one or as all-ins. One sign of the brevity of news interviews is that they are usually conducted standing, because it is quicker, and sometimes – as in this case, on the run. In this picture, journalists are chasing a lawyer, leaving court.

## Soundbites

Soundbites, also known as ‘grabs’, are the short interview segments used in broadcast stories. The length and style of these segments varies from radio to television, from public-sector to commercial services and between news and current affairs programs.

These days, radio bites usually run between five and 20 seconds and those in television between two and 15 seconds, with most running less than ten seconds. FM radio news services generally prefer shorter bites to AM bulletins and the public-sector broadcasters, both radio and TV, are more likely to run soundbites at slightly greater length than the commercial ones. There’s more on the politics of soundbites at the end of this chapter. For now, it is important to understand that broadcast reporters need a good ear for a soundbite because, while these interview segments might be short, they help sell and explain the story and allow the listeners and viewers to hear from the newsmakers themselves.

## Editing out questions

A reporter’s questions rarely form part of a news story and are usually edited out. This has a big effect on the way news reporters work. Broadcast reporters generally gather their background material before the recorded interview. By the time they start recording, they will most often know the type of comment they want. Often, that’s why they chose that person to interview. So their questions will be designed to elicit certain types of answers, and reporters will often persist in a line of questioning, changing the phrasing a little each time, to try to get the soundbite they want.

The fact that most broadcast news and current affairs interviews are edited into segments gives reporters a very large degree of control over interviewees’ remarks, because the journalist both selects the remarks to be used and writes the script around them, and so determines the context in which the soundbites appear. It is probable many young reporters don’t realise this initially, and nor do many interviewees, except for media regulars. That this raises ethical issues is self-evident, but it is also one more example of the point that the structure of an interview for a soundbite is not critical, since the interview will be cut into segments for broadcast and any flaws in interviewing technique can be covered in the scripting.

## From interview to story

Some stories begin with an interview in which a reporter canvasses a range of topics with an influential person. For example, comments made on the ABC’s panel interview program *Q&A*, in the interviews conducted on Sky News, or

on the free-to-air political and business programs *Insiders*, *Inside Business* and *Meet the Press*, broadcast on Sunday mornings, often spark news stories. Some stories originate from the interviews conducted at media conferences. But it is more common, in broadcast news and current affairs, for the story idea to come first. Depending on the nature of the story, the interviewees may need to be selected to represent different positions on a particular issue.

Where time or distance are issues, reporters will arrange to conduct interviews by phone or over the Internet using Skype, which has made remote interviews for television both straightforward and inexpensive.

Sometimes these niceties are dispensed with; for example, when a public figure is enmeshed in controversy and unlikely to agree to talk. In such cases, reporters will wait outside the place the reluctant interviewee might be found in the hope of securing a ‘doorstop’ or ‘ambush’ interview.

Other interviews are arranged on the spot – at crime scenes, protests, conferences and so on.

Broadcast news often has to be put together so quickly that reporters have little time to research their interviews, other than to read a media release, or an article or two, or to ask some background questions before they start recording. It’s one more reason why reporters need to keep themselves well informed on a range of topics, so they have a body of knowledge to fall back on.

Broadcast interviews, like broadcast writing, are often conversational in their tone. But an interview is not really a conversation. Conversations are frequently casual and unstructured. By contrast, even the shortest interview requires a purpose and plan.

It involves knowing the questions that need to be answered about a particular issue and anticipating what the audience wants to know. It means knowing how to get that information without rambling or wasting the interviewee’s time. And it means respecting the fact that you have a job to do without losing sight of your responsibility to the person you are talking to.

## **News interviews: techniques and styles**

While different media and outlets require different approaches to interviewing, there are two pieces of advice that almost everyone agrees on. One is *listen* to the person you’re interviewing and be prepared to change your tack if they give you something newsworthy you didn’t expect. The other is don’t go on and on.

At Melbourne’s leading commercial news-talk station, 3AW, news interviews can take as little as two minutes, but more commonly four to five, and

reporters expect to get two or three soundbites from each interview. News director Rob Curtain says reporters need to be innovative and avoid being too abrupt:

You've got to anticipate a little bit. So if you get on the phone you don't say 'can I talk to you about this?' If you know someone is difficult to talk to, you don't hit them right on the line and say 'what's your name and title and I want to quote you on this'. You've got to be a bit more skilful and just talk to them, understand that they're coming from a completely different viewpoint and try to understand their viewpoint so you can reassure them and ease into the interview.

One of the challenges for broadcast reporters is that they have to draw from their interviewees pithy responses and useful background, while working at a fairly brisk pace. In these circumstances, your approach is critically important. Polite persistence is important. It's also useful to put yourself in the place of the listeners and consider what they want to hear from the interviewee, as the head of the news team at Sydney news-talk station 2GB, Erin Maher, explains:

I think the most important thing is to remember that there's no such thing as a dumb question. Sometimes what you might think is a stupid or obvious question gives you that perfect answer to explain the story and fit in that 15-second grab. It doesn't have to be complicated. You just have to keep it simple.

It would be unusual for a reporter in a commercial FM newsroom to spend more than four minutes on an interview. As Sydney FM journalist Mark McKeown points out, anything longer than that will take too long and radio journalists have to work at very high speed:

In an FM newsroom your phone interviews are probably going to take about two minutes; four at the most. Everything is on a time limit. You may have 30 minutes between bulletins and it may seem like you've got buckets of time. But if you do two interviews of four minutes there's already eight minutes gone. You've still got to cut your audio for each of those things – that could take you two minutes each. It could take you longer. But that's already 12 minutes. You've got to write your scripts – that could take you three minutes each, so it very quickly adds up. And that's only two stories. If you've got an eight-story count for your bulletin and you've also got a full sports wrap to write and you've got to touch up your weather and everything else, that half hour goes very quickly.

Mark suggests that one way to encourage interviewees to phrase their comments in the best way for the short audio bites that radio uses is to pose the question in a way that challenges them.

Sometimes the best way to get the gold grabs is to flip your question around and play the devil's advocate. So instead of asking a government minister 'can you tell us about your new policy?' ask 'is it really that important, minister, that we consider (whatever the issue is)?' Sometimes by turning the question around you can get a grab that explains exactly their point, but is also perfectly phrased at the same time.

There are some interviews that require a different approach. These are where listeners cold call with a story they want to tell. It might be about how bad weather – from drought to storms – is affecting them. It might be a concern about traffic conditions, with implications for public safety. It might be to complain about vandalism in their neighbourhood, or over any number of other issues. And it might be because someone in the community has achieved something that deserves to be acknowledged. Broadcast journalism lecturer and former network news editor Samantha Blair, who has worked with regional journalists throughout Australia, says local stories can be the most compelling, interesting and sensitive interviews a journalist will ever do:

It is out of the grassroots level of reporting that the most amazing stories emerge and it is usually because the people who want to tell their story are 'real'. They are not trained in PR and media and have no hidden agendas, so their message is often heartfelt and their stories can have impact in such a personal way.

Samantha says that, while these interviews can produce wonderful stories, the interviewees need to be encouraged and reassured along the way. Acknowledge how intimidating it can be for someone with no experience in public speaking or the media, to suddenly find themselves in the spotlight:

As a journalist, you have a responsibility to treat interviewees well and to be fair in dealings with them. To help your interviewee feel more relaxed in a phone interview, talk them through the steps of recording and reassure them they're not being put live to air and give them as much time as they need to convey their story or point of view. Be patient.

Samantha thinks young journalists often suffer from a number of misconceptions.

First they think that as a 'journalist' they need to be pushy and combative, when in fact for community based reporting the opposite works far more effectively.

Focus on the stories that are important to the community, defer to those who know more about a subject and be courteous and friendly.

Young journalists need to build their reputations and 'life skills' and being arrogant for the sake of it early on will do more harm than good. Those journalists who ask the tough questions and fight the big battles have had years of experience and have the knowledge, expertise and confidence to back up their 'attitude'.

Samantha says journalism is a career where you learn something new every day. Whether it's about how to be a journalist, the details of a news story, insight into a particular issue or the workings of organisations – it's a fascinating career that builds on knowledge and skill.

She encourages young journalists to recognise their own limitations and tailor their style accordingly but also recognise the times where they will need to be brave and push themselves to achieve:

There will be many stories and situations that require courage and trust in personal ability, so put self-doubt aside and get on with the job of reporting.

While radio news interviews rarely take much time, because of the hourly or half-hourly deadlines, television news reporters have a little more latitude, though most will keep interviews as short as they can.

## **News and current affairs: different approaches**

Even when interviews are edited into soundbites, the way they are used varies considerably between news and current affairs.

The soundbites in the average television news story make up only between about 20 and 40 per cent of the total running time of the story and they are commonly used to reinforce or comment on the material in the narration, but not to tell the story. Journalists can tell stories more quickly and efficiently than interviewees. Current affairs stories are different. The interview segments in television current affairs are not just longer than news soundbites, they generally make up a greater proportion of the total story and they carry

more of the narrative. This influences the way interviews for current affairs stories are conducted, and while they may be longer than news interviews, there are limits.

Alan Sunderland, Head of Policy for ABC News, says an overly long interview simply leaves everyone exhausted and it's too easy to lose the point:

I think you have to understand what kind of interview you're doing and why you're doing it. My advice is to keep the interview as simple as possible. I don't believe in writing questions before you go into an interview because if you prepare a long list of questions, almost invariably you're not listening to the answers. You're waiting for a pause so you can ask the next question. So my advice would be to think about why you're talking to this person and what you want to get out of them and then do two things. First of all listen to their answers and if you know you've got what you want, go with it. But secondly, be prepared to be surprised. If you're not over-prepared for the interview, if you know that you want to talk about X and in the process they say something interesting, if you're listening you'll hear it and take it where it leads.

Studio interviews need a cohesive structure in a way that news interviews generally don't. They will also be more discursive, a point made by the former presenter of Triple J radio's current affairs program, *Hack*, Steve Cannane:

If you listen to a news journalist who's getting grabs for news do an interview, it's a very different kind of interview from what we would do because they're fishing for quotes in a sense. We actually do longer interviews, where you are having a discussion with somebody. They might be a politician. They might be an expert on drugs. They might be a person who understands how the music industry works. We're actually having a conversation, a discussion, so we're following up with questions and scrutinising what that person is saying.

In cases of live, in-depth, television studio interviews, where the structure is particularly important, interviewers will sometimes workshop the interview with colleagues who will try to anticipate the answers the interviewee might give to specific questions. That gives the interviewer the opportunity to work out a line of questioning that has the best chance of getting the responses they want. On the other hand, experienced interviewees, including some politicians, may go through the same process in reverse, workshopping a planned interview with their advisers to help them anticipate the questions and stay 'on message'.

## Documentary-style interviews

In some stories that might better be considered more ‘documentary’ than current affairs, interviews will be required to carry the entire narrative line. One example of this is ABC TV’s series *Australian Story*. Interviews for programs of this nature must cover some material that would normally be left to the reporter’s narration, so that a coherent story can be told from interview segments alone. This means questions have to be open-ended and cast very wide, such as ‘could you tell me about your job?’ As one of the program’s producers, Vanessa Gorman, once noted, this technique is quite different from the one a reporter would usually adopt: ‘Normally you like your questions to sound intelligent, but with this, you actually don’t want to, because you need to elicit all that information in the answer’ (McGregor 1999: 9).

## The questions

Young reporters naturally approach an interview by focusing on the questions. But it is often more useful to start by thinking about the answers: What do you want to find out? Now frame the questions to draw out that information.

As we’ve seen, by the time you begin a recorded interview you generally know what you want from it. Individual reporters have different approaches to the issue of whether or not to prepare a list of questions and whether or not to write them down. If the interview is to be long and complex, and if it is to be broadcast as an interview rather than as edited soundbites, many will prepare a list of questions. But it is the interviewee’s responses to questions that determine whether they stick to that list.

Reporters conducting short, news interviews are more likely to work from memory or prompts than written questions. The exception is when the questions need to be precise because they involve detail, such as quotes from other people. Some situations simply don’t lend themselves to working from scripted questions. If you are part of a scrum at a doorstep interview, you won’t have time to consult a notebook. Also, reading questions can make you sound stilted and look nervous.

## Open-ended and closed-ended questions

Closed-ended questions direct the interviewee to provide specific detail and can often be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Open-ended questions usually involve a ‘how’ or ‘why’ and invite an interviewee to give a more expansive answer. In general,

broadcast reporters looking for a soundbite prefer open-ended questions because single-word answers are not useful soundbites (though they are sometimes used in television reports). There are exceptions. Some circumstances demand a yes/no response; for example, ‘Did you do it?’. There are also occasions on which the question itself is the point. One of the most celebrated examples, which is also quintessentially Australian, was delivered at a Canberra media conference in February 2002. The then Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie, was addressing reporters over the ‘children overboard’ affair in which a boatload of asylum seekers had been accused of throwing their children into the water. Having formerly argued that this had occurred, the Admiral was now retracting that claim. The tone of questioning was fairly harsh and the most pointed question came from Canberra veteran Laurie Oakes:

Q: Do you feel like a dill, Admiral?

A: I don’t feel like a dill.

It was the question that received media attention, not least because the Admiral repeated its key word in his response (Kelly 2002: n.p.).

Questions become more significant than answers in any ambush interview in which the subject of the ambush doesn’t say anything. But most interviews are far less confrontational and often with people who are not accustomed to being interviewed. In these cases, you may need to phrase questions in such a way that they encourage the type of response you want. Consider the reporter who needs to interview the fire officer at the scene of a blaze. The open-ended question ‘How did the fire start?’ will probably yield an explanation suitable for an audio bite. By contrast, a closed-ended question such as ‘Did the fire start in the living room?’ may yield no more than ‘yes’ or ‘no’, which is not enough to stand alone.

### Providing questions in advance

It is normal to explain why you want to interview someone and the gist of what you plan to ask at the time you set up an interview. Some interviewees want more; they ask to see the questions before the interview. No reporter likes this and few will consent willingly. There are several reasons why people might want advance notice of what you’re going to ask. Experienced interviewees, such as public figures and officials, may be interested in controlling the line of questioning. In his book *Inside 60 Minutes*, John Little explained how that program gave the brush-off to politicians who called for a list of questions in advance:

*60 Minutes* producers have developed a fine line in deceit when it comes to these applications. If you tell the truth it is unlikely your target will submit to an interrogation. But you cannot tell a lie either. The usual ploy is to say that you cannot submit specific questions because you cannot be sure where the conversation will lead, but you will be happy to suggest a list of topics. This allows more latitude. (Little 1994: 22)

On the other hand, inexperienced interviewees are usually simply nervous and figure they will feel calmer if they have prepared answers. In these cases, you are best served by explaining that they will come across best if they look and sound spontaneous rather than as though they have rehearsed their responses. As long as the interview is not intended to be an interrogation, the reporter might also tell the interviewee to think of it solely as a conversation between the two of them.

### Dealing with ambiguities

It is easy to overlook the importance of clarifying information given in an interview, especially if you are working to the clock or don't want to appear ill-informed. But failure to clarify an ambiguity can lead to errors, a point illustrated by research conducted by Julianne Schultz. The research team surveyed people quoted by name in four newspapers. The respondents were asked about the accuracy of the report(s), whether they were interviewed and how the reporter conducted the interview. Seventy per cent of those who had been interviewed said it had been by phone, not face-to-face, which reflects the realities of contemporary news gathering even though other research has shown that interviewing face-to-face increases the level of accuracy. Most of the people in this group who identified an inaccuracy in the report in which they were named said it was due to a need to 'sensationalise'. But one-quarter said the error occurred because the reporter failed to 'ask sufficient questions to clarify the subject or understand the background' (Schultz 1990: 34).

Commercial radio news director Rob Curtain says it is easy for inexperienced reporters to misinterpret information, but there's a simple solution:

One thing that's really important with younger journalists, especially in commercial radio news where you are doing so many different stories, including stories you may not know a great deal about, is you need to keep putting back to the person you're interviewing your understanding of what they're saying. So, you're almost writing the story in

## Interviewing checklist

### Before the interview begins

- If you're interviewing by phone, you need to remember that the *Federal Telecommunications (Interceptions) Act 1979* makes it illegal to record someone over the phone without their consent. Interviewees should be asked if they agree to being recorded and should be told when the system is active.
- Regardless of whether you record in person or over the phone, you will need to do a sound check before you begin recording, to ensure that your recording levels are neither too low nor overloaded. Tell the interviewee you need to check the sound levels and ask them anything that will encourage them to speak at their normal level while you do it.
- If the 'talent' is unaccustomed to being interviewed, use any time you have before the interview to put them at ease.
- If you're working with a camera operator or crew, introduce them to the interviewee. It's impolite not to, and it helps break the ice. Incidentally, they are '*the crew*', not '*my crew*'.
- While you're at it, ask the interviewee if they would mind switching off their mobile or diverting their calls for the duration of the interview. If you are interviewing over the phone, you might want to discourage the interviewee from using a speakerphone. It can make them sound rather remote.
- If the interviewee is nervous, keep the microphone at a non-threatening distance. You can do this without compromising the sound quality by moving the mic from directly in front of the interviewee to slightly to the side but still pointed at them. If the interview is for television, tell the interviewee to disregard the camera and treat the interview as a conversation. In reality, an interview is not the same as a conversation, but this line of encouragement promotes informality and discourages the interviewee from treating the interview as an opportunity to make a speech.
- Discuss what you plan to ask in general terms, but don't give the interviewee the precise wording of questions in advance. Interviewees who rehearse their answers sound stilted.
- Some interviewers use the pre-interview chat to check the kind of responses they'll get to the questions, as in: 'If I were to ask you about X, how would you respond?' This can be particularly important if the interview is live-to-air, because you'll want to be sure that the interviewee isn't going to lapse into jargon or overly technical language.
- Unless it's obvious, tell the interviewee the kind of people who'll be listening, to give them some indication of how to phrase their responses. ➔

- If the interview is to be edited into soundbites, it is common courtesy to point this out to someone if they don't already realise it. Explain that you will only be able to use a small amount of what they have to say. You might want to tell them approximately how many seconds you will be able to use, so that they can frame their answers accordingly, and that you may use some of their other comments when you write the story narration. If you can only use answers of a certain length, tell them so.

### During the interview

- Don't waste the interviewee's time. If you are only going to use 15 seconds, it's unnecessary to question someone for 20 minutes, or even ten. Some news interviews take only one or two questions. Once the reporter has the required response, they will wind up.
- Speak clearly and confidently and sound as though you are interested in the topic. Don't mumble, ramble or sound apologetic. If the interview is face-to-face, look the 'talent' in the eye, with the occasional glance down to check your notes.
- Avoid double-barrelled questions ('What's your organisation's policy on this and what reaction do you expect?'). Two-part questions can confuse interviewees. They may ignore part of the question and it won't always be obvious which part the answer refers to.
- It may be worth telling the interviewee that if they feel they could make a key point more concisely they should say so, so that you can repeat the question (within reason).
- On the other hand, if the interviewee drifts off the topic, or gets on a soapbox, draw them back to the point, politely.
- One difference between this style of interview and live-to-air or newspaper ones is that the reporter needs to remain silent except when they are asking a question. The small sounds of agreement, disagreement and so on that most of us make during conversations – such as 'hmmm' and 'really?' and so on – sound fairly silly on a recording and cause problems during editing. Saying 'yes' to encourage an interviewee is even worse, because it sounds as though you are agreeing with the interviewee's comments. In a face-to-face interview, the reporter can use non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language, to convey their interest in what the interviewee is saying and to encourage them to talk. Unfortunately, there's no such luxury in phone interviews.
- If you're interviewing by phone, try smiling as you talk (unless the interview is a hostile one, of course). Smiling will make your voice sound warmer and more friendly. Don't overdo it, though.



- The techniques for incorporating soundbites within a scripted story are discussed in chapter 7. Broadcast stories have to be written very quickly, sometimes while travelling from the story location to the newsroom. So many television reporters use a small audio recorder to record their interviews while they are being videoed. That way they can select the soundbites without needing to review the video.
- Remember that if an interviewee defames someone, the broadcaster is usually the one sued. You should be as careful about using statements made in interviews as you are about the words you write yourself.

### Before you go

- Check the recording. If you are recording on a computer, save the file.

### After the interview

- Unless you are making a documentary or a very long current affairs piece, don't transcribe your interview. It will take too long and you need to learn to work quickly and listen for the soundbites you want to use as you conduct the interview. On the other hand, you should transcribe the soundbites themselves when you write your script.

your head and putting it back to them because if that sounds completely different to them than the way that it should be then you know you're on the wrong track. You've got to make sure your understanding of the story is in accordance with the facts. Less experienced journalists can sometimes hear something, have an idea of the story, say 'thanks very much' and write it in a way which bears no relation to the real story.

## Opening questions

One of the considerations an interviewer can face is whether to start on their toughest question. Starting on a tough question usually makes for a lively exchange, but it can also make an interviewee defensive and, if the interviewee has the opportunity to leave, it might prompt them to walk away. (Though, for some television interviewers, that *is* the intention since it can look quite dramatic.)

Of course, the way you structure an interview will depend on the way it is going to be used, and the circumstances under which it's conducted. Some interviews, such as doorstops, are impromptu and short. In those cases, you ask the most important question first. It might be the only chance you get.

Studio interviews, which are going to run at least several minutes, allow for a more varied and creative structure. Many programs that broadcast Q&A interviews also post transcripts on their websites and these are an excellent resource for anyone wanting to look at how the best interviewers fashion their questions.

### Follow-up questions

Unlike interviews conducted for soundbites, those that are to be broadcast as Q&A need to flow logically from one question and answer to the next. If the interview covers several topics, the interviewer is likely to make the transition from one to the next with bridging phrases such as ‘If we could turn to ...’ and so on. If the interview covers a single topic, the interviewer can build on each answer to formulate the next question. This example, from the ABC’s Radio National breakfast program, involves an American scientist, Dr Paul Chodas, talking to presenter Peter Thompson about doomsday asteroids and the threat they pose to earth:

- PC: Well one of these doomsday asteroids hits the earth on average every three hundred to five hundred thousand years. And that means ... that in the next century there’s a one in three thousand to one in five thousand chance ...
- PT: That’s a reasonably high chance actually.
- PC: It is rather surprising, indeed yes. What we want to do is ... find that asteroid, make a prediction decades ahead of time that it will hit and mount a mission to go out and divert it. We can do something about this problem. If we have enough warning.
- PT: How much warning would you need?
- PC: I would say ten years, twenty years, the more warning the better ...
- PT: Say if there were a twenty-year warning, what could be done?

The interview above was conducted on talk radio and, in keeping with the format, was conversational in tone. The interviewer didn’t need to know a lot about asteroids because he was listening and responding to the interviewee.

By contrast, hard news or current affairs interviews, where the reporter needs to clarify information or pin down a response, require thorough research. In the exchange below, from Nine’s long-running *Sunday* program, journalist Graham Davis quizzed a nurse who had become a widely publicised critic of standards of care at two Sydney hospitals.

- GD: Why didn't you ever raise these matters in the Critical Care Committee?
- Interviewee: Oh, Graham, I did, I did every month.
- GD: No, you didn't.
- Interviewee: Yes, I did.
- GD: We've seen the minutes of those meetings.
- Interviewee: The minutes are not a true reflection of what happened at those meetings.

Interviews with leading public figures such as senior politicians demand the same level of research and preparation. These days, business and political leaders are generally very media-savvy. They have to be. Often they have undertaken specific training to help them put their case to the media. That puts additional pressure on reporters to have a strategy to break through any stonewalling on the part of the interviewee, as ABC (NSW) state political reporter Mark Tobin explains:

I think there are people who are skilled at not answering a particular line of questioning if they don't want to. So I do think that often you do have to hammer home the point. It helps if you are across your facts yourself so that when they do try to lead you down another path you've got the authority to bring them back on track, because they know that you know what the real story is. I think sometimes also media conferences help this. It must be daunting for some of the politicians that there are often five or six journalists firing questions at them, so there's little opportunity for them to back away from some of those questions.

Mark thinks the media training politicians and others undergo can be a hindrance now because it teaches interviewees to stay on message and deliver sound grabs for use on news. But ABC News 24, Sky News and online sites often use entire media conferences and just repeating pre-scripted grabs sounds silly in this context.

There are a number of ways to encourage an interviewee to elaborate beyond simply asking more specific questions. One is to repeat the speaker's last answer as a question. Here's an example from an interview with a banking executive on the Nine Network program *Business Sunday*.

- Interviewer: Who is driving or pushing this new strategy, is it you or the Board?
- Executive: I am.
- Interviewer: It's you?

Executive: I am. Having said that we've taken the senior management, the top 25 people and I meet off site quite regularly ...

Even if it doesn't draw out more information, repeating part of an answer as a question has the added effect of emphasising or confirming a point.

Another technique reporters sometimes use to tease out more information is to simply say nothing after an interviewee has responded to a question, in the hope that they will fill the silence by saying more. This works best in personality interviews or with people who are not experienced interviewees. These days it is unlikely to work in a political interview, where the interviewee will have worked out in advance how much they are prepared to say. Interviewers who use silence effectively are usually ones who have done enough research to know that there *is* something more to be said on a topic, which is why they are prepared to wait for it.

Even the best interviewers can sometimes lose the thread of the conversation, especially if they're distracted by technical or timing demands. The much-respected ABC presenter, the late Andrew Olle, told how he'd had to fall back on questions such as "Why's that important?" or "Could you elaborate?" Even – if you're really desperate "Let's go back to what you were saying earlier ..." (Olle 1992: 2). Apart from giving the interviewer breathing space, the above questions are designed to draw out a speaker on a particular topic.

There are some simple questions that can be used in a soft interview to much the same effect. An old ABC training manual cited the example of British interviewer Sir David Frost, who 'once said his three best questions were: 1. Really? 2. Mmmmm. 3. Go on' (ABC 1995: 16).

### Unsustainable assertions

An assertion (that is, 'X says Y, how do you respond to that?') is a common line of questioning, but beware of using it if you can't sustain the assertion or source the quote. The wisdom of using this technique suffered irreparable damage back in 1981, when George Negus interviewed British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for *60 Minutes*. Part of the exchange went as follows:

GN: Why do people stop us in the street almost and tell us that Margaret Thatcher isn't just inflexible, she's not just single-minded, on occasions she's plain pig-headed and won't be told by anybody?

- MT:            Would you tell me who has stopped you in the street  
                  and said that?
- GN:            Ordinary Britons.
- MT:            Where?
- GN:            In conversation, in pubs ...
- MT:            How many?

(Little 1994: 23–24)

And so it went on. The exchange is so well known you can assume that anyone who faces the media on a regular basis would know of it and be prepared to copy Mrs Thatcher's response were they asked the same style of question.

### Using statements as questions

Posing a question as a statement (for example, 'you must feel shattered') can be a way of persuading someone to open up. But if you use this technique you need to be sure of your facts. A statement containing an error might antagonise the interviewee, with predictable results. A statement about a controversial issue may also carry defamatory implications. This would be a particular problem if it were posed in a live broadcast.

### Unexpected reactions

A journalist's questions can sometimes prompt a completely unexpected reaction both from the interviewee and the public. Two examples from 2011 attracted considerable attention and debate about the appropriateness of the reporters' approach.

In the first, Channel Seven's federal parliamentary reporter, Mark Riley, questioned Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, about a remark he had made to military officials when discussing the death of an Australian soldier during a visit to Afghanistan. Channel Seven had obtained video of the conversation in which Mr Abbott used the words 'shit happens' (Hunter 2011: n.p.). Regardless of the substance of the comment itself, which Mr Abbott's supporters argued was taken out of context, it was his reaction to Riley's questioning that garnered most attention. He fixed the reporter with an icy stare, while shaking slightly, for nearly 20 seconds. Few questioned whether the politician could have handled the exchange in a less damaging way, but in the subsequent debate, the actions of the reporter and the network came in for as much criticism.

The tone was naturally completely different when Network Nine presenter Karl Stefanovic sat down with the visiting Dalai Lama. But his decision to break

the ice with a joke ('So the Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop') drew some unflattering comment. The religious leader looked mystified. The reporter ploughed on, creating what one paper later called 'a low point for diplomacy – and comedy' (Whyte & Wright 2011: 3).

Both episodes were a reminder that the public can be a harsh critic when a reporter's approach to an interview goes awry.

## Dealing with grief and trauma

While political and business interviews require a level of self-confidence and a grasp of the issues, there are other interviews that require, above anything else, humanity and decency.

Interviewing people who are suffering grief is one of the most difficult things a journalist can be asked to do and few like doing it. It is also one of the greatest causes of criticism of reporters and reporting. But covering stories where the people involved are experiencing trauma and are vulnerable is part of the job. Journalist and presenter Hugh Riminton points out that all of us, including those who become the subjects of news in terrible circumstances, are consumers of the media and journalists shouldn't be ashamed of doing their job in emotional situations. But reporters do need to earn the trust of people in these cases:

It doesn't matter with a politician, particularly in a media conference, whether they trust you emotionally or not. That's not relevant. But it is with a family whose child is missing. My feeling is that the best that you can do as a journalist, is to bring your full, human self, to that situation. You have to be disciplined about it in that you don't want to be emoting or anything like that. But I think that most people react instinctively to people who seem to them to be fair dinkum. Decency will go a long way. In the end it's not about you. It's their story. And a proper kind of focused humility about what you do and a sense of tact goes an enormous way.

The MEAA Code of Ethics (see page 241) cautions reporters to respect those who are grieving.

But people in this situation often consent to be interviewed in the hope of achieving ends of their own – perhaps to remember a loved one publicly, to warn others of a danger or to seek help in solving a crime.

Understanding the expectations of interviewees in these circumstances is one way in which journalists can show greater sensitivity and one tragic case from 1997 serves to remind us of this.

In early October that year, two schoolgirls went missing near Bega on the New South Wales south coast. Two men would eventually be sentenced for their abduction, rape and murder. But there was a prolonged search before their bodies were found and during that time there was the possibility that they were still alive. The father of one of the girls wanted everyone in surrounding areas to search their properties and he hoped the media might help him spread the message. But he said the media had its own agenda:

I've cooperated with the media to the extent that I have because I'm trying to get a message out ... Unfortunately, that message is not getting out. Instead the interviews concentrate on how we feel, and just show us crying (Overington 1997: 17).

It's often said that the question 'how do you feel?' is one of the most obvious and least sensitive a reporter can ask of someone who is suffering. It can also obscure the issues that motivate a person to agree to an interview at a time of distress.

## Levels of information

Reporters work with three main levels of information – On the record, Background and Off the record.

While the definition of 'on the record' is usually clear, some ambiguity surrounds the limitations imposed when material is accepted as 'background' or 'off the record'. As Mark Pearson and Mark Polden have written:

Part of the problem is that Australian journalists have no accepted system for ranking information according to its level of confidentiality, no way of defining what expressions like 'off the record' or 'background only' really mean (Pearson & Polden 2011: 307).

They argued that the MEAA or Australian Press Council should clarify the terms so that reporters have commonly accepted guidelines.

In general (White 1991: 49–50; Conley 1997: 210), the various levels of information are defined as follows:

- *On the record.* Information and comments given on the record may be used and attributed to the interviewee or speaker.
- *Background.* Information given as background may be used, but the source may not be named. Instead, the information might be sourced generally; for example, 'a company official says ...'
- *Deep background.* Information given as deep background may be used, but

without any attribution. The use of the term ‘deep background’ is more common in the United States than in Australia.

- *Off the record.* Information given off the record should not be used. Most reporters prefer not to receive information off the record at all because they can’t break the confidence if they obtain the same information later from another source.

Broadcast reporters, even more so than their print counterparts, need to work ‘on the record’, since they need to use the voice or the voice and image of their interviewees.

On some occasions, interviewees may be prepared to be recorded, or appear on camera, as long as their name is not used. On rare occasions, they may want their voice or image concealed. Both voice and image distortion can be achieved electronically. This is usually done by a technician and the reporter needs to let the newsroom know about it as quickly as possible. A person may also be videoed from behind, or in deep shadow, or the camera can be trained on a non-identifying part of them, such as their hands, an extreme close-up of their eyes or mouth, or on their shadow. Commercial public affairs programs sometimes use wigs and make-up to disguise interviewees.

Granting an interviewee anonymity should not be done without careful thought. Information is less credible when the source is not identified. However, there are some cases where there are clear and compelling reasons for protecting an interviewee’s privacy.

## The usual suspects

One of the drawbacks of interviewing for broadcast is that interviewees need to be more than well informed on the subject at hand. They also need to be interesting to listen to. In industry jargon, people who can speak well in front of a microphone or camera are called ‘good talent’. and reporters keep going back to them. But this can become unrepresentative and boring for audiences. So one of the challenges for broadcast journalists is to draw from a range of interviewees that extends beyond the most obvious.

Another is to draw fresh comments from people who are regularly interviewed, such as celebrities, and who have developed a well-worn patter. The tendency for some stars to speak in ‘sugary, shop-worn language’ was noted by feature writer Fenella Souter when she profiled musician Keith Urban. She termed the repetition of ‘celebrity-speak’ (“arriving at a special place”, “being blessed”) and so on as ‘pure Hallmarkian ... heartfelt, no doubt, but slightly

nauseating in large doses' (Souter 2011: 14). That said, it can be hard for an interviewer to break through.

## **Studio interviews: live, prerecorded, remote**

Current affairs interviews in both radio and television are often conducted in a studio and may be prerecorded or broadcast live. In television, in particular, the studio interview can be a daunting experience. Both parties will need to be made up for the cameras and on the studio set they'll be surrounded by cameras, operators and a floor manager taking instructions from the studio control room. If the interview is part of a live broadcast, there will be the added tension of working without the 'safety net' that prerecording offers. Some interviewees prefer working live-to-air because they know their comments won't be edited, at least for that particular broadcast.

### **Working live**

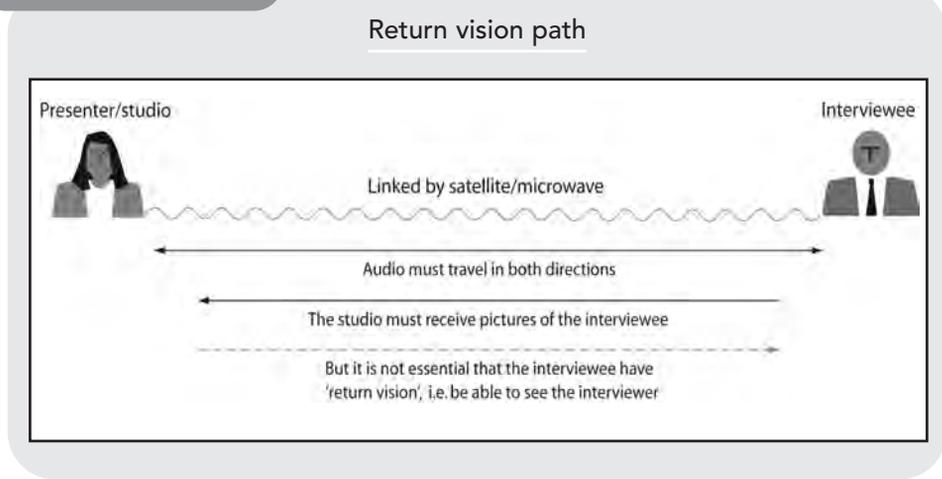
Live interviews within news and current affairs programs are governed by strict timing requirements. This is especially the case in television. Reporters are given a duration for their interview before it begins and they must stick to this. Just before a live TV interview, the floor manager gives the interviewer a countdown, then a cue to start. The floor manager then signals how much time is left at prearranged points in the interview. Finally, the interviewer will be given a wind-up cue when the interview has to end and, if it runs into overtime, the floor manager might make throat-slashing signs. At this point, an interview has to end, even if it's done a bit abruptly. An interview that is to be broadcast as a Q&A, either edited or unedited, needs to have a coherent structure, proceeding logically from one issue to the next. In addition, if the interview is being broadcast live, the reporter needs to make sure that the most crucial questions are asked in plenty of time for the issues to be canvassed adequately before the interview has to end.

A prerecorded studio interview doesn't require quite the same level of discipline, although some are recorded 'live-to-video', which means they won't be edited and need to follow the same structure as a live-to-air interview.

### **Satellite and microwave links**

Some television interviews are conducted by satellite or microwave link, with the reporter or presenter in the studio and the interviewee at another location. For

Figure 6.1



simplicity's sake, these interviews are usually conducted by having both parties look directly into the camera. In other interviews, the interviewee and interviewer look at each other and the camera functions as an observer. Another technical feature of studio-to-location interviews is that of 'return vision' (see figure 6.1). When satellite or microwave links are used, there are four possible components to the signal, two audio and two video, only three of which are essential.

When a program's budget is tight, one of the first areas likely to be cut is the use of return vision. You can usually tell when this has been done, because the interviewee has no one to interact with visually, and it shows.

Since about 2010, television networks around the world have made increasing use of the computer-to-computer video phone system Skype for interviewing, either when there is too little time get a crew to the interviewee or they are too far away to make that practical. Skype has the advantage that the reporter and interviewee can see each other but its downside is the poor image quality and it says much about the way television news has evolved that this is accepted.

### Simulated satellite

Another cost-saving technique for long-distance interviews is 'sim-sat', short for simulated satellite. In this case, the interviewer and interviewee are connected by telephone with the audio carried through an ear piece. Cameras in each location record the questions and answers. The video of the interviewee is then fed to the broadcast centre at a more convenient time and the interview is assembled from the two recordings.

## Competing agendas

By now you will have realised that the pace of broadcast news, and many current affairs, interviews is so brief and time management so important, that you need to have worked out the angle to the story before conducting the recorded interviews. Story angles sometimes seem obvious, but thoughtful reporters know that, like other elements of news gathering, the selection of the story angle is coloured by their (or their supervisor's) perspective, and this will also influence the way the questions are framed. It can be equally easy to take for granted the people in front of the lens. Some will have been cajoled into being interviewed, or consented to appear without fully understanding the consequences of being part of a story. So reporters who are developing their interviewing skills should also spend some time considering the impact of their stories on those participants for whom a media appearance is unusual. During his time reporting and presenting for Nine Network, Hugh Riminton sat on the MEAA's National Ethics Panel, which gave him a special insight into the way people react to being in the news and the sorts of issues that lead to complaints:

One thing that gets brought home to you is that even people with some level of experience and knowledge of the media can be extraordinarily bruised by the business of reading about themselves in newspapers or seeing themselves on television. It's an extraordinarily exposing event. When their own story or their own self has been essentially entrusted to someone else who has chopped it up, put it into some kind of context, portrayed it in a particular way, it is extremely confronting to people and they are enormously sensitised when people get things wrong. And it can be very slight things that journalists get wrong – obvious things that happen so often; names wrong, quotes that they know they didn't say. People get extremely upset about those things. So journalists should realise that they're entitled to do what they're doing and you've got to be fearless about what you do, you've got to be tough about it at various times. But you should – *always* – be honest and solid about what you are doing, not because of ethics panels, but just because it's the right thing to do.

Treating interviewees with respect and 'as we would like our own to be treated' can be 'a hell of a juggling act', ABC presenter Kerry O'Brien once wrote:

It doesn't mean we should walk away from necessary intrusions in the ethical practice of our craft. It does mean that we should never forget that behind every story, great or small, there are people whose lives go on, long after we've moved on. (O'Brien 1998: 13)

## The soundbite syndrome

Television has a love–hate relationship with interviews. ‘Too much talking head’ is one of the standard industry terms for ‘boring’ and it’s presumed there is a limit to how much of a person simply talking all but the most intellectual of audiences will tolerate. Yet talk-based programs often find a large audience. This enthusiasm for chat, which can also be seen in the popularity of talk radio, rarely extends to news and current affairs, where interview segments, or soundbites, have become shorter over time, both because of advances in broadcast technology, which have allowed audio and video to be cut more tightly, and to answer a perceived lack of audience attention by providing snappier items and more of them.

It’s very difficult for a speaker, even one experienced in dealing with the media, to offer much information or explanation in a very short soundbite, and people who are interviewed regularly, such as politicians and business people, sometimes express their frustration at not being given more time and worry about the implications for public debate. Then leader of the Australian Democrats, Cheryl Kernot, summed up these concerns when she suggested there were two problems with soundbites, first their brevity: ‘I think it really undermines your intellectual credibility when you’ve got to reduce something that’s often incredibly complex to a 10-second explanation’ (*The Media Report*, ABC Radio, 27 February 1997: n.p.). She also complained that interviews of this type could be very compromising because the main point of them was not what she wanted to say, but rather: ‘... that the journalist or the producer actually has a formula for the story, and they just want to fit me in according to some predetermined formula’ (*The Media Report*, ABC Radio, 27 February 1997: n.p.).

For broadcast professionals, such as news director of Melbourne’s 3AW, Rob Curtain, this type of criticism is selective and misses the point:

People often criticise the news for just looking for the short soundbite. But the soundbite is just a quote. It’s not the whole story. It’s not asking the person to tell the whole story in five or ten seconds or 15 seconds ... It’s just a quote, and you no more want the whole story in that quote than a newspaper wants the whole story in one quote.

While soundbites may be no more than the quotes in a broadcast story, the perceived power of the electronic media means that some public figures put a great deal more effort into polishing their quotes for radio and TV interviews than they would for a print interview. One sign of this effort is the 

frequency of punchy comments designed to have broadcast appeal even if they don't add much to public understanding of the issues involved. Soundbites are a sign of a speaker, often a politician, going 'on message'. Australians who followed the 2010 federal election campaign were treated to endless repetition of the Labor mantra that it and the country would be 'moving forward'. After the Labor government was elected, and the Prime Minister proposed a tax on carbon, the opposition punched on with criticism of 'this toxic tax', no doubt pleased with its use of alliteration.

If one drawback of the soundbite culture is that it forces interviewees to compress their comments into unnaturally short segments, another is that it has allowed media-savvy interviewees to control the outcome of some news interviews. These days, most politicians, business leaders and other public figures who are interviewed regularly undergo media training to teach them how to put their message across most effectively. Often this training is conducted by former or current journalists and the practice is regularly called into question because it presents working journalists with a substantial conflict of interest.

Media training includes an explanation of the news production process and the fact that reporters' questions are usually edited out when interviewees' comments are included in a story. Interviewees are encouraged to consider the most important points they want to make in an interview and press those points. Some trainers teach clients to press a particular line regardless of the interviewer's questions.

Evading the question in this way works because answers are allowed to stand alone. If news story formats allowed the use of reporters' questions more often, the technique would be a lot less successful. It can also backfire in an interview broadcast as question and answer, particularly if the interviewer challenges the interviewee on their style of response.

## **If you want to read more ...**

Andrew Boyd et al., section 9 'The Interview' in *Broadcast Journalism: Techniques of Radio & TV News*, 6th edn, Focal Press, London, 2008.

Gail Sedorkin, *Interviewing: A Guide for Journalists and Writers*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011.

# 7

## Broadcast writing style

Broadcast news and current affairs programs are a paradox. On the one hand, surveys tell us that more people prefer broadcast news than print. Yet, at the same time, there is considerable evidence that many listeners and viewers take in only a fraction of the news programs they apparently find so appealing. One reason is that broadcast news, especially radio news, is often forced to compete for attention with a host of distractions. People listen to radio news while getting ready for work or driving, and the main television bulletins go to air when many people are preparing dinner. Sometimes, broadcast news is little more than background sound or video-wallpaper.

The sorts of practices that can make broadcast stories difficult to follow include:

- the brevity of stories and the consequent lack of background information
- the fact that listeners and viewers usually hear or see a story just once and, while digital technologies allow them to review stories if they want to, the nature of so much radio and television consumption is likely to make this the exception rather than the rule
- the rapid editing of shots in television
- the structure of some television news stories, where giving priority to the pictures, without careful attention to the writing, can break up the flow of the narrative.

### **The elements of broadcast style**

Broadcast reporters know they have a less attentive audience than their newspaper and magazine colleagues, just as online reporters know their audience is

restless and one click away from going somewhere else. Broadcast writing is often seen as less complex than its print equivalent. But you could argue that, since the audience is so much more fickle and distracted, writing for the electronic media is the most demanding form of news writing.

There are obvious differences in the writing styles of radio and television news, but they share many features, starting with a need for brevity. Broadcast news stories are short. Some have to be conveyed in a couple of sentences. Radio ‘voicers’ can be as short as 20 seconds and a typical television news story is one minute ten seconds to one minute 30 seconds long. That means the overriding consideration is time and how best to use it, a point made by Justin Kelly when he was news director at Sydney’s 2GB:

My number one writing tip is keep it simple. And I’m sure everyone will say the same. There’s a tendency to try to fit in too much. The other thing would be, write it in words that people understand. In radio copy you can have colourful language, you can have emotive language and good use of verbs. But at the end of the day you have to ask, why is this news? It’s news because something has happened and you’ve got to explain that in the shortest amount of time possible. There’s a real skill in being able to take a complicated story and put it into 30 seconds. So keep it simple and write the way people speak.

The features of broadcast writing that make it unique are the tools that are used; not just words, but ambient sound and silence and, in television, pictures, all combined into an integrated whole. Television stories are longer and more complex than those on radio, but brevity is still fundamental to the medium:

Your starting point is that you are given a finite time for your story – let’s say it’s one minute 30. You can’t make it a better script by writing more. What I try to do is to convert what I see as a two-dimensional thing into a three-dimensional one. You can’t make it longer, you have to make it deeper. So for me, writing is about how much extra depth can you get into that finite 1:30. To do that you have to know what pictures you have, because the pictures and the sound are the parallel narrative to the script that you’re writing. You are trying to build a resonance between the pictures and what you write. Together they will convey the information much better. The best approach is to write far less and have the pictures carry what’s going on. And I certainly think that sound is overlooked – little upsots (bursts of natural sound) – of hurried footsteps or a door slamming as people hustle into a court, or whatever it might be – they convey a sense of being there and make the story immediate (Hugh Riminton, television journalist/presenter).

Write less. If you want to write better, write less. Only write what you absolutely have to write and then look at it critically. The best stuff is where you just take three-quarters of it out. There is nothing worse than overwriting, and there's nothing worse than leading your audience by the nose to where you want them to go, because a good piece of television journalism means your pictures will take people to where they want to go. All you want to do with your script is simply make sure people can understand what's happening and what they're seeing. So write to the pictures and keep it as simple as you possibly can. The worst thing people do is the opposite of that. They write a long, interesting script with lots of facts in it and then work out how they can get some pictures to match it, which is just atrocious (Alan Sunderland, Head of Policy, ABC News).

## **Different services, different styles**

While this chapter covers some of the common elements of broadcast news writing, much of the style used on air is 'house style', which varies between the public and commercial sector broadcasters, between the AM and FM radio bands, between the metropolitan and regional stations.

The ABC services a diverse, national audience and one that is probably more critical of any perceived lapses in standards of English usage than the audience for commercial broadcast news. Former Victorian News Editor Marco Bass says its journalists write in a way that reflects the way the majority of the community speaks:

The hallmark of our writing is to mirror conversational but literate spoken English. That doesn't mean that we throw out the established grammatical rules. It just means that we're terribly conscious that we are writing for the ear. And we, like any responsible media organisation, abhor the use of pejorative language.

Commercial 'news talk' stations adopt a slightly less formal style than the public-sector broadcasters. News director of Sydney's 2GB, Erin Maher, describes it as being more conversational:

Commercial AM is definitely more casual and conversational than the ABC. At the ABC they'll say things like 'the Premier (name) whereas we would just say 'Premier ...'. Overall commercial AM scriptwriting is more casual, but doesn't go as far as on FM stations. They're very colloquial in the types of words they use in their scripts. We tend to see it as a

conversation between two people – probably a similar conversation to what our target audience would have. That’s how we try to write.

On those commercial FM stations pitched at a younger audience, the use of language will reflect the target demographic. On those news services, a car accident might be described as a ‘prang’ and plans will be given the ‘thumbs up’ and so on. That tone is reflected in the approach they take to some stories too. The news is more likely to be written in the first person plural (‘Looks like we’re in for higher petrol prices ...’) to indicate that the station, including its journalists, identify with the listeners. By contrast, journalists writing for AM news services are more likely to stand back a bit and write in the third person.

Mark McKeown, who covers state parliament for a ‘classic hits’ station with an older audience than the youth-focused FM stations, says that in order to write you need to understand who you are writing *for*:

You need to know the things your listeners are interested in. You also need to know the important issues they need to know about that maybe, at face value, don’t seem interesting and how to tell them about those things. There is a section of our listenership who might say among friends and colleagues that they’re not interested in politics. But there are important things in politics they need to know. So you need to tell your listeners those stories in an interesting, informative, even entertaining way.

That means writing in a way that is appropriate to the specific audience:

You do need to use some colloquial language. You need to be to the point and not go into long-winded explanations. You need to avoid technical or political jargon. You need to speak in a way people speak at the water cooler.

The need to avoid jargon applies across all radio services. Mark Tobin also reports state politics, in his case for the ABC. He recommends using ‘uncomplicated’ words and avoiding the jargon that many workplaces develop:

I work in parliament and a lot of parliamentary terms may not be familiar to the wider public. So it’s good to simplify them. That’s also true if you’re in business reporting or police reporting. Using everyday language is essential.

Mark McKeown has worked for two different commercial FM news services as well as a metro broadsheet paper, and believes the youth-focused FM style,

which has the shortest bulletins and the shortest stories, can seem deceptively simple:

It's actually so much more difficult to write. There's so much more thinking involved. Taking a concept you could write 300 or 500 words about at a paper and then bringing that down to three or four lines is possibly the most difficult thing I've had to learn. It's extremely hard to pack huge concepts into bite-sized chunks – yet still put across the full value and the full weight of what's going on.

Youth-focused FM services like their news written in a punchy, racy style and their journalists say that where AM services can use formulas for writing routine stories, such as 'The Prime Minister says ...', they have to be more creative.

Writing for regional radio is different again. Victorian regional radio sports editor Steve King says writing for regional audiences means giving a little more detail than you would in a metropolitan area:

Reporters in the city can get away with writing two paragraphs to tell the story because the items they're writing about have appeared either on mainstream TV or in the daily newspapers, whereas regional listeners may not necessarily have that background information where they can go – 'yes, I've read that in the paper or I've seen that on TV'. You need to spell it out and give people the full facts and you may need to use some historical references in the story, especially if it's a court case or something similar.

Steve says writing for a regional audience requires a more formal style than is used by some city stations and that means you have to try harder to make the writing sound conversational. There are also differences in the way regional reporters approach stories involving their local identities, such as politicians:

It's very hard to write a story without mentioning them in the first paragraph, although you don't want to. You don't find city radio stations writing about their politicians this way. You would never hear a story saying 'The member for Melbourne Ports says ...', whereas in my world, 'The member for Murray Valley is calling for gas to be extended to north-east Victoria ...' is a perfectly legitimate opening to a news story.

The common denominator in the way all broadcast news is written is the need to establish a connection with the audience. At the ABC's youth network Triple J, the audience is clearly different from that for ABC's Radio National and

Local services and, as former presenter of *Hack* Steve Cannane explains, Triple J tailors its language and tone accordingly:

We reflect the language that our audience uses. I find in ABC current affairs there's a voice of authority that we don't use. You even hear it in the way they talk. We call it the 'big voice' of authority, like 'I'm telling you something that you should know about'. We don't do that. We talk the way our audience talks and use specific language that connects with the audience because we're telling a story to somebody who is like one of us. We don't want to put a big dividing line between us and them. So the language is pretty crucial as far as we are concerned.

Despite some regional and national differences, the main elements of broadcast writing apply very widely, a point made by Travis Parry, whose career has taken him from regional Australian broadcasters to the BBC and Al Jazeera:

The writing style used by broadcast journalists in Australia is similar to that used by international broadcast journalists. Of course there are some minor differences, particularly between American English and British English, but major international broadcasters have style guides in an attempt to eliminate these. Copy in Australia tends to be a little crisper than that used overseas, particularly when compared with the UK. British and international broadcasters often run much longer packages also. But the general broadcast rules of active copy and leading with the top line of the story are universal. In addition, at the continuous TV news channels, there is a much greater emphasis on updating the story with the latest lines than there might be in Australia. It's similar to what you would find in an Australian radio newsroom. I think that hourly news bulletins — as opposed to one, two or three each day — also have a lot to do with the type of writing style used. Often this can influence the editorial judgement of what is the top line of the story, in comparison with the latest line.

Broadcast writing makes one other demand on those who do it; they need to remember that their work will be *heard* rather than *read* by its audience and that clarity is paramount. If a reader doesn't understand something, they can go over it again. A listener or viewer either can't or won't bother.

The following are guidelines for writing for both radio and television. Each medium also has specific guidelines. We'll come to those later.

## Guidelines for broadcast news writing

### Write copy to be spoken

Good broadcast writing should sound natural or conversational, but with a little bit of an edge to it to command listeners' attention. One reason for this emphasis on informality is that broadcast news, particularly radio news, is an intimate person-to-person service. For audience members, the voice on the radio is another individual talking to them at home, at work or in the car. Newspaper reporters may write their stories, broadcast reporters need to *tell* theirs (Block 1987: 32). Much of what's written in the newspapers sounds excessively formal when it's read out loud. Broadcast journalism has to *sound* crisp and clear. Broadcast journalists check their copy by reading it aloud or under their breath. If sentences are too long or too cumbersome, they will be hard to read and if they are hard to read they will probably be hard for the listener or viewer to understand.

Writing conversationally means avoiding the use of any jargon or slang, which your listeners might not understand. It usually means avoiding the use of bad language, unless you are quoting someone and depending on house style.

The speed at which a story is delivered varies from one reporter and presenter to the next, but the average rate of speech is about three words to the second. So a 20-second radio report will be 60 words long and a television item of one minute 20 seconds will need no more than 240 words.

The computer software used in broadcast newsrooms tallies and displays the number of words as you write your story. But as well as the total word count you also have to bear in mind the flow of words between pauses for breath. You can check the importance of structuring your writing to take into account these pauses with a simple experiment.

Take a breath and then count, at one-second intervals, for as long as you can without discomfort. How far can you count? The result varies according to the individual, but 15 or 16 seconds is common. Sixteen seconds is 48 words and that is the *longest* sequence of words most people would want to read before encountering a full stop or some other logical pause for breath. Ideally, the string of words before a pause for breath should be considerably shorter – say 25 to 29 words or fewer.

Since broadcast writing is judged by the way it *sounds*, it's considered permissible to break some of the rules of written grammar from time to time. For

example, verbs are routinely left out of throws such as ‘This story from Sonia Scribe’. But the opportunity to exercise a little licence with grammatical rules is no excuse for complete indifference.

### Use the active voice

One of the first lessons in writing that journalists usually encounter is to use the *active* rather than the *passive* voice. The active voice employs a subject–verb–object sentence construction. In other words, it puts the subject of the sentence, the person or thing *doing* the action, before the object of the sentence, the person or thing to whom or to which the action is being done.

A simple active voice sentence looks like this:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>object</i>
A reporter	writes	the story.

Put into the passive voice, the sentence would read:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>object</i>
The story	is written	by a reporter.

In general, journalism favours the active voice because it is more concise and more direct. Of course, there are exceptions. Court or crime stories often require the passive voice because the subject of an action cannot be or has not been identified. For example, the passive voice in this construction is usually considered preferable to the active voice version:

*Passive:* Pensioner Morag Jones was robbed by a bag snatcher.

*Active:* A bag snatcher robbed pensioner Morag Jones.

The passive voice is also preferable when the object of a sentence is more interesting than the subject.

*Passive:* The Oscar-winning actor ... is being mourned by admirers around the world.

The driver was cut by flying glass.

In news writing, issues that might seem technical or routine can be imbued with political considerations and this is the case with the choice between the active and the passive voice.

During the 2003 war in Iraq, linguist Annabelle Lukin wrote of the way use of the passive voice in phrases such as ‘bombs were dropped on Baghdad’ dehumanised reality. In a reminder that journalists need to think about even simple forms of phrasing, she argued that ‘grammar is the first important covert operation in any war’, and that ‘when so much is at stake and the potential human cost’ was so high it was vital that people better understood the way language is used (Lukin 2003: 19).

In general, subject–verb–object sentences are stronger and more easily understood and this is particularly true when sentences become more complex. However, it is important not to fall into incorrect use of the active voice, as in constructions such as the following.

#### Example

The sports complex will begin construction next month.

Here, the use of active voice is wrong because the object of the sentence has been made its subject.

#### Corrected copy

Construction of the sports complex will begin next month.

### Use the present tense

In general, broadcast writers are advised to use the present tense, although this is a little simplistic since the present tense can be divided into several categories. The simple present is often used in headlines, teasers and promos, as in ‘The Prime Minister announces a new aged care policy’ or ‘Tonight, on the late news, the treasurer explains her budget policy’. In the first example, the action has already occurred and in the second it has yet to occur, but the use of the present tense implies that the audience is hearing the information for the first time and that each action is occurring in their present.

In story intros and narration scripts, with their more complex sentences, broadcast reporters are likely to use the present perfect, the present continuous or the present perfect continuous tenses as well as the simple present. The differences between the various tenses are illustrated on the next page.

Broadcasters usually try to write in the tense that will make their story seem as current as possible since an ability to present news as it happens is the advantage the broadcast media have traditionally had over print. Events that are in progress may be described in the simple present or the present continuous.

#### Examples

*Simple present:*

Freetown *is* on alert tonight as Cyclone Joe *heads* towards the coast.

*Present continuous:*

Residents of Freetown *are cleaning up* after Cyclone ...

This desire for currency means that events that are concluded are often described using the present perfect rather than the past tense, unless this would sound inappropriate.

Tense	Sentence – active voice
Simple present	Demonstrators <i>protest</i> against airport noise.
Present perfect	Demonstrators <i>have protested</i> against airport noise.
Present continuous	Demonstrators <i>are protesting</i> against airport noise.
Present perfect continuous	Demonstrators <i>have been protesting</i> against airport noise.
Simple past	Demonstrators <i>protested</i> against airport noise.
Past continuous	Demonstrators <i>were protesting</i> against airport noise.
Past perfect	Demonstrators <i>had protested</i> against airport noise.
Past perfect continuous	Demonstrators <i>had been protesting</i> against airport noise.
Simple future	Demonstrators <i>will protest</i> against airport noise.
Future continuous	Demonstrators <i>will be protesting</i> against airport noise.
Future perfect	Demonstrators <i>will have protested</i> against airport noise.
Future perfect continuous	Demonstrators <i>will have been protesting</i> against airport noise.

### Examples

#### *Present perfect:*

The coastal city of Freetown *has been battered* by Cyclone ...

The mayor *has used* his vote to ensure a development will go ahead ...

In these cases, the use of the present perfect conveys currency without the need for a time frame. This is particularly important if the events in question happened the day before, or earlier. Newspapers may deal with what happened yesterday, but radio and television only refer to ‘yesterday’ when it is unavoidable. Yesterday is already too long ago.

In fact, radio news rarely uses the term ‘today’. It is assumed that the news is today’s news. If time frames are required at all, radio prefers terms like ‘this afternoon’, ‘this morning’ or ‘has just announced’ and so on. On the other hand, television news, which is broadcast in the evening, is comfortable with the word ‘today’ if a time reference is required.

Broadcast news' preference for immediacy means that speeches and announcements are often reported in the present tense, even if the events themselves are over. The construction below would be used regardless of whether the mayor made their remarks earlier in the day or even days before.

#### Example

The mayor of Freetown says a planned highway will ruin the town's character.

But there are obviously times when the past tense is the appropriate one to use. These include occasions when the events being described clearly happened in the past or when the details being given make it clear that the matter being reported has concluded.

#### Examples

At a speech in Melbourne the Mayor of Freetown *said* ...

Four people are dead and fifty injured after a volcano *erupted* on ...

The prosecutor *told* the court ...

The use of the present tense to convey currency is a convention in broadcast news, but it is not universally accepted and it needs to be exercised with thought and care.

Some commercial news services make extensive use of the present participle (verbs ending in 'ing') in an effort to make stories seem as up to date as possible.

#### Example

Queensland triumphant in their game against New South Wales. The home side *proving* too strong for the visitors. Ellery Ryan again *showing* his tackling skills. Fans *celebrating* into the night.

This type of effort to avoid the past tense ('proved too strong ... showed his tackling skills ... celebrated into the night ...') produces sentences that are grammatically incorrect and probably harder to understand than they need be, but it is a sign of how far broadcast news will go to maintain the appearance of currency. Using the simple present to refer to events that have concluded can be equally confusing. A BBC News style guide once observed that employing the simple present in headlines such as 'In the next half-hour, the president of Georgia flees from rebels' sounds 'just plain daft' (BBC n.d.: 7).

While some of those who work in television news can be critical of its style, there is also no shortage of concerned observers, such as writer Don Watson, who complained:

The words over the image sound remote, staccato, disembodied. They serve as an almost subliminal support to the pictures. A school fire in January 2003 is reported: *two hundred staff rallied together, some needing counselling, later inspecting the devastation first hand*. The sentence has been stitched together to match fleeting pictures of people in a meeting room; a person standing; a burnt building (Watson 2003: 62).

Watson put the failings of television news writing down to the fact that words are written to pictures. But writing to pictures and clarity of expression need not be strangers. They just take care and thought.

### K.I.S.S.

Broadcast news writing generally needs to be kept short and simple – though this should never be at the expense of accuracy. Since broadcast news stories are brief, every word needs to justify its place in the script. In addition, broadcast news has to be delivered aloud, sometimes under the stress imposed by tight deadlines or a live-to-air broadcast. Story introductions will be read on air by newsreaders or presenters who may not have written the copy themselves. If a story breaks close to air time, the presenter may have to read it sight unseen; that is, without having had the chance to go through it first. In all of these circumstances, delivering the copy is made more difficult if the sentences are long and complex. Writing crisp copy usually means avoiding the use of dependent clauses.

#### Example

The chief censor says that, whatever her own reservations about the film, the public has a right to judge for itself.

This version of the sentence is acceptable in print but hard to follow when read aloud. It would be better phrased as:

The chief censor says the public has a right to judge the film for itself, despite her own reservations.

The direction to ‘keep it simple’ also means that when broadcast writers have a choice between two or more words that convey the same idea – such as ‘however’ and ‘but’ – they will usually choose the simplest one. Another way of shortening a sentence is to remove the word ‘that’ when its absence won’t affect the meaning of a line.

**Example**

The play's producer says ~~that~~ audience numbers have been better than expected.

**Write the intro first**

The various story formats for radio and television are set out in chapter 4. The more complex stories have an introduction written by the reporter but read by the newsreader followed by a voicer, voice-over or package/donut comprising a reporter's narration often wrapped around soundbites.

Every story begins with a lead. The lead is the most important of the written elements of the story. If the lead doesn't work, the listener or viewer is unlikely to pay attention to what follows.

The lead needs to:

- contain the most important news element of the story (except in the rare cases where the story begins with a 'blind' intro, leaving its punchline to be revealed in the voicer)
- signal to the audience why the story is important
- set up the rest of the story
- be succinct.

If you break down a story into Who, What, When, Where, Why and How, the lead will usually deal with What and perhaps When and Where. The Who will usually be left to a subsequent sentence, unless it's someone well known, and the Why and How are also likely to belong in later sentences.

**Example**

Three people have survived a powerboat crash on Port Phillip Bay.

Unless those rescued are well known, their names will mean nothing to most of the audience and should be left until further down the item.

**Example**

The Victorian Premier, Lily Lee, is one of three people rescued after a powerboat crash on Port Phillip Bay.

In this case, the focus of the story will be the premier, so her name belongs in the lead.

It can be extremely tempting to try to pack details into the lead, but this is self-defeating. A good lead is short and sharp.

It might sound obvious to say that the intro should be written first, since it is the beginning of the story and the part the audience will hear first.

But the intro is the part of the story you give away to the presenter to tell and it can be very tempting to pay more attention to the part of the story you will be narrating yourself.

The problem with writing the narration first and the intro second is that, almost inevitably, you will put all your best material into the narration, leaving nothing for the intro. In this case, you will have no option but to repeat in the intro things covered in the narration and this always sounds sloppy.

The same principle applies to the cues or throws that anchors or presenters use to introduce live reports. Reporters should write a cue for the studio, so that the presenter's introduction will flow into their own remarks rather than repeat them.

### **Put the attribution before a comment**

In print journalism it is common to see statements or comments followed by an attribution. But in broadcast writing any attribution usually precedes the statement or comment.

#### **Example**

##### *Print style*

A plan to build a garbage dump in Freetown poses a risk to residents' health, Mayor Marija Pavlovic said yesterday.

##### *Broadcast style*

Mayor, Marija Pavlovic, says a plan to build a garbage dump in Freetown threatens residents' health.

(or better still –)

Freetown Mayor, Marija Pavlovic, has accused the state government of risking residents' health with its plan for city garbage dump. She says ...

One reason for putting the attribution before a comment is that it sounds more natural. The other is that placing the attribution first makes it clear whose comments are being reported. This is particularly important if the remarks are contentious, because reporting such remarks before attributing them can give the impression that they are fact rather than opinion. In the example below, a little more rephrasing is required to make it clear to a broadcast news audience that it's the Mayor, not the reporter, who has used the word 'outrageous'.

**Example**

An 'outrageous' plan to build a garbage dump in Freetown poses a serious risk to residents' health. That's the view of Mayor Marko Horvat, who says ...

This construction would be misleading in a broadcast report. It would be better phrased as:

Mayor, Marko Horvat, says a plan to build a garbage dump in Freetown is 'outrageous' and poses a serious risk to residents' health.

Or:

Mayor, Marko Horvat, has described a plan to build a garbage dump in Freetown as 'outrageous'. He says it poses a serious risk to residents' health.

While it is important to place an attribution before a comment, matters of fact do not need to be preceded by attribution since the risk of misleading listeners does not arise.

**Example**

If you travel by train, expect long delays today. Drivers will stop for six hours over a pay dispute. Their union says ...

**Use contractions, but with care**

Writing conversationally often means using contractions.

Print style	Broadcast style
she is	she's
they will	they'll
he would	he'd

However, you need to take special care with the word 'not', which can be fundamental to the meaning of a sentence and which, in such cases, should be said in full rather than contracted.

**Example**

The accused man said he did not commit the crime.

In this sentence, the words 'did not' are preferable to 'didn't'.

As with so many other facets of broadcast news writing, the decision on whether or not to use a contraction will usually depend on the sound of the sentence.

## Write *exactly* what you mean to say

Most Australians would have heard of the giant Papua New Guinea copper mine Ok Tedi. But every so often, a current affairs or news presenter will go on air and, perhaps cruising on autopilot while reading the Autocue, refer to the mine not as ‘Ock Tedi’ but as ‘Okay Tedi’. You might think highly paid presenters should know better and you would probably be right. But even if they don’t there is a convention in broadcast writing meant to prevent this type of error. That convention is that you should write *precisely* what you mean to say or be said.

For example, terms such as MI5, F111, FA18, RAAF and so on, can make perfect sense in print and in context. But they can appear a great deal less obvious to a reporter recording narration under the pressure of time or to a newsreader who is reading copy sight unseen.

In broadcast writing, acronyms (that is, abbreviations that are spoken as single words) such as NATO, AIDS, ANZAC, NASA and so on can be written as such. But when letters need to be read individually, they should be separated by dots or dashes. Any numerals that might be confusing (for example, is 18 ‘eighteen’ or ‘one eight’?) should be written as words.

Written form	Broadcast script form
MI5	M-I-five or M-eye-five
RAAF	R-double-A-F
DVD	D-V-D
F111	F-one-eleven
Pope Pius XII	Pope Pius the twelfth
0	oh, nought or zero

The same rule applies to dates, numbers with decimal points, fractions and amounts of currency. Decimal points can easily be overlooked by a presenter reading live-to-air and dollar signs can be confusing because their position in the written form of an amount is different from that in the spoken form. Ideally, everything that is said as a single word should be written as one.

Written form	Broadcast script form
\$25.50	twenty five dollars fifty, 25 dollars 50
\$3m/ \$3 million	three million dollars, 3 million dollars
1.2	1 point 2, one point two
May 21, 2017	May the 21st, 2 thousand and 17, May the 21st, two thousand and seventeen
1/2 / half	half (or one-half, in some contexts)
1/4 / quarter	one-quarter
20% / 20 per cent	20 per cent or twenty per cent (since the 20 will be counted as a single word regardless of which way it appears)
From 100–200	From one hundred to two hundred

The rule about writing what is going to be spoken is particularly important when it comes to noting outcues on scripts, particularly in television, where the production staff need to recognise the last few words of a story in order to switch back from the story to the studio smoothly. In these cases, abbreviations can be very confusing. For instance, if you end the narration on the figure ‘two hundred million dollars’ and the cue is written as ‘\$200m.’ studio and control room staff may miss it, resulting in ‘dead air’ or the screen going black. Similarly, ‘U.S.’ is not the same as ‘United States’, ‘S.A.’ is not the same as ‘South Australia’ and so on. The spoken version and written cues need to be the same.

There’s another reason television news writers need to take care with the way numbers, symbols and dates are expressed in scripts and that’s because the software used in broadcast newsrooms counts the words in a script as they’re being written and displays an estimated running time for the story. In television, where a precise fit may be required between words and pictures, the accuracy of that count is vital. A carelessly written script can easily run longer than anticipated. If the story is a reader voice-over, where the narration is added to the pictures live on air, this can cause the words and pictures to fall out of sync.

#### Example

Between 2015 and 2018, the company spent \$22.5 million on ...

The copy above appears to run three and a half seconds. But when it is written out its real length – six seconds – becomes apparent.

Between 2 thousand and 15 and 2 thousand and 18, the company spent 22 point 5 million dollars on ...

### Round off complex numbers

In print, complex numbers can be used for precision, as in ‘The number of Australians looking for work in March stood at 997 282 ...’

But while readers can take in long numbers it is much harder for listeners to do the same, so the convention in scripting for broadcast news is that complex numbers should be rounded up or down. That means the figure above would be described as ‘nearly one million’ or ‘just short of one million’. And note that in this case it is usually ‘*one* million’, rather than ‘a million’, because even when rounding figures you need to maintain as much precision as possible.

While numbers are usually rounded in scripts, television reporters who need to provide viewers with the precise figures can do so, by using telementation to accompany the narration.

There are some numbers that should obviously not be altered, including the times, distances and heights set by athletes as well as other sports scores.

But if numbers can be made less complex without sacrificing meaning, then do so.

It’s also important to avoid confusing listeners or viewers with a string of numbers in a story.

#### Example

Statistics for the two thousand and sixteen to two thousand and seventeen financial year show sixty-three per cent of businesses employ at least ten people, while only twenty per cent have more than one hundred workers.

This sentence contains so many figures that listeners would find it hard to take them all in.

One way of making it easier for the audience to take in large numbers is to use a comparison. A large crowd of people might be ‘enough to fill the M.C.G.’ A large amount of liquid (such as an oil spill) could be described in terms of the number of domestic swimming pools it would fill, and so on.

## Keep dates as simple as possible

Since broadcast writing needs to sound conversational, full dates are usually best avoided. If something is taking place this year, the year can be taken for granted. But if there could be any confusion between the current year and another one, use the words ‘this year’. Similarly, the previous year is best expressed as ‘last year’ and the following one as ‘next year’. Events that will take place in a week or a month and so on, should be referred to in those terms.

If the action will happen in the current week	You’ll be paying more to insure your car from Friday ...
If the action is later in the current year	Car insurance premiums will rise on May the first.
If it’s next week	The world’s biggest ship docks in Melbourne next Tuesday.
If it’s next month	The outcome of the ballot won’t be known till next month.

## Titles before names

The convention in broadcast news is to give an individual’s position before their name – unless the position requires more than a few words to explain. So ‘Jack Singh, the Prime Minister’ becomes ‘The Prime Minister, Jack Singh’ or just ‘Prime Minister Singh’.

Some broadcast news services drop the definite article, preferring the shorter ‘Prime Minister, Kim Lee’. It’s a practice that has its critics, among them the ABC, which once described it as having ‘overtones of the parade ground’ and ‘not the way people normally speak’ (ABC 2004: 37).

## Honorifics are not necessary with full names

The honorifics – Mr, Ms, Miss and Mrs – are not used with full names but may be used with last names only on subsequent references. Thus a first reference to an individual would be ‘Leading businesswoman Sally Chan ...’ and this would become ‘Ms Chan’ or ‘Sally’, depending on house style, after that.

On the other hand, titles such as Dr and Professor, may be used with full names (although brevity would usually dictate that on second or subsequent

references the title would be followed by the last name only) and the title The Reverend should be followed by a *full* name.

## Write for the audience

Because broadcast news is *spoken* to its audience it's a particularly personal form of communication and broadcast journalists try to acknowledge this in their writing. Some commercial news services go further, by referring to the community or nation in terms of 'us' or 'our'. This works well if the 'us' and 'our' are used in an inclusive way to refer to all of us – as in 'Our farmers will be hoping this week's rain continues for a few more days'. But there are times when this type of writing can imply an 'us' and 'them' view of the world, which can be hurtful and divisive, so it needs to be treated with some caution.

## Write for the rhythm of speech

For broadcast writing to sound natural it must be written to the rhythm of speech. In a sense, this requirement contradicts an earlier suggestion that sentences be kept short since people don't usually speak in a string of short sentences and copy written that way can sound very choppy.

### Example

Protesters will rally at the gates of Green Forest this morning. They're angry over plans to log the area. Protest organisers say logging threatens local koalas. They want the area listed for preservation.

This example consists of short sentences only, so it is easy to read but it sounds poor.

Good broadcast writing demands not that sentences be kept short *per se*, but that they be written with regard to the way they will sound and include logical pauses for breath. You also need to remember that the longer a sentence becomes, the harder it will be to read aloud simply because it becomes more difficult to scan the sentence from start to finish. The need to keep sentences to a manageable length is particularly important when it comes to writing intros for television newsreaders because their scripts are displayed on the teleprompter at about three words per line, making long sentences very cumbersome.

## Read your copy out loud to check it

A story may look fine on the page, but the test of its effectiveness as broadcast news is what it *sounds* like. Broadcast reporters check their copy by reading it aloud, or, at least, in their inner voice.

Some of the problems that will become apparent when you read your copy aloud include repetition, alliteration, sibilance and inadvertent rhyming.

- *Repetition*. In broadcast writing it's best to avoid repeating a word, or a variation of the same word (for example, 'demonstrate'/'demonstration') within the space of a few lines. This is because the repetition, which might not matter in print, becomes obvious when copy is read aloud. Of course, repetition can be used deliberately, for effect, which is a different matter.
- *Alliteration*. While you're trying not to repeat words in close proximity, you'll also want to avoid having a string of the same consonant side by side. As well as sounding bad, alliteration can make a phrase difficult for a presenter to read. Alliteration can sometimes be used for effect. But this should be done sparingly.
- *Sibilance*. The difficulty of saying a phrase where one consonant is repeated is particularly acute if the repeated consonant is 's'. A string of words beginning with 's' will cause sibilance. Try saying aloud 'the successful Syrian soccer side scored sixty-seven ...' and you'll see the problem.
- *Inadvertent rhyming/singsong effect*. A BBC News style guide (BBC Training & Development n.d.: 63) cited this 'apocryphal example' of sing-song writing:

There were scenes of delight in Port Talbot tonight, as news of the settlement spread.

This type of construction often only becomes apparent when you read it aloud.

Reading your copy aloud should also alert you to any errors such as missing words, literals (that is, transposed letters, missing letters and so on), poor punctuation and other mistakes that might trip the newsreader.

## Try to make the intro as self-contained as possible

Some newsrooms favour making story intros as self-contained as possible in case a technical glitch prevents the accompanying audio or video from playing to air, or in case the audio or video component of the story has to be dropped to save time. Writing an intro that can stand alone is easier when the intro, excluding the reporter's 'throw', is two sentences long rather than a single sentence.

### Example

Geelong police are looking for two men after a hold-up at the local branch of the Moneybags bank.

Harry Hack reports the pair was seen escaping on a black motorbike.

This is a two-sentence intro that can stand alone. Written as a single sentence of information plus a 'throw', the intro would read:

Geelong police are looking for two men seen escaping on a black motorbike after a hold-up at the local branch of the Moneybags bank. Harry Hack has more.

The first example sounds complete. The second contains the same information but doesn't stand alone as easily. Nevertheless, in radio news, the question of the way intros should be structured is a matter of house style.

### Think about where you place key details in a lead

Some broadcast writers believe it is best to avoid placing key details of a story in the first couple of words because listeners and viewers may miss them. Not everyone agrees with this assumption and, sometimes, trying to avoid placing important information at the start of a lead can result in a more awkwardly expressed sentence. One device broadcast writers use to keep details, such as numbers, out of the first words of their lead is to start by referring to a story's location. This would not work in print journalism, but it is a common construction in broadcast writing (although it is important not to overuse it).

#### Example

Twenty-five people are missing in a snowstorm in Sydney.

This lead is crisp but contains key details at the top. The two versions below move the important detail to further down the lead.

In Sydney – a snowstorm has left twenty-five people missing.

In Sydney – twenty-five people are missing in a snowstorm

### The voicer/voice-over needs to have its own coherent beginning

The intro and the voicer are separate parts of the same story, but you can't treat the voicer as simply a continuation of the intro. The audience hears a shift in the narrative when the newsreader's voice stops and the reporter's voice takes up the story. When you write for broadcast, you need to acknowledge that shift and give the voicer its own beginning.

Consider this transition from intro to narration:

*Intro:* A leading environmentalist has warned industrial pollution is threatening a stretch of the Queensland coast. She says chemical contamination has been killing fish found washed up on beaches near Cairns.

*Voicer:* That's the claim of marine biologist Dr Jane Sturgeon. Her tests on waters off Cairns have found high levels of ... etc.

In this case, the first sentence of the voicer is a continuation of the intro and doesn't acknowledge the break between the newsreader's voice and that of the reporter. It will sound confusing. But that can be avoided by some simple restructuring.

*Intro:* As above.

*Voicer:* Marine biologist Dr Jane Sturgeon has been testing water off the Cairns coast. She says she's found high levels of ... etc.

## A story for broadcast needs a conclusion

Unlike some print and online news, broadcast stories can't trail off at the end. They need a decisive ending to remind listeners and viewers that one story has ended and another is about to begin. In newspapers, magazines and online news, readers can see that. In broadcast news, they need to hear it. If the story is an ongoing one, the last sentence will often be used to point to the next development.

### Example

The defendant was bailed to reappear in court on May the second.

## Spelling and punctuation matter

You might imagine that broadcasters don't need to be able to spell or punctuate. After all, broadcast journalists are very often writing copy they will narrate themselves, so why would they need to worry about correct spelling and punctuation? For the answer, consider Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* the night then presenter Ray Martin closed the program by musing that someone had been 'playing some cruel jokes' with the office atlas. Earlier, a story on discount shopping had segued from one state to another with quick shots of maps on which the waters between South Australia and Western Australia and between Victoria and Tasmania had been respectively labelled 'Great Australian Bite' (Bight) and 'Bass Straight' (Strait).

Television news and current affairs writers work with text more often than you might imagine. They use graphics with text, supers that identify interviewees, they telemate some quotes and they write headlines for a news bar.

In each case, the accuracy of the final product depends on the journalist's attention to detail, of which correct spelling and punctuation is one element.

Moreover, broadcast writers produce a considerable percentage of their copy for another narrator, usually the newsreader. Inaccurate copy is hard to read and can lead to errors on air.

Another reason that broadcast writers need to pay attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation is that television scripts can be used to generate subtitles for hearing-impaired viewers and it is increasingly common for broadcast scripts to be used as the basis for stories published online. The ABC was the first Australian broadcast outlet that had to address the issues raised by repurposing broadcast copy as online text and, as its founding online news editor, Bob Johnston, explained, that meant changes in work practices for broadcasters:

Journalists who are going into a broadcast medium because they have an innate love of the spoken word, the immediacy of radio and the presentation on TV, can no longer expect to get away with spelling which might not be particularly accurate. There's probably a view sometimes that the spelling of the talent's name in a radio story is not critical as long as it's spoken correctly. There's probably been a view among some journalists that near enough is good enough. The web changed all that for people aspiring to go into broadcast journalism. Attention to detail is now fundamentally important.

Accurate spelling of proper nouns, including people's names, is particularly important – not just for the immediate broadcast, but because errors can lead to mistakes in identification when audio or video is retrieved from the library. At worst, this can lead to the risk of defaming someone through misidentification.

### Take care with the placement of time references

Misplacing time references leads to constructions such as 'The aircraft took off after a bomb threat at 5 o'clock this afternoon', where it is unclear whether what happened at 5 o'clock was the jet's departure or the bomb threat. A time reference should be placed near the main verb. Rephrasing the above sentence as 'The aircraft took off at 5 this afternoon after a delay caused by a bomb threat' removes this ambiguity.

### Pronouns can be confusing

Pronouns are words that stand in for a noun and include. 'I', 'we', 'he', 'she', 'it', 'they', 'someone', 'who' and sometimes 'which'.

Pronouns can be used to avoid repeating a noun, as in the following sentence.

#### Example

Injured Maulers' forward Jimmy Grit will meet team officials on Friday for talks about his future.

In this case, the pronoun ‘his’ is unambiguous, but consider the sentence below:

The team doctor has cleared Jimmy Grit to play on Friday after he showed up fit for training.

In the example above, ‘he’ really refers to the doctor, not the player. To fix it, you need to replace the pronoun with a noun.

The team doctor has cleared Jimmy Grit to play on Friday after the forward showed up fit for training.

While we are on the subject of pronouns, note that ‘who’ refers to people, while ‘which’ and ‘that’ should be used for objects or institutions.

## Quoting other people

Broadcast reporters have two main ways of quoting other people. They can either insert a soundbite of the speaker or report the person’s comments using indirect speech. Television reporters also have the option of using telemation (that is, words appearing on the screen) to reproduce a quote being spoken in the narration.

### Throwing to a soundbite

The way in which soundbites are incorporated into narration varies from radio to television and between different styles of television program. The convention in radio and television news programs is to edit out the question that prompted a soundbite and throw from the narration to the speaker’s comments. Current affairs, infotainment and documentary programs, which run stories at greater length, are more likely to include the reporter’s question(s), though this is not always the case.

In radio, the reporter has to give the name of each speaker (unless the soundbite is a ‘vox pop’ from an anonymous person in the street). In television news bulletins and in some current affairs programs, it is not necessary for the reporter to name speakers because the work of identifying them is done by a super on the screen.

This noted, there are several ways of writing into soundbites. Let’s imagine that one of the main banks, the Savers’ Friend, has put up its fees and charges by 25 per cent. A reporter writing about this will have no shortage of comment to use in their story. The following are the main ways of incorporating the soundbite without including the question.

- You can paraphrase some of the interviewee’s remarks and use these as the throw (that is, the line leading into the grab).

Example	
Narration – radio	... Savers’ Friend’s C-E-O, Phil Smith, says the bank’s been forced to raise its fees in order to maintain profits at current levels.
Narration – TV	... The bank says it’s been forced to raise its fees in order to maintain profits at current levels.
Soundbite	‘We have a duty to shareholders to provide a suitable return on their investment.’

Note that it’s important that the throw contains different information from that heard in the soundbite. Repetition of words or phrases in the narration and soundbite is called ‘parroting’ and sounds sloppy.

- You can use the throw to say something about the speaker, their mood, (providing the description is accurate and fair), location, history and so on.

Example	
Narration	The consumers’ lobby group, Voice, is angry at the scale of today’s increase.
Narration	Consumer advocate Laura Ng turned to talk-back radio to air her organisation’s case.
Narration	Financial analyst Frank Gee has been monitoring the bank’s performance.

- You can begin a sentence and have the speaker finish it. This works as long as it is done with some discipline. It sounds laboured if it is used too often.

Example	
Narration	Rival bank, Cash and Loans, says it has no plans to lift its own charges yet, but ...
Soundbite	‘... we’ll be reviewing our position over weeks to come to ensure we stay competitive in the current market.’

Note that the reporter needs to end their part of the sentence on an upward inflection to indicate that there's more to come.

- You can use the soundbite either to reinforce, or as a counterpoint to, information in the voice-over, without any specific reference to the person speaking in the grab. This works better in television than in radio, since a television news reporter doesn't need to identify the speaker in the script. But radio reporters may leave the identification to a back announce.

Example	
Narration	The timing of today's decision is likely to win it little public sympathy. Savers' Friend announced a record profit just last week.
Soundbite	'We've been forced to lift our fees to maintain our current level of profitability.'

Another version of this technique is when two soundbites are run back-to-back, in which case there is no throw to the second grab.

- You can paraphrase the question within the narration.

Example	
Narration	Savers' Friend announced a record profit just last week. So how can it justify today's announcement?
Soundbite	'We've been forced to lift our fees to maintain our current level of profitability.'

- Sometimes it's enough to throw to the soundbite by simply naming the speaker.

Example	
Narration	Rival bank, Cash and Loans, says it has no plans to lift its own charges. C.E.O. Fred Jones ...

- On some occasions, it is permissible for the reporter to use the first person in the throw to a grab – as in 'I asked Ms Nguyen what she thought about the new

policy' or 'I caught up with Mr Hansen in Vienna' and so on. This works best if done sparingly. Journalism students often overuse lines such as this, or equally obvious and unimaginative throws such as 'Ms Ling had this to say' or 'Mr Grant explains ...' While these lines work in some situations, they should not be overworked by writers too careless to consider the alternatives.

Radio reporters and presenters often back-announce the names of interviewees or speakers, partly as a transitional device to lead them from one story or element of a story to another and partly to remind listeners of the speaker's name. This is particularly common after a long soundbite.

In television, it's usually only necessary to caption each interviewee once in a short news item, but in a longer current affairs or feature story a speaker may be captioned each time they appear, depending on the amount of time that has passed between the soundbites and whether the audience can be expected to remember who was speaking.

One additional point about soundbites is that the audience should not have to wait too long to hear one in a packaged item. One of the purposes of soundbites is to break up the narration, so, as a reporter writes, they need to consider how to space the soundbites and to avoid having more than a few sentences of narration before the audience hears another voice.

## Telemation

Television news services use telemation (text on the screen) to provide precise information, which would be hard for viewers to absorb if it were just presented by a reader or reporter. Telemation is also used within stories in cases where there is a limited amount of other vision available. Reporters telemating details such as a quote from someone or figures such as amounts of money should ensure that the on-screen text is accurate. But the voice-over that accompanies the telemation usually sounds better if it speaks *to* the text rather than repeats it (although particular care needs to be taken with court stories to ensure that the narration is an accurate report of what was said). For example, consider a story on cost of living changes in the various states. The telemation could reveal the changes, state by state, from highest to lowest. The narration might say 'New South Wales is now the most expensive state, Victoria is not far behind. But prices have fallen in Queensland – making it one of the cheapest states to live in ...', and so on.

On the other hand, there are some cases where the narration and telemation must match precisely. These include telemation of phone numbers and

web addresses for charity appeals or emergency contacts. In these cases, the scripts and frames of telementation should be cross-checked before the broadcast and the phone number(s) dialled and URLs accessed to ensure they are accurate.

### Quoting in indirect speech

If it is particularly important that the audience understands that the material is a direct quote, a reporter may use the words ‘quote’ and ‘unquote’ at either side of it, but this can sound clumsy. A less awkward alternative is to precede the quote with the words ‘and I quote’. Using quotation marks in a broadcast script will not, in itself, indicate that the words are a direct quote. As Block (1987: 6) observed, ‘listeners can’t see quotation marks’. But quotation marks are used to indicate emphasis for the reader.

#### Example

Coach Freddie Boot describes the last quarter of the game as a ‘dog-fight’.

## Balance and fairness in scripting

### Over-dramatised copy

Since broadcast writers want to grab their listeners’ attention, it can be tempting to inflate the facts with overblown writing. So drownings are ‘tragic’ and sieges and crashes ‘dramatic’ and so on. This style of writing can defeat its purpose, as the American writers John Chancellor and Walter Mears observed:

If the event being described is dramatic, the word is unnecessary. If the event is not dramatic, writing that it is won’t make it so ...

Writers are not salesmen for the events they recount. It is the description, not the shopworn adjective, that can make a lead extraordinary. Using words like ‘dramatic’ or ‘shocking’ ... is not only sloppy writing, it demeans the event itself. (Chancellor & Mears 1983: 21)

Simple language, clearly written, has an eloquence that over-dramatised copy can never match.

### People like us ...

It is easy to use language unthinkingly to convey the idea that one side of a dispute or conflict, or one line of thought, is correct at the expense of another.

One example of the way in which language can be used in the contest of ideas in news came during ongoing coverage of the Australian government's ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia in 2011, following a graphic and disturbing report on the ABC's *Four Corners*. The use of emotional terms, notably 'slaughterhouse', prompted a string of emails around the ABC, gleefully reproduced by *The Australian* (16 June 2011: 15), which likes to niggle the national broadcaster. One email disputed the term 'slaughterhouses', saying they should correctly be called 'abattoirs' or 'meatworks'. Another countered that these were euphemisms and yet another suggested there was an 'element of industry capture' in the recommended terminology. *The Australian* saw the debate as sign of a culture clash between the rural and city lobbies.

Commercial television news director John Rudd cautioned against loaded terms in his guide to better scripting. He wrote that descriptions such as 'Muslim extremists', 'fundamentalist Taliban', 'angry strikers' and 'radical demonstrators' raised several problems, including the lack of care with which they are used:

All these descriptions might be accurate. But then again they might not. You could just be repeating a bunch of spin-doctor hype. And your customers have heard most of these expressions so often and for so long, they just glaze over. So what about some clarification and explanation. You might ask yourself when you last called the Pope a *fanatical Christian* ... Bill Gates a *computer monopolist* ... or Hugh Morgan a *radical anti-communist* ... We shouldn't just recycle tired old descriptions without testing their accuracy. And trying to write something better'. (Rudd 2000: 78)

Far more subtle forms of loaded language go to air every day, probably more by accident than intention. One way in which this happens is when reporters look for an alternative to the word 'says' and opt instead for terms such as 'confirms', 'believes', 'agrees', 'claims' or 'accepts', which carry different implications and which may not be accurate in the context.

#### Examples

The Business Council has acknowledged the government's economic policies are right.

Here the word 'acknowledged' suggests that the government's policies *are* correct, not that the Council is expressing an opinion. The words 'says it believes' or simply 'says' would be fairer.

Police were forced to use teargas to clear the demonstrators.

Unless it's clear that the police were ordered to use teargas by a particular authority, the use of the verb 'forced' in this context implies the demonstrators were violent, which might not be the case, or that they had no right to protest. Unless this is true, it would be better to say 'Police *used* teargas ...' or 'Police *were ordered* to use teargas ...'

The minister is resigning to spend more time with his family. *or* The team captain is confident of victory ...

This type of construction takes an official's statement at face value. Unless the statement can be assumed to be accurate, it's preferable that it be attributed: 'The minister *says* he's resigning to ...' or 'The team captain *says* she's confident ...'

Another form of loaded language is the unthinking use of words – such as 'riot', 'mob', 'gang' and so on – which carry particular implications. The use of emotive terms carries the risk of colouring the way audiences view the people being described. It also risks reducing the impact of powerful language through overuse. When words such as 'war', 'annihilate' and 'catastrophe' are routinely used in such stories as sports copy, what do we have left to describe events that are truly serious?

## Avoid clichés

Some clichés are obvious – 'razed to the ground' (which is also tautological), 'ground to a halt', 'only time will tell' and 'at this point in time' are all long-standing offenders. 'Fragile cease-fire', 'bundled out' and 'situation', preceded by 'crisis', 'emergency', 'siege' and so on, are more recent additions to the list. If a term seems hackneyed and over-used, it is best avoided.

It's not just words that can become clichéd in broadcasting. Some music, especially songs with topical lyric lines, can become overused. The appearance of certain animals on television news also seems to invite use of laboured references to the images, such as 'grin and *bear* it', 'having a *whale* of a time', '*seal* of approval' and so on. Good broadcast writing demands more imagination at every level.

## Common errors

Errors in sentence construction are distressingly common in Australian broadcast news. Many occur because reporters try to add flair to their writing without

paying sufficient attention to the meaning. Some of the most common errors occur when a journalist begins a sentence with a subordinate clause or phrase, creating what's called a 'dangling modifier'.

### Examples

After 36 hours lying in state, pallbearers from both sides of politics removed the flag-draped coffin.

Here a television reporter had the pallbearers, rather than former US President, Ronald Reagan, lying in state.

Five hundred and 60 kilometres above Australia, Perth saluted John Glenn for old times' sake.

This line from a television news report put the West Australian capital, rather than astronaut John Glenn, out of this world.

Despite his limited intellectual capacity, the magistrate said the defendant knew what he was doing.

This TV news report on an attempted poisoning suggested that the magistrate had a limited intellect. The magistrate may not have been amused.

As a BBC News style guide explained, 'Phrases at the beginning of a sentence need a noun or a pronoun, and they will cling to the first one that comes along' (BBC Training & Development n.d.: 37). To avoid writing confusing sentences such as those above, journalists need to consider the relationship between the subject of a sentence and the verb(s) plus any dependent phrases or clauses.

Some reporters get into trouble even when the sentence is perfectly straightforward.

### Examples

The suspect left the police station, seen here in the passenger seat, after three hours of interviews.

In this report, the police station was either very small or the car was enormous.

Mr Bloggs lit two fires and was arrested by police attempting to light a third.

Who was trying to light that third fire?

## Avoid poor taste

Poor phrasing and tasteless puns are not confined to the electronic news, but writers in those media work to very tight deadlines, leaving them with less time to check or reflect on their work. The result is the occasional use of an expression that is either unintentional or ill-considered and best avoided.

### Examples

A teenager's sentence for a school stabbing is slashed.

Osteoporosis won't be taken lying down.

Broadcast reporters' work often goes to air without being checked by someone else, which makes it particularly important for them to consider its implications.

## Writing for online delivery

While many of the conventions of broadcast news writing are shared by outlets across the world, there are noticeable differences in the writing styles of the main online news organisations. Stories on the large US sites, CNN and MSNBC, are often written in a style that is closer to that used for newspapers than radio or television. Stories on the BBC and ABC sites are more likely to be written in broadcast language, using the present perfect tense, though quotations generally appear in newspaper style, consisting of the quote, followed by an attribution, usually in the past tense.

The fact that the online news services of broadcast outlets have blended print and broadcast writing styles should hardly surprise since the stories are delivered as text. But there are other reasons why these online news sites have moved away from pure broadcast style. First, some of them draw on agency copy, which largely reflects the style of the newspapers. Secondly, broadcast news often tries to give the impression that everything is happening *now* so its news writers use the present tense. By contrast, most large online sites flag the time at which each story is posted, not least to show the frequency with which stories are updated and to clarify the currency of the stories to an audience that may cross different time zones, so there is no reason to avoid the use of the past tense.

Like many reporters, Mark Tobin, who covers state politics for the ABC, also contributes to his organisation's online service. The way copy is moved from one platform to another varies between organisations. At the ABC, radio copy is processed by an online editor who will use the broadcast reports but may also have to chase additional reaction and information to compile the

online version, which will be longer than most radio scripts. But if reporters have a story they have been working on, they can also submit an online version which will be published with their byline. It's an opportunity for reporters to break out of the narrow confines of broadcast stories and write something more analytical, or use more of the information they have gathered but been unable to fit into their radio or television pieces. Mark's comments on how he changes style between broadcast and online are a reminder that the differences are quite manageable:

One difference between broadcast and print is that in print you have to put it into the past tense. The big difference is that the level of detail you can go into in an online piece is far greater than you can in a 40-second news report. You have to bear that in mind if you're writing an online piece. There's a lot more scope to go into detail, which is one of the advantages of having that dual capacity to file for different forms of media.

## Headlines

Journalists usually write their own headlines for online news, and these are different from the ones you often find in the press. Newspaper and magazine headlines can be enigmatic, because readers can already see the story to which they refer, so the headline can be a 'teaser' without it being confusing. By contrast, the headlines for online stories often have to stand alone in a menu page as a pointer to each item. Readers have to click on the items that interest them to learn more. That means each headline has to be a succinct snapshot of the story, and usually between four and six words long.

## Opening pars

Some sites use a separate abstract or summary as a pointer to the full story in the news menu. Others generate the menu listings using headlines and the first sentences of individual stories. In those cases, the first sentence has to stand as a clear summary of the item because it is all some readers will see.

## **If you want to read more . . .**

BBC Training & Development, *The BBC News Styleguide*, n.d.,  
 <[www.bbctraining.com/journalism.asp](http://www.bbctraining.com/journalism.asp)>.

## ⑧

# Constructing the story

### Writing to time

One of the myths reporters trained in newspapers sometimes bring to the broadcast media is the idea that because broadcast items are usually shorter than equivalent stories in print they must be easier to put together. In fact, the opposite is often true. It is harder to write a clear, tight story than to convey the same information in a longer one. And broadcast deadlines mean stories have to be written quickly.

The need to keep stories short can be a frustration for broadcast journalists and it requires considerable discipline, as CBS news anchor and former newspaper reporter Harry Smith found at the start of his TV career:

The biggest frustration I've ever experienced in my life was when I went ... to my first television job and I was covering a strike, a strike I knew more about than anybody else in the city. And they said, 'well, you've got 90 seconds'. I said 'I can't tell this story in 90 seconds'. They said 'that's your job' ... (Berkov 1993: n.p.)

Broadcast reporters learn early that they can't fit into their stories all the points or pictures that they might want to. They have to be selective. Trying to cram too much into a story defeats the purpose, because the item becomes hard to follow. This is particularly true in television, where viewers have to absorb two strands of information, the aural and the visual. In television, good storytelling often means the reporter must under-write and 'let the pictures "breathe"' (Yorke 2000: 58).

The need to be so selective about what to include can make it hard to ensure that a broadcast news story is balanced and presents all sides of a story. This is

a particular problem for radio news. Most broadcasters deal with the competing demands of brevity and balance by opting for a policy of ‘balance over time’. In other words, if a story has a soundbite from one side of an argument in one bulletin, it is understood that the newsroom will try to present the other side in the next or a subsequent bulletin.

Some reporters find the task of writing their stories easier if they first draw up a list of the points they want to make and/or the pictures they want to show, in the order in which they are to appear. This gives them a template to which to script.

## **Sequencing events in a broadcast story**

The main news point of a broadcast story is almost always given in its intro, so the reporter’s package is there to add detail to something the audience has already learned.

There are several schools of thought in broadcast news about the way in which the rest of a story should unfold.

One school argues that the reporter’s voicer or package should always begin on the most current material and that any background information should be left till later. But this means telling stories out of chronological order and stories told this way can be harder to understand than those where the narrative flows from beginning to end in a linear sequence.

In television, the question of sequencing is made more complicated by the pictures. A third argument has it that the best available pictures should appear at the head of the story, no matter where in the linear sequence of the item they may occur. Having dealt with the best images, the story then has to move backwards and/or forward in time for the remainder of its narrative to unfold.

### **Different ways of telling a story**

Consider the example of a common rescue scene. You have pictures of a person being winched into a helicopter after a night lost in dense bush. The rescue is the most dramatic footage, but the story will also contain pictures of the preceding search and the aftermath. A picture-driven story structure would be rescue/search/aftermath, and this is what many television practitioners consider appropriate to the medium. But others argue that stories constructed in this way are unnecessarily difficult for viewers to follow. A story that unfolded in linear fashion would go search/rescue/aftermath, while one that began on the

most recent vision would start with the aftermath before moving to the search and rescue in either order. As with the first option, this means telling the story out of chronological order.

This example relies entirely on current pictures, but many stories also use pictures from the library and this adds another layer of complexity – should you start on current or file vision? Though the most common choice is to begin on current vision, starting on library pictures makes some stories more interesting visually and it also allows the reporter to set up an issue in a way that might not be possible if the vision were run in a different order.

So, rather than adhering to inflexible rules, you are better served by letting each story dictate the form of storytelling that suits it best.

## Writing with sound and pictures

Writing for broadcast means being succinct, but it also means taking advantage of the other storytelling elements the aural and visual media have to offer.

In radio these are soundbites, ambient sound, silence and, in some cases, music. A radio reporter writing a more complex story than simple narration will begin by considering what other sounds they can draw on and the amount of airtime each of these warrants. It is important not to let natural sound, effects, or music run too long. Often, a second or two is enough.

Ambient sound can give a story context and make it come alive for listeners. Consider this example from a story on Internet gambling, aired on the ABC's *AM* program:

Ambient sound	<i>Background sound of casino</i>
Narration	Internet gamblers don't care for the casino atmosphere or the free drinks. They prefer a different sound.
Ambient sound	<i>Computer beeping</i>

Not all radio voicers or packages incorporate ambient sound. Often, the nature of the story or the way in which it has to be produced precludes it.

But while writing for radio requires reporters to think of the background sound as they write *some* of the time, television demands that reporters think pictures as they write *all* of the time.

## A picture medium

At the risk of stating the obvious, television is a *picture* medium. There was a time when this was often interpreted as ‘no picture, no story’ – in other words, inconsequential stories with good vision would get a run on television news while serious stories with no obvious picture appeal would not. You will still hear this line occasionally, but it has less force than it used to. That is because technological developments, such as computer graphics and animation, and the increasing openness of some public institutions, such as parliaments and occasionally courts, to television cameras has made stories that were once hard to illustrate, such as political and economic items, far more television-friendly. That doesn’t mean that silly picture stories no longer appear on television news. But worthy ones are not excluded just because they are a challenge to produce.

The process of gathering pictures is discussed in chapter 11. In an ideal world, the reporter would always be present when the pictures were shot, but this is frequently not possible. For one thing, many stories incorporate vision from different locations and increasingly from amateur vision supplied by witnesses to events or lifted from social media sites. At the very least, a reporter should try to see the vision before they start writing.

In television news, there’s a dismissive term for stories where the vision appears to have been added to the narration as an afterthought. They’re referred to as ‘radio with pictures’. Or the pictures might be described as ‘wallpaper’ because they seem to be there just to fill up space. In the example below, the words have been written with little thought as to how they might be illustrated.

Visual: booklet on new welfare payments

V/O: Current welfare payments for people aged eighteen to twenty-five are being replaced by the Youth Allowance and Austudy, as part of a federal government initiative.

This example illustrates several problems that can occur in television news scripting. First the fit between the words and pictures is very poor. This could be overcome if the narration and pictures started on young people themselves, but the phrasing and illustration would need to be done with care, to avoid implying that all the young people shown in the pictures were receiving these allowances, unless that were known to be true. The second problem is that the story starts on a shot of a booklet. Shots of books, newspapers, signs and so on

are usually boring and should not be used as opening shots unless there is no alternative.

The importance of vision to the narrative in television stories was well described in this dry observation by American former anchorwoman, Linda Ellerbee:

... let me suggest an experiment. Turn on the newscast and go into the next room. Now, listen to any story on the newscast – from beginning to end. If the story is perfectly clear to you at all times, it is a normal newscast. There is a name for this manner of telling a story. It's called radio. (Ellerbee 1987: 90)

Ellerbee argued that television reporters need to make use of pictures for their storytelling value, not just as illustration. To do this, reporters need to write *to* and *with* their pictures, which perform a separate, but complementary function to the words. One of the giants of US television news, former NBC news boss, Reuven Frank, explained it this way: 'Words ... go mostly to the intelligence: pictures go more to the feelings and responses' (Ellerbee 1987: 90). One of the maxims of television news and current affairs is that audiences pay more attention to the pictures than narration and that if there is any conflict between what is being said and what is being shown, the pictures will win.

The predominance of pictures in television news means that it is a good medium for stories with an element of emotion, but less so for those that require a lot of detailed explanation. This, combined with the brevity of television news stories, has contributed to its method of storytelling; a point made by radio host and former television news director, Jason Morrison:

The TV news story is typically not a chronological representation of the day's events and the day's points of view. The TV news story is primarily about providing interesting television that informs. Radio is about reporting what people say and what happens. Television is about jumping into the psyche and explaining why things happen. You have to become an analyst of the facts and information, not just 'John Bloggs says ...', 'Fred says ...'. We have to help people understand the issues we're covering because if they don't they'll just switch off.

## Scripting techniques

The order in which Australian television news and current affairs stories are put together is explained in greater detail in chapter 4. In short, the information,

interviews and pictures are gathered first, then the reporter writes the narration, and finally the script and images are joined.

In this system, the words come first. But they need to be written with the vision in mind. While the words and pictures need to be linked, there is no point in simply describing in the narration what viewers can see on the screen. American journalism educator, Fred Shook, advises that ‘every television writer can eliminate information the viewer already knows or that the visuals communicate more clearly and that the best approach to scripting is to ‘write from the visuals’ 2005:16). He uses as an example a story on homelessness. The pictures might show a homeless man in the street, in shabby clothes carrying a bottle in a paper bag. The pictures convey a message and he suggests it might be scripted as follows:

**Example**

<p><b>Visual:</b> homeless man</p>	<p><b>V/O:</b> Joe carries his best friend in a brown paper bag. (Shook 2005: 16)</p>
------------------------------------	---

In another example, Shook used the image of a politician speaking on the phone. His script referenced the picture, without needing to labour it.

**Example**

<p><b>Visual:</b> politician on the phone</p>	<p><b>V/O:</b> Congressman Johnson spends a lot of time listening these days (the ‘touch’). It’s the first time he’s ever been behind as a political candidate (the ‘go’). (Shook 1994: 72)</p>
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Another form of referencing the narration to the video is using the narration to point to the picture (although it’s important not to overdo this).

**Example**

<p><b>Visual:</b> school sports carnival Olympic Games</p>	<p><b>V/O:</b> It’s a long way from this ... to this. And netballer Ellen Dwyer has made the journey in just three years.</p>
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In longer stories, a reporter has the opportunity to build in a sense of expectation. The following example is from ABC TV’s *Lateline* and the question of what the

farmer does now is answered first by the visual and a moment later by the narration. But the same technique, minus the pictorial element, can be used in radio.

### Example

<p><b>Visual:</b> Hazel Seaman walking on her property</p> <p>wind turbines</p>	<p>V/O: Hazel Seaman and her husband ran sheep and cattle on this property at Crookwell near Goulburn in New South Wales for forty-five years. Now with her husband deceased, Hazel, in her 70s, is a very different kind of farmer. (Pause) She farms wind.</p>
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Failing to write *to* and *with* the pictures in television leaves the images reduced to ‘wallpaper’ covering the narration. But the flipside of this is a heavy-handed approach in which the pictures are used as a metaphor for an idea the reporter wants to convey, as in the case below.

### Example

<p><b>Visual:</b> aircraft on tarmac after engine caught fire in flight</p>	<p>V/O: This is the flight that got too hot to handle.</p>
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Some stories are difficult to illustrate because there is no genuinely suitable vision available. But using unrelated vision in a metaphorical way requires more thought than was used in the following example.

### Example

<p><b>Visual:</b> gorillas in jungle</p>	<p>V/O: These are the kinds of gorillas tourists expect to see in Uganda. But a tourist party encountered Hutu <i>guerrillas</i>.</p>
<p><b>Visual:</b> b/w pics of a World War II sea battle</p>	<p>V/O: Our body is like a war zone – every day millions of battles are going on.</p>

Careful attention to word–picture linkage means avoiding a laboured approach to matching images to words.

## Library pictures

The last of the above examples is a reminder that, while stories have to be current to secure a place in a news bulletin or information-based program, the images used to construct them do not. 'File' or 'library' vision is a staple part of many news stories and without it some stories could not be put together at all. The use of file vision, like the use of sound effects, poses a number of practical and ethical problems for television reporters. Clause 9 of the Journalists' Code of Ethics requires that journalists: 'Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed' (MEAA 1999).

Unless the script itself includes a reference to a past event – in which case, file pictures may be a direct match for the narration – television news services don't like to flag that their vision is anything other than that day's because it risks giving the idea that the news is stale. Yet file pictures are very common in news stories. In many cases, they are used as generic vision because up-to-date pictures are either not available or because recording new vision is considered unnecessarily time-consuming or expensive. For instance, a story on the Prime Minister's latest rating in the opinion polls might be illustrated with recent pictures if none were available for that day. And the same would apply to a story on the latest profit figures from any large company. But even seemingly straightforward examples can pose problems. For example, in the case of the story on the PM's opinion poll rating, some in the audience might take the expression on the PM's face to indicate their reaction to the poll figures.

Moreover, like any generic vision, pictures from the library lend themselves to being used in a clichéd way. The biggest study of the use of file pictures in Australian television was conducted in Brisbane in 1993. While the percentage of stories made up of file vision may have changed since then, the researchers' conclusions remain just as valid.

They concluded that file vision could add to the quality of a report but there was a tendency to use pictures in a stereotypical way (Putnis 1994: 128). Former Labor minister, Lindsay Tanner, raised the same concerns nearly two decades later, complaining that ... 'Climate change stories are typically run against backgrounds of giant factory chimneys belching smoke. Stories about wage case hearings usually show cash machines counting \$50 notes' (Tanner 2011: 55). Television newsrooms usually have a policy, albeit informal in some cases, on when and how to super library pictures. The commonly adopted formula is to super 'File' or something similar in those cases where it would be misleading not to, but to leave the pictures unsupered in other cases.

The use of library pictures shot within the viewing area raises another ethical issue, specifically the impact on those people shown in the vision or those who knew them.

Deborah Potter, of the US organisation Newslab, notes images of people in hospital or victims of crime often continue to be used long after they were recorded, and that it is too easy for journalists to forget that ‘These are real people; they are not file tape’ (Tompkins 2000: n.p.).

A BBC News style guide makes the same point:

Other pictures may cause distress simply because of their repetition. Identifiable library pictures of a road crash used to illustrate a story on road safety may be acutely painful to the individuals who were involved. Library pictures of an identifiable patient to illustrate a hospital story are very risky. (BBC n.d.: 14)

Quite aside from the ethical problems posed by file vision, there are a number of technical reasons why pictures from the library should be treated with care.

- Pictures often reveal their date, even if they are of a routine subject – such as traffic, shoppers or the airport. The weather, even the brightness of the light, will vary. Current pictures always make a story look more polished.
- Other elements of library pictures don’t change as often as the weather, but they do change and it is easy to overlook this. For example, airlines change their livery, companies change their logos or uniforms and our currency changes every so often. Shots sporting the old look will make the library vision appear dated.
- In some circumstances, the use of file vision carries the risk of defaming someone. This is explained in greater detail in chapter 15.

## Sound effects

Natural sound plays an important role in television news and current affairs items and in some radio ones. Although natural sound is usually played low-level under the reporter’s voice, some sounds are used at full strength either as part of the narrative or to punctuate the narration and make the overall story more interesting. Examples of the use of natural sound as part of a narrative include:

- the sound of bullets in a story from a war zone
- sirens in an item about a fire or accident
- protesters chanting in a piece about a demonstration.

Examples of the use of natural sound as punctuation include:

- the sound of a car door being shut as delegates arrive at a meeting;
- the sound of an engine revving as they leave;
- the sound of a cash register in an item about the cost of living.

Without natural sound, the pictures under the reporter's narration in a television report would be silent and the effect would be sterile. In radio, natural sound is an important way of giving context to a story. But the use of 'natural' sound in television news and current affairs, in particular, raises some often overlooked ethical issues. Ideally, only the sound that was captured at the same time as the pictures were shot would find its way onto the effects track. But some library vision is only available as single track, making it impossible to isolate and re-use the effects. Video editors maintain files of useful sound effects culled from earlier stories, or they can also turn to sound effects libraries available on CD or the Internet. In cases where the effects being laid in are mundane and generic – such as room or traffic noise – it can be argued that the fabrication does not alter the meaning of the story. But the use of some sounds – such as bullets and sirens – clearly does. Many broadcasters prohibit the use of such sounds unless they were recorded synchronously with the pictures being used, so that even if bullets can be heard on the original story the sound can't be laid in from another source in any re-edit of the vision.

While reporters prefer to work with video that has natural effects, amateur video, including that found on social media sites, often comes with audio of the camera operator and others commenting on what's being shown and this is usually treated as the ambient sound in the context and incorporated into reports.

There are a few broad guidelines that you should bear in mind before laying in effects:

- Synchronised sound – such as people chanting at a rally – can't be replicated, so there are technical as well as ethical reasons why this should not be attempted.
- The sounds made by emergency service sirens vary from one country to another, so, once again, there are technical as well as ethical reasons why these should not be taken from an effects library. There are always some members of the audience who can spot the substitution.
- The sound of nature is also a regional phenomenon. As tempting as it may be to add bird noises to a scene, unless they are authentic someone will notice and point out that either the bird in question only chirps in spring or it has never been heard in the wild south of Austria and so on.

## Using effects with archival pictures

The use of effects with archival vision, particularly that from World War II and earlier, also requires thought because the development of highly portable synchronised sound units is a post-World War II phenomenon. Most battle footage from the two World Wars was shot mute, though World War II newsreels routinely combined pictures and effects that had been recorded separately. There are few rules to guide reporters and editors in reusing this material, but they should at least be aware of its nature. In news stories, where archival pictures will be on screen for only a few seconds, images are often more poignant run mute than with clearly faked effects.

## Reenactments and reaction shots

The ethical problems that beset the use of file vision and audio also affect the use of reenactments and reaction shots.

In mid-2011, the White House announced it was ending a decades-long practice of reenacting scenes of the president giving televised speeches so that photographers could get pictures without disturbing the real thing (Bauder 2011: n.p.). The decision came after a Reuters photographer had blogged about taking pictures ostensibly showing President Obama announcing the death of Osama bin Laden, presumably without thinking it would lead to a debate about the ethics of reenacting events for the camera (Reed 2011: n.p.). There was no immediate suggestion that the White House's decision would be adopted elsewhere. In fact, television news and current affairs stories often include small amounts of reenactment by subjects, not least so that camera operators can get several different angles of the same piece of action. So doctors and scientists are asked to repeat a procedure two or three times and members of many professions are asked to answer the phone, work at the computer or scrutinise a book, just for the camera. One of the worst features of some of these reenactments is that they often look artificial even if they are not normally seen to raise ethical issues.

However, there are other circumstances in which reenacting scenes raises far more fundamental ethical issues. One example occurred in late 2003 in an ABC news story from Iraq about the dangers to children of military hardware and munitions left over from the war for Baghdad. The story included images of children on or near missiles and, as the program *Media Watch* revealed, the pictures were obtained by asking children to sit on or walk around the weapons for the cameras. ABC News responded with a clarification, noting that 'While it

was known that the children regularly played there, the ABC regards the request to the children as an error of judgement' (*Media Watch*, 29 September 2003). The reporter resigned.

### Overcoming the restrictions of single-camera coverage

Reaction shots – such as pictures of audience members listening to a politician's speech – can also involve a level of deception, even if it is not intended. This occurs because camera operators covering speeches, concerts and other public events usually record pictures of the audience either before or after the pictures of the main action. Even if the reporter and editor are scrupulously ethical and try to match the tone of the reaction shots available on video to the speaker's comments, the result is still a creation rather than real. It is also hard to avoid, given the logistics of daily news coverage. However, in circumstances where the reaction shots are considered particularly important, crews – either from different programs from the same channel and even from rival channels – will sometimes agree to divide up the shooting load and then swap pictures later.

### Seeing is believing

Occasionally, the guidelines on identifying file or reenacted vision are pursued with a zealotry that borders on the silly. There can be few reasons, for instance, to super 'File' over black-and-white pictures, though it's still done from time to time. Similarly, supering 'File' over pictures of the subject of an obituary seems redundant, though identifying the year in which the vision was shot can be helpful.

On the other hand, some pictures that are reenacted, but rarely described as such, have entered our consciousness as documentary. Perhaps the best known examples are images of Depression-era Australia, including men queuing for work, which were shot in 1954 by the Waterside Workers Film Unit and which continue to be used because there are so few authentic pictures of the hardships of the time.

One of the paradoxical features of television information programs is that so many in the viewing audience still presume that 'seeing is believing', even though anyone with the most rudimentary understanding of the news-gathering and production process knows that all news is constructed and television news is the most elaborate construction of all. The problem is not that the camera lies. It may be true, as former US news executive Reuven Frank once wrote, that

the camera never lies (Frank 1993: 20), but it is selective, and the words that are written to the pictures can be misleading.

Since broadcast reports require considerable manipulation of real time, there is a constant risk that stories will distort reality because of news' preference for events that are unusual or dramatic. One regularly occurring example of this is the large public rally that passes off largely without incident except for a dust-up involving a small number of participants. While the disturbance will inevitably draw the attention of the electronic media, a balanced report requires that the events be placed in context.

# 9

## Narrating and presenting

A good broadcast story begins with a well-written script, but it needs to be narrated well too, if listeners or viewers are to get the most out of it.

Narrating skills are vital for almost all radio reporters and most television ones (other than producers and chiefs of staff). But while only some television reporters go on to present bulletins, most radio reporters will need to present eventually, especially in smaller newsrooms where everyone needs to be able to do everything.

While radio news requires reporters to think about voice production and pace, the pictures in a television story add an extra layer of complexity and, because stories are longer than those in radio, television reporters need to give particular attention to narration. Journalist and presenter Hugh Riminton is one person who has made the common transition from radio to television news. He found that voicing a television story requires closer attention to the specifics of the script than the more general approach used in radio:

There's a whole new set of subtle understandings that you need to get about what your voice does, about what it conveys. You can use your voice to develop pace in a story or, alternatively, to convey restraint, letting the events themselves breathe. If I am packaging a story that's essentially static – perhaps a court or a finance story – very often I read at what feels like an unnaturally fast pace. When you look back at the finished result, it doesn't seem over-paced because it is not competing with dynamic visuals or sound.

Broadcast journalists need to develop an understanding of their own voice and how to use it. That requires both a lot of practice and also a great deal of

thought at the scripting stage because, as we've seen already, the two are interdependent. Hugh notes that:

Very often the more dramatic and appalling the events, the more appropriate it is to pare back both the delivery of the voice and the pace and the choice of words that you use. When things are already enormous, when there's been some terrible massacre, no one wants to hear a hysterical voice over, it's counter-productive.

These days, broadcasters prefer a conversational style, though the pace and tone will vary from one service to the next. If there is any single rule governing presentation, it is that the reader should sound clear, credible and confident.

The qualities that define a 'good voice' can vary from one speaker to another. But Queensland speech pathologist Elizabeth Neil isolated many of the common characteristics in a study in which she compared the voices of a group of broadcast journalism students with those of on-air professionals. She found:

... the professionals had a faster speaking rate, more pitch variability, and a more knowledgeable and confident style than novice news broadcasters. The professionals had higher ratings on vocal quality, emphasis, phrasing and continuity. Surprisingly, she found female professional broadcasters had higher pitched voices than the students. (Day & Pattie 1998: 150)

Many reporters go on air without any formal voice training, though those in metropolitan television, in particular, may be offered it on the job and some reporters seek out private coaching to improve their prospects. But even without professional help, beginners can improve their delivery by following some simple procedures.

## Copy layout

It's much easier to read copy when it is clearly set out. Most broadcast newsrooms use automation systems, which format the copy. But if you are using a generic word processing package, you should set up the page so that your story will be as easy to read as possible:

- Text should be printed in a clear typeface and in a font size you can read easily.
- Set the margins wide enough to allow notes on the side of the page. Wide margins will also keep the lines of text to a manageable length, which is important because long lines of words are hard to scan.
- Copy should be double-spaced and there should be additional space between paragraphs.

## Tips for improving delivery

- Read your copy, aloud if possible, at least once before you record it or deliver it on air. While professional news presenters can read copy authoritatively ‘sight unseen’, they only do this when there is no other choice; for example, in cases of very late-breaking news.
- While you’re reading the copy, think about which words to stress, where to pause to draw breath and also where to pause for effect. Never underestimate the importance of these short pauses, which can influence a story’s impact.
- Whenever possible, wear headsets when recording a narration. The reason is explained in *Microphone Technique* on page 189.
- Many broadcast reporters and presenters prefer to mark their copy to make it easier to deliver. While these marks can vary according to the individual, the most common ones are:
  - underscoring (underlining) words to be stressed
  - a single forward slash to indicate a short pause
  - a double forward slash to indicate a longer pause
  - an upward arrow above a word requiring a rising inflection
  - a downward arrow above a word requiring a falling inflection.

### Example

Alarmed by a sharp fall in the number of Australian union members / the A-C-T-U has launched a campaign to reverse the trend. Called ‘what union membership can do for you’, the campaign will run on radio, / television / in the press / and on billboards. // Unions hope to increase membership by twenty per cent over the next year.

- Use punctuation to make copy easy to read. For example, a pause can be signalled by a comma, and a longer pause by use of an ellipsis ( ... ). This is an area in which broadcast writing differs from writing for print. The aim is not to adhere strictly to the rules governing punctuation, but to make copy easy to read aloud.
- Never break a word at the end of the line and never break a sentence at the end of a page.
- All pages should be clearly identified with the name of the story, the writer’s name, the date and any other details required by house style.

## Pronunciation

Broadcast reporters need to be able to speak words as well as spell them and that introduces another level of complexity to their work.

- Some words have more than one pronunciation, each having its own adherents. Examples include harass (harass or harass), kilometre (kilometre or kilometre), and controversy (controversy or contrroversy).
- Secondly, broadcast reporters often need to check the pronunciation of any words with which they are unfamiliar, especially the names of people and places.

In the case of words with more than one common pronunciation, you will be guided by house style, if the newsroom has one. Consistency is important. If the presenter and reporter use different pronunciations, it will sound confusing and careless.

It is important to know how to pronounce every word in the script and to take nothing for granted. Aside from an overriding need for accuracy, checking pronunciations before a live-to-air broadcast will also overcome the embarrassment of slowing or stopping in front of a difficult word, like a horse approaching a jump it can't take. As with other forms of accuracy, the rule is: if in doubt, check. This is particularly important for words where pronunciation might *seem* self-evident but isn't – such as in the case of the New South Wales town of Canowindra, the Western Australian port of Derby and the Uruguayan capital Montevideo, to name just a few.

Reporters working for the ABC have the advantage of access to the corporation's Standing Committee on Spoken English (SCOSE), which issues daily updates on the corporation's intranet.

Reporters at other organisations can turn to a dictionary for the pronunciation of words other than proper nouns. For help with overseas place names or the names of high-profile foreign public figures, you can call the relevant embassy, high commission or consulate. For domestic place names, try the local council, tourist office, police station, or pub (these have the advantage of being open all sorts of hours) and, in the case of Aboriginal names, Lands Councils can be very helpful when it comes to names in their own area.

The easiest way to get the names of interviewees right is to check and, if necessary, record, the correct pronunciation at the time of the interview.

Once you have checked a pronunciation, you can add a phonetic guide in brackets next to the word to which it refers, or in the margin, depending on house style.

**Example***pronounced**‘Les-oo-too’* ... in the tiny southern African nation of Lesotho.

While it may be tempting to use a phonetic pronunciation of an unfamiliar word in place of the original in the script, there are several reasons why this is not a good idea. First, it is important to record the correct spelling in case the script is to be used as the basis for an online story, news bar or subtitle, which will appear as text. Secondly, the correct spelling is preferable when the script is archived, so that it will be retrieved on any key-word search. Thirdly, if the script is being prepared for a presenter, they may already be familiar with the pronunciation of the word concerned and any departure from the correct spelling might confuse them.

**Common pronunciation errors**

Some of the most commonly mispronounced words include:

- *Australia*      Some speakers, including some high-profile ones, say the nation’s name as though there were no ‘l’ in it. There is.
- *says*              is ‘sez’, *not* ‘saes’.
- *nuclear*           is ‘new-klee-ar’.
- ‘h’                  is ‘aitch’, *not* ‘haitch’.

**Common speech errors**

While novice broadcast reporters are routinely advised to ‘be themselves’ and ‘sound conversational’ when they narrate or present, many first have to overcome some common errors of speech before they can sound both natural and credible.

The most common of these errors are:

- placing stress on the wrong words
- speaking in a ‘sing-song’ voice
- using upward or downward inflections in inappropriate places
- using a tone of voice that is inappropriate for the story
- speaking in a monotone
- speaking too fast or babbling
- slurred speech, where syllables or even words are left out
- speaking too slowly
- poor enunciation.

You are in danger of committing any of the first four of these errors if you don't think properly about what the words in the script mean and how that meaning should be conveyed. There are few hard-and-fast rules about which words in a sentence should be stressed, since this will depend on the nature of the story and the writing. But where a noun is described by an adjective, or a verb by an adverb, it's more usual for the stress to fall on the adjective or adverb.

#### Examples

M-P-s will be given a conscience vote on the issue. / The company breached safety regulations. / The fire burned fiercely.

In the examples above, the adjective or adverb is stressed because it conveys the significance of the sentence. But this is not always the case. If, for example, two things are being compared, the stress may fall on the noun.

#### Examples

It was the hottest day in Melbourne this year.  
There have been more hot days in January than in February.

A 'sing-song' effect is caused by stressing words at regular intervals in a sentence. As with other errors mentioned here, this can be avoided if you consider the meaning of the story and where the stresses should fall and mark the copy accordingly.

It's conventional to use an upward inflection at the end of a question. This gives the idea that the sentence is 'open' and will be closed by the response. But it seems to be an Australian characteristic to end many other sentences with an upward inflection, which is a mistake. Sentences that are not questions should end either in a downward or a neutral inflection.

## Different presentation styles

Different stories require different styles of presentation, since it would be inappropriate to read an item about a tragedy in the same tone as the sports scores or the 'light and breezy' story that is often used to close a bulletin. Trainee broadcasters sometimes forget this and present serious stories with insufficient gravitas. This doesn't mean that broadcasters should 'act out' the news, since a melodramatic tone can diminish a story just as easily as one that's too light (and news presenters should not use their tone of voice to suggest their own opinions on a story). But it does mean that news should be delivered with due regard for its importance.

The final five errors in the above list are caused either by nervousness or by

## Voicing and presentation tips

The shift with the highest prestige for a radio newsreader is breakfast news, but it comes at a price. Typically, the breakfast shift means rising at 4 am to be at work at 5 and on air at 6. Until you've done this, you have no idea how hard it is to sound *good* early in the morning. Your voice doesn't work all by itself. It needs a bit of encouragement. Journalists reading the breakfast news can find that the early morning calls they make to the emergency services are not just important for news gathering, they act as a warm-up for their voices as well. So can something as simple as spending a few minutes before the bulletin talking to the morning announcer. There are other measures you can take to improve your delivery, if you have time. These include:

- gentle stretching exercises to relax your neck and back muscles
- limbering up your voice by reciting simple verses or scales
- sipping water to lubricate your throat
- deep breathing.

Regardless of whether you are reading the news or reporting it, here are some other tips for good presentation:

- Get enough sleep to look and sound credible. Fatigue will show in your face and voice and will also make mistakes much more likely.
- Some presenters prefer to avoid

food or drink, other than water, immediately before recording a narration or going on air. Fizzy drinks can be unsettling and milky products make some readers feel 'gummed up'.

- Don't drink alcohol before a broadcast. This should be self-evident, but there are some celebrated cases of people who should have known better going on air after having had at least one too many. The audience *does* notice, so do the rest of the media and, even after the immediate brouhaha has died down, the audio/video will probably still be available on YouTube. Moreover, behaviour that might be tolerated in a professional of some standing is rarely tolerated in a junior staff member.
- Don't do too many 'takes' of a narration or piece to camera. How many is too many? That depends on the individual. But the more 'takes' you do to try to get a story right, the more weary and annoyed you will sound. Broadcast reporters usually expect to deliver their narration or piece to camera with no more than a few takes.
- Once again, remember the broadcaster's mantra – *all mics are live*. All cameras are live too. Never swear or do anything silly in front of a mic or camera. There's every chance it will be switched on.

failing to consider the audience. A speaker who drones is boring and hard to listen to. So is someone who speaks too quickly. Deciding how fast to speak depends on the station or channel you work for and the type of audience it has. A broadcast journalist working for an ‘easy listening’ radio station with an older audience profile will be encouraged to speak a little more slowly than a reporter at a station with a young demographic. Regardless of their rate of speech, broadcast reporters need to enunciate clearly, without dropping syllables from the beginning or end of words or slurring their speech.

## Looking after your voice

Since a broadcast reporter’s voice is one of their tools of trade, it makes sense to look after it.

- Don’t smoke (tobacco or anything else) and avoid smoky or dusty areas.
- Drink plenty of water and try to cut back the amount of alcohol or coffee you drink.
- Be kind to your vocal chords. Don’t shout yourself hoarse when you’re excited or angry and try to minimise the number of times you cough or clear your throat.

## Dealing with errors

Even the best-prepared reader/presenter makes the occasional error. In live broadcasts, mistakes fall into two broad categories:

- The first is the type of error that is serious and affects the meaning of a story. These require immediate and obvious correction. For example, if you say ‘A man has pleaded guilty to ...’ when the story should have said ‘*not* guilty’, or made some other serious error of fact, it is important to correct the line and, depending on house style, you might preface it with words to the effect of ‘I’ll read that again’.
- The second type of error is slight by comparison, perhaps a minor stumble, or a mispronunciation. In this event, an apology and repetition would only draw attention to the mistake, which many listeners or viewers would not have noticed, and you should try to slide over the mistake and continue reading.

In either event, once the appropriate action has been taken, it is important for the presenter to refocus and continue reading and not dwell on the mistake. Dwelling on an error is likely to lead to more of the same.

If you stumble in a prerecording, you should correct the mistake so that the edited story is error-free. Ideally, you should pick up the narration from the last edit point, usually the end of the last soundbite, rather than just from the end of the last sentence. This is because people often make small shifts in pitch or tone when they resume reading and these shifts will be noticeable if two sentences are edited together. You can avoid this problem by resuming the narration from an edit point.

## 10

# Online and social media

For radio and television journalists, reporting for broadcast is only part of the job. Most now service other media and, in general, that means filing for an online service or for social media or both. The use of social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter, as vehicles for news delivery and to drive traffic to a news organisation's broadcast or masthead, began in Australia around 2009 (varying from one organisation to another) and by 2010 media outlets were putting considerable effort into the strategy.

That meant that news organisations (and often specific programs) maintained their own Facebook pages and Twitter streams, while individual reporters also used personal accounts as part of their work. TV news audiences became accustomed to seeing reporters' Twitter IDs superimposed during their stories.

Some news outlets, notably the ABC, also offered journalists the opportunity to reflect on professional practice in blogs, published online.

Social media have fundamentally changed the relationship between journalists and their public. Audiences consume the work of journalists but they also feed back comment and information. As US journalist and blogger Jeff Jarvis put it, journalism has become 'a process, not a product' (King 2008: n.p.). Journalists are more scrutinised than ever before. Get something wrong and well-informed audience members will let you know. And they will let you know in public, because the conversations on social media are largely there for anyone to see.

The ways in which broadcast media have used social media in news delivery include as:

- a platform on which to break news. Getting your story out on Twitter before anyone else is now a 'scoop', something once reserved for being first on air

- a means of providing running commentary on ongoing events, including sports matches
- a headline service to update stories and drive traffic to scheduled bulletins and programs
- a platform for ‘teasers’ – i.e. short segments of information and pictures as a pointer to coming stories
- a way of circulating the ‘brand’ as consumers pass on stories they like to others in their social networks
- a platform for information and pictures that don’t fit within a broadcast story because of time constraints
- a way of encouraging public participation in debate over some stories.

For instance, video journalist Allan Clarke (see chapter 11) uses Facebook as a marketing tool for his stories for *Living Black* on SBS, linking to video files so followers can preview his reports. He also blogs for the program’s page on the station’s website. In addition, the site features stories from the broadcast.

Geelong sports editor Steve (Tom) King uses Twitter to update his listeners between hourly or half-hourly bulletins. When he attends AFL press conferences, he tweets as the coach is briefing the media, so fans who follow the K-ROCK SportsTwitter feed are getting the story in real time. His game calls are streamed live through the AFL website and a combination of that, his Facebook presence and followers retweeting his updates has given him a global audience that would once have been out of reach for a journalist at a radio station in Geelong. Depending on the nature of their output, journalists everywhere are doing much the same thing; using social media to break, update and preview the news or to comment on it.

## **Social media as sources**

At the same time, social media have given journalists a series of fresh tools for news gathering. These include:

- mining the social media sites of prominent people (including celebrities and politicians) for updates and statements
- monitoring trending topics on Twitter for information on issues engaging community interest and for details of any incidents or breaking stories
- using Facebook as a source of information on and images of people who find themselves the subjects of news (including as a result of accidents)
- using various social media to find sources of information and for people to interview

- using YouTube as a source of images of breaking news (including natural disasters, accidents, protests and so on).

Sydney commercial radio reporter Mark McKeown points to Twitter as the eyes and ears of a big city, constantly feeding information:

Twitter is a massive source of news for us. If something is happening right now, you've got thousands of 'reporters' on the road instead of one, who can only see one corner of one street. Twitter is constantly updating. You can have photographs. You can have video and audio to verify what's going on. It has really changed the news landscape for radio. It means we've got eyes everywhere.

The news-gathering and dissemination potential of social media has also introduced new ethical and legal challenges for journalists in a media environment which continues to evolve.

These include:

- the speed with which material is posted, particularly to social media, and the obvious potential for error
- the borderless nature of online and social media
- the personal and casual tone social media invite, which can lead to indiscretions
- the ease with which material posted online by individuals can be accessed by the media and used for reasons not envisaged by those who uploaded it
- the blurring of personal and professional as some journalists use their personal social media sites to send story updates and other work-related material, or comments that reflect on their professional activities or employer.

## Unwanted exposures

In 2010 and 2011 there was a series of much-reported indiscretions on social media. Journalist Miranda Devine was accused of posting an anti-gay comment on Twitter, causing what *The Australian* fairly termed a 'media scandalette' (Jackson 2010: n.p.).

More significant was the criticism of Indigenous academic Larissa Behrendt, who tweeted an ill-considered remark about Aboriginal leader Bess Price, which became front-page news. Professor Behrendt apologised (Karvelas 2011: n.p.).

The regional publishing arm of Fairfax stood down a young editor for insensitive comments that appeared on his Facebook page. The remarks, on the page of *Glen Innes Examiner* editor Matt Nicholls, related to the death of a police officer who had grown up in the region and was shot while on duty in Sydney. Nicholls denied posting the comment ‘there’s nothing better than a death to lift circulation’, but the company sacked him (Lentini 2010: n.p.).

Academic and author Peter van Onselen has written that in cases where public identities are embarrassed by reaction to their comments, Twitter has ‘unintentionally done the community a service’ because ‘we now know what they say when they aren’t operating on script, on cue or on message’ (van Onselen 2011: 14).

Each of the above episodes, and others, illustrated the blurring of personal and professional boundaries and also served as a reminder, as if it were needed, that anyone using social media should think carefully before hitting the ‘send’ button. It is an axiom of new media delivery that, while speed may lead to errors of fact or taste, they can also be easily and rapidly corrected. However, media outlets had taken screen captures of the above posts, which was one more reminder that messages on social media are not ephemeral. Indeed, in 2010, the Library of Congress announced it would accession Twitter’s full archive of public tweets, which would be available for study (Raymond 2010: n.p.).

The speed with which the media environment is changing makes it hard to find ethical and legal guidelines that have kept pace. However, among Australian broadcast news organisations, the ABC has taken the lead in the generation of policy in this area.

In late 2009, Managing Director Mark Scott issued a single-page policy on use of social media which set four standards, requiring that staff not mix personal and professional ‘in ways likely to bring the ABC into disrepute’, not imply corporation endorsement of personal opinions and not disclose workplace confidences (ABC 2010: n.p.). The ABC also formulated a Guidance Note to its Editorial Policies covering the use of pictures from social networking sites. The document discussed the ambiguous nature of such sites, noting that, while ‘in some ways these online spaces are public’, they were also ‘private to varying degrees’ and that users might assume that ‘their obscurity protects them, never contemplating that they might come to the attention of the mass media’ (ABC 2011: n.p.).

The advice given to journalists was to consider, from the context of an image on a social networking site, whether its subject intended it to be public and whether the image had been posted by the subject or someone else. It asked

## Using social media as news sources

### Case study

The value of Twitter as a news source has been coloured by its connection to celebrity and the often banal stories that characterise much entertainment reporting. But Twitter is also a powerful news-gathering tool and one illustration is the way it was used by ABC Radio Current Affairs to cover the uprisings known as the 'Arab Spring'.

Protests demanding political change had begun in Tunisia and spread across north Africa and the Middle East. The protests achieved some early victories, as governments fell in Tunisia and Egypt, but they met violent resistance in other countries, including Libya and Syria. With some of the affected areas closed off to journalists, Sydney-based producers for ABC Radio Current Affairs, Connie Agius and Jess Hill, turned to social media to find witnesses who could tell their listeners what was happening.

Their first contacts were with Libyan expatriates who were tweeting information they had obtained from their own family and friends back in their home country.

The process Connie and Jess followed was first to identify potential sources from the tweet feed by sorting through tweets using hashtags (key words used to categorise topics on Twitter) related to the protests. They then tweeted back to individuals whom they considered potentially useful, asking them to follow the ABC Current Affairs tweet stream. Once they had that connection, they used Twitter's private messaging option, Direct Message (DM), to contact individuals. As we will see later, Twitter can be a source of disinformation as well as information. The first way in which they sorted genuine sources from other users was to look for people tweeting *specific* information that indicated a knowledge of places and events, rather than general comment.

Their first direct contacts, in which they asked for the phone numbers of people inside Libya who might speak to them, led to a single reply containing nine anonymous phone numbers. With the help of an Arabic speaker, whom they had met through an earlier story, they phoned each number. Just one of those they rang agreed to be interviewed and gave what they believe was the first eyewitness account of the use of African mercenaries by the Libyan government to be published by any international media outlet (Alysen et al. 2012: 48).

In the weeks and months that followed they used Twitter to expand their range of sources inside the areas in which protests, and armed resistance to military offensives against them, were taking place. They also used Facebook to locate potential interviewees, including government officials. Their interviews with protesters were most often conducted using 

Skype, because it was considered the most secure audio line in an environment where people were conscious of being monitored.

The people who agreed to be interviewed, Connie explains, included politicians, human rights activists, political analysts and eyewitnesses who could tell the audience what was happening 'right then, right there':

The first person we spoke to had seen children jumping off a bridge in fear, trying to escape Gaddafi's troops. In some interviews from Bahrain you could hear gunfire in the background, so people who were right there at the scene were using Twitter while they were there under siege.

When the Intercontinental Hotel was being attacked in Kabul [at the end of June 2011], we tracked down a journalist who was there and while we were interviewing her you could hear gunfire in the background. She was being fired on while we were interviewing her.

While they were gathering information for Australian radio they also tweeted reports of their own and their reliability brought them new contacts. In one instance they were able to confirm the arrest of an opposition leader in Bahrain and they gained new followers from being retweeted by Bahraini readers.

Social media are, in the first instance, personal media and there is a strong element of personal involvement in the way Connie and Jess went about their research. In one case, they received a message from a contact inside Libya saying his friend had eight-month-old twins and was fast running out of formula and needed to get milk for them. Connie made calls from Australia to try to organise assistance:

I contacted Doctors Without Borders, who referred me to the World Food Bank, which referred me to the Tunisian Red Cross, which had someone on the border.

She was given a phone number to pass on and told that if the people she was trying to help could get to the border with Tunisia and call it, someone would arrange a meeting.

A few days later I received a message saying they had made it to the border, they had got the formula and the babies were OK.

Aside from being a human response to the situation, it earned them respect among their sources.

Journalism is often criticised for providing a platform for the powerful, ↻

influential and well-off at the expense of ordinary people, seeing the latter as less credible. Social media are changing that, not least by making it easier to locate witnesses to events. In the reporting of the Arab Spring protests, the use of social media meant that people engaged in the protests were able to put their message to the world's media at the same time as the region's governments. They were also able to circulate photographic evidence of the suppression of protests, which challenged official versions of events.

However, the use of social media in news is not without its critics. The biggest concern is verification. How can you tell whether people are who they say they are in an online environment? In one case, amateur video which purported to show protesters being beaten by Syrian security officers in 2011, and aired widely on broadcast news, was subsequently revealed to be old images taken in Beirut. As *Media Watch* pointed out, the same media that delivered the material could have been used to check it, but reporters need the contacts and skill to do this. Jess Hill was able to use her followers on Twitter to identify where and when the pictures had originated (Hill 2011: n.p.).

Another example that received worldwide attention was that of the self-identified 'gay girl in Damascus' whose blog, complete with photo, appeared at the start of the protest movement of 2011. In early June she was said to be missing and followers feared for her safety. Stories expressing concern appeared in many mainstream, and normally cautious, media outlets. But other reporters expressed concern that they could find no one who had ever met the blogger, 'Amina Araf', and soon 'she' was revealed to be a 40-year-old married American man living in Scotland. A *Guardian* blogger called it an 'arrogant fantasy', and it caused a lot of embarrassment. But it was also a reminder of the importance of checking and verifying information, something Connie and Jess had done in regards to all their interviews. While the human dimension of the story made it hard to resist, some did. ABC Radio Current Affairs did not use it because, as Connie says, it didn't check out:

I had been following the blog for a month and when I saw that she was 'kidnapped' I emailed her apparent cousin, who was listed as taking care of her blog while she was detained. I also contacted some reliable sources in Syria asking if they had any advice on how to contact her family because I wanted to verify the story and what had happened to her. I didn't get any response. Some people simply replied that they didn't know anything about it. Others didn't respond. I know a human rights lawyer in Damascus and she didn't know about her. So alarm bells were ringing. Then I saw 

reports from the *New York Times* saying they were having the same problems. I kept on monitoring the story but I decided not to run with it until I could get verification.

Among those who think that today's reporters have to have social media skills is presenter of ABC Radio's *PM* program, Mark Colvin. He wrote a piece on the News Ltd. site *The Punch* in which he noted that Twitter had also been critical to their coverage of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami and the nuclear crisis that followed. Explaining the work that Connie and Jess had done, he wrote:

This is not a magic formula. You'll notice that it relies on old and proven journalistic techniques, like source-checking and cultivating contacts.

And this:

Social media is like a really big wave for journalists. If you get on it and ride it skillfully, it'll carry you a long way. If you miss it, it'll dump you. (Colvin 2011: n.p.)

journalists to consider whether they could gain consent for using an image and, if not, whether the public interest outweighed other considerations, including possible issues of distress and grief and those related to other people who could be seen in the same image (ABC 2010: n.p.).

## **If you want to read more . . .**

[media.twitter.com/newsrooms](https://media.twitter.com/newsrooms)

[sites.google.com/site/aujournalists/Home](https://sites.google.com/site/aujournalists/Home)

# 11

## Recording sound and pictures

Until quite recently, an electronic media reporter could enjoy a long and productive career while knowing very little of the technical side of the business. Radio reporters had to be able to operate recorders and have a rudimentary knowledge of microphones. Television reporters didn't even have to know as much as that, since the crew looked after the pictures and sound.

These days, a combination of digital technology and changes in the cost structure of the industry mean many journalists need technical as well as editorial skills to do their jobs. Radio reporters, and some news agency journalists, record digital audio, assemble it on computer and deliver their files over the Internet. A growing number of television reporters now shoot some or all of the video for their stories. A few assemble their stories using desktop editing. Together with multiple media reporting, these practices are changing the nature of broadcast journalism.

### **The video journalist (VJ)**

Video journalism (aka Personal Digital Production or MoJo (mobile journalist)) is a relatively new term for a longstanding practice. Australian viewers would be familiar with the work of a number of journalists who have performed the role of both reporter and camera operator. Australian Neil Davis, who established his reputation during the Vietnam war, is a celebrated example. Another is British reporter Sue Lloyd-Roberts, who worked for ITN and later the BBC. Lloyd-Roberts found working alone allowed her access to parts of the world that would have been off-limits to a professional crew. She posed as a tourist during assignments in former eastern bloc countries and later teamed

with dissident Harry Wu to expose forced labour camps in China (MacGregor 1997: 205–206). In the late 1990s, the ABC's *Four Corners* and *Foreign Correspondent* aired a series of stories, including ground-breaking reports from East Timor and Papua New Guinea, by video journalists Ginny Stein and Mark Davis (who later became a presenter of *Dateline*). *Four Corners*' Matthew Carney has long specialised in what the program's website calls 'one man band' filmmaking (*Four Corners*, n.d.).

### Video journalism in news

In 1998 the Central GTS/BKN news bulletin, a weekday, free-to-air service covering South Australia's Spencer Gulf region and Broken Hill in New South Wales, became the first and, at the time of writing, the only Australian news service to be produced entirely by video journalists. The move was designed to contain the cost of running a news service and, while the results were less polished than bulletins on other regional services, Central GTS/BKN had the advantage of having no direct competition because it covered the only remaining Australian market with a single television licensee. The Southern Cross Television network retained the video journalism model for the news when it took over the station in 2003.

All Australian networks make some use of video journalism. The stringers who provide coverage from regional centres are effectively video journalists and the practice is also used for some special reports. The ABC's foreign correspondents sometimes shoot material for their stories. However, the biggest growth in this form of journalism has been in television current affairs and more recently in newspapers as they move towards greater use of mobile platform and online delivery.

The smaller of the public service networks, SBS, adopted video journalism as the main production model for its international current affairs program, *Dateline*, in 1999 in an effort to both contain costs and give the program a different feel. It paid off. Between 2000 and 2002 alone, *Dateline* reporters won six Walkley awards for coverage of topics that ranged from the pro-Jakarta militias in East Timor to North Korean refugees to child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and the program has continued to be a trailblazer in the use of the technique. The SBS Indigenous affairs program *ICAM*, which later became *Living Black*, also took up video journalism at around the same time as *Dateline*.

## Video journalist: case study

Allan Clarke (see page 193) is one of three video journalists generating stories for *Living Black*. He came to the program in 2008 from a print journalism, theatre and PR background. After one week of in-house training, provided by some 'amazing trailblazing' video journalists, including David Brill, he took up his first television reporting job, working solo on a national current affairs program.

At a time when the traditional mass media are losing ground to a more diverse media landscape, *Living Black* is an example of the appeal of specialty programs. It is pitched at all Australians and its rated audience is largely non-Indigenous and over 30. But it has a special appeal in remote communities and it also boasts an audience of young students because schools across the country use it as part of their Aboriginal Studies curricula.

The nature of the program means that Allan spends much of his working life in remote areas where, if the equipment breaks down, 'you can't just pop into JB Hi-Fi'. That means he has to be unusually resourceful, a characteristic required of many VJs since their work often takes them into areas beyond the reach of most news teams.

The effort it takes to reach some of his story locations means he shoots more material than would normally be required to edit a piece of seven minutes or so. If the location is really beautiful, he's been known to come back with four hours or more of material. The excess can be used on the web and for other stories, but the more you shoot, the more time it takes to go through the vision later, so it's a matter of balancing competing interests.

Video journalism is generally a budget-driven decision and budgets also determine how long Allan can spend on the road each season. In each six-month period he might undertake three big trips, which keep him away for up to two weeks at a time, during which he will shoot six or seven stories which will be a mix of profiles/light stories, investigative pieces and features. He will also travel on shorter trips throughout the season, often to urban locations for up to three or four days.

At *Living Black*, the VJs shoot their material and generate a rough cut, which is polished by a craft editor.

Allan's kit contains: a tripod, a small HD camera with three filters and memory cards, a zoom lens and sometimes a wide-angle lens as well. The camera has a top mic for recording ambient sound, plus he carries radio mics and lapel mics for interviews and pieces to camera. It's designed to be 'as lightweight as possible'. The nature of the stories Allan shoots means he usually has the luxury of bringing the material back to the office to work on rather than having to file from the field.



He also carries small lights that come with their own tripods or can be attached to the camera. They're useful for shooting at night but they drain the battery, so where possible, Allan, in common with most video journalists, prefers to work with natural light.

The types of cameras VJs use have both manual and automatic settings and some journalists rely on the auto functions, such as for white balance and focus. Allan says that's what he did at the start, but now his approach depends on the circumstance:

If you value good work, you can't put everything on auto. There are certain moments for auto. Sometimes the auto white balance is fine if you're in nice light and if it's not going to fluctuate too much. Then you should concentrate more on the focus and the exposure rather than white balance.

One thing most solo operators agree on is that they need to pay special attention to getting the audio levels right.

I always do manual sound. I stress that to people. You really need to take the time to get the sound right. There's nothing worse than having it blown out. I like to always utilise the two channels (one for background and one for the interviewee or reporter's piece to camera), so if you use a radio mic for an interview you need to make sure that its level is higher than the background sound. If it's a nice ambient background – like birds – then as long as it's pulled down to maybe a quarter the level of the radio mic you will have two (audio) dimensions to the interview.

Another point most VJs will agree on is that being a journalist is harder when you have technical considerations to worry about as well. Reporters who work with a camera operator or crew have the luxury of getting to spend time with their interviewees while the camera is being set up. They can use that time to put the interviewee at ease or probe for more information. A television crew has several people all noticing what's going on and supporting each other. Allan says working around the limitations of operating solo requires a well-developed strategy for the way you work:

You need to run an automatic checklist in your head when you're setting up and it's an art because often you're with an interviewee – and maybe it's just you two and you have to suddenly pull out your tripod and set up your camera and not alienate them. So it's about being conversational with them and talking to them as you set up and putting them at ease. Most people are nervous if they see a camera, let alone if you're setting it up in front of them.



It can often get frustrating. Obviously any journalist likes to get really stuck into an interview and focus just on that. A VJ can't do that. It really limits you. I find I don't have time to take notes anymore because I'm checking the sound, the focus, checking everything and also listening to what they're saying. That can be a bit of a testing time for any reporter.

That said, video journalism offers more benefits than simple cost efficiency. It offers multiskilled journalists the freedom to chase stories that are too distant or require too much time on location to be allocated a full crew. Those benefits have particular application to a program like *Living Black*.

Aboriginal remote communities are very savvy about media and I think people, particularly in urban centres, don't understand that. But if you think about it, Aboriginal communities are less than 2 per cent of the population yet the amount of press they get is enormous. So they're very well aware of their image in the media, particularly as in the '80s and '90s when it was overwhelmingly negative. So when you visit these communities they're very wary of what you're doing there. Being Aboriginal myself helps. But at the same time you're still a reporter, so you have to walk that fine line. Being a VJ, I prefer to stay in the community and get to know people. I know a lot of journalists won't do that. They want to stay away. I don't find that helpful at all. I might not even start shooting for a day. Even if you have a three-day shoot, obviously in the back of your head you have the deadline, you know you have to get the story, but it's not worth me pulling out the camera unless I'm getting something that is useable. I don't want to force people, particularly our elders. I've seen a lot of mainstream media be very disrespectful in communities. They've been sort of very flash in the pan; bang-bang-bang and they're out and no one knows what they've said. I think that's why the stories I come back with, that all the other VJs on *Living Black* come back with, are really well-balanced stories that no one else has got and I hope they show a different side of issues.

If video journalism can be criticised for generating less polished stories than full crews produce, Allan says that's a price worth paying.

I think you have to put it in context. If you watch something like *Dateline*, any jerkiness of the camera or bad exposure just heightens the sense that they're in a place that is dangerous. There's no time for pictures that look slick because you're focused on getting information out. I think for us also it is about showing



people that we're on the road and bringing to people who would never experience remote communities, what it is truly like in those places and giving them a sense that we're roughing it. The rough, off the cuff, style should be celebrated.

## Video journalism: pros and cons

The SBS experience highlights both the benefits and drawbacks of video journalism:

- Video journalists can operate in some geographic and political situations that would be either inaccessible or less accessible to a full crew.
- A video journalist operating alone with an unobtrusive camera can achieve a level of intimacy with their subjects, which is much harder for a full crew to establish.
- A video journalist is more mobile than a full crew.
- Finally, video journalism allows media proprietors to stretch their dollar further, since stories can be produced by fewer people using cheaper equipment.

## Industrial issues

One of the less remarked on features of video journalism is that it has increased the role of freelancers in television journalism. Many journalists work as casuals, but VJs sell entire reports and need expensive equipment to do their job, as well as the more general skills of finding and constructing stories.

The union that covers journalists (including photographers and camera operators), the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, publishes a recommended list of rates for freelance work on its website <[www.alliance.org.au](http://www.alliance.org.au)> (Resources – Media – Freelance Rates). At the time of writing there was no rate for video work listed there, though the rate for photojournalists might be considered equivalent. That may change in future as more video and multimedia journalists confront the need to negotiate story by story.

The MEAA Industrial Officer, Bede Payne, who helps freelancers in their negotiations with publishers, points out that freelancers need to protect their interests regardless of whether their medium is print, broadcast or online. That means anyone considering freelancing as a VJ will need to think about issues staff reporters often take for granted.



He says anyone taking on an assignment should have the deal in writing and the contract should include certain key elements. It should have a date on which it begins and ends and specify how and when you will be paid. It should also contain a 'termination clause' in the event that the relationship between the person commissioning the work and the contractor fails and it should include a clause that specifies a 'kill fee' is payable if the story is ultimately not used.

### Copyright

In selling a story, you are assigning the rights to use it and the nature of that use should be specified. Bede describes the issue of copyright as particularly important, because it is easy for publishers to misunderstand their rights. 'They think if you give them something they own it', he says.

In general, the contract will be for first usage and any subsequent use of your story or the raw vision should attract a separate fee. You should also consider whether the initial fee applies to Australian rights or includes overseas ones, even though it can be difficult to police overseas use of material. If you want to sell your material separately to overseas markets, you need to ensure each contract specifies the market in which it may be used. The online environment poses particular problems for journalists. Bede describes it as a 'nightmare' because it is so easy for a publisher in another country to download and use work without consent. At the time of writing, the union was formulating a policy on protection of intellectual property.

The contract should also address the following:

- *Professional indemnity.* Journalists run the risk of defaming someone in their stories and individual professional indemnity insurance to protect against this can be hugely expensive. As a freelancer you can seek to have your contract specify cover for professional indemnity.
- *Public liability.* This is not much of a concern for print journalists, but video journalists work with equipment and there is a risk that your camera, lights or kit may cause damage to someone or someone's property. You may wish to consider having insurance for public liability written into the contract.

Organisations generally offer a standard contract, but the MEAA usually advises its members to negotiate items in or out and says only the larger organisations will refuse to budge. The union has a standard contract it suggests members consider and can offer advice. The standard contract can be found on the Alliance website <[www.alliance.org.au](http://www.alliance.org.au)>.

## Shooting video

All television journalists should know something of how images and sound are recorded and edited because this affects the content of their stories. Video journalists, of course, need a thorough understanding of picture composition and how shots can be assembled into a coherent sequence.

The first video camera most people pick up is usually a home video one and their initial approach to shooting is to move the camera about to follow the action or give the illusion of it. But professional camera operators understand that, while it is sometimes necessary to follow the action in a single shot, the flow and pace of a sequence are created by *editing* and shots should be recorded with that in mind.

### Types of shots

The types of shots that can be taken can be categorised according to:

- whether the shots are static or whether they are moving
- the distance between the subject of the shot and the camera
- the angle from which the shot is taken.

The term ‘moving shot’ doesn’t refer to what’s happening in front of the camera. It means a shot in which the camera itself is used to generate movement and can be a:

- *tilt* (that is, a shot in which the camera is moved along the vertical axis – either downward or upward)
- *pan* (that is, a shot in which the camera is moved sideways – from right to left or vice versa)
- *zoom* (that is, a shot in which the camera lens is used to move into or out of a scene. A zoom in will be used to draw attention to one specific part of a shot, while a zoom out will be used to create perspective by revealing a subject’s surroundings.)

Metropolitan television news makes far more use of static shots than moving ones. This is because moving shots are by nature longer and conventional wisdom dictates that you can’t insert an edit during the movement. That makes it hard to accommodate moving shots in stories that mostly run only one minute ten seconds to one minute 30 seconds and in which shots are likely to be edited every few seconds. On the other hand, moving shots are more likely to be used by some regional news services, for precisely the reason they don’t

fit within metropolitan ones – they take up time. In regional news, where journalists and camera operators usually have to report on more stories each day than their metropolitan colleagues, and where editors have to assemble more stories, longer shots containing some movement can be a blessing. Of course, there are some news stories in which a moving shot is essential to tell part of the story. For instance, a report on a cat that survived a fall from the tenth storey would need a tilt shot to show the trajectory. Moving shots are also common in current affairs stories, which are longer, and where a pan can be used to great effect to set a scene. When shooting a moving shot, it's conventional to hold the shot static for several seconds at each end of the move. That way, the static can be used even if the moving shot proves unsuitable.

Static shots are those where the camera and lens are not moved and they come in several broad categories (see figure 11.1). You will notice that, except for the wide shot, these shots are referenced according to the view they give of a human figure.

One of the mistakes novices make is to shoot too much of their story in long shot and too little in close-up. It is easy to do this because we instinctively look at the whole scene and that's what we want to convey. When Reuters photographer Will Burgess came across two students shooting video of a service to remember victims of the Bali bomb attacks, he offered them some particularly memorable advice on how to capture such a scene pictorially. 'What you see in front of you', he said, 'is the whole picture. But within that there are a series of little pictures that tell that story. There's a woman grieving. A child holding a flower. The small pictures are the devices you employ to tell the big one'.

Where possible, news favours action and the camera operator will look for movement in a scene and frame around it. Critics of television news may bemoan its fascination with 'colour and movement', but these remain a fundamental part of the medium.

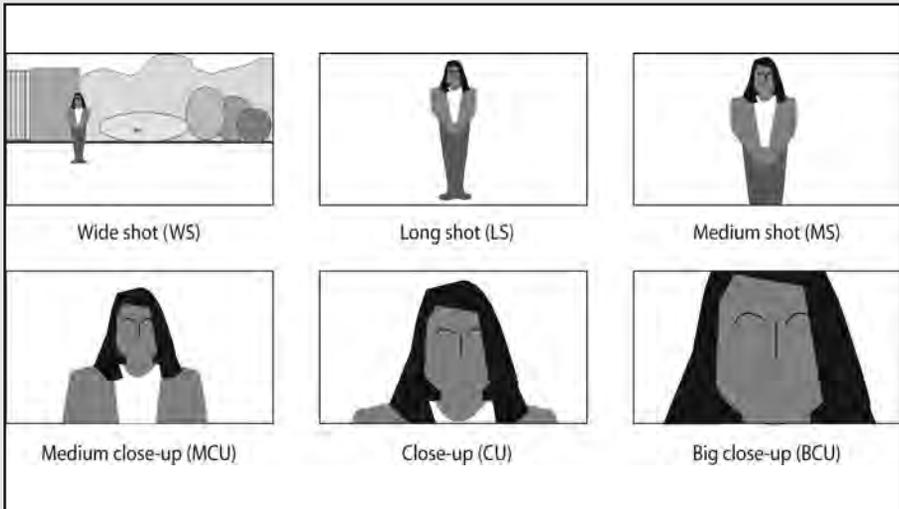
An editor uses combinations of these shots to assemble sequences and, in the process, create movement on the screen.

## Cutaways

There's another type of shot that is often referred to in any discussion of television news and that's the 'cutaway'. A cutaway can be any of the above types of shots – although it's most likely to be a mid-shot or close-up – and its name comes from the role it plays in editing. When two similar shots are joined together in editing, the effect created is often a 'jump cut', a jarring movement in which the subject appears to jump from its position in the first shot to that

Figure 11.1

## Static shot categories



in the second. You will most often see this in interviews when two sections are butted together. In some circumstances, jump cuts are now acceptable, even commonplace. You see them all the time in video clips of pop songs and some documentary makers use them to make it clear that material has been cut from an interview. But jump cuts are still frowned on in most television news and current affairs programs. There are a number of ways of avoiding a jump cut. One is to dissolve between the two pictures instead of cutting. Another is to cover the edit point with a shot of something else. In the case of interviews, this other shot – the cutaway – is usually a picture of the reporter listening or sometimes a close-up of the interviewee's hands. In cases of all-in interviews, the cutaway will often be a shot of another camera operator.

So cutaways are insert shots that allow the editor to cut away from the main action (such as an interviewee's face) in order to contract time without creating a jump cut.

The same principle applies to any continuous action.

## Camera angles

The other way in which shots can be categorised is in the angle of the camera to the subject. A shot might be taken:

- from overhead (a top shot)
- from a position level with the subject
- by looking up at the subject (low-level shot)
- as a point-of-view shot (where the camera is used to show what a particular person, or animal, would be seeing)
- as a tracking shot (a shot where the camera is wheeled along)
- or as a drive-by (a shot taken from a moving vehicle).

Some camera angles have to be treated with caution in news and current affairs because different angles create different impressions. For example, a shot looking down on a person can make them look small, while a shot from below can make the same person look imposing or even threatening. It's not a camera operator or journalist's job to editorialise in this manner unless the story involves some compelling reason to do so. On the other hand, overhead shots – for instance of crowds – can create a useful sense of scale.

## Staying on the right side of the 'line'

One of the trickiest technical concepts for novice camera operators is 'the line'. In her guide to video production, Martha Mollison defines it this way:

In any scene you shoot, there's an imaginary 180° line called the *action axis line*. It runs along the path of the dominant action. This action may be moving people or vehicles, or the action may be the eyeline between the characters in the scene. (Mollison 2010: 93)

As early advocate of video journalism, Richard Griffiths explained, if you ignore the line your pictures will be both difficult to edit and confusing:

When you glance around yourself, you are looking at objects and actions from one perspective. That perspective does not move unless you do. However, the camera does move. It gets different perspectives. And on its own, it doesn't let the viewer know how that perspective is changing. If you take a series of shots from every conceivable angle and cut between them indiscriminately, it would be very easy to disorientate viewers so they lose their sense of direction. (Griffiths 1998: 37–38)

You can see how this affects television production by watching something like a football game being recorded for broadcast. Most of the cameras will remain on one side of the field because if shots from both sides were intercut the players would appear to be running in different directions from one shot to the next. If one camera is placed on the opposite side of the field from the others, its pictures will be used for instant replays or shots that are clearly flagged as separate from the main action.

## **Different stories, different techniques**

Broadly speaking, stories fall into one of two categories when it comes to the way they will be shot. In the first group are 'spot' news stories, which are based on events and where the images come as part of the story. In the second category are stories that can be viewed as issues-based and where the reporting team has to find a way to illustrate an item that does not come with ready-made pictures.

### **Covering picture-based stories**

Examples of the first type of item include demonstrations, most emergency rounds stories, all sports matches and so on. To take a case in point, consider the shots that would be required to illustrate coverage of a protest rally. The entire item might run only one minute 20 seconds or so and some of that time would be taken up with soundbites and perhaps a piece to camera. That leaves only 40 or 50 seconds for picture 'overlay', so the challenge is to explain the demonstration pictorially in less than a minute. First you would want to show the size of the protest, so you would need wide shots and, if possible, a top shot to show the crowd in its entirety and the onlookers. You would also want shots that tell the viewers what the protest is about – people chanting, holding banners and so on and, in order to edit these pictures together, you would need a variety of types of shots, from long shots to mid-shots to close-ups. Onlookers, and people being held up by the protest, would also form part of the visual narrative, so you would want pictures of them, and if there were an incident such as a scuffle, you would want to capture that. You would also record at least some of the speakers, and even if these were not used as soundbites, they would probably be used as natural sound in the edited package.

Recording a range of different types of shots is critical to telling the story effectively. If the rally were illustrated entirely by long shots, it would lack a

human element and if it were portrayed entirely in mid-shots or close-ups, it would lack context. The range of shots also makes it possible to edit the pictures together into a coherent whole.

### Illustrating issues-based stories

By contrast, stories that are issues-based, such as items about movements in the economy, health and welfare, require the reporting team to work harder to find pictures with which to illustrate them. Consider this: a medical journal has reported a significant increase in the rate of diabetes in Australia and you want to produce a news story on it. In this case, you would have a choice of three main means of opening the story. One would be to open on a shot of the journal and article in question. Another would be to open on a wide shot of a city street accompanied by narration explaining the percentage of Australians thought to have diabetes. Variations on both of these techniques make regular appearances on television bulletins, but this means of illustrating stories tends to attract the derisory term ‘wallpaper’. You can create a stronger opening for the story by using one individual as a way of making a statement about a much wider group of people. This tendency to individualise stories attracts a certain amount of criticism from outside journalism, but it makes stories more engaging for audiences and easier to follow.

So the third means of opening a story about the rate of diabetes in Australia would be to focus on a single diabetic and the reporter might want shots of them with a doctor. When a medical organisation is involved in an announcement of this kind, it’s common for it to help find someone prepared to be videoed. There is no point in simply shooting one long sequence of a consultation, since this would be virtually impossible to edit. Instead, as with the protest rally, the operator would need to shoot a range of pictures that would allow the editor to manipulate the real time of the consultation and reconstruct it as a much shorter sequence. The images required would include an establishing shot of the surgery showing both doctor and patient, medium shots of each separately and close-ups. If some specific action were performed – such as the doctor performing a finger-prick test – the camera operator would probably want several different angles and this would necessitate a small amount of reenactment.

While the operator is taking the pictures, both they and the reporter will be thinking about how the images will be put together. It’s important to shoot enough cutaways for an editor to assemble the sequence without jump cuts.

In this story, just as in the protest rally, the natural sound of what's being recorded is very important. One or two seconds of natural sound – be it demonstrators chanting, or part of a conversation between the doctor and patient – can provide punctuation within a reporter's narration and add atmosphere and context to a story.

To make the most of this, the reporter will take good notes in the field of what is being shot and the order in which the shots appear on the recording. Professional and semi-professional video cameras are equipped with time-code, a digital readout that can be seen in the camera viewfinder and during editing, but which does not appear in the broadcast. Noting time-code references for key shots in the field makes it easier to find them quickly, later. It's also easier to write the script if you start constructing it as the pictures are being recorded.

### Shooting ratios

If the completed story is to be one minute 20 seconds, the camera operator will shoot anywhere between four and 15 or so minutes of vision, and sometimes more (not including the interviews). The difference between the amount of vision shot and the amount used in the edited story is called the *shooting ratio* and this will vary according to circumstance. For instance, shooting ratios in television news are usually largest in metropolitan services with comparatively large numbers of reporters and crews and considerably smaller in regional services where there are fewer staff who have to work on more stories per day than their city colleagues. Metropolitan television newsrooms can work with shooting ratios of 10 to 1 or more, whereas regional ones might operate on 3 to 1. There is no rule that determines exactly how much vision should be shot in any given situation. But the camera operator and reporter will need to ensure that, on the one hand, they have enough pictures to cover the narration and, on the other, they don't have so much vision that going through it slows down the editor, who will usually be working to a tight deadline.

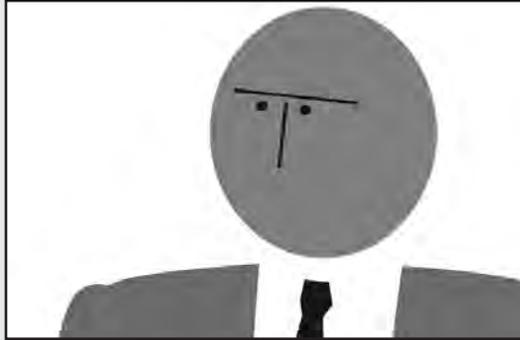
### Framing interviews

Television news and current affairs interviewees are usually framed on their own in either medium close-up or close-up, with the subject positioned a little to one side and looking into the space created between themselves and the other edge of the frame.

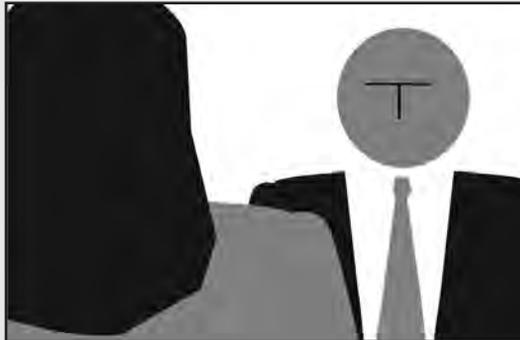
Sometimes, subjects are framed in a two-shot with either another interviewee or with the reporter visible in the frame. But this is less common than showing the subject alone, particularly on television news.

Figure 11.2

## Framing interviews



Interviews for news are usually framed in close-up with the interviewee positioned to one side of the frame and looking into the picture. Wider framing is sometimes used.



A cut from an interviewee to a two-shot has three uses. A shot showing the interviewee listening and the back of the reporter's head can be used to cover the reporter asking a question or as overlay. A shot showing the reporter listening and the back of the interviewee's head can be used as a cutaway, to join together two interview segments. The framing can range from a close-up to a wide shot.

The frame will usually need to include a little space beneath the interviewee's mouth or chin, so that there's room for the 'super', or caption, that many programs use to identify speakers. Some programs prefer to frame quite tightly, so that the top of the subject's head either touches or is cropped

slightly by the top of the frame. The space between the top of a subject's head and the upper edge of the frame is called 'head room' and even when a subject is framed loosely, the amount of headroom should be small. Television is usually thought of as a close-up medium, because it's part of the viewers' living space.

The subject should appear to be looking at the reporter. Since the reporter talking to the interviewee is rarely shown in the same shot, the subject's eyeline needs to be fairly neutral, otherwise it will look odd to viewers. For this reason, the reporter should try to ensure that they face the interviewee at about the same height. Either both should stand or both should sit. If you are much taller or shorter than your interviewee, sit down and it won't be noticeable.

## Reverses

The interview segments used in news these days are so short that reverse shots (also known as 'noddies') and reverse questions, where the reporter repeats some of the questions asked in the interview, are now all but redundant. But if the interview is to be used at any length, such as in a current affairs item, the reporter may need both reverses and reverse questions and these will be shot at the end of the interview.

As explained above, reverses are used to allow the editor to join together two separate segments of interview without creating a jump cut. In a reverse the reporter will appear to be looking intently at the interviewee, sometimes nodding very slightly or smiling if the interview is a lighthearted one.

## Reverse questions

For obvious ethical reasons, it is important that the reporter reproduces any reverse questions as closely as possible to the original, both in wording and intonation. Unless they were working from a written list of questions or comprehensive prompts, most reporters do this by using a hand-held recorder during the original interview, which allows them to check what they asked the first time.

People who are regularly interviewed by the media, especially those who have been subjected to a 'hostile' interview, often make their own recording. So a reporter who does not want to be accused of manipulation will take some care to ensure that their reverse questions are an accurate recreation of the original.

Ideally, any reverses should be shot with the interviewee present because that way the camera operator can include them in the frame, the reporter has something meaningful to look at during the shot and the interviewee knows

what's going on. If the reverses are recorded after the interviewee has left, you will have to use the camera operator's outstretched hand or some object as a reference point and this can tax your acting skills.

Since 'noddies' are used to cover an edit while the interviewee is speaking, the reporter needs to listen, not talk, while they're being recorded. The same applies to reverse two-shots where the reporter's face is on screen. The reporter can't talk during those shots. But the camera operator may also take a two-shot that is just a wider shot of the interview itself – so that the back of the reporter can be seen together with the interviewee's face. These shots are used over the sound of a reporter's question from the interview itself, to add variety to the picture. In these cases, the interviewee needs to remain silent while the reporter should talk, because it's possible to tell whether or not someone is talking even when the shot is taken from behind.

### The axis line in interviews

Reverse shots in interviews need special care to make sure the shot doesn't cross the line, which would give the impression either that the interviewee and reporter are looking away from each other or that they are both looking at someone else, rather than each other.

## Reporters and camera crews

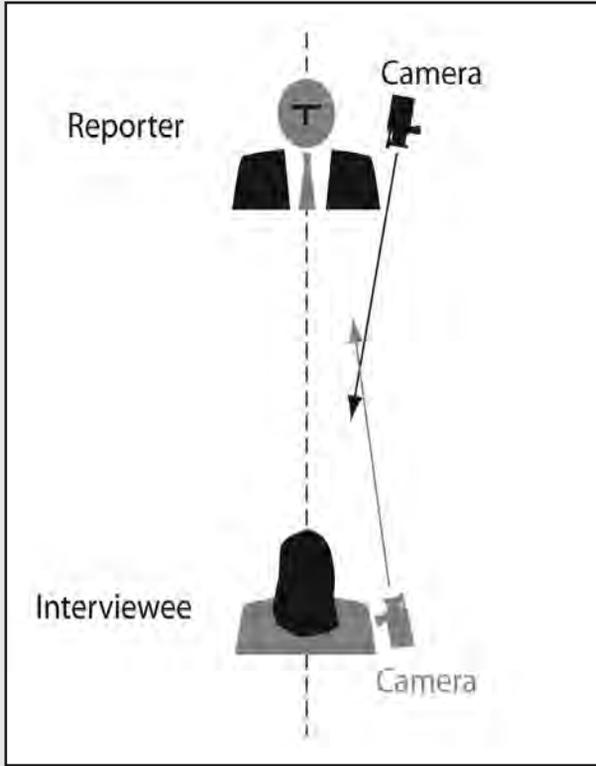
The relationship between the reporter and camera operator or crew can have a big impact on the quality of the end product. For the best possible outcome, you need to draw on the expertise of the crew, which means explaining the story, what you are hoping to achieve and encouraging suggestions. Just having to explain the story to someone else forces you to think about it more clearly and makes the piece easier to write.

The camera operator or crew will likely want to know not just the subject matter of the story but also:

- how long they are likely to have (usually a matter of hours) to shoot the story
- the approximate duration of the script the pictures will be expected to cover
- whether they will have to shoot inside, outside or both
- the number and nature of interviews. (If there is to be more than one interview, the camera operator may frame the subjects so that they look towards alternate sides of the frame. This technique works particularly well if the reporter knows in advance the order in which the interviews will be run, because the framing can then be alternated from one interview to the next.)

**Figure 11.3**

Correct camera placement to avoid crossing the line



The dotted line indicates the action axis line in this shot. The position of the camera relative to the subject may be changed, as long as the shots of both the interviewee and the reporter are taken from the same side of the action axis line. The grey line, beginning right of the interviewee, indicates the placement of a single camera to shoot reverses after the interview.

- whether the interviews are one-on-one or ‘all in’ (that is, a media conference or doorstep) and whether they are interior or exterior.

## Some tips for shooting

Anyone who has ever watched television news will have seen pictures of camera operators/crews at work. In many cases, the camera team will have been following someone in the news down a street – often walking backwards to get a shot of the subject’s face. In almost all of these pictures, the camera operator will have the camera on their shoulder. It’s called shooting ‘hand-held’ or ‘off the shoulder’ and it may look fairly dynamic, but professional news and current affairs camera operators only shoot this way when circumstances demand it, usually in fast-moving situations. The rest of the time they will put the camera on a tripod. When they do have to work hand-held, professional camera operators have a couple of advantages over non-professionals. First their cameras are heavier and more stable than domestic models and secondly camera operators get lots of practice at shooting hand-held and are good at it.

To ensure that any pictures you shoot look as professional as possible:

- Use a *tripod* when you need your shots to be steady. Save hand-held shots for times when there’s a good reason to use that style. Unless you are tilting the camera for effect, make sure the tripod is level. A good tripod will have a spirit level on which you can check this.
- Make sure the camera is *white-balanced*. Cameras need to be adjusted for the change from interior to exterior light and vice versa. Many non-professional cameras white-balance automatically but may also offer a manual selection option for outdoor or indoor. If you want the best results, use the manual settings in the menu. But remember that if you’re not using the auto white-balance function, your settings must be correct. Pictures shot outside while the white balance is set for indoors may look blue and shots taken inside when the white balance is set for outdoors are likely to have an orange tinge.
- On the subject of *lighting*, try to avoid conducting interviews in very bright sunlight. If the day is very bright, try to find a little shade. Avoid having strong sunlight fall on the interviewee’s face or on yours. Harsh light will cause deep shadows. If you’re shooting someone in exterior light, try to keep the sun behind the camera.
- If you’re working on your own and need to shoot at night, the only light you’re likely to want to carry is a small, battery-operated one that fits on top of the camera. You can soften the impact of this light by carrying a 

piece of half-stop or full-stop scrim (a type of gauze). Peg the scrim to the barn doors around the light to give a softer look with fewer harsh shadows.

- If you want to throw extra light onto a subject outside, try using the foil-coloured windscreen reflector from your car.
- If time permits, do a short test record with sound and play it back. This will tell you if you have a problem with the camera, dirty heads, or faulty batteries or microphone. Incidentally, tapes and some memory sticks have a protection system to prevent accidental erasure. If you are using any of these, check that this tab is set to record mode.
- Non-professional cameras have an *auto-focus* mode. The problem with auto focus is that it tends to search for correct focus if something moves in front of the lens. So if you're shooting an interview or your own piece to camera, the focus will shift if the subject moves, or even if someone walks across the shot behind the subject. To avoid this, use the manual focus during interviews or similar shots (or you can line up the shot on auto focus and then flip to manual before you start recording). If you're working with a camera with an LCD screen, you

can set the focus from in front of the camera. Alternatively, you can ask someone else to stand in your place while you focus, and then mark the spot on the ground on which you should stand.

- Think about the *composition* of each shot. Ask yourself what will draw the viewers' attention in the shot? Then frame the pictures to take advantage of this. One error novices often make is that they frame their shots too loosely, so that the subject of the shot is almost lost within the frame.
- Use a hand-held or clip-on *microphone* for interviews. Most cameras have an inbuilt microphone, but this is only suitable for recording ambient sound, not for recording interviews, pieces to camera and so on.
- If you're recording an interview, stand just beside the camera. This will allow you to frame the interviewee full-face and stop them from moving into a profile shot. (Before you start an interview you can also gently remind your interviewee to look at you and not at the camera and to try not to move around too much.)
- Don't talk unnecessarily when the camera is on. Unless you have a separate mic connected, the camera's mic will probably be taking sound and idle chatter ☹

will ruin the ambient sound, which you will want to use during editing.

- Let each of your *shots* run several seconds longer than their edited time. Remember that cameras using tape need a second or two to stabilise each time the drive operation begins. If you expect an edited shot to run three seconds, leave about five seconds at the head of the shot and a few seconds at the end.
- As you shoot the pictures, consider what you are going to say in the narration. Make sure you have enough shots, and an adequate *range* of shots to edit the sequence together. Normally, you would want a wide establishing shot plus medium and close-up shots. But don't overshoot, since this will make editing more cumbersome.
- Think carefully about the number of moving shots you take. Static shots are usually more useful. And when you take a moving shot, remember to hold the shot static for several seconds at either end of the movement.
- The shots in television news stories are edited so tightly that it can leave little room for much creativity in the camerawork. But there are times when a creative touch is called for.
  - For example, a focus-pull from the background to the foreground (or vice versa) can add emphasis to a shot.
  - Some shots might call for a simultaneous zoom and focus pull.
  - Another useful technique is the 'Dutch tilt', where the camera is inclined at an angle. This works well for some stories, but needs to be used sparingly.
  - If you're shooting pictures of children, lower the camera to their level rather than tilting down.
  - You can take a tracking shot by using a trolley or shopping cart as your platform and getting someone to push you along.
- If you want to pan across a scene, it is preferable to move from left to right. This looks more natural because we tend to scan from left to right.
- You can give yourself useful editing points by videoing subjects entering or leaving a frame (or both). For example, if you're taking a shot of a car, hold the shot at the end until the car leaves the frame. The same applies to people, or animals. You can also start with an empty frame and have them moving into frame and then out of it.
- If you are covering a media 



While single-person crews are now most common, metropolitan television newsrooms will assign a camera operator and sound recordist when they need to record good sound in difficult situations and when the camera operator might need help getting action shots. (See page 72 for what happened next.)

Metropolitan news stations have link vans to send material from news scenes to the news room.

conference, try to shoot the speaker(s) walking in. Shots of a speaker at a lectern, punctuated by audience cutaways, can become monotonous. So a shot of the speaker walking in can be very useful to cover narration at the start.

- As you shoot a sequence, remember the need to avoid ‘crossing the line’. This usually means remaining on one side of the action.
- If you are using tape and you rewind your tape in-camera to check it, make sure you don’t accidentally erase any of what you have shot.
- Shooting video for delivery online demands special attention to technical issues. As noted earlier, video is compressed for use online. Compression can make the images a little duller than in the original, which means the lighting needs to be good to start with.

### Looking after equipment

- Don’t leave the camera and tripod unattended. (One risk is that the camera can fall forward if the pan handle is not locked off.)
- If you need to move the camera and tripod together, make sure you hold both securely.
- Keep the camera away from water, salt water in particular, and also humidity.
- Never point the camera directly into the sun.
- Remove batteries from equipment when it is not in use. Batteries can corrode and damage your gear.
- Cables should be loosely wound after use. Winding them too tightly may damage the cables themselves or the connections between the cables and plugs/sockets at each end.

While contemporary broadcast journalism increasingly demands technical skills, this does not imply that reporters need to become ‘geeks’ to work in the new environment. Multiskilling has become possible precisely because the types of recording systems and software programs journalists commonly work with are user-friendly, and often have been produced for the home user.

Nevertheless, working with pictures and sound is much easier if you have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the technicalities and understand the terminology you will encounter in the menus.

## Some useful technical details

The reason so many journalists now work with audio and video or image files is computerisation. To a computer, sound, image and text are all just numbers. To understand how this affects how we work, let's start with sound.

When we speak or create any kind of sound, we generate sound waves that disturb the air around us. Microphones pick up those vibrations in air pressure, convert them into electrical energy and send them to a transmitter or recording device. The last link in the chain of audio reproduction is the speaker, which turns electrical energy back into vibrations in the air, which are then picked up by our eardrums.

Until the mid-1980s, recording systems were analogue – a word that means a copy. Analogue sound reproduction has some drawbacks, including that it is susceptible to noise (crackles, pops and hissing), and the signal degrades with each subsequent copy.

A *digital* recording doesn't copy the original sound; instead, it describes it by taking a series of measurements of the waveform and coding each one. The greater the number of separate measurements of the waveform, the higher the quality of the reproduction will be.

If you have worked with audio or video files, you will already know that they are *big*, because it requires much more data to describe sound or pictures than text. So working with digital audio and video involves a series of trade-offs, between quality on the one hand and storage space and transmission time on the other.

Sound and video files can be stored digitally using disc, server or tape. The advantage of disc or server is that it gives you non-linear access, so you can edit the material in any order. If you work with tape, you will need to edit from start to finish in sequence, but as with disc or server, you can copy the material with no loss of quality.

Here are some terms that are fundamental to digital recording and editing:

- *Binary code*. In digital recording, sound and pictures are data, stored as a finite number of pieces of information (bits), which are used to recreate the original. The information is written in *binary code*; that is, combinations of the digits 0 (zero) and 1 (one) – hence the term 'digital'.
- *Bit rates*. Computers organise data in groups (multiples) of eight combinations of zeros and ones. Digital audio reproduction, including CD, commonly uses 16-bit. But the audio strand of digital video can use 12-, 16- and 24-bit strings. This means that if you want to combine audio from different sources you will

need to check the different bit rates and have the material coded to a single bit rate. (This is most often an issue when adding audio from a CD to a digital video production.)

- *Compression*. A video or audio file can be made smaller by reducing the number of bits in the file. This process is called *compression*, also known as *perceptual coding* or *data reduction*. Compression involves removing from the file material that can be considered redundant. Compression formats are often described as either *lossy* or *lossless*. As the name implies, a lossy format is one that involves the permanent removal of information from the file. Material compressed using a lossless format can be decompressed into a precise replica of the original.
- *Audio compression* draws on a field of research known as psychoacoustics, which looks at the way people interpret what they hear. Researchers have found that some sounds mask or hide other sounds. Since listeners don't hear part of the sound signal anyway, the amount of data needed to encode the sound in these areas can be reduced. In theory, the compressed sound file will be almost as good as the original and sometimes you won't be able to hear the difference.
- *Video compression* is made possible by the fact that the video image is often substantially the same from one frame to the next. It depends on what the picture is showing. For example, a fast-moving sports program will involve a lot of change between frames as players move about the field and different views of the crowd appear in the reaction shots. By contrast, there's only a small amount of change between the frames of a 'talking head' interview. The backgrounds, skin tones and the participants' clothing remain much the same despite changes in the figures' positions. These characteristics of video can be exploited to achieve very high rates of compression.
- Journalists generally work with only a small number of the many different audio and video compression standards available. In audio work, they may work with WAV files, which are uncompressed. Reporters who transmit files across the Internet may use MP3 (short for MPEG 1 layer III). In video they might work with Quicktime or Windows Media. You'll notice many of these codecs (short for compression/decompression) have an MPEG prefix. This is short for the Moving Picture Experts Group, a subcommittee of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which has responsibility for setting compression standards for use in a range of media. Reporters working online will be familiar with JPEG formats for the compression of still images. The number of MPEG formats continues to grow and includes MPEG 1, which was designed for use in CD-ROM, MPEG 2, which is digital video disc (DVD) quality, and MPEG 4, which was developed to deliver audio and video for use on the Internet. While a more detailed explanation of coding is beyond the scope

of this book, anyone working with digital video should try to get a deeper understanding of the compression formats they use, because knowing how a codec works will give you the best chance of exploiting it for maximum quality.

- *Bandwidth*. One of the main reasons for compressing sound and picture files is in order to send them from one place to another. The speed at which a digital signal can be sent depends on the carrying capacity of the wired or wireless medium along which it's being moved. This carrying capacity is called its *bandwidth*. Since the available bandwidth is often either limited or expensive, it's more efficient to transmit compressed files than uncompressed ones.
- *Sampling rates*. While analogue systems capture sound as a continuous wave, digital systems measure, or 'sample', the sound at regular intervals. The number of times per second at which samples are taken is called the *sampling rate* or *sampling frequency* and is usually expressed in kilohertz (kHz). The higher the sampling rate, the higher the sound quality, and the more disc space the file will require. CDs use a sampling rate of 44.1 kHz (that's 44 100 samples per second). Digital broadcast and domestic recording systems offer 48 kHz and 96 kHz. Audio recording and editing systems typically offer a choice of sampling rates, including 48 kHz, 44.1 kHz, 22.05 kHz or 11.025 kHz. Spoken voice recordings sampled at 22.05 kHz will still sound acceptable and will take up less disc space than if a higher sampling rate had been used. For an individual, decisions about sampling rates are a trade-off between quality and disc space. But within organisations, systems are often designed to work with particular bit rates and sampling rates and won't allow them to be mixed.
- *Frames* (in video): There are three main standard definition television broadcast systems used around the world:
  - *PAL* was developed in Germany and is used in Australia and New Zealand and also the UK and China among other countries. PAL has 625 lines to the screen and runs at 25 frames per second.
  - *NTSC* is the US-developed system and is used throughout most of North and South America, Japan and South Korea. NTSC has 525 lines to the screen and runs at 30 frames per second.
  - *SECAM* was developed by the French and is used in France, much of north Africa, parts of the Middle East, in Russia as well as some other countries. SECAM has 625 lines to the screen and runs at 25 frames per second.

These three systems are mutually incompatible and material produced on one system has to be converted to run on another (though domestic systems are manufactured to accommodate playback of both PAL and NTSC so that they can be sold on multiple markets).

Computerised editing systems usually require the operator to choose between PAL and NTSC and the number of frames per second required. In Australia and New Zealand you would normally choose PAL and 25 frames for television.

Digital transmission introduced several new standards to Australia. Standard definition television (SDTV) has 576 lines to the picture and interlaced scanning. High definition television (HDTV) ranges from 576 lines with progressive scanning (called 576p) to 1080 lines with interlaced scanning (called 1080i).

- *Screen ratios*: The introduction to Australia of digital transmission in 2001 brought with it broadcasts in widescreen or 16:9 ratio and began the phase-out of the analogue 4:3 ratio.

## Digital sound recorders

When a radio reporter heads out of the newsroom they are likely to be carrying a solid state device, that records onto flash or HD cards, or a tablet computer. In the newsroom, most reporters will record audio, such as phone recordings, straight into a computer.

Today's portable recorders offer a selection of file formats (such as WAV (uncompressed) or MP3 (compressed), and recording quality (such as 16-bit and 48 kHz). You can record in stereo or mono and set levels manually or using the automatic level recording option. You can also carry out basic editing on the recorder. Alternatively the audio can be transferred to a computer for editing using software such as Adobe Audition or Pro Tools. This is dealt with in greater detail in chapter 12. Where audio quality is important, reporters set their recording levels manually. The formats and recording quality they use will often be a matter of newsroom style. Reporters also have the option of recording audio on their mobile phones, just as these can also record still images and videos. This option is of most use for filing to social media sites where audio quality is less critical than speed of delivery.

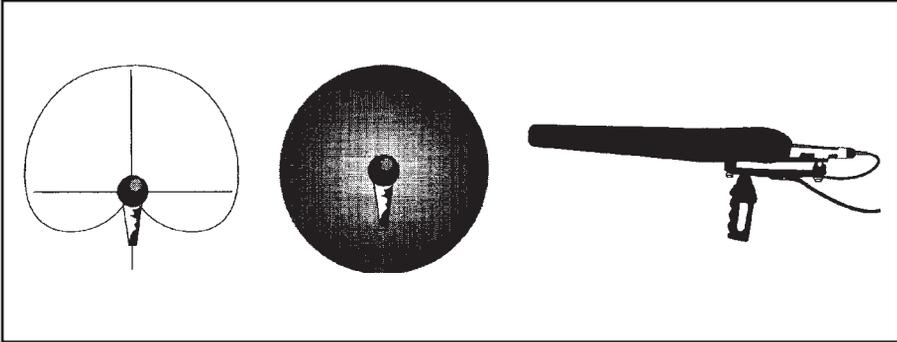
## Microphones

The quality of sound you get will be determined, in part, by the microphone you use and by how you use it.

Radio reporters usually use a *cardioid* microphone, which picks up sound in a heart-shaped pattern around the top of the mic. This means the mic picks up the sound in front of it and, to a lesser extent, the sound on either side, but is not very sensitive to any sound coming from behind the mic.

Figure 11.4

## Types of microphone



From left to right: cardioid, omni-directional (both showing pick-up patterns) and uni-directional or 'shotgun'.

By contrast, an *omni-directional* mic will pick up all the sound within its range, regardless of the direction from which it comes.

Reporters using cardioid mics need to remember to point them at the sound they want to record, be it their own voice or the interviewee's.

Some mics, called *condenser* mics, need a power supply and either require their own battery or draw off the power supply of the recorder or camera. Microphones that do not need a power supply are usually *dynamic* mics. If you are using an *electret condenser* mic, it will have an on/off switch and it is most important to remember to turn it *on* when you want to start recording.

*Uni-directional* or '*shotgun*' mics are used commonly by television news crews. They are highly sensitive to sound directly in front of them and have very little sensitivity to sound from the side or behind. The mic itself is a thin tube of metal that is usually seen covered in a tubular grey windshield. Gun mics are often attached to a pole, so that the camera assistant can reach across a throng of reporters to capture good sound during 'all in' interviews.

Television crews will also have access to *lapel* mics, which are attached to the reporter/interviewee's clothing and are relatively unobtrusive.

In some circumstances, they may also want to use a *radio* mic, which allows sound to be captured via a transmitter even if the person speaking is some distance from the recording unit.

## Microphone technique

Using the microphone correctly is essential for broadcast work. Some microphones, called lip-mics, are designed to be held very close to the mouth and are commonly used by sportscasters who work in the noisy environment of the commentary box.

But most reporters work with standard cardioid or directional microphones (see figure 11.4), which work best when positioned about a hand-span away from the mouth. This is because when we speak we expel air, which can hit the microphone like a light wind. A speaker who is too close to the microphone will find their ‘p’ and ‘b’ sounds popping, which can be very distracting to the listener.

Here are some suggestions to help you make the best possible recordings:

- Sit or stand approximately one hand-span or 15–20 cm from the microphone. You will find this easiest if the mic is mounted or on a stand, but if you have to hold the mic, or if you’re conducting an interview using a single mic, be mindful of its distance from the speaker’s mouth.
- Try to direct the air from your mouth over, under or just to one side of the microphone. This should avoid any ‘popping’ effect. If the mic is mounted, it can be tilted a little, making it easy for you to direct your speech just under or over it. But make sure you don’t turn away from the mic because that will make you sound ‘off-mic’. Alternatively, you can cover the mic with a foam ‘pop guard’.
- If you are using a mounted mic in a studio or booth, adjust its height and angle to suit yourself before you begin recording or broadcasting.
- Some studio/booth microphones have an equaliser switch, which makes it possible to reduce the treble from a higher pitched voice or the bass from a deep one. The setting may need to be adjusted before you use it, but in this case you will probably have a professional supervising the recording.
- If you’re moving the mic back and forth between two speakers, move it gently to avoid any sudden rush of air across the top of the mic.
- Remember to balance the position in which you hold the mic to compensate for any difference in the loudness of the different voices. A softly spoken interviewee will need the mic held closer to them than you might need for yourself.
- If you are a broadcasting novice, you can boost your confidence by thinking of the microphone as a friend you are talking to rather than a piece of equipment. The same technique works with cameras.
- Wear headphones wherever possible when you’re recording. Headphones allow you to hear the quality of sound that is being recorded and confirm that the

microphone is working and has been switched on. The other reason to record using headphones is that the voice we normally hear when we speak is not the voice others hear when they listen to us. That's because we hear our own voices through vibrations in our bones and skull. Other people hear us because our speech causes disturbances in the air that are picked up by the listener's eardrums. So wearing headphones while recording allows you to hear your voice as it will be heard by the audience and to tailor your style accordingly.

- Don't rustle paper or create other irritating sounds.
- Remember the broadcast reporter's mantra – *all mics are 'live'* – in other words, *never* say anything in front of a microphone that you would not be happy to be put to air. It might be.

### Care of the microphone

- Always hold a microphone by its stem, never by the cable.
- Test the microphone by speaking into it in a normal voice. Do not blow into the mic or tap it and try to avoid knocking or bumping it.
- Keep it dry.

### Some tips for good recording

- Before you leave the office, check that the recording device works, that the batteries are sound and that if you need a disc, card or tape onto which to record, you have one.
- Carry a spare set of batteries and a spare disc, card or tape and, where applicable, a windshield for the mic.
- Carry a roll of masking tape or gaffer tape. This is essential if you want to tape your microphone to a lectern or mic stand at a media conference or public meeting.
- If you are recording on disc or tape, make sure its record-protect tab is in the record position. Label your discs/tapes and their containers with the story name or contents, the date and your name.
- Before recording, check your sound levels (unless the machine sets these automatically).
- If you engage the *pause* on any recorder, make sure you disengage it before you begin the recording itself. 

- Record an 'ident' (identification) at the start of each recording. The ident should include the date, the name of the reporter and the subject of the recording.
- A windshield (the foam cap on top of the mic) will help ensure a cleaner recording if you are working outdoors (although be realistic about the amount of wind noise it can stop). It will also stop the 'popping' sound that is created by a speaker's breath hitting the microphone.
- Consider the acoustics of the location in which you are recording. Sound will reverberate in a room with cement or tile walls and dissipate in a very large room or hall. Medium-sized rooms with curtains and carpeted floors usually have good acoustics. If you are recording outside, remember that many locations are identifiable by their sound and you need to decide whether you want this to form the background of your recording.
- Another thing to consider is that, while people tend to exercise some selectivity about the sounds they listen to and the way they hear them, a microphone makes no such discrimination. It will pick up whatever is within its range – in other words, it will 'hear' sounds you might overlook and which might affect the quality of your recordings, such as an air-conditioning unit or a siren going off streets away. That's why it is advisable to wear headphones while recording, in order to hear what the microphone is hearing.
- Background music poses special problems when you want to record an interview and locations where it is playing are best avoided. Even low-level music in the background makes it impossible to join segments of foreground audio cleanly because the edit will create a jump in the music.
- If you are covering a public meeting or a performance, you might want to check in advance what kind of sound system is being used, whether you would be allowed to record direct from it and what type of leads you will need to do this. The alternative is to record from a speaker, which usually results in poor quality sound, or to ask for separate interviews later. Many events provide the media 'splits'; that is, mic or line level feeds from the sound system, usually on XLR (Cannon) connections. You can take advantage of this by carrying an XL to recorder cable. ➔

- If you are producing a more complex report than a short news item, consider recording a short segment (30 seconds or so) of the background sound of every interview location. This background sound can be used to replace the moments of silence between edits when the material is put together. Complete silence is artificial. Every location has its own sound and taking this into account will result in a much more polished production.
- Always check your recording before you leave a location or hang up the phone. If you have to do it again, this will be the best (and possibly the only) opportunity. One of the advantages of recording on computer is that you know it is working because you can see the sound wave. But don't forget to save the file the moment the interview is finished.
- Good sound quality is important and a poor recording can rarely be fixed later.

## Working safely

Working with equipment means thinking about safety – both yours and that of other people. It means thinking about where you leave equipment, how and where you place audio and electrical cables. It means remembering that you should *never* switch on an audio source while you are wearing headphones because a sudden burst of sound can damage your hearing. Here are some basic points to remember:

- If you are working with any form of audio monitoring (and this includes cameras, audio recorders and editing consoles), always turn the audio signal on and ensure switches or faders are *down before* putting the headphones over your ears. Keep the headphones slung loosely around your neck while you switch on and then gently turn the volume up to a comfortable level.
- If you are working with cables (audio or electrical), make sure they are not placed in such a way that they might trip anyone. Always carry a roll of wide tape and tape all cables to the floor. Wherever possible, run cables around the edge of a space rather than across an area where people will be walking. Electrical cables and power boards should be kept away from water – including puddles or drinks.
- Equipment boxes and any gear not in use should be stowed in such a way that they are secure and will not trip anyone.

- In most cases, the only light video journalists carry is a camera-mounted one. Never look directly at the light while changing the bulb or switching on the light. Remember lights become hot during use. Don't try to touch them until they have cooled.

## Sending the story

Reporters often have to file their stories from location, particularly in cases where the deadlines don't allow the luxury of driving back to the newsroom to write and record the story or edit the soundbite. Metropolitan television stations usually have several link vehicles capable of transmitting material via microwave link and these are used for interviews between the studio and a news scene, late-breaking stories or in circumstances where the vision and sound will have to be sent back from the scene.



Some journalists shoot and script their stories and also prepare a rough edit. Video journalist Allan Clarke is one of the team on the SBS program *Living Black* (see pages 163–66).

Radio reporters can send their voicer and soundbites via their mobile phone. Reporters who are further afield, with a little more time available, can edit their voice reports and interviews on their laptop or desktop computer and send the audio file as an email attachment. The story intro and script can be sent at the same time.

Video stories can be sent by microwave or satellite link or by file transfer over the web.

# Editing

## Video editing

When video replaced film editing in television news in the early 1980s, it changed the way stories were constructed. Editing news film meant cutting up the only copy, but tape is dubbed, which gave editors greater flexibility since they could afford to redo an edit that did not work. It also allowed them to edit a story more quickly and with greater finesse, since shots could be trimmed more easily. That, in turn, made it possible to include more shots and shorter interview bites in a story and so the pace of television news and current affairs quickened.

Nowadays, television news and current affairs are edited on server-based systems. But while the underlying technology has changed over the years, the method of news editing has stayed much the same.

The very tight deadlines in television news mean editors use specific techniques to assemble stories as quickly as possible.

This involves laying down first the main audio track, usually the narration, plus any synchrosonised sound segments – the soundbites and the piece to camera. These elements, once combined, form the story ‘bed’. Once it is put together, the reporter will know the length of the item and the cues for any soundbites. This information can then be relayed to the producer.

Once the bed is complete, the editor then colours in the rest of the story, adding overlay to the narration plus low-level natural sound on audio track 2.

Editing by first building a story bed is the fastest way of assembling a story, though digital, non-linear systems allow the editor to change any part of the story at any point in its construction.

**Figure 12.1**

**Stage 1 – main audio track plus synchronised sound segments**

Video		Soundbite		Soundbite	Piece to camera	
Audio track 1	Narration	Soundbite	Narration	Soundbite	Piece to camera	Narration
Audio track 2						

**Figure 12.2**

**Stage 2 – add picture overlay plus ambient sound**

Video	Overlay	Soundbite	Overlay	Soundbite	Piece to camera	Overlay
Audio track 1	Narration	Soundbite	Narration	Soundbite	Piece to camera	Narration
Audio track 2	Natural sound		Natural sound			Natural sound

In an ideal world, an editor would want about one hour of editing time per minute of screen time, though many stories are edited more quickly if deadlines demand it. Current affairs and lifestyle programs produced to a weekly deadline can afford to employ a different method of editing, which is more time-consuming but which gives both the reporter and editor greater flexibility in the construction of the final product and which produces a more polished result. In these cases, the story is built up section by section, with the picture overlay being laid down in tandem with the main narration line and synchronised sound segments. This system allows the editor to incorporate moving shots accompanied by music or effects and to build pauses into the narration in places where the story is better told by pictures and natural sound.

Figure 12.3

## Desktop editing



Journalists often now work with software that allows them either to edit their own video or generate a rough cut for the craft editor.

## Other storytelling techniques

### Split edits

The most basic method of joining narration, overlay and soundbites in television stories is to match the picture and sound edits so that the narration and overlay for each segment end simultaneously and the picture and sound for each soundbite begin together. This form of editing is fast, but the result can be rather flat. Instead, the narrative can be driven forward more imaginatively by what's called a 'split edit' or 'L-shaped edit', which involves backlaying some of the images and sound. This means that overlay from a segment of narration might continue for a second or two over the voice of an interviewee. Backlaying

the vision or sound can help build a sense of flow into the narrative. Radio reporters can achieve the same result by backlaying audio effects and music.

## Thought-track

‘Thought-track’ is the term used to describe a sequence where an interviewee is heard on the soundtrack but their image has been covered with picture overlay. Usually the interviewee will be seen on screen for at least a few seconds before their image is covered by other pictures, so that the audience has a visual reference for the speaker. Thought-track is most often used when an interviewee features extensively in a current affairs/feature story or documentary. In these cases, the overlay is used either to prevent a single image from becoming repetitive or to illustrate a speaker’s words.

## Silent speakers are best avoided

Hearing a speaker while seeing other pictures can add meaning to a story. But the same is not true of the opposite – that is, seeing someone framed in medium close-up or close-up speaking while the sound is the reporter’s narration. In American broadcast jargon, this is referred to as ‘lip flap’. In Australia, it’s sometimes referred to as ‘gold fishing’. Either way, it is discourteous to the speaker, irritating to the audience and best avoided.

## Tips for better editing

There are a few basics that anyone scripting for television news should remember:

- Good editing can improve a good script, but it won’t make up for poor scripting in the first place. The reporter needs to be mindful of the pictures they have available while they are writing the narration and also needs to build in any pauses where pictures and natural sound can be used to continue the narrative.
- Reporters should also make sure that they have enough pictures to cover the words they write. If you don’t have enough pictures to cover your narration, you will either need to resort to file shots, use graphics and telemation (where suitable) or write less.
- Just as a reporter needs to write for the rhythm of speech, an editor needs to consider that when cutting. It is permissible to shorten overly long pauses between words or sentences, ⏪

but if segments of speech are butted together too tightly the result will sound unnatural. Of course, this applies equally to editing audio and so does the next point.

- It is important to respect the integrity of a speaker's comments, even if it is necessary to shorten them. It is very easy to change the meaning of a person's remarks; for example, by cutting out a qualifying phrase.

### Example

If there's no resolution to this dispute by tomorrow, ~~there's a risk~~ the workers will be fed up and call a strike.

Removing some words from this sentence would make it more punchy – but the alteration to its meaning would be unacceptable. An edited comment should retain the meaning of the original.

- When editing soundbites, it is also important to pay attention to the speaker's inflections. In general, you should try to avoid ending a bite on an upward inflection, unless the speaker is posing a question.
- Pictures have their own grammar. Good editing means assembling a sequence of images and sound to tell a story in the clearest way possible, bearing in mind that many in the audience may be giving the bulletin or program less than their full attention.

- One important requirement of edited sequences is that they retain a logical continuity. Reporters should bear this in mind as they script. For example, consider a story about a fire that broke out at night and is being investigated the following morning – the day it will be shown on the news. The reporter can begin with the night-time shots and work forward in time, or begin with the day-time shots and then go back to the previous night's events – but either way, the pictures need to reinforce the narrative, not jump about.
- A similar situation occurs when someone is shown engaged in a linear action (such as driving a car) and then talking, either giving a speech or an interview. Editing back and forth between the person speaking and the action makes a nonsense of continuity – although examples of this are not uncommon.
- The frequency with which shots are changed in a news or current affairs story varies from one broadcaster to another and will often be dictated by the nature of the pictures themselves. Pictures containing a lot of action, or that have a strong visual focus, can be held on the screen for longer than pictures in which very little is happening.

## **A basic guide to non-linear video editing**

There is a plethora of platform and software configurations used for television news, current affairs and documentary editing, but the most common system involves ingesting the pictures shot by the camera operator to a server. Journalists can then call up a low-resolution version from their desktops while editors work with high-resolution files.

If you are a student or home user, you will probably be working on a desktop or laptop system, which will be our focus here.

While these systems vary, their basic operations are similar. The editing interface will usually feature the following:

- a 'bin' in which the story segments are displayed. (Note that the term 'bin' comes from film editing, where strips of film were hung above a storage bin to make it easy to locate each segment.)
- an editing window that shows each edit in detail
- a timeline on which the project is assembled.

Different editors have different ways of working, but the process of assembling a story using the second of the two methods mentioned earlier is generally as follows:

- 1 You record your narration, either directly into the editing system or onto a separate recording system for subsequent transfer.
- 2 You transfer the voice-over and as much of the overlay, interview segments and piece to camera as is needed to edit the story to the computer. It is important to exercise some discipline here. Capture too little and you'll be scrambling for shots. But capturing too much material will slow down the editing process. Of course, additional material can always be transferred as editing proceeds, but this is likely to be a slower process than capturing all the necessary material at the outset.
- 3 It's a good idea to label material thoughtfully as it is captured and also throughout editing. This is a matter for individual preference, but the segments of the voice-over might be labelled sequentially as 'voice 1', 'voice 2' and so on. The soundbites might be labelled by the speaker's name and the overlay labelled by whatever system works best for the story.
- 4 This material will appear as individual segments in the bin on the editing interface.

- 5 Once the elements of the story have been captured and labelled, you can start assembling them in the editing window. The time line tells you the progressive running time of the story, though a reporter who has produced a properly written script will already have a good idea of the story's length.
- 6 To assemble the story, you preview each piece of sound or vision, trim it as required, and then drop it into the video or audio line on the edit window. If the video is accompanied by synchronised sound, the two elements will remain linked on the edit line. This link can be broken if you want to create a split edit or some other effect requiring non-synchronous sound and picture.
- 7 Once the rough assembly is finished, you can fine tune any shots and mix the audio tracks by raising or lowering a line on the screen to adjust levels. You can also add captions or 'supers' to the pictures, using the graphics menu.
- 8 Video editing software enables non-destructive edits, which means that when a shot is edited its file remains the same. What the editor is doing is creating a set of instructions about how the material will be incorporated into the final version. Non-destructive editing means that you can easily lengthen an edited shot or audio sequence by clicking on its edge and dragging it out, since the original material remains unaltered. But it also means that if a file is removed from the computer for some reason, the edited story will disappear unless it's been transferred to tape or another system.
- 9 Video editing software packages include an array of visual effects – from simple dissolves between shots to very complex wipes and cube effects and so on. These can be incorporated just by dragging the relevant icon to the edit line. This is another area in which editing requires discipline because, apart from simple dissolves between shots, visual effects can over-complicate a story. Similarly, editing software makes it easy to speed up or slow down the vision or audio or even play them backwards. As with other effects, they should only be used when there is a good reason for their inclusion.
- 10 Once the story is completed, it can be broadcast from a server, or transferred to disk, or compressed using a code such as MPEG 4 or H264 and uploaded to the web.

## Digital audio editing

There are several types of audio editing systems, of which the most widely used in radio news and current affairs are:

- computer software systems, such as the audio editors in newsroom automation systems such as NewsBoss and NewsRoom as well as specific programs such as Pro Tools, Adobe Audition, Sound Forge and others, which run on

## What a video editor wants from a reporter

Some reporters already edit some of their stories and, in the future, more may be expected to do so. But the bulk of news and current affairs stories are assembled by a craft editor. Reporters using workstations that allow them to view the video for their stories on the same platform as they use to write their script may be expected to supply the editor with a low-resolution or rough cut of the pictures called an 'edit decision list' (EDL). The editor produces a polished final edit from the EDL.

In other newsrooms, the editor works from a copy of the reporter's script.

In this environment, the editor is the last link in the story production chain before an item is broadcast.

It's not always possible for the journalist to be on hand while their story is being compiled, but since the reporter is ultimately responsible for the product that goes to air, they need to supply the editor with clear guidelines as to the story's construction. These include:

- a neat copy of the script
- if possible, a shotlist of the camera vision
- details of all soundbites, either a transcript or accurate in and outcues and preferably time-coded references for these as well
- if there is more than one take of the piece to camera, a clear indication as to which one is to be used
- unambiguous notes, preferably with time-coded references, for any key overlay
- if library vision is required for the story, the reporter may need to have the pictures retrieved in advance.

Finally, the editor will want to be trusted to do their job without interference. However, since the reporter is responsible for the story, they may be expected to approve the edited version before it goes to air.

a Windows or Mac platform and which allow the operator to edit a waveform by moving elements around the screen, much as text is edited onscreen

- hard disk recorders which also offer random access editing
- mobile devices including tablets and smart-phones on which you can record, edit and send files.

The process of audio editing varies according to the software package and also according to the recording and transfer system used. Phone interviews are

**Figure 12.4****The audio editing screen in NewsBoss**

Digital audio editing allows a reporter to highlight and delete or cut and paste audio as easily as text. Image courtesy of NewsBoss.

recorded direct to computer, but material recorded ‘in the field’ may have to be transferred to the computer for editing. This process is much faster if you are organised. In radio, speed matters. So you should know what segments of interview or narration you want to use and only transfer those you will actually need, with a few seconds of slack at either end of each segment. Once the material is captured, it becomes the master file for that item on the computer’s hard drive and it is to this original file of data that the system will return to construct the final edit once the elements have been chosen.

### **If you want to read more ...**

Martha Mollison, *Producing Videos: A Complete Guide*, 3rd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2010.

# 13

## Compiling a news bulletin

### Bulletin formats

All newsrooms with a daily output are driven by the clock. But deadlines are particularly remorseless in radio and television, where programs must often start and end at a precise second.

In order to satisfy the need for punctuality and precision, fixed duration broadcast bulletins are generally compiled to a format so that, while the content changes, the structure of the bulletin – including opening and closing themes, any headlines, promos and so on – is fixed. Twenty-four-hour news services have a more flexible construction.

The duration of the bulletin is the overriding formatting concern in free-to-air news. Television news services generally run 30 minutes or one hour. Once you remove the ads from a commercial half-hour service, the content is generally about 23 minutes.

The longest radio bulletins on the AM band are broadcast by the ABC, where some of its local and national news services run 15 minutes. Commercial AM news bulletins generally run between four and five minutes and bulletins on the FM band are usually three or four minutes long at the most.

People who work in newspapers delight in noting how few *words* radio and television can fit into their bulletins, compared to the feast of text available in their medium. But electronic journalists understand that their media serve different roles and provide information in a different way and that anyone interested in the breadth and depth of information available in a paper will read one.

## Different services, similar aims

The radio audience tunes in to be kept up to date, both on the big daily issues and on the minutiae of life – including how the traffic is flowing and what the weather is going to be like. The typical audiences for AM and FM news are years apart in age, and the content and packaging of stories on the two bands reflects that, but the reasons people listen are remarkably similar:

To find out what's going on. To be brought up to date with things that are interesting and important to them. They want to feel like they're in touch. We want to reflect the important things happening in Melbourne. But we want to reflect anything important to Melbourne people as well. (Rob Curtain, 3AW)

So often our audience members are listening so that when they're at work having a conversation with a friend they know what's going on. They're not listening for an in-depth analysis of complex issues. They want to know a bit about what's going on in the world so that they can have an informed conversation with somebody else. So you need to keep that in mind as you write. (Mark McKeown, WSFM.)

## Line-up

The order in which stories appear within these news bulletins and the amount of time each is given is a more complex business than you might think and involves far more than simply putting items in some theoretical order of 'importance'. For one thing, the criteria that determine a story's significance and therefore its position in the bulletin will vary from one news service to another. Secondly, bulletin producers in both radio and television are concerned with the way in which stories flow from one to another and the pace of the program as a whole.

It is a truism in broadcasting that its information programs, unlike newspapers, have no 'back page'. Newspaper readers can read what interests them and skip the rest. Traditionally, a listener or viewer who became bored with an item has not had that luxury, they have had to wait for the next item or switch stations or switch off. The fear of losing the audience informs much of the programming philosophy on the majority of newscasts, which are broadcast from beginning to end in the order determined by the producers.

What makes a story important? That will depend on the news service and its audience. It will depend on whether the audience is local, statewide or

national, on the age range of the listeners and on whether the service is a public-sector or commercial one.

### Audience influence on news agendas

Most radio services serve a specific geographic region as well as a specific, usually age-based, demographic and those factors determine their rundown. For instance, the pay TV service Sky News, can be seen across Australia and New Zealand and that reach drives its news agenda. It's more likely to focus on national and international issues and less likely to cover stories of limited, single-city interest. The ABC's News Radio and Radio National are national, while Triple J is national and youth-focused. A growing number of radio newsrooms service two stations with two different audiences. For instance, of the two Austereo stations in Sydney, one is skewed more to female and the other to male and its newsroom produces two slightly different bulletins to reflect that, with the one with the larger male audience including more sport. The nature of the FM audience is reflected in the volume of show-business stories they run; stories that rarely make an impact on the commercial AM news-talk bulletins, where the audience is largely over 45, as 2GB's news director, Erin Maher, notes:

What our listeners are looking for in general is the 4 H's, which is Hip-pocket, Home, Health and Heart. So we focus on things like petrol prices, taxes, things that affect mortgages like interest rates and also superannuation. They're all important because that's what our audience is dealing with. But we also cover more social issues, hospitals and schools – that's what their families are dealing with. Being a journalist is always a matter of looking at what's going on in the world around you. If you're a 20-year-old coming out of uni, look at what matters to your parents, and that's what you focus on. But that doesn't mean we only focus on those issues. We obviously cover everything else. But we're less likely to give prominence to the latest pop star scandal that another station's audience would find interesting.

At the public service broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, staff will consider a story's impact – that is, the degree to which its subject matter affects the community. So radio and television bulletins on the public-sector broadcasters will be more likely than their commercial counterparts to lead on stories about politics, economics or world affairs.

This does not mean that commercial services do not do this, simply that the ABC and SBS bulletins are more likely to give prominence to such stories. This judgement revolves around not just the newsroom's definition of 'importance' but also its definition of 'community'. The ABC has a responsibility to consider the nation as an entirety in its programming decisions.

So when public-sector broadcasters decide on the importance of a news story, the decision is framed by a notion of a story's impact on the community as a whole. Former ABC Victorian News Editor, Marco Bass, points out that there is no 'simple formula' for the way daily decisions about news line-up are made and that 'judgements about the weighting that national, international and local stories need to be given vary according to whether each story is a development on a running story or a genuinely new one'. He describes the ABC style as one where:

... local is not always king, sensational is not always king. The philosophy 'if it bleeds it leads' does not come into ABC news judgements. So therefore we are more likely to give prominence to a major national or international story in a local market than our commercial competitors are.

By contrast, commercial newsrooms have a much narrower definition of 'community', seeing it largely as a synonym for 'audience'. This means a producer at a commercial radio or television station will assess the significance of individual news items in terms of their 'appeal' or 'interest' to listeners or viewers.

However, it is important not to see these judgements in too simplistic a light. Issues of stories' importance or impact on the entire community do inform decisions in commercial broadcast news, but rarely at the expense of their interest or appeal. Often, a producer or reporter will ensure that both criteria – importance and appeal – are satisfied by ensuring that a story is packaged in such a way that its audience appeal matches its impact or importance.

## **Presentation**

News presentation evolves like every other facet of bulletin production, though changes have been gradual. As noted earlier, the biggest changes over the years have been the increasing number of women presenters and the replacement of very formal delivery with a conversational style. The services that have done the most to change presentation standards are those on FM radio and none more so than Nova FM, whose newsreaders became the first in Australia to be accompanied by a backing track, or 'bed'. During the time she was a NOVA FM



Radio news bulletins are generally presented from purpose-built booths and presenters handle their own technical work. This is the news presentation studio at Nova FM in Sydney. Newsreaders have to wear headphones because the studio speakers are automatically muted when any of the microphones are on, to prevent feedback.

journalist, Penny Ghosn explained the backing track kept the news in synch with the station's music format:

The idea for the bed is something that we researched. We had a listen to a lot of the stuff coming out of Radio 1 in the UK, and they use beds and it sounded awesome. It makes the news sound like another part of programming – there's no stop down from music to news, which means a better service for our listeners. It encourages readers to pick up the pace of the read. The music is a call to arms kind of thing – our music's on, get ready to read. It makes us up the pace and, going by feedback, our listeners like it.

## Assembling the bulletin

In radio, where bulletins fall every hour, or even more frequently, the running order of stories can be decided quite close to air time, not least because a radio bulletin is a technically fairly simple affair. It will be read usually by one person, who will open and close their own microphone and cue the audio inserts as they are needed, usually from a server.

A television news bulletin is an entirely different matter, though the complexity of the broadcast varies between markets and channels.

A prime-time, metropolitan, free-to-air news service is a highly complex production. As well as the prerecorded stories, there may be live-to-air links to reporters or interviewees outside the studio. During the day, the bulletin will have utilised the talents, not just of reporters, camera crews and editors, but of graphic artists, the video library, technical operators handling video and audio links, a make-up artist for the newsreader, and so on.

### Day-long planning

Ensuring that this large team of people, some of whom will also work on other programs, produces a glitch-free bulletin requires day-long planning.

The news producer will begin developing the rundown (the running order of stories complete with production details) soon after the morning news conference, or from mid-morning. The total length of the ad breaks and their configuration is predetermined and the newsroom will have no power to adjust this. It is a reminder that commercial news services have to be constructed around the revenue-raising requirements of the station.

The third segment of a half-hour commercial program is filled by sport and, while this may be coordinated by a sports producer, the news producer will have to look after the timing requirements of the program as a whole.

### Building around ad breaks

Advertisements on a commercial news program can be seen as an interruption to the flow of information with severe repercussions for the credibility of the medium. However, those who work in commercial television news usually take the view that, without the ads there would be no news and that commercials are part of the fabric of the program just as they are part of the fabric of the print media. In television, commercial breaks allow a news service to promote stories scheduled further down. They also add pace to a

program and bulletins are structured around them. One of the most important news stories each day will be used to lead the second break – that is, the segment that follows the first commercial break. This gives each segment of a commercial bulletin a strong beginning, and audiences learn that they should continue watching after the advertisements or risk missing a significant story.

## Deciding running order

In determining the running order of a news bulletin, producers in both radio and television are governed by the following factors:

- the duration of the program
- fixed items – such as the sting or opening titles at the head of the bulletin, any closing theme and other elements, which are included in every edition of the news
- the relative importance of the available news stories within the framework of the station's news agenda
- the 'newness' of each item – in other words, whether the item is breaking news or the latest development in a story that has been running for a period of time
- the placement of commercial breaks (on commercial services)
- a desire to ensure that the stories flow logically from one to another and that the bulletin has an appropriate pace.

*Pace* and *flow* have considerable bearing on the structure of broadcast news programs. This means that the different types of story, outlined in chapter 4, are mixed within each bulletin so that the audience hears a range of stories of different length and a variety of voices. This gives a bulletin a faster-paced feel than would be the case if it comprised one long story after another. Stories with a common theme will usually be grouped together. For example, television bulletins might run a string of several short foreign items one after the other. And producers will often try to create a link from one story to the next using signposts such as 'Elsewhere in Europe ...', 'Still overseas ...', 'Back home' ... and so on. At their best, these lines signal loose connections between stories. At their worst, these segues can sound rather strained.

The need to ensure a logical flow between stories means that producers usually try to avoid placing a light item immediately after a story dealing with tragedy, since this would undermine the gravity of the first item.

Commercial radio bulletins, particularly those on music stations, are now dominated by the shortest story formats – the live read and intro followed by a

soundbite, which is itself rarely more than 15 seconds in duration and usually much shorter. The trend towards shorter soundbites has been driven by a desire to keep bulletins as fast-paced as possible, which reflects assumptions about the attention span of the audience. But the increase in the number of these shorter stories in radio bulletins may also reflect changes in the economy of radio news production. It is easier and quicker to prepare an intro and soundbite than it is to write a package, and this allows reporters to produce more stories.

## **Formatting in television news**

Television has its own formatting devices and they can be seen in almost any mainstream bulletin.

- Commercial news stories routinely hover around the one minute 20 second length, preceded by an intro of 10–15 seconds.
- Each story will have about four, sometimes more, short soundbites. Most stories feature a reporter's piece to camera of about 10–12 seconds.
- There will be a reader voice-over in each segment, breaking up the pattern of packaged items.
- A bulletin is likely to include at least one live cross to a reporter at a news scene either to update a breaking story or just to lend immediacy to the broadcast.
- About halfway through the bulletin, some commercial services might feature several short foreign stories read by the news presenter, with each item separated by a wipe across the screen.
- Finance news will generally appear in the second break.
- The throw to each ad break will be accompanied by a 'teaser', a headline and pictures of a couple of the stories still to come. 'Teasers' are so important to the pace and flow of a bulletin that they have also been used in the middle of some public-sector bulletins, which don't have ads or station promos within the news.
- The sports segment will often feature a live cross to a reporter at the scene of training, a night match or a tribunal hearing, etc.
- Before the presenter says 'goodnight', there will be a 'light and breezy' or 'feel-good' story with strong pictures, to leave the viewers feeling that the world is not such a bad place.

Television news is an expensive business. Those with control of the newsroom budget treat their product with caution and this usually excludes moving too far from the accepted format. In the ABC's satirical program *Frontline*, the executive producer once observed that 'change is the natural enemy of news and current affairs'. The Australian experience to date has been that the most

popular news services are those which maintain a degree of continuity and effect changes with subtlety. The most obvious changes to the look of bulletins in the past decade has been driven by the introduction of digital transmission and the widescreen 16:9 screen ratio. News producers responded by pulling back the cameras and widening the framing on the news presenters. That has made both the sets and the background graphics more prominent and there is now more use of moving rather than static backgrounds.

If you compare the main metropolitan news bulletins on any given night, you will see the way news values and formatting vary between the public-sector and commercial services. The rundowns of the commercial programs are often very similar, while the ABC will put more emphasis on political and international stories.

The ABC and SBS bulletins are also less tightly formatted than are the commercial ones. Their story intros vary in length and are generally longer than those on commercial services. Their stories are usually longer too.

## Timing

Timing is critical in radio and television news. Broadcast time is not elastic. Many bulletins are networked, which means they need to start and end at precisely the right second for different network stations to switch in and out of them.

Ensuring that the bulletin is neither under-set nor over-set – that it has neither too few nor too many items – means the producer must pay meticulous attention to timing throughout the day. When the running order is first drawn up, the producer will assign projected times to items and reporters are expected to adhere to these with room for error of only a few seconds. Any substantial over-run in one item will have to come out of another one. As the stories for the bulletin are edited and their durations become known, the producer will tailor the program so that the broadcast will run to time. If a bulletin is running over time, the producer will look for a story or stories to drop. If they have a choice between items judged not essential to the program, the decision about which one(s) to drop may be based purely on time.

Once the program is on air, the producer may have to do some fine-tuning to make sure it runs to time. There are a couple of other devices used to time-out a news program. One is the weather presenter, who may be asked to tailor their segment. Secondly, many news programs end with a play-out of music and pictures. These play-outs or ‘closers’ run a set time – usually one minute. The closer is played so that it finishes at the precise second that the bulletin itself has

to end, though the audience will see and hear only the amount needed to fill the gap between the presenter’s goodnight and the off-air time.

## Shaping the rundown

The bulletin rundown that a producer first draws up each day may be much the same as the one that goes to air, or it may bear little resemblance to the final program. That depends on the way news develops during the day.

News rundowns are compiled using specialist software and the presenters’ intros and the supers (the captions that identify reporters, locations and interviewees in news stories) are all entered into a database from which they will be called up during the broadcast. The database also contains any graphic

**Figure 13.1**

Final news rundown

Item No	Story Slug	Segment	Presenter	Final Appr	Est Duration	Actual	Front	Back	Cume	Last Mod By	Camera
	TENBUG	VTR				0:00	5:00:00 PM	5:00:31 PM	0:00	Angela Murphy	
	OPENER STANDBY	VTR			0:10	0:00	5:00:00 PM	5:00:31 PM	0:00	Angela Murphy	
	OPEN digger, rounds, shots	INT			0:30	0:33	5:00:00 PM	5:00:31 PM	0:33	Sandra Faulkhead	...L
		VTR				0:00	5:00:33 PM	5:01:04 PM	0:33	ATVPA1 ATVPA1	
	INTRO PLAYON	LIVE			0:03	0:00	5:00:33 PM	5:01:04 PM	0:36	Angela Murphy	C5/WS
	POINTER (carbon)	LIVE			0:05	0:07	5:00:36 PM	5:01:07 PM	0:43	James Sutherland	C2/25
	THROW DIGGER CROSS	LIVE			0:15	0:24	5:00:43 PM	5:01:14 PM	1:07	Martin White	C1/W
	DIGGER CROSS	LEVE			0:30	0:00	5:01:07 PM	5:01:38 PM	1:37	Sandra Faulkhead	ASS?
	DIGGER ##	LVO				0:00	5:01:37 PM	5:02:08 PM	1:37	ATVPA1 ATVPA1	...L
	MINISTER ##	VTR			0:20	0:20	5:01:37PM	5:02:08 PM	1:57	ATVPA1 ATVPA1	...L
	THANKS DIGGER	LIVE			0:05	0:04	5:01:57 PM	5:02:28 PM	2:01	Sandra	C1/B

This is the first page of the final rundown from the draft that appeared in chapter 2 (figure 2.3). By air time, a breaking story (related to the death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan) had replaced the original lead item. While not all the details on the rundown will make sense to a casual observer, you can see the importance that news services place on crossing live to reporters. You can also see that even very short items require a duration to be listed on the rundown. Rundown courtesy of Ten Melbourne.

backgrounds that identify stories behind the newsreader. Other stored data will include share market and currency information that will be used during the finance section of the bulletin and the weather maps and daily forecast details.

While all bulletin systems are now computer driven, graphics production has been digitised since the mid-1980s and was the first main area of newsrooms to go digital. While the bulletin is taking shape, editors will begin assembling stories, often starting with items drawn from the early international feeds. Time differences between Australia and New Zealand and the major news centres of London and North America mean the European feeds arrive early in the morning local time, while the main US ones come in between morning and early afternoon.

At the same time, an associate producer will probably be writing short news updates and promos, which run throughout the day, and copy for the news bar that some services run along the lower edge of the screen. At commercial services they will also be writing the 'breakers' or 'playoffs', the transitions from each section of the news to a commercial break, which promote stories still to come. A producer may also be assigned to script interview questions for the reader and the throws from the newsreader to the sports presenter and the weather presenter. These are intended to sound off the cuff, but are frequently scripted and available on the teleprompter.

### Technical aspects of bulletin production

In the hours before the broadcast, the news presenter will check their scripts and a studio director will supervise the technical requirements for the bulletin and watch as many as possible of the stories that will be used in the transmission. The director will want to know how each story begins and ends and where the soundbites occur in order to make the broadcast as polished as possible.

In the hour or so before the broadcast, the studio and control room crews will begin preparation. One of the final steps will be a sound check on the news presenter(s) to make sure their microphone controls are set at the right level.

At ten seconds to air, the control room begins the countdown to broadcast.

### **On air**

Some regional television and radio news bulletins are prerecorded, especially in those places where a single newsroom prepares bulletins for several geographical areas. This is done by having the news presenter record all the story intros. These are stored in a server with the packaged stories and tailored bulletins are then sent out to each of the different areas. Each bulletin will feature



Some news services, including Ten Sydney, have built their presentation area into the newsroom.

some stories in common (known as ‘travellers’) and some stories specific to its area.

Metropolitan news bulletins are broadcast live and the on-air period is one of considerable tension for those involved. In an ideal world, all the items on the bulletin rundown would be standing by in the replay system before the start of transmission. In reality, and this is more common in some organisations than in others, the program often starts with a few, or even more, of the stories still being edited. If any of these items is not ready in time to roll in its slot, the running order has to be shuffled while the bulletin is on air.

As the newsreader finishes the intro to each story, the control room staff close the microphone and key the item to air. The director or their assistant will call out the duration of the story, so that everyone knows how long it will be before the presenter has to read the next intro. The control room will then focus on keying the supers over the story and on having the following story cued and

ready. Since supers are usually added live as the story goes out, it is imperative that the control room has accurate cues. If these are imprecise, the caption may appear in the wrong place. As soon as a story ends, the switcher will key the presenter to air and so on.

## Standards and breaches

Radio and television news and current affairs programs are bound by Codes of Practice, which are explained further in chapter 15. The final arbiter on public complaints over breaches of these Codes is the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), but in the first instance complaints are dealt with by the broadcasters themselves.

Complaints are relatively uncommon. The commercial television umbrella group, Free TV Australia (FTVA, formerly Commercial Television Australia) recorded a total of 1292 written complaints in relation to its Code of Practice in the year to June 2010. This was 384 more than the previous year, but FTVA noted it amounted to 'less than 2 complaints per month per licensee' (FTVA 2010b: 2). Of those complaints, news attracted the largest percentage with more than 22 per cent and most related to issues of privacy, with bias the next most common complaint. Current affairs programs attracted nearly 10 per cent of complaints and the most commonly complained about issue was bias (FTVA 2010b: 7). Of these complaints, stations upheld only 26 and none of these related to the content of news or current affairs programs.

In the years 2009–10, ACMA found 30 breaches by news and current affairs programs. *A Current Affair* was the program found in breach most often (six times). *Today Tonight* was found in breach three times. Most of the breaches of the Codes of Practice were in relation to factual accuracy. Two cases involved a lack of sensitivity; one of which concerned images of bereaved people and the other failing to ensure that victims were not identified before relatives were notified. One case involved gratuitous emphasis on race (ACMA n.d.: n.p.).

While some complaints each year are the result of specific issues in the news, there are other things that trouble viewers from one year to the next, particularly the airing of vision, either violent or containing sexual references, considered unsuitable for the 'G' classification zone in which many news and current affairs programs are scheduled or in news promos aired during times when children would be watching.

The ABC releases monthly reports on Upheld Complaints on its website. In the three months to June 2011 it upheld 56 complaints, of which 18 related to radio and television news, 11 to radio and television current affairs programs

and 12 to news online (ABC 2011c: n.p.). The number of comments and complaints the ABC receives can be seen both as a measure of the size and reach of the Corporation and also as a reflection of its relationship with its audience. The ABC audience is more picky than most and errors do not go unnoticed.

One issue that appears regularly in complaints to television stations is that of graphic or distressing images within news bulletins. This is a particularly difficult issue for program producers, particularly those on mid-evening bulletins. Unlike other television programs, news and current affairs bulletins (plus live or near-live sports broadcasts) are not required to be classified (FTVA 2010a: 8). But the main free-to-air news bulletins and some public affairs programs air during the G (General) viewing period and broadcasters are expected to be mindful of the viewing audience and exercise care in what they present. In general, reporters and producers restrict graphic images (such as those of dead or wounded people) to medium and wide shots and routinely remove the more ghastly images from available vision. But removing some graphic images from stories on armed conflicts, natural disasters and accidents can have the effect of sanitising the news and can reduce the gravity of some events.

### The television studio and control room

A presentation studio for television news and current affairs programs is linked electronically to a control room, which houses panels of equipment that drive the studio's operations.

Like so many other features of news production, news studios have shrunk over time and nowadays are most likely to be compact and purpose-built. It is increasingly common to locate the news set within the newsroom, so that the computers and news staff form part of the backdrop to the broadcast. Seven Network's Sydney bulletin is one that has followed the US NBC's example of making its news set a shopfront, visible to the public.

News studios have as many as three cameras. This gives the director a choice of two angles on the presenter plus a camera for the sports and weather presenters or for wide-angle shots of the set. Traditionally, each camera had an operator taking instructions through headphones from a studio director located in the control room. The presenters were cued by a floor manager who also took instruction via headphones from the →

director. Presenters read their scripts from a teleprompter and the operator who drove it would also be located on the floor of the studio.

This expensive production model is still used for the most competitive, metropolitan mid-evening bulletins, but it has given way to increasing automation on those bulletins where cost efficiency is more critical.

For instance, at the Sydney-based, 24-hour service Sky News, the studio cameras are remote-controlled and the presenters operate their own teleprompter (and apply their own make-up). But since Sky News includes the regular use of live transmissions from outside sources, it operates with a standard studio control room team. The same studio model is used in some subscription news services, such as finance news. In 2000, Network Ten adopted a different production model to defray some of the costs of moving to digital technology and widescreen sets. It relocated the presentation of its Perth and Adelaide news bulletins to Sydney and Melbourne respectively. Stories were shot and edited by reporters in each city, then fed interstate to the presentation centre. Digital satellite technology meant the bulletins could be delivered with no loss of technical quality though the move was widely criticised. By early 2011, that experiment had ended. Local presentation returned to Ten in Perth in mid-2008 and it resumed in Adelaide a little less than three years later. Many news services maintain single-camera, single-operator studios that can be used for news updates or other special broadcasts that don't warrant the expense of a full studio.

Some commercial radio networks use regional news centres, or hubs, to prepare national, state and sometimes local news for many different geographic areas. Regional television networks Prime 7 and Southern Cross Ten each have a news centre in Canberra from where they send out news updates to those of their markets for which they do not prepare full bulletins.

While some news and information programs use the newsroom as their set, others feature a purpose-built background or one that is electronically generated. The set is an important feature of news programs, at least to news executives. There's a maxim in commercial television news and current affairs that if the program is not rating well then 'change the set, change the producer and change the presenter' in that order. Sometimes none of these options work.

## The ratings

Performance appraisal is standard practice for many Australian workers these days, but broadcasting must be one of the few working environments in which that appraisal happens every day. It's the result of the ratings, and the figures are taken very seriously. They determine whether a program has a future or, in the case of prime-time news, whether key staff stay or go. Stations supplement this data with their own research.

In television, rating figures are delivered electronically to stations Monday to Friday soon after the beginning of the working day. They provide a minute-by-minute breakdown of the previous day's viewing, though newsroom staff will usually look at figures presented in quarter-hour blocks. The figures show the percentage of households that have at least one set turned on at any given time (known by the acronym HUT – households using television) and the channel to which the set is tuned. But far more complex data, showing the viewing patterns of various demographic groups, will be examined by network executives. (In television, the audience is segmented into socio-economic groups A, AB, B, C1, C2, C3, D and E. Groups A–B are white-collar professionals, C are clerical workers, D manual workers and E unemployed. In radio, these groups range from A to H, with the additional categories including labourers, students and retirees and those not in the labour force. Audiences are also segmented according to age, whether they have children, pets, their buying habits and so on.)

Newsroom staff will look at these figures to tell them a number of things:

- Their program's share of the available audience.
- How this compares with other news services (even though only Channels Nine and Seven occupy the same timeslot and can be properly compared).
- How the latest ratings compare with those for the day before, the previous week and so on. News bulletins, which air seven days a week, usually rate better on some days than on others. For example, weekend figures are often better than weekday ones.
- The figures will also be studied for 'turn on' and 'turn off' factors. Stations are interested in the numbers of people who continue watching, switch on or switch off as one program ends and another begins. Staff can also see whether the number of viewers climbs or declines during their program. Viewing patterns are rarely fixed over 30 minutes and even less so over one hour and the reasons for the changes are the subject of much speculation.
- The minute-by-minute breakdowns allow news executives, and especially those involved in current affairs and infotainment programs, to gauge the type of

stories that prompt viewers to turn off. These programs are often criticised for paying insufficient attention to social issues at the expense of more appealing fare. But lessons learnt from ratings data are often behind these choices.

The main significance of ratings is that they determine the value of advertising time. Advertisers are interested not just in the total audience but in target groups to which they have the greatest chance of selling their products. The primary reason for the compilation of ratings figures might seem to exclude the public broadcasters, ABC and SBS, but the audience figures for these services increasingly are scrutinised to justify their funding levels and SBS, of course, also sells advertising.

Some programs can survive comfortably with a niche audience; one that might not be numerically large but is influential or high-income. The Sunday morning business and political interview programs fit this category. In prime time, however, poor ratings augur a bleak future. Long-time producer at Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* and later executive producer of *Sunday* and *Business Sunday*, Stephen Rice, once described the moment when the ratings figures appeared on the computer each morning as 'the most traumatic time of day', noting that 'These are the figures by which a television producer lives and dies and you can start to respond to them as if they're some sort of Holy Grail' (Rice 1998: 13).

There's no shortage of examples of why the ratings command such respect from program makers. Here's just one:

In 1994 Sydney broadcaster Alan Jones began his brief foray into prime-time current affairs with a 12 and soon plummeted to seven. He was off the air after 13 weeks. (Porter 1998: 4)

These days, a program drawing poor numbers would be unlikely to last more than a few weeks. Even when indifferent ratings pose no immediate threat to a program's survival, they still have a psychological significance for those involved and they affect the image a program or station is trying to project.

## Counting the audience

At the time of writing, Australia's radio audience was being rated by ACNielsen and the metropolitan television one by OzTAM, which was conducting two ratings panels nationwide. Three thousand and thirty-five homes in metropolitan centres were being rated. Of those, 765 were in Sydney, 705 in Melbourne, 615 in Brisbane, and Adelaide and Perth had 475 each. A second panel of 1200

homes (drawn from the above households and those in the regional panel described below) generated data on viewing patterns for subscription TV. Ratings for regional television were compiled by Regional TAM, which used a panel of 2015 homes in five regional markets in the eastern states and Tasmania.

Since 1991, Australian television has been rated by the ‘black box’ or people meter. Devices attached to every TV set in the sample households record viewing patterns by household members and their guests (OzTAM 2010: 2–3).

The households in the ratings sample group are chosen to represent the population being analysed.

The ratings figures the public usually sees are the ones in the newspapers, which list the numbers of people said to be watching particular programs plus a weekly audience figure for each channel, expressed as a percentage.

These figures are often reported in quite simplistic terms, with little reference to the way figures are generated and plenty of emphasis on total rather than target audiences and the supposed implications of particular figures for the programs concerned.

In 2011, radio in Australia, as in the world’s other main markets, was still being rated by the use of diaries which remained the most cost-efficient model for compiling data on the use of radios, which are both more mobile and more numerous than television sets.

Radio ratings surveys are conducted most often in the mainland state capitals where there are eight survey periods each year and also, less frequently in Newcastle, Canberra and the Gold Coast plus periodically in other regional areas and Hobart. The sample size varies from 2400 in Sydney and Melbourne to 1850 in Perth, 1750 in Adelaide, 1500 in Newcastle and the Gold Coast and smaller numbers in other regional centres. Individual households spend just one week as part of the sample.

The results of radio ratings surveys appear in newspapers expressed as the percentage of listening each station attracts in the main timeslots. But, as with television, clients can drill down to more complex data and look at the behaviours of specific demographic groups. The difference between television and radio ratings is that TV is rated daily, minute by minute, whereas radio is rated to show average weeks, in quarter-hour blocks.

All systems of ratings have their shortfalls and their critics.

Radio diaries require participants to write down details of what they listened to and where they listened every quarter hour over a full week. But people listen to the radio in places where note taking would be difficult, if not unwise,

such as in the shower, in the car and so on. So many entries are invariably made after the event, with the inevitable risk of recall inaccuracies. But even when data are uncontaminated by human error they still don't tell us whether people are listening or watching attentively or distractedly, or whether they are enjoying the program or not, or whether they are being informed.

Broadcast news and current affairs have no shortage of critics who complain that programs are ratings-driven. But in commercial terms, programs are audience-dependent and the counter-argument would question whether program makers have a right to ignore audience preferences and simply serve up what they consider best for viewers.

Like it or not, ratings data will continue to cast considerable influence over broadcast programming. The challenge for information-based programs is to offer viewers news of consequence and impact in a form in which they want to receive it.

# Current affairs, public affairs and infotainment

## Prime-time current affairs

Most radio and television journalists begin their broadcast careers in news, some having first worked on newspapers. But broadcast news stories are short, produced at high speed and often formulaic. So many reporters see news as a stepping stone to another kind of broadcast journalism; one where they can spend longer on stories and report in more depth and at greater length. Traditionally, that kind of journalism has been current affairs. The current affairs program format was devised as a response to the brevity of broadcast news. Its purpose was to give background and context to the stories in the news and to offer in-depth analysis of current issues. This relationship between news and current affairs was noted by *This Day Tonight's* Gerald Stone when he said the two programs had to be considered in concert: 'a certain proportion of daily news involves unchallenged claims of intention and claims of success ... we believe it's our job to explore those intentions' (Hall 1976: 110).

At their best, current affairs and documentary radio and television have exposed official corruption, corporate indifference and matters of pressing public concern. One example, with wide-ranging repercussions, was a *Four Corners* report in 2011 on the brutal slaughter of Australian cattle at some Indonesian abattoirs which led to the suspension of live cattle exports to that country. In other landmark reports, *Four Corners* detailed government and police corruption in Queensland, resulting in the Fitzgerald Inquiry, and proved official French involvement in the sinking of the Greenpeace ship, *Rainbow Warrior*, in Auckland. *60 Minutes* exposed the deep sleep therapy scandal at Sydney's Chelmsford Hospital and took on BHP over the deaths of 13 miners in the New South Wales town of Appin, and *Foreign Correspondent* showed the

previously hidden suffering of victims of famine in North Korea. The more populist current affairs programs have campaigned for the interests of ordinary people, as *A Current Affair* did when it lobbied for proper funding for public dental care programs.

### Declining audiences

But towards the end of the 1990s it was clear that serious current affairs programs were in trouble, particularly on commercial television. That was the conclusion the *Sydney Morning Herald* reached after analysing the city’s long-term viewing figures. In the seven years since 1991, the audience for Nine’s flagship current affairs programs, *60 Minutes* and *A Current Affair*, had slipped by 18 per cent and 29 per cent respectively. The ABC’s *7.30 Report* had dropped 27 per cent. *Four Corners* was down nearly 30 per cent and *Lateline* more than 21 per cent. The headline screamed ‘The Big Turnoff’ (Casimir 1998: 4–5). More than five years later, some of those programs had failed to staunch the flow of viewers.

**Figure 14.1**

The current affairs and news audience – April 2011

Program	Network	Timeslot	Viewers
<i>Seven News</i>	Seven	6 pm	1.511 m
<i>Nine News</i>	Nine	6 pm	1.363 m
<i>Sunday Night</i>	Seven	6.30 pm Sunday	1.228 m
<i>60 Minutes</i>	Nine	6.30 pm* Sunday (*usual timeslot 7.30 pm)	890 000
<i>ABC News</i>	ABC	7 pm	818 000

SOURCE OzAM TV Networks Report published in crikey.com 2 May 2011.

NOTES This is a snapshot of viewing figures for news and current affairs programs – showing one week in early 2011. It indicates relative viewing figures between services.

While some established programs had trouble holding viewers, others came and went. From about the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the commercial free-to-air stations flirted with serious night-time current affairs, before retreating. Network Ten had put up *The Reporters* and *Page One*, weekly programs staffed by a high percentage of refugees from the ABC. Nine had *60 Minutes*, which mixed ground-breaking stories and interviews with celebrity profiles and 'feel-good' pieces. On occasion, Nine also dabbled in more cerebral offerings, such as Jana Wendt's short-lived interview program, *On Assignment*. Seven Network had experimented with an innovative, late-night offering, *The Times*, and later launched its high-profile, big budget program *Witness* in April 1996 as part of a strategy to dent Nine's supremacy in news and current affairs. By 1999, all except *60 Minutes* had gone, and there was a perception that it had become more tabloid (though, in fairness, *60 Minutes*' executive producer said he was happy to call the program 'tabloid' journalism (Aiton 1998: 18)). In addition, Seven had cancelled its long-running morning news-magazine, *IIAM*, after having first moved it down-market, and Ten had put up, and then taken off, its more tabloid offerings of *Hinch*, *Alan Jones Live*, and *Hard Copy*.

In 2008, commercial current affairs offerings thinned even further when Nine cancelled two of its headline programs, *Sunday* and *Nightline*. The loss of *Sunday* attracted particular concern. In its 27 years it had been both journalistically and stylistically ground-breaking. But towards the end of its life it had been subject to budget cuts and format changes and the network's new owners had none of the sentiment towards the program of its founder, the late Kerry Packer. Then Director of News and Current Affairs at Nine, John Westacott, blamed financial issues for the cancellation of both programs, telling the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the realities of the time imposed 'much tougher cost and performance benchmarks across the media industry than those of the past' (Idato 2008: 3). By mid-2011, the commercial channels had largely replaced previously serious Sunday morning current affairs offerings with extensions of their weekday breakfast programs. The exception was Ten, which maintained *Meet the Press* on Sunday mornings. Tabloid programs also dominated the prime-time, mid-evening commercial timeslots, with Nine's *A Current Affair* and Seven's *Today Tonight*. Once again, the exception was Ten. At the start of 2011 it had launched a current affairs program, *6 PM*, fronted by veteran journalist and presenter George Negus, most recently seen on SBS, and programmed in the same timeslot as the Seven and Nine news bulletins. But poor ratings saw it moved back to 6.30 pm within months and by mid-year the network had announced a wave of redundancies among news staff, prompting

speculation about the program's future. The risks associated with programming serious current affairs on commercial television in prime time had been acknowledged by George Negus, who told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that it was a 'high-wire act' that demanded a 'bold' approach. He said current affairs' value was that 'it tries to explain the news':

I think people would like to know as much [about] why something is happening as much as that it has. There's an audience out there, we've just got to find the buggers and get them to watch. (Dick 2011a: 4)

By contrast, the publicly funded broadcasters continued to support programs such as *7.30*, *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *Lateline* (ABC), *Dateline* and *Insight* (SBS). The ABC also pursued a traditional current affairs agenda on radio, with its daily programs *AM*, *World Today* and *PM*, along with the weekly *Asia Pacific* and *Background Briefing*.

### The 'death' of current affairs

The reasons for the apparent 'death' of commercial, prime-time current affairs have been the subject of much speculation, particularly after the cancellation of *Witness* in 1998, which was, at the time of writing, the last commercial current affairs offering in a weekday, evening timeslot.

*Witness* had been launched with a high-profile, popular presenter, Jana Wendt, and a budget estimated at \$12 million annually (Barry 1998: 7). The reporting and production team represented some of the industry's best. It lasted two years and four months and was mired in acrimony within a year. By the time the show was cancelled, two of its former staff, including presenter Wendt, were engaged in legal action against the network, a process that gave the public a rare glimpse into the inner workings of television, especially the treatment of its stars. It was reported that Wendt had been lured from Nine with a three-year contract starting at \$1.5 million a year and \$400 000 more in benefits (Ellicott & Thorp 1997: 5). But by the time *Witness* was taken off air, speculation about these financial considerations had given way to a debate about how such a program could succeed in the current television environment. The program's second and last host, Paul Barry, had spent several years on *Four Corners* before moving to Seven. A year after he joined *Witness*, he was asked about the change in culture. In something of a backhander to his former employer, he said: 'Commercial television is tougher. You can't bore them rigid. It does matter that they watch' (Attorney-General's Department 1998: 5).

When the program was cancelled, Barry published a lengthy post-mortem. He noted that the audience for *Witness* would have been considered large at the ABC or SBS, or even compared to Nine's *Sunday*. He complained that the show had been hobbled by a series of timeslot changes (Barry 1998: 7). But he came to the disturbing conclusion that the program failed for more fundamental reasons – a shift in audience tastes:

I have this feeling that there's an increasing trend, particularly in this country, for people to be interested in their money, their houses, their bodies, their health, all sorts of personal things, where they eat, what they buy to decorate their houses with, what they wear ... and they're not actually interested in other people or the outside world, and that makes it quite hard for current affairs to exist. (*The Media Report*, ABC Radio National, 20 August 1998: n.p.)

The clear suggestion was that coverage of serious social issues had viewers reaching for the remote control.

The predicament facing *Witness* was one familiar to every production team charged with attracting a mass audience: Which way should it turn? Should it move down-market to try to pick up a bigger audience, or stick to serious journalism and hope the market would rise to its level?

Barry concluded that moving up-market would not have pulled in the viewers. He said some of his stories for *Witness* had been 'ground-breaking' and among the best he had ever done. Yet none of these had rated well.

My gut feeling is that people are sick of the trash on current affairs programs, but they aren't queuing up to watch quality either ... The mass audience is interested in emotion and triumph, envy and courage, stars and starlets. (*Age*, 22 August 1998: 7)

There are many reasons why what were once headline programs lost viewers and why other programs folded. One problem for current affairs programs is that the newer lifestyle and infotainment programs have eaten into their traditional subject matter. There is a greater number of news sources now available, including pay TV, online news and social media, and some viewers may have migrated from mid-evening to other bulletins. Not all the figures are negative. The ABC's *Australian Story*, which blends current affairs and documentary, has been one of its most popular programs.

## Chasing the under-40s

So perhaps more alarming than the raw figures are the viewing habits of people under the age of 40. These are the people most likely to be winding back their television viewing in favour of the Internet, or other pursuits. But they are also the people television needs to attract if it is to ensure a sizeable audience base in the future, so their tastes and interests have particular influence on TV executives.

As ratings for conventional current affairs programs declined, the conventional wisdom was that young people were not interested. More optimistic voices argued that they were, but that traditional programs had little to offer them and that what was needed was tailored content. In 2004, the ABC's youth radio network, Triple J, scheduled a half-hour current affairs program, *Hack*, in the prestige afternoon drive slot of 5.30 pm. Within six months, it had become one of the highest rating shows on the national network. It's founding presenter, Steve Cannane, reckoned the idea that young people were not interested in the format was 'bullshit':

I don't believe it at all. We used to do a morning show 9–12. Then we moved current affairs into prime time. I've probably had two or three emails saying 'I don't want to hear current affairs' or 'I don't want to hear talk while I'm driving home. I listen to Triple J for the music'. Triple J is basically a music station and so there are people who are always going to hate a talk component on a music station. But overwhelmingly the response we've got through email has been really positive.

Cannane said, in his experience, the problem was not the format, but the content:

You can say that young people aren't interested in current affairs, but I would say that people who say that are doing stories that have no relevance or interest to people who are young. We do stories about things they're interested in – like file sharing, and what is (the drug) GHB. A current affairs story for someone in school could be something that they'd never see on the TV current affairs or hear on *PM* or *AM*. On 702 (Sydney ABC local radio) they might do a story on 'how you know if your kids are taking drugs'? We'd never do that story. We would do – this drug exists, this is who's taking it, this is why it's a problem, this can happen if you take this drug and we kind of provide information. So it's about relevance.

Since *Hack* showed there was a young audience for *radio* current affairs, a handful of television public affairs programs have developed new formats as well as content to attract young viewers.

In 2009 ABC launched the weekly *Hungry Beast*, with a brief to take an ‘out of left field’ approach to current affairs; ‘break out of the standard news cycle and tell us something we don’t know’. As it went into its third season in 2011, the ABC TV blog quoted the *Beast*’s executive producer, Andrew Denton, saying it had shown that journalism could ‘evolve in new and exciting directions’. The series was built around weekly themes, beginning with Captivity on which the stories ranged from ‘life in prison’ to ‘people trapped in their own bodies ... and an entire nation held captive by one man’ (ABC TV Blog 2011: n.p.).

The previous year the ABC had launched *Q&A*, a weekly panel discussion program, hosted by current affairs veteran Tony Jones, and built on new media notions of audience participation. *Q&A*’s publicity material heralded the show as ‘democracy in action’ because it allowed audience members to ask questions of each week’s panel, made up of politicians, journalists and community leaders (*Q&A* 2011: n.p.). In reality, taking questions from a studio audience was not novel. Instead the innovations included taking questions emailed or texted to the program on air, and running items from the Twitter stream across the screen during the broadcast. What made the program lively and topical was the interesting mix of panel members and Jones’s skills as an anchor as well as its engaged audience both in the studio and on social media.

Another program that delivered contemporary news and information in a way that engaged a young audience was Network Ten’s *7 PM Project*. Ten launched the nightly panel discussion in mid-2009 with the line ‘daily news will never be the same’ and describing the program as ‘current affairs ... starring some of Australia’s best known comedians’ (Yahoo!7TV 2009: n.p.). After a strong debut, the *7 PM Project* had a mixed ratings performance. In mid-2011 its ratings stood at some 900 000 viewers nightly (Vickery 2011: n.p.).

## Story formats

Just as radio and television news stories are constructed to a series of formats, so similar formatting devices can also be applied to current affairs or public affairs stories.

Current affairs stories can be:

- reporters’ packages – comprising narration and soundbites
- Q&A interviews
- stories told entirely in interview segments.

Radio current affairs programs sometimes air stories that are told entirely by reporter's narration without any soundbites. These pieces are usually analysis of, or comment on, an issue in the news. Often they include background material. In order to tell a story of several minutes entirely in narration, a reporter needs to have a thorough grasp of the subject and the report needs to be well written and narrated. This format is almost never used on television.

The most obvious observation that can be made about current affairs stories is that they are longer than news items. The typical news story runs between one minute ten seconds and one minute 30 seconds, whereas stories on nightly current affairs programs generally run between three and five minutes, and on weekly programs individual items can range from under ten minutes to the 45-minute length of the program, in the case of *Four Corners*.

But a well-constructed current affairs item is not simply a longer rendition of a news item. Some of the common construction devices for current affairs items include the following.

### Starting on a soundbite

This technique is used sometimes in news stories, but, as we have seen already, it is very common on prime-time current affairs programs. One reason may be that current affairs programs often take local stories and report them for a statewide or national audience. Starting on a soundbite is one way of making the focus of the story the individuals involved, rather than their location. That in turn may increase a story's appeal outside its own geographic area.

### Starting on music and/or natural sound

Longer stories can move at a more leisurely pace than news items and one way of establishing this pace is to begin on music or 'atmos'. This is often accompanied by a long establishing shot.

### Using natural sound and pictures to help tell the story

News stories are so short that they can make only minimal use of natural sound and vision. But the more relaxed pace of current affairs items means there is greater scope for using these elements to tell the story. In radio current affairs, in particular, reporters need to remember to gather raw audio from the scene to mix in and out of the narration.

## Allowing the interviews to carry the story

Interview segments usually comprise up to one-third of the length of news stories, but they can command as much as twice that amount of a current affairs item. The importance of interview segments in current affairs stories means they require a different form of interviewing from that often used in news. The interviews will be longer, more probing, and the formulation of the questions will be particularly important because the questions will often be used as part of the edited package, which is rarely the case in news. News stories are structured around the narration. Current affairs ones are often structured around the soundbites. That means the reporter needs to be especially aware of the soundbites when writing the script, some of which may be no more than links between one sequence of interview material and the next.

You might imagine that allowing interview segments to carry a large proportion of the narrative of a story makes it easier for the reporter to construct the item. After all, the reporter doesn't have to write as much if the interview segments are longer. In reality, constructing a story using interview segments to carry much of the narrative can be much harder than writing a narration around a few soundbites. First, the interviews have to be well thought out, so that the responses carry a line of argument and can be intercut coherently. Secondly, the interview segments must be interesting enough to hold the viewers' attention. It's not enough to simply use longer interview segments than would be required for a news item. In television, interviews that are longer than they are interesting invite the criticism 'too much talking head'.

## Using interviews as a key part of the narrative line

Even when they don't form the bulk of the story, interviews still carry more of the storytelling function in a current affairs story than in most news items. As noted in the point above, this determines the way they are conducted. News interviews can be short and sharp. But a current affairs interview usually requires a different kind of structure. A reporter who wants responses that can be run at length will need to build a rapport with the interviewee and win their trust, and that takes time. Some of the time spent building rapport may occur well before a formal interview is scheduled. Once the interview begins, the interviewer must also be prepared to tease out the required responses.

Not only are the interview segments in current affairs and infotainment programs longer than those in news, they are often framed differently too. News

interviews are almost always shot in medium close-up or close-up, with just the interviewee in the frame. But the interviews for longer-format stories are often shot in two shot, with both the reporter and interviewee in frame. One reason for this is that it makes the interview appear more of an exchange between two people and this can be important if the edited segment includes both questions and answers. These interviews are often also recorded with the reporter and interviewee walking, and for this to work best the journalist needs to be a bit of a performer, though this doesn't mean indulging in 'personality journalism', where the reporter's prominence overrides that of the story.

All broadcast reporting requires a degree of performance from its reporters, because voice projection is important. But it's a particular requirement of those television formats that require the reporter to spend a bit of time in front of the camera. Just how useful a theatrical sense can be was illustrated by Paul Barry in a story for *Four Corners*. Barry, and his crew, with cameras rolling, approached Alan Bond outside Sydney's Federal Court. Given the circumstances, and the fact that Barry had written a book on the businessman entitled *The Rise and Fall of Alan Bond*, the meeting was unlikely to be friendly. Barry introduced himself and identified his program. 'Do you remember me?' he asked as he handed over his business card. Bond threw the card down and stamped on it. 'You do remember me', said Barry. So far Bond had said nothing, but that just made the exchange more compelling television.

### Building the story in editing

Television and radio current affairs stories can be constructed segment by segment, using natural sound, and vision in television, as integral parts of the story line. This technique takes longer than standard news editing, but it allows a story to unfold at its own pace, using all the elements of a narrative. Editing this way requires considerable preparation. Although some of the construction will be decided in the editing room, the structure needs to have been worked out beforehand and the reporter needs to have a full script and a clear idea of the interview segments, effects and, in television – the pictures, that will be used. The need for a clear idea of structure becomes more important the longer the story becomes.

Like news stories, current affairs items require some discipline in the amount of detail that can be included. It is important not to take on too much in telling a story, even if you have the relative luxury of three to five minutes, or even longer, to tell it. If you try to cram too much detail into an item, you risk losing the audience's attention.

## Intros

The presenter's intro to a current affairs item will be longer than a news intro and need not have a hard news angle. News intros usually give a story's main details, which are then fleshed out by the report that follows. Current affairs intros can also be written that way, when the topic of the story is breaking news. But many current affairs intros circle the topic of the story to set up the report. By way of example, consider the news story on the protest at Sydney airport, which appears in chapter 4. News stories are driven by incidents and events, such as announcements, protests and so on. But a current affairs story will look at the broader issue, even if it uses the news-making incident or announcement as a peg. So the airport protest reported in chapter 4 is the sort of story that might prompt a current affairs item. Since the protest was on a weekend, a current affairs program would hope to have a report ready for early the following week and it would include interviews with politicians and other officials as well as residents. Such a report would almost certainly draw on the audio or pictures of the demonstration. Protests make lively material for both radio and TV. But to start a current affairs story on these sounds/images would mean repeating material seen recently on the news. So a reporter looking at the background to the story in our example might start with audio or video of something more generic – such as planes using the airport. Or they might start on one or more soundbites from politicians, residents or lobbyists. In either case, the protest would be used later in the item. Other reporters might start with the protest. It is important to note that there are no hard and fast rules here. Different reporters and programs have different approaches.

Since a current affairs item will look at the issue behind the incident, the presenter's lead – for radio or television – can be wider in scope, and a little longer, than a news intro.

### Example

It's now four decades since the Whitlam Labor government gave the go-ahead for a second international airport for Sydney. It's preferred location was Galston, in the city's north-west.

Since then various proposals have come and gone. Kingsford Smith has been expanded with a controversial third runway. But a long-term solution to congestion seems as distant as ever.

Now the government wants to increase the number of aircraft using Mascot rather than build a second airport.

But angry residents of the inner city are turning to action to try to force Canberra's hand. (34 seconds)

## Story production

Many current affairs, infotainment and ‘reality television’ programs call for quite different storytelling techniques from those employed on news. This is not merely because longer stories would become boring if told using just the narration/soundbite style of news. It’s also because these programs often cover subjects that don’t easily lend themselves to visualisation. Some current affairs stories contain a sequence or two requiring special visuals. Often these techniques are drawn from drama and, if they involve reenactment, this needs to be made explicit to the audience. Sometimes this is done by captioning ‘reenactment’, or something similar. But sometimes it is conveyed by the way in which the material is shot – such as the use of monochrome or high-contrast images. Other techniques used in current affairs include rapid editing of images accompanied by music or effects, or use of slow motion.

### The producer’s job

The job of finding ways to tell stories in television current affairs and infotainment programs often falls to a producer (sometimes called ‘segment producer’), and many producers come from a journalistic background. Producers develop stories and angles. They do the research (though they may also have the assistance of designated researchers). They line up interviews. Sometimes they conduct them too. They organise locations for recording pictures. Often they write the scripts. Producers can do almost everything connected with a story, except for putting their face on it, a point once made by *60 Minutes* producer Warren McStoker: ‘A producer’s job is to make his reporter look good ... You might as well realise that it requires non-stop sublimation of your own ego’ (Little 1994: 21).

A television or radio current affairs program will also have a line-up producer, often called a ‘supervising producer’ and sometimes an executive producer as well. The line-up producer performs much the same task as a news producer; selecting items, supervising scripts and making sure the program runs to time. Radio talkback programs also employ producers. In these cases, they will develop themes to be followed during a broadcast and line up interviewees. They will also filter callers to the program and keep the presenter briefed on who is ringing in, and on the subjects being raised by callers. The producer of a radio program will usually have the assistance of one or more researchers. These are very often people with a background in journalism and their skills include spotting story ideas, writing suggested questions for a program host

and having a thick contact file so that they can find people prepared to speak on almost any topic, at short notice.

## Podcasting

Podcasts are audio programs made available for download to computers and mobile devices. The term can be used to refer to video files as well, though these are also referred to as vodcasts. Podcasts started to make an impact in 2004, initially as a way of distributing music mixes. By the next year, broadcasters across the world had begun to see their potential for allowing audiences to hear and see programs free of the tyranny of the on-air schedule (Gilbert 2005: n.p.). The podcasts available from the broadcast media are generally of programs that were made for broadcast though they may also include some programs made specifically for online and mobile media.

Podcasts allow listeners to time shift programs and have breathed new life into long-form radio such as documentaries, current affairs and some lifestyle productions in a broadcast radio market dominated by shorter news formats, talk back and music.

The biggest provider of podcasts in Australia is the ABC. The corporation began offering podcasts in 2006. By mid-2011 it was seeing nearly seven and a half million audio and video downloads per month. Podcasting has been taken up by not-for-profit agencies, including community radio, as a means of giving a voice to groups and individuals with messages that do not fit within the confines of commercial and public-sector broadcasting. Many companies use podcasts to deliver presentations. As the audio and video form of blogging, podcasts have the potential to make anyone a 'broadcaster', though as with blogging this needs to be tempered with the realities of finding and sustaining an audience.

Anyone wanting to make their own podcasts will find excellent technical information attached to the software applications used to make them, including GarageBand, Propaganda and Audacity.

Podcasts can be stored on your web server or a third party host. To distribute them, you need to create and upload an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed and then sign up with a distribution service, of which one of the first was iTunes, though there are now many others.

Making material for podcast requires the same skills as for radio news and current affairs, though since podcast programs are generally longer than stories for radio, they demand special attention be paid to narration and production to ensure the program remains lively and interesting to listen ➔

to. Many of the technical requirements (including attention to acoustics, microphone quality and use, and audio levels, are covered in chapter 11).

Podcasts also raise a couple of issues specific to new media. The first is that, while programs made for broadcast have to conform to specific time requirements, podcasts made independently do not. They can be as short or long as the material can sustain. Secondly, anything available for download is effectively permanent – since it will be cached in systems beyond your reach and that means special attention should be paid to legal and ethical issues.

# 15

## Legal and ethical issues

The preamble to the Journalists' Code of Ethics begins:

Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. They (journalists) inform citizens and animate democracy. They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable. (MEAA 1999: n.p.)

Journalists see their professional activities as deriving legitimacy from the public's 'right to know'. But journalists have no more legal rights to gather information, pictures and so on than do any other members of the public. On the other hand, they have obligations about the ways in which they carry out their work. This chapter outlines those legal and ethical obligations. It is not intended to be a comprehensive explanation of the law as it affects journalists (that can be found in the book recommended at the end of this chapter). But it does explore some issues that specifically affect broadcast and online reporters.

### Codes of ethics and practice

The responsibilities of Australian journalists are set out in a series of codes of ethics or practice, most of which are specific to a particular medium or organisation. For example, the Australian Press Council's Statement of Principles sets out guidelines for its member publications and an increasing number of newspapers have in-house ethical codes. In these cases, publishers have taken on the duty of encouraging ethical behaviour among their staff. Members of the journalists' union, the MEAA, undertake to abide by its Code of Ethics. Once again,

the organisation itself enforces its rules. There is no independent regulatory body that enforces ethical standards on the print media.

The situation of broadcast journalists is a little different. In most countries, the broadcast media are regulated far more tightly than the press. One reason is that broadcasts have traditionally been seen as having greater potential for influence than the printed word. But broadcasters also need something publishers do not; they require a share of the finite amount of a public resource – the broadcast spectrum – over which to send their signals. The number of available broadcast licences in Australia is determined by the federal government and the body that oversees regulation of the broadcast media (other than the public broadcasters ABC and SBS) is the Australian Communications and Media Authority. The ABC and SBS have their own Acts of parliament and are responsible to parliament through the Minister for Communications. But unresolved complaints regarding breaches of their codes of practice are handled by the ACMA. Its predecessor, the ABA, was established by the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, which gave broadcasters more power to self-regulate than had been the case under the previous regulatory body, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT). As part of this self-regulation, industry bodies, including Free TV Australia (formerly Commercial Television Australia) and Commercial Radio Australia, were required to develop, in consultation with the ABA, Codes of Practice with which stations were expected to comply.

The original Codes of Practice appeared in 1993. Both the FTVA and Commercial Radio Australia (CRA) Codes were revised and republished in 2004 and 2010 (see Appendices 1 and 2). Australian broadcasters are therefore answerable to the ACMA for the ethical standards of their reporters (and other staff). But complaints about breaches of ethical standards are, in the first instance, dealt with by the individual broadcaster involved.

Though the phrasing of these codes varies from one to the other, they all have some points in common. They require that:

- the news be presented in an accurate, fair and balanced manner
- opinion or comments should be clearly distinguished from facts
- the news should not be presented in such a way as to alarm the public or cause unnecessary distress
- people who are bereaved or who have been subjected to trauma be treated with sensitivity
- personal privacy should be respected unless there is a clear public interest in specific material

- members of particular groups should not be reported in a negative way
- significant errors of fact should be corrected as soon as possible.

At the time of writing, there was no umbrella code governing the work of Australian journalists working in an online environment, though reporters for the web arm of a larger organisation would be expected to adhere to the guidelines imposed by the parent publisher or broadcaster.

The codes of ethics or practice applying to Australian broadcast reporters are:

- *The CRA (Commercial Radio Australia) Codes of Practice & Guidelines*. These Codes apply to commercial radio services and cover a station's entire operations, including news and current affairs (see Appendix 1). The CRA Codes also set out the terms on which people's comments can be aired. The Codes state that a 'licensee must not broadcast the words of an identifiable person unless':

- 6.1 (a) that person has been informed in advance or a reasonable person would be aware that the words may be broadcast; or
- (b) in the case of words which have been recorded without the knowledge of the person, that person has subsequently, but prior to the broadcast, expressed consent to the broadcast of the words. (CRA 2010: 19)

During the 1999 update of the CRA Codes of Practice, Guidelines were added on the Portrayal of Indigenous Australians, which were drawn up following recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The Codes also contain Guidelines on the Portrayal of Women on Commercial Radio. These note that women are 53 per cent of the population and urge broadcasters to avoid gender stereotyping and try to balance the use of women and men as experts and authorities in interviews. In 2001, in a reminder of the importance of radio at times of flood and fire and other disasters, Guidelines on Broadcast of Emergency Information were attached to the Codes which require licensees to implement 'internal procedures to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of warnings and information supplied by' appropriate 'emergency and essential services organisations' (CRA 2010: 21).

- *The FTVA (Free TV Australia) Code of Practice*. News and current affairs programs (see Appendix 2). The FTVA Code applies to commercial television licensees and, like the CRA Code, covers a wide range of their operations. The FTVA Code includes Advisory Notes on the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disabilities, women and men and on the portrayal of cultural diversity. It also includes an Advisory Note on Privacy, which deals with the broadcast of images of dead or seriously injured people, suicide and the treatment of the bereaved.

- *The ABC Code of Practice*. The specifics of the ABC's policies on news and current affairs coverage appear in its comprehensive Editorial Guidelines rather than its Code of Practice, both of which can be found on its website <[www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)>. The 2011 edition of its Editorial Policies expands on the universal issues in such documents, with a nuanced approach to accuracy and balance, independence, integrity and responsibility. It also covers privacy, and questions of harm and offence.

On the issue of accuracy it says:

The efforts reasonably required to ensure accuracy will depend on the circumstances. Sources with relevant expertise may be relied on more heavily than those without. Eyewitness testimony usually carries more weight than second-hand accounts. (ABC 2011a: 4)

On impartiality it says:

Impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time, nor that every facet of every argument is presented. (ABC 2011a: 6)

- *The SBS Codes of Practice*, which can be accessed through its website <[www.sbs.com.au](http://www.sbs.com.au)>.
- *The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia Code of Practice*, which applies to community radio and television.
- *The ASTRA (Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association) Code*, which applies to pay TV.
- *The MEAA Journalists' Code of Ethics*. Though many ethical codes apply in various areas of the Australian media, the one most widely cited is that put in place by the journalists' union, the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA), which is now part of the MEAA. The AJA first adopted a Code of Ethics in 1944 and revised it in 1984. In 1993, amid considerable debate about the adequacy of the Code, the MEAA set up a public review of its ethical guidelines, chaired by Father Frank Brennan. Among the criticisms of the then ten-point Code was that it was out of step with the contemporary media, being too focused on the print media at the exclusion of broadcasters. In 1995, the review committee published a proposed revised Code of 20 points. Then, after more discussion, and a great deal of criticism of the amount of time the process had taken, the union's members endorsed a 12-point Code (opposite) in 1999. While the Code is largely seen as a standard to which journalists are held accountable, the federal secretary of the MEAA, Chris Warren, has pointed to its other role as 'a declaration that journalists have a loyalty to higher principles than they do to the corporation they may happen to work for ...' (Warren 2005: 33).

## The Journalists' Code of Ethics

Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. Journalists describe society to itself. They convey information, ideas and opinions, a privileged role. They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They give a practical form to freedom of expression. Many journalists work in private enterprise, but all have these public responsibilities. They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable. Accountability engenders trust. Without trust, journalists do not fulfil their public responsibilities. MEAA members engaged in journalism commit themselves to

- Honesty
  - Fairness
  - Independence
  - Respect for the rights of others.
- 1 Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness, and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis. Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply.
  - 2 Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief or physical or intellectual disability.
  - 3 Aim to attribute information to its source. Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motives and any alternative attributable source. Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances.
  - 4 Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.
  - 5 Disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism. Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.
  - 6 Do not allow advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness or independence.
  - 7 Do your utmost to ensure disclosure of any direct or indirect payment made for interviews, pictures, information or stories.
  - 8 Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material. Identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice.
  - 9 Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed. 

- 10 Do not plagiarise.
- 11 Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.
- 12 Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors.

### Guidance Clause

Basic values often need interpretation, and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.

(MEAA 1999)

As noted earlier, though this Code is held up as applying to Australian journalists in general, it can only be enforced against those who are members of the union. While the level of unionisation remains high among journalists working for the public-sector broadcasters, it is more patchy among those in the commercial services. In 2011, the MEAA estimated that approximately 85 per cent of ABC journalists were union members. The situation at commercial broadcasters varied widely, but it was thought that between 65 and 70 per cent of commercial broadcast journalists were likely to be unionised. Even among those journalists who are union members, it is doubtful whether many greatly fear the sanctions that go with being found in breach of the Code. The penalties range from a warning or reprimand, to a fine of a maximum of \$1000, to suspension from the union or, at worst, expulsion. But disciplinary proceedings are rare, not least because few members of the public would be aware that the MEAA is an avenue of possible redress for breaches of journalistic ethics. In the years 2009–10, it received just five complaints.

These figures suggest that observance of the Code of Ethics owes more to journalists' own commitment to upholding its provisions than to the penalties for those who fail.

A commitment to working within ethical guidelines is not always an easy undertaking. The culture of the workplace, particularly in commercial broadcasting, tends to be focused on results rather than on how they are achieved, though this should not be seen to imply a routine disregard for ethical standards.

One of the most common concerns about journalistic ethics is that complaints about breaches are dealt with within the industry rather than by an inde-

pendent body and complaints about breaches of the broadcasters' codes of practice are dealt with by the individual broadcaster in the first instance and then by the ACMA, if the broadcaster's response is considered inadequate.

## **New Code, new questions**

No code of ethics or practice can cover the full spectrum of ethical issues a reporter might encounter. Some of the new provisions of the 1999 Code were prompted by specific incidents, which fell outside the ambit of the old one. But after its introduction there were ethical lapses that, in turn, did not fall easily within any of the current guidelines. One of these occurred in August 1999, when a camera crew from Channel Nine found a missing American man, Robert Bogucki, who had been the subject of an intensive search in the Great Sandy Desert. Though Mr Bogucki was weak and disoriented, the Nine team interviewed him before they put him in the helicopter and headed for medical attention. On the way, they set down when he wanted to throw up and then took an aerial shot of this before the journey resumed. Another case that prompted considerable debate began in mid-2010, when Sydney's Channel Seven aired low-light pictures of the then state Labor Transport Minister, David Campbell, leaving a gay sex club in a Sydney suburb. The report was broadcast at a time when the state government faced almost certain electoral defeat at the next poll (which occurred in 2011), so the context was one of a trouble-plagued government. The pictures, however, related to private behaviour.

Two members of the public complained about the report to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) which published its ruling early the following year. It found there had not been a breach of privacy because the Minister had resigned shortly before the report went to air and the story was thus in the public interest because it explained that resignation (ACMA 2011b: n.p.).

Both incidents prompted bouts of journalism's periodic soul searching about the intersection between competitive reporting and ethical behaviour and they raised the troubling point that if journalists are considered to be abusing their freedoms and acting without restraint, self-regulation will be seen to have failed. Such failure invariably leads to calls for regulation by legislation or some other means, a point made by investigative journalist David Marr in an interview with the ABC. He noted the pressure for new privacy restrictions on reporting and said the Campbell case invited such moves which, were they to succeed, 'would put the press in great difficulties' not just in stopping reports of dubious public interest, such as the one Channel Seven had aired, but 'in doing its proper work in a wide range of fields' (ABC 2010: n.p.).

## Chequebook journalism

While some ethical issues shock because they arise only rarely, others have become routine. One of these is the practice known as ‘chequebook journalism’, which flourishes primarily in the women’s magazines market and in commercial television public affairs shows. Few questions of propriety in journalism arouse as much passion among practitioners as that of paying for stories. Those who look at journalism from the outside may be more concerned about issues of privacy and accuracy. Those on the inside fret about the power of the chequebook and its implications.

Some of the more celebrated reports of stories for sale include:

- Some family and friends of the so-called ‘Bali Nine’ and Schapelle Corby received payments from various media outlets over the years of their long-running cases.
- Todd Russell and Brant Webb, who were rescued from a mine in Beaconsfield in Tasmania after two weeks trapped underground, were signed to an agreement with the Nine Network said to have cost upward of \$2 million (*Media Watch* 2006: n.p.).
- Mamdouh Habib, who spent three years in US military custody during the ‘War on Terror’, gave an exclusive interview to Nine Network’s *60 Minutes* (McMahon 2005: 3) with the fee widely speculated to have been \$200 000.
- Security guard Karen Brown was initially denied access to the \$100 000 Seven Network had agreed to pay for an interview about a 2004 Sydney robbery during which she shot a man dead. The network was ordered to surrender the fee to the Public Trustee (Wallace 2004: 17).
- The Seven Network paid Olympic swimmer Craig Stevens an estimated \$100 000 package, which included a contract with the broadcaster, for an exclusive interview on *Today Tonight* in which Stevens announced he would give up his spot in the 400m freestyle in the Athens Olympic Games in favour of Ian Thorpe (Crawford & Smith 2004: 1).
- Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke and fiancée Blanche d’Alpuget told the story of their romance to *60 Minutes* and *Woman’s Day* for a reported six-figure sum in early 1995 (Thorp 1995: 3).
- British yachtsman Tony Bullimore was reckoned to have been paid between \$100 000 and \$200 000 by the Seven Network, for his account of the four days he spent waiting for rescue in an upturned yacht in the Southern Ocean at the beginning of 1997 (Strickland & Green 1997: 4).

Opponents of chequebook journalism argue that paying for interviews introduces the risk that interviewees will ‘gild the lily’ to justify the money. Buying

stories also forces up production costs and diverts money that could be spent hiring experienced journalists.

### Chequebook journalism: supporters and detractors

The dangers of paying for stories are clearly greater when the information being traded has implications for public policy than when it is more a matter of 'human interest', though in those cases media outlets often walk a fine line between competitive pressures and good taste. Some stories are so tragic that treating them as being for sale would create a public disquiet that would outweigh the advantage of any exclusive. In August 1997, Seven's *Witness* program aired the first interview with Stuart Diver, the only person to be found alive in the rubble of the landslide in the NSW alpine resort, Thredbo. In this instance, Seven secured Diver's story by contracting him as a commentator for the upcoming Winter Olympics. The exclusive interview drew an estimated audience of more than two million to *Witness* in August 1997. The extraordinary public interest gave the ailing program the highest ratings in its 15-month existence (Meade & Gough 1997: 3).

Not all reporters condemn chequebook journalism. Nine's Tracy Grimshaw, who conducted the network's interview with the freed Beaconsfield miners, later told *Good Weekend* that people who had become the subject of news through suffering a misfortune would understandably want recompense. 'If you've got cashed-up media organisations all vying for your story, why not make a buck,' she said. 'Money makes a difference to your life ... It makes the difference between having an easy life and a hard life' (Cadzow 2011: 16).

As a guide to just how valuable a commodity information can be, consider the case of one-time White House intern Monica Lewinsky. In early 1999, she spoke to Britain's Channel 4 for a reported \$1 million. But she was paid nothing to talk to veteran interviewer Barbara Walters on the US ABC network. It is said Lewinsky was prepared to pass up on a fee because of the credibility Walters brought to her story. Whatever the interview brought to Ms Lewinsky, it brought ABC hard cash. The network charged US\$80 000 per 30-second slot for advertising during the interview, five times its usual rate in the time slot and a reported total for the program of US\$35 million (Forbes 1999: 15). Five years later, Ms Lewinsky spoke of what it was like to be the *subject* of news and defended the practice of demanding money for an interview as a way of maintaining some control over her story as well as paying the bills it had generated for her. Speaking at a debate on chequebook journalism, she said:

‘As the commodity in the interview, you’d be crazy not to get compensated ... you’d be an idiot not to get the money’ (Associated Press 2004: 16).

There are signs that, in recent years, more people with a story to tell have become aware of the commercial value of such material without wishing to profit individually, with the result that commercial current affairs programs sometimes note that an interviewee asked that a fee be paid to charity in return for their appearance. The MEAA Code of Ethics doesn’t rule out chequebook journalism. But it urges that the practice should always be made explicit, so the audience can judge the product according to its source.

## **Faking it**

On the other hand, the Code of Ethics does insist (Clause 9) that pictures and sound must be genuine and that any manipulation that might mislead should be acknowledged.

As we have seen, the electronic news media operate in an environment where small amounts of reenactment or fabrication are commonplace and usually accepted. On the other hand, outright fraud is not common – but neither is it unknown.

Perhaps the best-known Australian example of fabrication of pictures occurred on Seven Network’s *Today Tonight* in November 1996, to be revealed several months later on the ABC’s *Media Watch*. A *Today Tonight* team had gone to the Spanish island of Majorca to detail the lifestyle and state of health of fugitive businessman Christopher Skase. What made the report dramatically different from other such stories on the former boss of Channel Seven was the allegation that, after it conducted an ambush interview with Skase, the *TT* team was hunted by the Majorca police and was forced to flee the island on a midnight ferry. The apparent menacing of the Australian television team was illustrated by shots of police setting up roadblocks and by some melodramatic comments by the reporter. In fact, as *Media Watch* revealed, the shots of a scary drive through Majorca were actually shot in Barcelona and showed routine traffic management by the local police. Seven’s reaction when the fraud was exposed was to suspend the reporter and producer for a month (*Media Watch*, 17 February 1997: n.p.).

## Journalists and the law

If the ethical and legal framework within which journalists carry out their tasks can be seen as a continuum, personal ethics are at one end of that scale. Further along can be found the quasi-judicial professional ethical codes and, at the other end of the scale are legal restraints backed by penalties.

Three broad areas of law affect journalists in their daily working lives, those of defamation, contempt of court, and copyright. Electronic media reporters encounter these laws in a different working environment from their colleagues in print, for several reasons:

- While the ABC has a legal department (and reporters are encouraged to seek advice, at any time), other broadcast reporters do not always have such easy access to legal advice within their organisations.
- Broadcast reporters usually work to tighter deadlines than those in print and this is particularly true of radio, where bulletins can be scheduled every half-hour. In online news, the deadlines are fluid, but this can be both a blessing and a curse. At worst, it can encourage a reporter to rush material to a website rather than take the time to seek legal advice.
- Electronic reporters perform some of their work in live transmission, which calls for instant decisions. Broadcast studios afford presenters the safety net of the 'dump' button, which generates a seven-second buffer zone between a statement being made and its being broadcast. But the presenter or producer has only a few seconds to decide whether or not to activate the system.
- Journalists working in television have to remember the defamatory implications of illustrating their scripts.
- Most reporters now use social media as a journalistic tool, both for publication and research, and this raises a host of new issues.

The material below is intended only as a very cursory introduction to the way journalists are affected by legal matters.

### Defamation

Australia has had uniform national defamation laws since 2006. The national laws capped non-economic damages (at \$250 000 in most cases) and, most significantly, made truth alone a defence to defamation. Prior to that, some states had required both truth and 'public interest'.

Defamation is the publication (including broadcast) of material that identifies an individual or institution and has a tendency to:

- lower their reputation in the estimation of right-thinking members of society
- cause them to be shunned or avoided
- expose them to hatred, contempt or ridicule.

These circumstances are so broad that the risk of defamation in critical reporting is considerable. But there is also a risk of defaming someone through thoughtless or careless comments. Defamation can occur without it having been intentional. The test lies in the inference or understanding an ordinary audience member would give the remarks.

The defences to defamation are:

- *Absolute privilege*. This covers all statements and documents which are read into the record or tabled in or published by courts, parliaments and Royal Commissions.
- *Qualified privilege*. This defence applies to accurate and fair reports of the proceedings of parliaments and documents published with parliamentary authority, court proceedings, judicial inquiries such as Royal Commissions and, in some states or territories, council meetings and some other forums. To mount a defence under this section, it is now necessary to demonstrate that the publisher acted 'reasonably' in gathering and presenting the story.
- *Truth*. To mount a defence under this section the journalist and their publisher need to demonstrate that what has been published is actually the case and that there are facts or evidence to support this. Of course, the obvious problem in this area is how to prove truth?
- *Honest opinion*. To mount a defence under this section, the journalist and publisher must demonstrate that:
  - the opinion was honestly held at the time of publication
  - it was not born of malice or ill-will
  - the comments related to a matter of public interest
  - the opinion was based on material that was either
    - (a) substantially true or
    - (b) was published on an occasion of either absolute or qualified privilege, or
    - (c) was published on an occasion that either attracted the protection of publication of public documents, or the defence of fair reports of proceedings of public concerns.
- *Public document*. This covers documents and records published by parliaments, governments and the courts.
- *Fair report*. To mount a defence under this section the journalist and publisher need to establish that the matter complained of was, or was contained in, a fair report of any proceedings of public concern.

That noted, there are some other issues journalists need to be aware of in relation to defamation.

### 'Allegedly'

The word 'alleged' has an important place in crime and court reporting where a person accused of something is an 'alleged' wrongdoer until such time as the allegation is proven. In other circumstances, the word should be treated with great care.

Some journalists think they can make damaging remarks about someone as long as they preface them with the word 'alleged', as though 'alleged' is a sort of legal condom, which can be used to protect against contempt or defamation. Not so.

### Illustrating TV scripts

As well as having to watch the way they write, television reporters face the additional risk of defaming someone through the careless use of picture overlay. When reporters working in print or radio write about issues such as drug addiction, tax avoidance, disease and public health, the risk of defamation arises largely through the words they write, though care has to be taken in the selection and description of photographs for a print or online story. But television scripts need to be illustrated and unless the reporter and editor take great care in their use of picture overlay they can unwittingly defame someone.

Consider three examples:

- In December 2002, Channel Nine was ordered to pay nearly \$1.7 million dollars to a group of nine people who were seen in file vision of a biker wedding recycled on *A Current Affair*. The pictures had originally been shot for the reality TV program *Weddings* when the group, most of whom were not gang members, rode in formation with the bride and groom for Channel Nine's cameras. Four months later, the tape was reused in an *A Current Affair* item alleging links between organised crime and bikie gangs. Justice Adams of the NSW Supreme Court called the network's conduct 'wicked', 'outrageous' and 'irresponsible'. The award was the highest since judges had taken over the task of assessing damages from juries, eight years earlier (Connolly 2002: 5).
- The reuse of library vision was also an issue in 1990, when Channel Seven's *Hinch* program aired a report about a dentist, practising in Western Australia, who was infected with hepatitis B. The report contained overlay of the gloved hands of another dentist, Dr Patrick Henry, who had appeared on the program

eight months earlier in an item about tooth implants. Dr Henry sued for defamation, saying the item implied he was the dentist with hepatitis B and that acquaintances had subsequently called him ‘Hep’, to his great embarrassment. The Perth Supreme Court awarded Dr Henry \$100 000, the equal highest defamation payout in WA to that time.

What made the case particularly significant for television practitioners was that the *Hinch* team had followed standard practice when using picture overlay in circumstances that carried a legal risk. They had used close-ups of hands, figuring that these would not identify the dentist pictured. As presenter Derryn Hinch told the court, ‘Such film is commonly used in all current affairs and news shows’. The video editor added ‘It’s visual journalism – that’s the business we are in’. In imposing the fine (\$60 000 against TVW Enterprises and \$40 000 against Hinch), the judge said he hoped it would ‘deter any reckless use of file footage’ on the program (*Sun Herald*, 17 June 1990: 23).

- In October 1990, the ABC program *Lateline* aired a segment on corporate fraud and failed 1980s entrepreneurs. This included pictures of media owner Kerry Packer and former Prime Minister Bob Hawke dining together while the voice-over spoke of corporate crooks who ripped off shareholders. Packer sued. He had not been named, but the ACT Supreme Court agreed that the picture implied that he was guilty of corporate fraud. He was awarded \$47 700 (*Australian*, 26 November 1993: 3).

These cases reinforce how important it is for reporters to think carefully about the pictures that will accompany their words. Pictures from the library need to be treated with special care, since the reporter or editor reusing them will often not know the circumstances under which they were taken nor have a full explanation of what they actually show. Close-up shots, of hands, feet and so on, are usually safer than full body shots of individuals. But the *Hinch* case proved they are not foolproof. Nor are shots of people taken from behind, which are routinely used as non-identifying pictures. One cause of problems in the use of file vision is that journalists often write their script first and then look for something with which to illustrate it. In cases where you know you are going to need file shots, it is often preferable to consider what safe images you have first, and then write to fit them.

Not only do television reporters have to think carefully about overlay as they write, they should always check the edited versions of their stories to make sure that the juxtaposition of words and images has not created an unintended legal problem.

## Racial hatred

The law of defamation does not protect groups – such as those based on ethnicity, language, colour and so on – from remarks considered offensive or insulting, unless specific individuals are identifiable from within a group. But members of such groups are protected by a federal law, the *Racial Hatred Act 1995*, and journalists should be aware of its provisions.

Rather than set a regulatory standard for the media, the Act reinforces provisions in the existing codes of ethics and practice outlined in this chapter. (See also Appendices 1 and 2.)

The Act allows groups and individual members to take action against ‘racially biased reporting and the use of offensive stereotypes in the media’ (HREOC 1996: 5).

However, this does not mean that the media cannot debate racial issues. It means that reporting must be fair and balanced. When commentators give their own views, they should state the facts on which these are based and the views must be ‘genuinely held’ and made in ‘reasonably good faith’ (HREOC 1996: 7).

The types of reports that are allowed under the legislation include:

- a publication, discussion or debate on a matter of public interest
- a fair and accurate report on a matter of public interest
- a fair comment on any event or matter of public interest if the comment is an expression of a person’s genuine belief (HREOC 1996: 6).

Complaints of breaches of the Act are dealt with by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and relevant state agencies. Complaints may be dealt with by conciliation or be referred to the Federal Court.

## Contempt of court

The Australian system of justice is governed by two fundamental principles:

- A person is innocent until proved guilty in a court of law.
- An accused person is entitled to a fair trial.

The laws of contempt are designed to protect public confidence in the administration of justice by maintaining the authority of the courts, and this includes ensuring the right to a fair and impartial hearing.

In general, contempt is a criminal matter and, whereas civil defamation actions are usually pursued against the employer, individual journalists found in

breach of the contempt laws face the possibility of a fine or even imprisonment. Their employers may also be punished, as happened in March 1998, when Sydney-based radio host John Laws was fined \$50 000 and his employer, Radio 2UE, \$200 000, after Laws described a man being tried for murder as ‘scum, absolute scum, pig’ (Fife-Yeomans 1998: 3).

## Sub judice

Sub judice is one form of criminal contempt. The rules that apply in this area are designed to protect the administration of justice, including the right to a fair hearing. While they apply to both criminal and civil proceedings, they tend to assume greater importance in criminal matters because these are heard by a jury, which is considered more susceptible to influence than a judge.

A criminal case is *sub judice* (literally ‘before the judge’) once the case is ‘pending’, and this is usually seen to begin from the moment an arrest warrant or summons is issued and remains so until the appeal process is ended. During this period, reporting is governed by the following rules:

- During the period between when an accused person is arrested and when they are charged – either in open court or by summons – they must not be identified.
- It is a contempt to publish the picture of an accused person in cases where identity may be an issue. This usually includes crimes such as assault, murder, robbery. The restriction on identifying suspects is sometimes ignored by media outlets, especially in cases where the accused has received considerable publicity before being charged. But the law remains, even if it is not always enforced. Since the prohibition on publishing pictures hinges on the question of identity, television stations usually show pictures, but electronically obscure the accused’s face so that they can’t be identified. But this also requires some care because an accused might be identified by their clothes, or the people around them (such as family members). The prohibition on identification extends to court drawings, so these often appear with part of the face obscured. A detailed physical description of the accused can also amount to identification and should be avoided.
- An accused’s previous criminal record may not be published until the case is over. It is also an offence to publish any other information about an accused that might be prejudicial. Even describing any special security arrangements for the trial might be prejudicial because of the implications it would carry about the accused person.
- It is a contempt to publish evidence (including suggestions that an accused has confessed) until this is presented in open court.

- During a trial, the jury is sometimes sent out of the courtroom to allow debate on the admissibility of evidence or other issues. Statements made in the absence of the jury must not be reported. It is also a contempt to publish any material suppressed by the court.
- It is a contempt to prejudge a case before the courts – in other words, to suggest a defendant should be found guilty or acquitted and so on. However, an accused person may protest their own innocence.

There are several other prohibitions of which a reporter needs to be aware when covering courts.

- Children *may not* be identified. The age at which someone is still considered to be a child can be either 17 or 16, depending on the state. Journalists should be aware of the requirements of their own state. This applies both to hearings in the Children's Court and also to cases in which children appear in other courts. In order to avoid identifying the child, it is often necessary to avoid identifying the parent(s), or anyone else connected with the child as well. In some areas, even giving the location of the court might amount to a form of identification and this is something reporters should check in their own area.
- Parties to hearings in the Family Court *must not* be identified.
- The victims of sexual offences *must not* be identified.

## Examples

It is not just ignorance of the law that causes journalists to flout the sub judice rules. The desire for a stronger story than that which is legally proper can be a powerful, though in no way excusable – influence. Another is the assumption that an accused person is clearly guilty even though the judicial system is based upon a presumption of innocence until guilt is proved in court. Two historic cases illustrate what happens when the media presume that guilt can be taken for granted. In each of these cases, the media erred, in part because of their unquestioning acceptance of the police's version of events.

- *The Harry Blackburn case.* On 24 July 1989, Sydney police arrested one of their own – a former police superintendent, Harry Blackburn – in relation to a series of sexual assaults that stretched back to 1969. Blackburn, a man a Royal Commission would later describe as having been of 'hitherto unblemished character', was paraded before the television cameras and other media before being taken to the Sydney Police Centre and charged with 25 offences. A television reporter told the subsequent Royal Commission that 'the foyer and doorway' of

the building where Blackburn was paraded, 'were flood-lit by police so camera crews could be sure to show Blackburn's face' (Green 1990: 5). Television viewers were told 'that a former senior policeman who "had his finger on the pulse of every major criminal investigation in NSW" was a rapist who had been terrorising women in Sydney for more than 20 years' (Dunlevy 1990: 9). Despite the certainty with which Blackburn was defamed, the case against him was shaky. Three of the victims said he was not their attacker and forensic evidence on blood samples confirmed this. By mid-October, the charges against Harry Blackburn had been dropped. The reports of Blackburn's arrest were both in contempt and also defamatory, since he was exonerated. Blackburn brought a defamation action against the NSW government, which was settled out of court, but he chose not to pursue actions against media outlets, preferring to put the trauma behind him.

- *The Paul Mason case.* Less than a week after the arrest of Harry Blackburn came another incident in which an accused man was effectively paraded before the media. Paul Mason had been sought by police over the murder of two women and an infant between May and July in 1989. He had given himself up and had been charged with the killings when police took him back to the crime scenes. Police invited the media to record the proceedings and also told reporters of Mason's confession. That night's television reports identified Mason as a self-confessed killer and showed him being led around the murder scenes. The court later rejected media arguments that the case had been watertight, saying 'everyone deserves a full and fair trial, no matter how convincing the case against them' (Pearson 1997: 45). Six media outlets, four of them television channels, were convicted of contempt and fined a total of \$670 000 (Pearson 1997: 45). The ABC, was one of the organisations fined. Its report cost it \$120 000.

In the aftermath of the Blackburn and Mason cases, some state police forces adopted the practice of issuing their officers guidelines on dealing with the media.

The enduring lesson of both the Blackburn and Mason cases is that journalists should treat information from the police with the same degree of caution and scepticism as they would any other source and not allow themselves to be seduced by the excitement of being treated as an insider in crime detection and law enforcement.

## Copyright

Copyright is the ownership people have over their creative endeavours – including written works, music, photographs, moving pictures and so on. It gives individuals, groups or organisations certain rights over work they have created, including the right to copy, publish or broadcast the work. The ownership of copyright is different from the ownership of an item itself. For example, an artist can sell a painting, but retains the copyright to the image unless this is assigned separately. Any one piece of work may involve a series of copyright owners, each holding the right to different aspects of the work. Take, for example, a song on a CD. There might be separate copyrights in the composition, the performance, the recording and so on.

While there is no system of registration for copyright, the copyright laws protect creators from the unauthorised use of their work. But note that there is no copyright in ideas or information, only in their creative expression.

Reporters in the electronic media often want to use excerpts of copyrighted works in their stories. If the copyrighted work, or its creator, is the subject of a news story or review, use of the work will usually be seen to be protected by the defence of ‘fair dealing’, for that particular report as long as the source is acknowledged. Probably the most common use of copyrighted work in news occurs in sports stories that draw on vision owned by another channel. Rival networks generally operate under informal agreements in which each can use a total of three minutes of material across three scheduled bulletins within 24 hours of the event. Any use outside that period has to be negotiated separately.

In the case of recorded music, fees have to be paid to several people in connection with each recording and this is handled through a number of music industry bodies. Broadcast stations generally have blanket agreements with these organisations, including APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association), ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) and PCCA (Phonographic Performance Company of Australia). Stations maintain cue sheets of music to determine the level of fees and reporters and producers are expected to notify use of even the smallest amount of music or some other sound recording in their stories.

The kinds of copyrighted pictures a reporter might want to use include scenes from feature films, documentaries and also archival vision, particularly from the newsreels.

## Copyright and archival material

One area of easy confusion here is films, or photographs on which a reporter's station has done a story in the past and which have been filed in the library. In these cases, permission can be assumed to have been given for the material to be used in the original story. But that doesn't mean the material may be reused in another context. Stations have paid out money for breach of copyright in cases where a copyright owner objected to material, particularly documentary film material that had been filed in the station's library, being reused without permission.

Archival vision poses particular problems. It is easy for reporters to forget that black-and-white newsreels are still usually protected by copyright and that steep fees are applied for use of this material.

As with other elements of journalism, the rule on use of copyrighted material is to check before you proceed.

## Privacy

As Pearson and Polden note (2011: 388) as of 2010, 'there was still no common law right to privacy in Australia'. However, individual privacy is covered in some specific ways of which broadcast reporters need to be aware.

## Secret recordings

- *On the phone.* It is illegal to record a telephone conversation without the consent of all parties involved. This is covered by a federal law, the *Telecommunications (Interceptions) Act 1979*. Telephone recorders are used routinely throughout the media, but reporters need to remember to ask the interviewee's permission to record them and then tell them once the recorder has been activated.
- *In person.* A series of state laws regulates the use of listening devices to record conversations. Eavesdropping (that is, secretly recording other people's conversations) is prohibited. However, in some states, it is legal for someone to secretly record their own conversation with other parties. But even when the recording itself is not illegal, publication of the material usually is. All secret sound recordings therefore need to be treated with great caution.
- *Video recording.* While the law restricts the use of listening devices and publication of conversations obtained in this way, there were, at the time of writing, few restrictions on recording pictures of people in public places. Most Australians would have been unaware of this prior to January 1999, when Telstra's use of news vision of flood victims in an advertisement prompted a public debate on

the issue and people learned that not only could television record their images, it also owned the copyright on those pictures and could sell them. The exceptions to this are pictures of public figures and celebrities where consent would normally be required for commercial use of their image, no matter how it was taken. Note also that the publication of video or photographs taken without consent could invite an action for defamation if they held someone up to ridicule.

Some states have legislated to restrict the use of hidden cameras and the secret visual recording of people engaged in private activity and reporters should check the current situation in their state.

## **Trespass**

Reporters and crews need permission to enter private property, just like everyone else. And they must leave once the owner requests it. Reporting teams doing a ‘walk in’ will enter a property with the camera rolling, taking the view that it’s necessary to enter the property to seek permission and then, if told to leave, continue recording as they exit. An aggrieved property owner can seek an injunction to stop broadcast of pictures recorded this way, although there’s no guarantee the injunction will be granted.

## **If you want to read more ...**

Mark Pearson & Mark Polden, *The Journalist’s Guide to Media Law*, 4th edition, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* and *Telecommunications (Interceptions) Act 1979* may be found under Commonwealth Consolidation Legislation at <[www.austlii.edu.au](http://www.austlii.edu.au)>.

# 16

## Getting a job

Broadcast news and current affairs is often seen as the glamour side of journalism and entry-level jobs are keenly sought. When metro stations advertise for entry-level reporters they can receive scores, and often hundreds, of applications. Compared to the number of vacancies, the number of applicants is daunting. Yet, determined would-be broadcasters still find work and the task is easier if you are realistic about where jobs can be found and what employers are looking for.

The larger metropolitan radio or television stations rarely employ journalists straight from university. Broadcast newsrooms are relatively small and, as one metropolitan news director explained, ‘we’re too busy to be able to have somebody who can’t be expected to work alone immediately’. Most metropolitan stations expect applicants to have either worked in another medium (usually newspapers) first or have gained broadcast experience in a regional market. Even larger regional stations will prefer applicants who have had experience in a smaller newsroom. So aspiring broadcast reporters need to be prepared to travel for their first job.

There’s no accurate data on the backgrounds of those who get radio and television news jobs, but anecdotal evidence suggests that, while some news executives insist they don’t care what kind of degree applicants have, or even whether they have a degree at all, the majority come from tertiary journalism courses. One reflection of that can be found at the ABC. In the 2010 intake it took nine cadets nationally, all of whom had some form of journalism qualification, either at Bachelor’s or graduate diploma level. Hiring graduates of journalism courses is a pragmatic approach for many newsrooms. As 3AW’s news

director, Rob Curtain, put it – applicants to his station ‘don’t have to have a degree in journalism, but so many who do are good that you don’t very often look beyond those who do’.

But a degree is not enough.

## **What news directors look for**

Anyone wanting to work in broadcast journalism needs to be able to write fast, crisp copy, conduct interviews and have an ear for a good soundbite. Most will need a broadcast quality voice, though there are some positions in television where journalists do not appear on air. But with so many people chasing relatively few positions they need more than that.

At Nine Network, Editorial Manager, Mary Davison, nominates ‘writing ability’ as the first skill she looks for in applicants. More broadly she suggests they need ‘good communication skills, speed and accuracy, good story sense and dynamic ideas about story production’, particularly in the use of graphics. Applicants are also more likely to impress if they can demonstrate a good knowledge of news and current affairs. ‘We like people who live and breathe news and who come into work each day fully across the stories we might be covering’, she says. They also need ‘a terrier like ability to chase down a good story’ and relevant experience. Internships with regional TV go down very well. Finally she looks for ‘a clear sense of career goals, not just “I want to be on telly”’. People who are applying for positions that will lead to on-air work clearly need a good voice and presentable appearance. But she says students should also be encouraged to think of the other jobs television news has to offer – such as being a Chief of Staff or being Executive Producer of a nightly news. Career goals such as this are often much more realistic and appealing to an employer. At Melbourne’s 3AW, Rob Curtain generally expects applicants to come with prior experience:

They need to be able to go on air. They need to present a good audition. They need to have some experience. They need to convince me they are really interested in news and the way we do news. And they need to be prepared to be flexible because even though our newsroom is one of the biggest [commercial radio newsrooms] in Australia even we have to be flexible because we are out and about and doing lots of different things and ... nobody can say ‘that’s not my job’.

Jason Morrison, who spent several years as news director at Ten Sydney, reinforces the point that students need a better than average attitude and approach

to be noticed in the highly competitive metropolitan environment. In a typical year, his newsroom hosted an average of 40 work experience students. In one year he recalled three of them stood out: 'They had something. They impressed people. They had good conversation. They asked intelligent questions. They were curious'.

Students need to be keen in order to be noticed, but there's a difference between being enthusiastic and being obsequious. Jason Morrison recalls hiring one reporter, not just because of her radio experience, but because she took a different tack from so many applicants:

She came in with ideas about news and how to make it better. We employed her because she tested our normal model of what someone trying to get a job here does. Usually someone will come in and they'll tell you how they love the news and they always watch it, never miss it. They don't come in and say 'I think your stories are boring because you use the same pool of talent all the time'. She challenged us and we saw that as interesting. She understood how things need to be.

Sky News, which employs a comparatively large number of junior journalists for a capital city service, looks for people trained in radio rather than just at other television stations because it needs journalists who can think and write at the pace demanded by radio news. It also requires its staff to be technically savvy, since its journalists need to be able to edit stories and compile programs at their desktops.

Since broadcast news is fast-paced, the people who work in it need to be able to deal with pressure and not be fazed by rapid changes in their routines. Entry level journalism is frequently not a Monday to Friday, nine to five, job. It requires a willingness to work weekend and overnight shifts.

Victorian radio sports editor Steve King is blunt about what to expect:

Be prepared to do long hours. If you think you're going to walk in and do a 38-hour week, you're kidding yourself. You think it's only going to be Monday to Friday. It's not. You're going to work unpaid Sunday sessions because if you've got any pride in your work you've got to prepare for Monday if you don't have a Saturday or Sunday bulletin.

## Work experience and internships

Work experience and internships are a common route into industry. But for time in a newsroom to count on a resume it needs to involve more than just watching what goes on. Employers want to know what you can *do* and industry attachments should be seen as a chance to develop skills and prove ability. Many students waste the opportunities afforded by internship placements, sometimes by choosing the wrong newsroom; sometimes by their attitude.

Many news directors can tell stories of students just assuming they will start at the top, which in radio means reading the news during the breakfast program. Equally unimpressive are students who undertake work experience and show no interest in the organisations they visit.

Regional radio and television newsrooms and some metropolitan radio newsrooms are more likely to allow students to contribute to stories for broadcast than metropolitan television ones.

Community radio and television stations are also an excellent way for anyone interested in broadcasting to learn presentation and production skills in a relatively low-stress environment.

Students who want to put their work experience and volunteer work to best use need to be realistic about where they go and what they can do while they are there. Potential employers are rarely impressed by work experience in metro TV newsrooms where the student spent their time making the coffee.

## The demo or showreel

Applicants for broadcast jobs usually have to supply a written application and a demo or showreel of stories.

If you already have some on-air experience, you will probably want to send an 'air check' of you reading or reporting on air. If you don't have a broadcast performance to send, you need to put together a recording of your work. The news director will want to assess your writing style, voice and delivery.

A radio demo recording should run about two to two and a half minutes. It should contain about half a dozen stories you have written, including a couple with audio so the news director can hear how you read into and out of a soundbite, and also a 'donut' or 'package' story where the reporter's voice is wrapped around an audio bite. Steve King suggests including a couple of sports stories because sport is so important to Australian audiences and when he jokes that 'someone who can pronounce the Uzbekistani tennis player's name is more

of a chance than someone who can't, it's to make a serious point, that news directors are picky because they know audiences are too.

You can begin with a very short 'sting' if you want to, but anything longer than a few seconds just defeats the purpose of the demo, which is to showcase your writing and reading.

Check with the newsroom if you are uncertain about the format of presentation they require, but CD is common, as is emailing the application with the audio attached as an MP3 file.

Label your file or disc with your name and contact details and don't expect anything you send to be returned.

Applicants for positions in television news may be expected to provide a showreel. This is a little less rigid than in radio since a video is harder to put together and some reporters are hired from a print background without television experience. It is also worth noting that only a small percentage of the jobs in television newsrooms involve working on camera. Students who focus their ambitions solely on working in front of the camera, as a reporter or presenter, rather than in other news production areas are severely limiting their options. A showreel from an entry-level applicant will typically consist of a couple of stories, which should include at least one piece to camera (if the application is for an on-camera position). Showreels for positions in television can be presented on disc or emailed as compressed digital files. Ads for television journalists often specify the preferred format for the showreel and if in doubt, check with the organisation. Once again, the disc should be properly labelled and is unlikely to be returned.

Students who write their material just for the demo reel are advised *not* to use the sign-off of a station they haven't worked for. It is likely to be seen as pretentious and if you use the sign-off of a different organisation to the one to which you are applying it might appear that you think you consider them second best.

## Dealing with knockbacks

One of the truisms of many industries is that the first job is the hardest one to get. Knockbacks are almost inevitable. It helps to remember that news executives have been through the same process themselves. Steve King's advice is simply to be persistent and remember that 'just because you've had one job knockback don't think it's the end of the line'. He also suggests trying to get feedback on what you might improve next time. This might be difficult if there has been a large number of applicants, but it is worth trying. He cautions that

there's 'a difference between being persistent and stalking the news director of a station'. It is also worth remembering that jobs are often awarded to candidates who are already known to the newsroom through their work experience.

### **If you want to read more ...**

Barbara Alysen, Mandy Oakham, Roger Patching & Gail Sedorkin, *Reporting in a Multimedia World*, ch. 19 'The Career Path', Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012.



# Appendix 1

## COMMERCIAL RADIO AUSTRALIA CODE OF PRACTICE 2: NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

### Purpose

The purpose of this Code is to promote accuracy and fairness in news and current affairs programs.

2.1 News programs (including news flashes) broadcast by a licensee must:

- (a) present news accurately;
- (b) not present news in such a way as to create public panic, or unnecessary distress to reasonable listeners;
- (c) distinguish news from comment; and
- (d) not use material relating to a person's personal or private affairs, or which invades an individual's privacy, unless there is a public interest in broadcasting such information.

2.2 In the preparation and presentation of current affairs programs, a licensee must use reasonable efforts to ensure that:

- (a) factual material is reasonably supportable as being accurate; and
- (b) substantial errors of fact are corrected at the earliest possible opportunity.

A failure to comply with the requirement in Code 2.2(a) to broadcast factual

material that is reasonably supportable as being accurate will not be taken to be a breach of the Code if a correction, which is adequate and appropriate in all the circumstances, is made within 30 business days of the licensee receiving a complaint or a complaint being referred to the ACMA (whichever is later).

2.3 In the preparation and presentation of current affairs programs a licensee must ensure that:

- (a) the reporting of factual material is clearly distinguishable from commentary and analysis;
- (b) reasonable efforts are made or reasonable opportunities are given to present significant viewpoints when dealing with controversial issues of public importance, either within the same program or similar programs, while the issue has immediate relevance to the community;
- (c) viewpoints expressed to the licensee for broadcast are not misrepresented and material is not presented in a misleading manner by giving wrong or improper emphasis or by editing out of context; and
- (d) the licensee does not use material relating to a person's personal or private affairs, or which invades an individual's privacy, unless there is a public interest in broadcasting such information.

10 June 2010

# Appendix 2

## FREE TV AUSTRALIA CODE OF PRACTICE SECTION 4: NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

### Objectives

- 4.1 This Section is intended to ensure that:
  - 4.1.1 news and current affairs programs are presented accurately and fairly;
  - 4.1.2 news and current affairs programs are presented with care, having regard to the likely composition of the viewing audience and, in particular, the presence of children;
  - 4.1.3 news and current affairs take account of personal privacy and of cultural differences in the community;
  - 4.1.4 news is presented impartially.

### Scope of the Code

- 4.2 Except where otherwise indicated, this Section applies to news programs, news flashes, news updates and current affairs programs. A 'current affairs program' means a program focussing on social, economic or political issues of current relevance to the community.

### News and Current Affairs Programs

- 4.3 In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licensees:
  - 4.3.1 must broadcast factual material accurately and represent viewpoints

fairly, having regard to the circumstances at the time of preparing and broadcasting the program;

- 4.3.1.1 An assessment of whether the factual material is accurate is to be determined in the context of the segment in its entirety.
- 4.3.2 must not present material in a manner that creates public panic;
- 4.3.3 should have appropriate regard to the feelings of relatives and viewers when including images of dead or seriously wounded people. Images of that kind which may seriously distress or seriously offend a substantial number of viewers should be displayed only when there is an identifiable public interest reason for doing so;
- 4.3.4 must provide the warnings required by Clauses 2.14 and 2.20 of this Code when there is an identifiable public interest reason for selecting and broadcasting visual and/or aural material which may seriously distress or seriously offend a substantial number of viewers;
- 4.3.5 must not use material relating to a person's personal or private affairs, or which invades an individual's privacy, other than where there is an identifiable public interest reason for the material to be broadcast;
  - 4.3.5.1 subject to the requirements of clause 4.3.5.2, a licensee will not be in breach of this clause 4.3.5 if the consent of the person (or in the case of a child, the child's parent or guardian) is obtained prior to broadcast of the material;
  - 4.3.5.2 for the purpose of this Clause 4.3.5, licensees must exercise special care before using material relating to a child's personal or private affairs in the broadcast of a report of a sensitive matter concerning the child. The consent of a parent or guardian should be obtained before naming or visually identifying a child in a report on a criminal matter involving a child or a member of a child's immediate family, or a report which discloses sensitive information concerning the health or welfare of a child, unless there are exceptional circumstances or an identifiable public interest reason not to do so;
  - 4.3.5.3 'child' means a person under 16 years.
- 4.3.6 must exercise sensitivity in broadcasting images of or interviews with bereaved relatives and survivors or witnesses of traumatic incidents;
- 4.3.7 should avoid unfairly identifying a single person or business when commenting on the behaviour of a group of persons or businesses;
- 4.3.7.1 when commenting on the behaviour of a group of persons or businesses, it is not unfair to correctly identify an individual person or business as part of that group if;
  - 4.3.7.1.1 the licensee can be reasonably satisfied that the individual person or business engages in that behaviour; or

- 4.3.7.1.2 the licensee discloses that the individual person or business does not engage in that behaviour.
- 4.3.8 must take all reasonable steps to ensure that murder or accident victims are not identified directly or, where practicable, indirectly before their immediate families are notified by the authorities;
- 4.3.9 should broadcast reports of suicide or attempted suicide only where there is an identifiable public interest reason to do so, and should exclude any detailed description of the method used. The report must be straightforward and must not include graphic details or images, or glamourise suicide in any way;
- 4.3.10 must not portray any person or group of persons in a negative light by placing gratuitous emphasis on age, colour, gender, national or ethnic origin, physical or mental disability, race, religion or sexual preference. Nevertheless, where it is in the public interest, licensees may report events and broadcast comments in which such matters are raised;
- 4.3.11 must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity. A failure to comply with the requirement in clause 4.3.1 to broadcast factual material accurately will not be taken to be a breach of the Code if a correction, which is adequate and appropriate in all the circumstances, is made within 30 days of the licensee receiving a complaint or a complaint being referred to the ACMA (whichever is later).
- 4.4 In broadcasting news programs (including news flashes) licensees:
  - 4.4.1 must present news fairly and impartially;
  - 4.4.2 must clearly distinguish the reporting of factual material from commentary and analysis.
- 4.5 In broadcasting a promotion for a news or current affairs program, a licensee must present factual material accurately and represent featured viewpoints fairly, having regard to the circumstances at the time of preparing and broadcasting the program promotion, and its brevity. A licensee is not required by this clause to portray all aspects or themes of a program or program segment in a program promotion, or to represent all viewpoints contained in the program or program segment.

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