

The state of news

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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It doesn't take a genius to work out that the way people take in news has totally changed over the last number of years...

In the 'old days' *The Star* newspaper would put out six editions in a day, which later shrank to four and today, maybe two... Now with a touch of a finger the hour's news is revealed to you on a range of sites, if not an SMS to your phone.

So apart from shrinking circulation figures, what else does this mean for the media industry? It means you have to be sharp about what you're putting out there, whether through electronic media, on the half hour and hourly bulletins and online.

Just this weekend, the *Sunday Times* front page story featured the horrific murder of the Van Breda family in Stellenbosch and the fact that in a new 'twist' there was evidence to put the young son Henry under suspicion. I read this around 9am and then tuned into a radio news bulletin where I heard the status of this story exactly as it had been the previous week, with no mention of the latest update. A little embarrassing for the station concerned, who by the next bulletin had updated their story.

An hour later and another 'breaking news' story was aired on the fact that the sister had now spoken her first few words and was being kept under strict security for fear of anyone in the family or outside attempting to influence her. We didn't have to wait until the next day - we got that story minutes after it happened.

Old in minutes, if not seconds

The point is, news today is old news in just minutes, if not seconds and the consumer now demands this constancy. And this brings me to where a growing number of people are hearing the news first - on Twitter. In just 140 characters, they can read the latest Zuma gaffe or even see the great fall of Mugabe. They no longer have to wait to tune in to the hourly news report.

This means today's media climate encourages speed and immediacy, which doesn't always lead to good journalism. So what's different about a newsroom of today compared to the past? Perhaps one of the major changes that online journalism has brought about is the idea of a single news item being replaced by fast-changing content and new ways of constructing 'breaking news'. Here, the reader is seeing a story unfold before them, hour by hour, minute by minute - or sometimes even more frequently (Twitter).

As it happens

We didn't have to wait until the end of the day to hear the latest in the Oscar or Dewani trials - we got a blow-by-blow account - and it was riveting.

There's also a different driver of news - what's trending! Most newsrooms today keep a close eye on their online sites to see which stories get the most hits and these are stories that stay online the longest. Are they the most important stories of the day? Not necessarily, but they're the ones the readers most like. Using this as an example you could say that a story on what Kanye and Kim wore to the Grammys would get far more prominence than say the death of Andre Brink, one of our greatest literary figures of all time. Tragic but true. We are reading what other people think is news...

Luckily, we do still have some good weekly publications that employ top investigative reporters lucky enough to be given the time and support to go in depth into stories that matter. This also should allow for more accuracy in reporting, given the time available - but is not always a guarantee.

Feeding the internet

Perhaps the biggest loss in this general situation are the days when a journalist would spend their day researching one or two stories in a shift, really trying to find the best interviewees to comment and get the complete story before going to print. These days you're more likely to have a shift editor looking over your shoulder waiting to zap the story onto the screen and fill the giant mouth that's an online news page. So you couldn't get comment to confirm a, b or c? Well, that's enough for now - we've got to put it up on the screen... Again, sad but true.

It's not all doom and gloom, however, as on the positive side it's exciting to be able to know what's happening in the world as it happens. Look ahead a few more years and we'll all probably have a built-in chip that will go straight to the news app in our brain.

Wow - how will that affect the media?

ABOUT MARION SCHER

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