

Feeding the hungry mouth - internet journalism

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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There's been a lot said about the demise of print journalism. Replacing it we have online journalism in the form of both electronic and print media organisations rushing to refresh their pages every hour.

There's obviously a lot of competition out there, which you'd think would be a good thing and encourage all concerned to make sure their news was presented professionally. Not so...

What we have is page after page of virtually unedited, badly written copy. I've just gone on to three top sites and it wasn't a case of searching for mistakes - they jumped out at me.

One article particularly caught my eye. It was a heart-warming story of a young beggar who's been given a new lease on life with a job, which he started yesterday. Parts of the story read like a 'learn to read' cat on the mat book:

"Yesterday when I arrived I met the management team. They all wanted to know more about me. The team welcomed me and they also understood the situation that I have been through," Phukubje told ...

He enjoyed his first day.

"The day was very interesting. Everything went very well," he said.

The story went on full of grammatical mistakes, such as Marlboro road.

Phukubje's life all changed when he met a Good Samaritan...

A quote from the ongoing Uber story from another site reads:

"Regulations unfortunately lagging innovation. There ambiguity and that does impact on other drivers to obtain the correct operating license because the regular is not exactly sure how they should be treated."



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I could have gone on to other sites and found the same. So what's the problem? Inexperienced writers, unqualified writers, inexperienced sub-editors, no sub-editors, lousy salaries, no real interest in their job? It could be all, none or a combination - but perhaps the most frightening part is what's known as the hungry mouth - the page which must be updated every hour with news.

In the 'old days' most newspapers put out one paper a day, with reporters bringing back one, two or at a push, three stories a day. Today's online writers are expected to produce and update stories every hour, but then again they're not going out on the streets to get their stories, they're either taken from existing electronic copy or from the comfort of their computer and phone.

Again in the past you didn't dare return to the newsroom without a few good quotes for every story. Today there are still quotes put in the stories but somehow, maybe because of cut and paste (who knows) they are often unintelligible. And as for punctuation - well, that must cost extra. From yet another site:

"This was due to certain corrupt people entrusted with administering this projects," the trustee said.

"We did not revise our demands, we will wait for the facilitators report. Once we have received it, we will go back to our members to seek a mandate either to reject or accept the offer",

"If our members accept the offer, it will then form basis for an agreement between ourselves and SALGA," Mohale said.

Another problem of sitting at your desk producing or rather reshuffling information into a news story is that the writer often has absolutely no understanding of the story they're writing or its background. I once asked two young writers I was training to tell me about Sharia law, which was the topic of the article. One of the writers was actually Moslem and even he didn't have a clue. We then went on to talk about the Taliban and I asked them where the Taliban was based - again silence!

I asked a Cape Town online writer once about the mining strike that was taking place in Gauteng only to be told: "We don't really know much about what goes on in Johannesburg." The majority of today's young online writers don't have a clue when it comes to general knowledge, not just in their own country but around the world.

Obviously the core problem is inexperience and perhaps unqualified writers but then what about the more senior people in these newsrooms? Wouldn't it be a good idea to introduce mentorship programmes, where senior staff take one or two young writers under their wing? When I've suggested this in newsrooms in the past I've either had grudging nods or been told it's not really possible as they're already short of staff...

The answer? Well, I don't have one right now. Perhaps journalism schools need to have dedicated online journalism courses together with English grammar and spelling. Oh and perhaps getting them to actually read good news, such as *The*

Economist to learn what's going on in the world and how to write about it...

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