

# Flimsy excuses for newspapers' mistakes

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Throughout history, newspapers have always made mistakes but until a few years ago these were mostly spelling and grammar gremlins, juxtaposed picture captions and double-entendre headlines. But, in the past few years, newspapers have been making far more serious mistakes.

They have been getting facts wrong through simple lack of homework, lack of skills and lack of professionalism. Today, the age-old media ethic of telling both sides of the story seems to have been consigned to the same waste bin as good sportsmanship, with the result that one-sided stories often end up as misguided stories for which newspapers have to apologise.

## Bad news

In fact, "newspaper" has become a misnomer; they really should be called "opinionpapers".

But, while they used to headline their apologies with the word "Apology", nowadays they're disguised under headings such as "matter of fact" and stashed away at the bottom of page two. Even worse, it's not even an apology but just fobbed off as an error - in a sort of "we-might-make-mistakes-but-we're-never-wrong" sort of way."

Meanwhile, lives get scarred, reputations sullied and businesses ruined. And those include people who work for newspapers.

## Er, um, oops

To add insult to injury, many newspapers have now cottoned on to the best excuse of all: "We regret the error which was introduced during editing." As though this is some sort of mitigating factor.

What actually happens in most cases is that somebody screws up by not checking the facts. Occasionally someone doesn't check the context of the headline and, in other cases, sub-editors simply hack pieces out of an article to shoehorn it into a space and in doing so completely ruin the context.

Frankly, it's time that editors took responsibility. Not only the big bosses but deputy editors, assistant editors and sub-editors. And apologise properly instead of skulking away behind syrupy, non-committal excuses. It's also time that newspaper management took responsibility for giving their editors the resources to be able to do the job properly instead of continuously having to patch over cracks and run on one cylinder all the time.

## Backs to the wall

The newspaper industry is facing all manner of challenges, with some legendary old titles all over the world closing down. Newspaper management and editors should think hard about why circulations are generally on a downward trend. Maybe it's not only because newspapers are being challenged by the Internet and the immediacy of radio and TV.

Maybe it's because a lot of readers have simply stopped believing in them.

Newspapers should also realise that, unlike a decade or so ago, when to admit wrongdoing or failure resulted in loss of face, in this day and age where the consumer is desperate for someone or something to trust, the power of apology is such that to admit to being wrong, openly and explicitly, one actually gains respect and trust.

## Paying the price

But then, newspapers have always been decades behind when it comes to marketing and communications trends. And they're paying the price for it.

With newspapers having their backs up against the wall, it is hardly surprising that they are having to make do with fewer journalists who seem to be a lot less skilled than their predecessors. As a consequence, everyone from hacks to sub-editors have to work harder and longer.

Add to this the fact that editors no longer seem to insist on their journalists investigating both sides of the story and one has a recipe for disaster.

## Sensation

And they seem to believe that the more sensational a story, the more readers they will attract. It doesn't quite work that way. Using sensationalism as a marketing tool to attract customers is like using a hand ball in the goalmouth to stop your opponents scoring. At first it looks like the hand of god but if you try it too often, you just get the reputation of being sneaky, underhanded and without substance.

I love newspapers and I don't believe they need to die out as they surely will if they keep behaving the way they do. They have made a complete mess of their online efforts, once again not understanding the marketing fundamentals of online publishing. They continue to try and run on the smell of an oil rag instead of investing in quality journalists and beefing up their editorial departments to be able to do the job properly.

And it's not just about throwing money at the problem. The solution is a lot cheaper - all it really involves is injecting some integrity, common sense and an understanding of just what it is that the consumer wants to hear. Right now, newspapers seem to operate on the premise of publishing what they think consumers want to hear, which is the exact opposite of proven modern communications techniques.

It hurts like hell when I hear people telling me that they love reading newspapers on Monday mornings to see what the Sunday press got wrong. The reason it hurts so much is that more often than not they are right.

The newspaper industry is vital to the sustainability of democracy, but only if it is seen to have integrity. It's no good having newspapers that are perceived to be just as untrustworthy as bent politicians.

## ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK: @CHRISMOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on [moerdyk@gmail.com](mailto:moerdyk@gmail.com) and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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