

Journalism or prescriptivism?

 By Leigh Raymond

31 Mar 2014

One of the most important things I learned at Rhodes University is to write for the audience.

It's not a tough concept to understand. As a journalist, the idea is to impart information. Whether you believe that journalism fulfils a watchdog or a collaborative role, or even if you are apolitical; you're writing for a group of people who will read your work. Of course, it's not always easy to understand or even visualise your audience as you write, but reliably they are not like you. They might share some ideas and they might have a similar agenda but you are different from your audience and as a journalist, your job is to convey information they will find important, in a way that will interest them.

Accuracy

I recently had a heated discussion with a colleague over an article about depression. It's a tricky subject to write about, which leads me to one of the other lessons I learned at Rhodes: accuracy. A slippery concept because there are as many versions of reality as there are human beings to experience them, and no doubt different people living with depression have different experiences of this disorder. This makes writing accurately about depression an almost impossible task. One thing that may be uniform across the experiences of depression is that everyone will know someone who has no idea what this disorder means to them.

So any article about depression comes from a good place. As long as it is written for the audience and is accurate.

As a health journalist, it can often be difficult to provide information without providing rules that someone believes people should follow. But prescriptivism is rarely a useful communication tool and it certainly doesn't help anyone to understand a complicated and diverse issue like depression. Combine a complicated issue like depression with a prescriptive agenda and you have a hot mess of stigma-inducing vitriol that's no use to anyone actually living with a disorder.

Humility

And then there's probably the most profoundly complicated lesson that studying and practising journalism over the last eight years has taught me: humility. Writing is no science. We know that because concepts like objectivity have fallen out of even the most robustly conservative journalism school agendas, for being too slippery. If there is any lesson to be learned it's that writing is a constant battle; it is like waging an internal war with oneself and there is nothing more humbling than speaking to someone else about your writing, especially someone whose opinion differs from your own.

But this is by and large the most important lesson a writer can learn about their own writing. Journalists can only become

better at this complicated art of storytelling by taking criticism and internalising it. By no means is everyone's opinion to be blindly accepted, but the first rule is always to write for the audience. So perhaps learning to listen to them is a skill worth cultivating.

ABOUT LEIGH RAYMOND

I'm a dedicated health journalist who trained at Rhodes University. I'm interested in anything health and wellness related with a special interest in behaviour change communication. MA qualified.

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