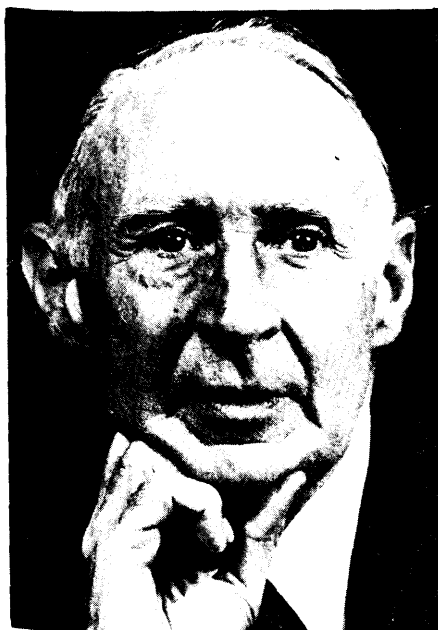


NEWSPAPER WRITING

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES MC CLURG



James McClurg was born in Cape Town in 1913. He was educated at St Joseph's College, Rondebosch and joined the editorial staff of the *Cape Times* in 1931 before moving to the African Broadcasting Company (later, the SABC) in 1934. He was the Director-General of the Federal Broadcasting Corporation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland between 1958 and 1963. He joined the managerial staff of the Argus Company in 1964 and retired in 1976 as Executive Assistant to the Managing Director of SA Associated Newspapers. He is now ombudsman, media columnist and book reviewer for the *Rand Daily Mail* and also writes a weekly column (on the Afrikaans Press, under the title 'Nadere Kennis') for the *Sunday Express*.

Question

In his book *The Summing Up* Somerset Maugham wrote: 'The Press ... kills the individuality of those who write for it'. Do you agree? What scope is there for self-expression in newspaper reporting, and for individual styles of writing?

Answer

As a generalisation, there is a great deal in what Maugham says. It certainly applies to news reporting, and in this sphere there

is in fact something to be said for setting the parameters of style fairly strictly. If the subject is essentially factual as in the case, say, of a trial or an air disaster or some other physical event, stylistic mannerisms can be an obtrusion. The first task of a messenger, after all, is to deliver his message effectively, not to call attention to himself. The trouble about newspaper style, if we can call it that, is that the mediocre writer moves inevitably towards the cliché and rubber-stamp word which is the subject of a later question, and rubber-stamp words lead to rubber-stamp thinking. From outside hard-news there is really quite a lot of scope on newspapers these days for an individual style of writing, in regular signed columns, interviews, political comment, sport (which again is the subject of a later question) and feature writing generally. Since Maugham's day, the increasing use of by-lines giving the names of reporters or writers has replaced much of the anonymous writing in the press, and there is certainly more scope for individuality now than then. The pity is that so much of the individualised writing is sloppy, vulgar, superficial, and aimed at scoring cheap points. In the last analysis there is only good writing and bad writing. Perhaps we should be grateful that there is still a fair amount of good writing in South African newspapers.

Question

Do journalists have a responsibility to uphold a certain standard of language? In these days of popular journalism, do you condone usage that forsakes grammatical correctness or completeness so as to catch the ear of the masses?

Answer

I do indeed believe profoundly that journalists have a responsibility for upholding a certain standard of language. This applies with all the more force in South Africa where, paradoxically, each of the two European languages endangers the other, and where both will be threatened to different degrees and in different ways by the increasing sophistication of the Black population. Afrikaans obviously faces the greater threat, no less in fact than possible extinction. But Afrikaans newspapers are painfully aware of this and make a strenuous, if not always successful effort to maintain the standard of the language. No comparable effort is made by the English language newspapers, and this indifference is matched by an equal indifference on the part of the English-speaking public. The few senior journalists who care have pointed out to me despairingly that recruits reach them from school, or even from a university, without having acquired the rudiments of grammar. This may be true — in fact, I know it is. But language is the journalist's tool.

I do not believe that it is any more justifiable for a reporter to be let loose on the public without a grasp of grammar and idiomatic English than it would be for a bank to employ a teller incapable of counting money or totting-up figures.

Question

Is there a place for colloquial language and idiomatic freshness in newspaper journalism?

Answer

There is plenty of room in journalism for colloquial language and idiomatic freshness. What is so often lacking is an ability to distinguish between those qualities and mere vulgarity. When a 'leader' writer asks 'what the hell is happening' in a certain government department, or urges the city councillors to 'get off their bottoms' no one nowadays is shocked by the mild offensiveness of these terms. What is truly shocking is the poverty of linguistic resource, the failure to find some fresher and more vigorous way of making a point. Similarly, it is not prudishness that makes me object to the use in newspapers of 'boobs' for breasts. I believe anatomical frankness is healthier than the sexual obscurantism than in which I, for instance, was brought up. What shocks again is the almost pathetic mental level that can accept the furtive school-boyism as the linguistic norm.

Question

In his book *Problems of an Editor* Sir Linton Andrews said: 'Editors provide many readers not only with words to think about, but words to think with'. Would you agree that the quality of the language used conditions a reader's perception of reality?

Answer

I am not quite sure what is meant by 'the quality of language' but there can be no doubt that the choice of words can affect a reader's perception of reality. The most obvious and topical example of this is the use of 'terrorist', 'freedom fighter' or 'guerilla' for the same person. The omission of 'Mr' from the name and the insertion of 'so called' in certain contexts are both obviously calculated to modify the impression made on a reader, viewer or listener. Then there is the euphemism as a reflection of changing social values: 'gay', a word that seems to me deplorably arch and patronising, seems set to replace 'homosexual'. Since what used to be called, or was sometimes called, common law marriages are now common in another sense, we must expect such associations to be differently described, and they are — in a variety of ways. 'Mistress' has been

replaced by 'girl friend', which used to mean something else and no doubt often still does. But 'lover', probably because it too is equivocal, and because it is certainly less pejorative than 'mistress', is still in currency. But sexual morality is one thing and honesty another. 'Shoplifting' is itself a euphemism for theft. Now that big shops are increasingly inclined not to prosecute for minor acts of shoplifting, will it too be replaced by a new word drained of moral disapprobation? 'Shrinkage' is already used in the trade for thefts by staff. Perhaps shoplifters could be called 'shrinkage assistants'!

Question

If newspaper journalists have a responsibility to maintain a high standard of language, don't they also have a responsibility not to cater to the morbid and prurient tastes of the masses (even at the expense of a better circulation figure)?

Answer

I certainly believe that journalists, and more specifically Editors, have such a responsibility. That they often fail to observe it is due mainly to the battle for circulation, but partly also to a failure to accept personal moral responsibility. That kind of failure is of course not confined to journalists, but that is no excuse. Unfortunately, a kind of 'Gresham's Law' seems to operate in this field, so that badginism (bad in this sense, at least) drives out good journalism.

Question

What is your view of newspapers that make concessions (however small) to the vogue for violence and sex — sensationalism of any kind?

Answer

Newspapers cannot be expected to ignore the vogue for violence, sex and sensationalism. The only question is how big or small the concession is to be. A newspaper that pretended this vogue did not exist, and averted its eyes from the violence and sexual excess that exists as an objective fact in today's world, would be failing in its duty to hold up the mirror to society. A different matter altogether is the extent to which newspapers contribute to the vogue, and undoubtedly many of them do.

Question

Newspaper writers are always facing deadlines. Are clichés and 'rubber stamp words' unavoidable?

Answer

Deadlines offer little excuse for clichés and 'rubber-stamp' words. These are mainly just a bad habit. In fairness, though, a sub-editor writing headlines where a large type has to be fitted into narrow columns often has no option but to use the shorthand words of the trade, now no doubt instantly recognised and understood by most readers. 'Accident' won't fit, so 'crash' will have to do. And, on the same basis, 'surprise' becomes 'shock' which is not necessarily the same thing. A prohibition of any kind becomes a 'ban', an agreement becomes a 'pact' however inappropriate the shorter word may be. And so we go on to the familiar litany of 'bid', 'chaos', 'quit', 'slash', 'horror', 'row', 'rap' and 'slam'. Readers of the Afrikaans press will find the Afrikaans equivalents equally familiar. Perhaps these headline words don't do as much harm as we may think. Experience teaches most of us to devalue them sub-consciously as we read. But what is really deplorable is that they come to be used in the text, what journalists call the 'body copy', where there is no need for them and the appropriate longer word could be used without difficulty. The best recent example of this malign process arose from the scandal involving the Department of Information. 'Information' wouldn't fit into headlines, so it soon became 'info'. A tasteless abbreviation, but possibly unavoidable for this purpose. Soon however, 'info' was being used as a substitute for 'information' in the body of reports, and worse still, in leading articles. I hope I was not the only reader who cried quietly into his breakfast porridge when he first saw this.

Question

Do newspapers have a legitimate role to play in directing language usage in new directions?

Answer

I cannot see that it is any part of a newspaper's function to direct language usage in new directions. Nor do I see how this would be practical even if thought desirable. On the contrary, I suggest that the best service newspapers can render in this field, is to be rather slow to admit new usages and especially vogue words until they have proved their usefulness or, perhaps, their inevitability.

Question

A source of novel expression is figurative language. Do you encourage/condone the use of metaphor or simile in newspaper reporting? And are concrete words necessarily preferable to abstract ones?

Answer

There is certainly room for metaphor and simile in newspaper reporting as in other forms of writing, provided they are apt, revealing and not shop-soiled.

Question

A danger of metaphoric expression is that it represents a break with semantic convention. Could it not cause a reader to lose the thread of discourse?

Answer

The answer to this depends partly on the intellectual level at which a given piece of journalism is aimed. In special articles, intended for select groups of readers, the rule should surely be the same as for any similar kind of writing in another medium (outside the strictly technical field, of course). In basic reporting, figurative language could be a distraction. There is no guide but good judgement applied in the particular circumstances.

Question

Isn't it possible that novel metaphors are sometimes used to disguise the banality of a writer's message? If metaphor can be used to embroider platitudes or fuzzy arguments, couldn't it be employed by unscrupulous writers as a technique of manipulation of the less perceptive reader?

Answer

Pretentious writing usually aims at disguising emptiness, and this applies as much to novel metaphors as to anything else. I have never encountered anyone writing on a newspaper who consciously devoted himself to manipulative techniques, though rushed production of newspapers in our kind of society would make such a process difficult in any case. No doubt, through habit of mind, some journalists do use manipulative language more or less subconsciously.

Question

Metaphor and simile are sometimes used to excess (notably by certain local sportswriters). This can cause the impression of objectivity in a report to evaporate in a swirl of self-indulgent and precious imagery.

Answer

There is no doubt that fancy writing is much overdone by South African sportswriters. That Neville Cardus and some of his

successors could use novel, sometimes startling metaphor successfully has made many bird-brain sportswriters think they can do the same. On the other hand, the overall standard of sports-writing seems to me to have improved greatly in the past couple of decades. I am old enough to remember the age of elegant variation when a sportswriter thought he had committed a crime if he used the same word, say 'ball', twice in successive sentences. Soccer writers therefore, developed such repulsive synonyms as the 'sphere' and the 'leather', and I recall one journalist who contrived, almost unbelievably, to call rugby enthusiasts 'devotees of the oval sphere'! At least nonsense of that kind no longer appears in sports columns.

Question

What do you think of 'readability formulas', such as that of Rudolf Flesch (*The Art of Readable Writing*) which advocates a standard of not more than 150 syllables per 100 words, and not more than 19 words per average sentence?

Answer

Like all formulas for writing, and most iron rules for style, Flesch's proposal should be rejected, or at least viewed with the utmost reserve. But so far as any generalisation can be justified, I suggest there is merit in preferring short, simple words, and short, simple sentences to long ones. Journalism is of course not the only form of writing that can benefit from this kind of discipline, applied with discretion.

Question

What do you think of the rule that each sentence should contain only one idea? Does this assist comprehension, or merely speed up reading?

Answer

Again, I am suspicious of absolute rules in writing. A sentence that contains more than one idea can be perfectly comprehensible. What causes difficulty, I suggest, is complex construction, particularly a proliferation of dependent clauses and the use of abstractions. Fowler illustrates the latter point where he quotes the kind of sentence one often comes across: 'Participation by the men in the control of the industry is non-existent' instead of 'the men have no part in the control of the industry'. I believe any journalist who goes through his copy weeding out dependent clauses and abstractions will do a lot to aid comprehension. This will, of course, make for quicker reading, but it is important to remember that few readers in any case will battle with a sentence they can't readily understand. They will

simply abandon it, often with disastrous consequences for their understanding of the whole piece of writing.

Question

Most would agree that editorials and reports should be concise, simple and lucid. How is this to be reconciled with the enormous amount of trivia that occurs in most newspapers? How important is entertainment in relation to information?

Answer

I cannot see that trivia are made less banal by being couched in concise, simple and lucid language. Indeed what I find saddest about Fleet Street's popular newspapers is that brilliant journalists often have to apply their talents to what is essentially vulgar and superficial rubbish. The proportion of entertainment as against information in a newspaper depends on the Editor's estimate of his readers' appetite for these two ingredients. Unfortunately, the South African market is too small to be stratified intellectually. So - to pursue the question in terms of Fleet Street - the proportion of trivia in even the more serious South African newspapers would affront readers of *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Guardian*. On the other hand, the amount of serious information and analysis offered in South African newspapers would be found intolerably boring by anyone whose idea of a newspaper is *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror* or *The News of the World*.

Question

Is vocabulary range a problem? Can newspaper writers cater for both the under-educated and the well-educated?

Answer

Since journalism is a form of communication, the reader's vocabulary range is obviously crucial. In South Africa the problem grows daily more acute as a large proportion, sometimes the majority, of a newspaper's readers struggle with a language that is not their own, and which they approach against a background of defective general education and limited general knowledge. At this stage I can see no easy solution. I do not believe that it is either desirable or practical to reduce an English language newspaper's vocabulary range to that of its least literate readers, or, for that matter, those whose home language is not English. A newspaper in something approaching pidgin-English would serve nobody's interests, least of all those, of whom there are many, who are seeking to improve their knowledge of the language as they read it. If a reader's vocabulary range is to be increased he must, at an early stage, be allowed to

get out of his depth now and then. The best compromise seems to me that in news reports (and I emphasize those words) obscure and difficult words should be avoided as far as possible. If they are novel, they should be explained, but this can be done without tediousness. But in feature articles a wider range should be assumed. There are good general grounds for avoiding obscure words. Their deliberate use, in any case, is often a badge of poor, pretentious writing. But if the standard of written English in South Africa is to be preserved, we cannot afford to embark on a deliberate campaign of impoverishing the language.

Question

What is the value of conveying a message through indirection, for example, by means of irony, satire or parody in newspapers?

Answer

Only rarely, in my opinion, should irony, satire or parody be allowed to intrude into the news columns. The danger of mis-interpretation is greater than might be thought by anyone unfamiliar with newspaper readers. There is certainly room for these though in specialised columns, and particularly, of course, in cartoons. A cartoon, because it is basically a picture, attracts the eye and can drive home a point far more effectively than a closely argued leading article.

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