

Journalists in the era of Covid-19: Learning along with their audience

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If one could sum up the job of a journalist, it mostly comes down to telling stories. Not our own, but those of other people. This might sound simple, but the work that goes into writing and broadcasting or publishing a story can take days.



Source: Markus Winkler on Unsplash

Journalists are thus considered people who have a wealth of information on the widest variety of topics. Now, taking this into consideration, who would ever think we would live in times where we would have to report on something unknown, invisible, so foreign, never experienced in modern times, and only learning the (mutating) facts as we write?

That's Covid-19 for you. It can certainly be considered a watershed moment in the media industry globally. One day the OFM news team was chasing a story about a church gathering with international guests in Bloemfontein with possible Covid-19 positive cases, the next the whole country had been shut down – lock, stock and barrel – cut-off from the rest of the world. I remember telling a colleague, who responded very calmly: “Not to worry, so is the rest of the world.”

The newsroom was abuzz with more questions than answers. Information overload was the order of the day. The team was in daily brainstorming sessions to figure out ways to tell the story differently. We had to make sure we were double-checking and questioning ourselves all the time. Are we giving enough information? Should we give more? Are we maintaining the correct balance of warning without causing panic? What should we do differently?



MARKETING & MEDIA

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But still, the ink from our pens could not dry. We had to learn and inform. And then learn more and inform more. We epitomised the Confucius quote: "The man who asks a question is a fool for a minute, the man who does not ask is a fool for life."

It was clear that it did not matter what happened, the basic test of journalism – whether a story is considered news or not – still applied. If you do not know the answer to a question, chances are about 10 of your friends or family members do not know it either and that is enough people who will be interested in the story.

Another foolproof strategy in journalism – especially when you run out of angles for news articles – is to tell the story through someone's eyes. To try and make it more human and to tell the story using someone else's words. But as time went on, we realised that hundreds and thousands of people were testing positive and a frightening number of them were succumbing to the pandemic.

As is the case with any news department worth its salt, the OFM news team sets the news agenda for listeners and readers in central South Africa. Our ability to keep people informed has been tested in so many ways with the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although listeners and readers were glued to their radios and screens during hard lockdown, they became overwhelmed within a few months, and news and pandemic fatigue set in. I do, however, believe that never before have the South African public and the government understood the importance of the news industry as well as they do now.

The OFM News team strives to keep listeners in central South Africa informed and up to date. More than a year later and the country is now experiencing the third wave. At provincial level, the vaccination programme is in full swing. As the pandemic continues to change our lives in a million different ways, we, the news writers, will continue to learn along with our listeners and readers, and, most importantly, report on it.

Why OFM?

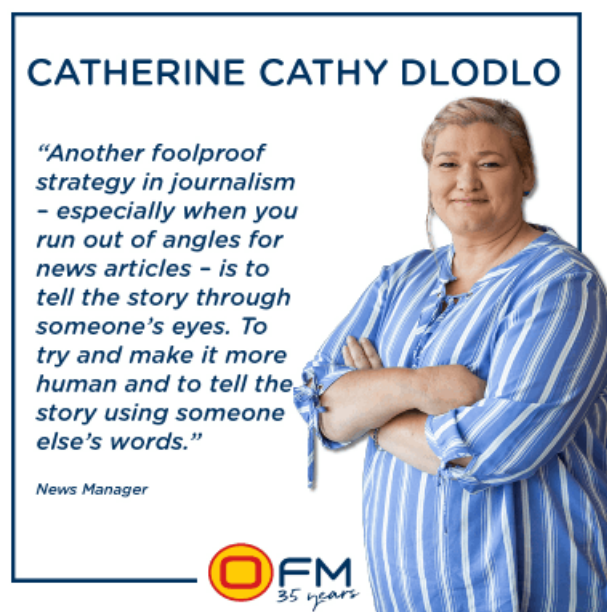
OFM, the sound of your life, is central South Africa's premier commercial radio station, offering a mix of music, news and entertainment. The station celebrates 35 years in the business in 2021.

OFM is part of the central Media Group, with its head office in Bloemfontein and a satellite studio in Welkom.

The station serves the affluent SEM seven to 10 economically active marketplace with a broadcast footprint across the Free State, Northern Cape, southern Gauteng and North West. OFM is synonymous with the people of central South Africa, and includes a full spectrum of listeners, from urban working moms and dads to corporate professionals, as well as rural communities and agricultural producers.

The station has an incredibly loyal and supportive audience. OFM enjoys one of the highest occurrences of time spent listening to the radio in South Africa. This is achieved by the station's great music offerings – such as playing listeners their favourite songs on the *Request Network* and counting down central South Africa's 30 biggest hits on the *Central SA Top 30*.

OFM offers several niche features – including a dedicated agricultural programme with three additional agricultural news updates a day, as well as a dedicated business programme with four additional economic news updates throughout the



day.

Sport is close to OFM listeners' hearts and is what brings much of central South Africa together. The station is a proud partner, sponsor and supporter of the Cheetahs, Griquas and Leopards rugby teams.

OFM is committed to living the real good life, while at the same time helping central South Africans to live their best lives. Initiatives such as Let's Move – a race that focuses on breaking the stigma of mental health – and Chip for Charity – Central South Africa's most loved golf day for 18 years – make a difference in the lives of the station's community. This speaks to OFM's mantra of caring and changing lives.

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