

A glimpse into the online newsroom

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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On day two of the National Prisa Conference, journalist, media consultant and trainer [Marion Scher](#) from Media Mentors shared insights on managing news in digital media, how this has changed and stayed the same, and the relationship between public relations (PR) and the media in this regard.



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Scher gave a glimpse into how the newsroom operates today. She says online news has enabled the now 24-hour newsroom to deliver what the reader wants, instantaneously. With this comes increased competition, and a greater need for the ‘hungry mouth’, that is the media, to be fed.

She says “there’s this perception that there’s you and us”, that PR and media are enemies, but their relationship is in fact interdependent. As much as PR need the media to publish their stories, so does the media need PR for content to fill the blanks. “Having said that, building those relationships and knowing how to work with the media, that’s another story.”

The good news is, “online you’ve got a lot more chance of your story actually seeing the light of day.” The bad news is... fake news. Most people believe everything they read on the internet, and the scary thing is that they’re getting their news from Facebook first. “On Facebook you’ve got these fake sites. What’s amazing is that poor Prince Philip woke up this morning (Thursday, 4 May) to the news that he was dead. Some people might say he’s been like that for years, but seriously, this is the danger of the internet – that you can wake up and find that you’re dead.”

What's changed?

- *Is there still room for the press release?* "It's all about multimedia," says Scher, and so the traditional press release is being replaced by the multimedia release.
- *How should I write news for digital media?* Online in particular is not the place for long releases. She recommends a paragraph or a page at most.
- *Deadlines, especially when it comes to crisis communications.* "If there is a situation and you don't get back to [the media], it doesn't mean they're not going to do the story, it means they're going to do the story without your input which could change it drastically. Deadlines for us are vital." Deadlines are deadlines, and it's so important that PR help journalists meet their deadlines, she reiterates.
- *Not just words anymore.* "This is the biggest change," says Scher, who does ongoing research into what readers want to read and how they want their information. She highly recommends visuals, in particular video and animation, as well as podcasts, but no longer than 1.5 minutes, she advises. These can be expensive, but you have to weigh up the results. "You have to look at different ways of attracting the journalist's attention. I can tell you now they are not going to read a page and they are certainly not going to read more than a page. They're not even going to scroll down." Scher suggests using infographics and photos because people take them in far more than words.
- *Social media changes.* "You've got to be very careful. You should be looking at what's happening to the story all the time, because if it starts going in the wrong direction, you need to be able to jump on it straight away."

What's stayed the same?

- *The importance of building media relationships.* "How many of you actually phone the media to introduce yourself and arrange a meeting?" Scher believes this is the way to go, saying that when you move on to another job, your value is going to be your contacts.
- *Knowing what each media want.* "I used to write for Men's Health and I got press releases about the latest nappies for babies... It certainly wasn't going to get into Men's Health. The editors fell about laughing. I mean it's just sending the wrong things to the wrong people. Give them what they want."
- *Understanding how they want it.*
- *Is it newsworthy?* "When looking to employ people, we at EWN look for their general knowledge. But general knowledge isn't just general knowledge – it's knowing what's going on in the world, because if they don't know what's going on in the world, how do they know what's newsworthy?"

What types of stories go on a digital news site?

The media wants what interests its readers, and this is typically the big stories of the day. The biggest story in South Africa today is our economy, our government really. It's fraud, it's corruption. Basically it's about almost anything that affects people's lives."

- News
- Sport

- Africa
- World
- Money – business, finance, new ventures
- Technology – science, IT, social media
- Life – travel, food, fashion
- Opinion – thought leadership

If you've got an angle on any of the above, there's a place for it in the media, and don't forget that there isn't just consumer media, there's B2B, business media, technology media, and custom publishing is massive. "So few PR really think about custom publishing. I mean look at Clicks ClubCard. The magazine (including the online version) goes to about 1.5 million people. These days an average consumer magazine goes to 40,000 people, if you're lucky." Mercedes Benz, Range Rover and Pam Golding, for example, also distribute magazines to their niche markets... "Look at those custom publishing magazines because not only are they hard copy, most of them are online as well, and they are brilliant."

Newsletters are the next big thing, believes Scher. Whether it's a bank's or a health insurance company's, you've got to start looking at people individually and sending them targeted information of interest and real value.

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