



Figure 15.1 Driving the desk in a self-opped (operated) studio. (Courtesy: 107.8 Radio Jackie Peter Stewart)

Professionalism

'Authority isn't a tone of voice that you can copy. It isn't sounding loud or deep or fast or ponderous. Authority is knowing what you are talking about, and having the confidence to explain it to the viewer or listener.'

– JENNI MILLS, BROADCAST VOICE TRAINER AND
AUTHOR OF 'THE BROADCAST VOICE',
FOCAL PRESS

Credibility and authority – qualities every newsreader needs – are derived largely from personal confidence. That the newsreader knows what he or she is talking about should never be in question. Consistent credibility and a flawless delivery are minimum requirements for a person whose performance has such a direct bearing on programme ratings – and profits.

Professionalism comes from having a cool head and plenty of experience. But it means more than remaining unruffled.



Figure 15.2 Radio is all about intimacy, even if you are broadcasting to millions, such as on the BBC World Service Arabic section. (Courtesy: Nahed Abou-Zeid)

Professionals hang up their personal life with their coat when they arrive for work and only take it up again when their work is over and they head for home. Along with their troubles, professionals hang up their bias, their background, their politics and their prejudices.

No one can be truly free from bias, but a professional has a duty to see his work is as free from prejudice as is humanly possible. This can only be done by recognizing where personal preferences, opinions and prejudices lie and compensating for them by being scrupulously fair to the opposite viewpoints whenever they appear in the news.

Radio newsreaders have to purge any trace of bias from the voice. The TV newsreader's task is more difficult: the face, which could betray an opinion at the speed of thought, must remain objective throughout.

Voice

'Voice is music and I think we respond much more than we realize to the music of the human voice.'

– CHRISTINA SHEWELL, VOICE THERAPIST

Advertisers for jobs in radio frequently call for a newsreader with a 'good microphone voice.' This usually means a voice that is reasonably clear, crisp and resonant and free from obvious impediments, such as a hare lip, stammer or a lisp.

Voices that would not fit the description are those that are piping, reedy, nasal, sibilant, indistinct or very young sounding. Newsreaders with distinctive accents that are not local to a station might find it difficult to persuade a news editor to take them, on the grounds that their out-of-town intonations might not find favour with a local audience.

Minor speech impediments such as weak 'Rrs', or 'THs' that become 'Vs' could be barriers to an otherwise promising career. Professional voice training may sort these problems out, and voices that are thick and nasal can be improved by treatment to the adenoids. With effort, voices can often be lowered to give a greater impression of authority, although in the long run voices tend to sound richer and wiser as their owners get older.

Another essential quality in a newsreader is the ability to *sightread*. For some people, the seemingly simple task of reading out loud can prove impossible. Not everyone has the ability to read ahead, which is essential for a smooth delivery, and for them sightreading can mean a staccato stumbling from word to word, losing the flow and sense of the item. It can trouble people who are dyslexic or have to read in a foreign language. Some may have this problem without even realizing, as few people are frequently called on to read out loud.

'What is it that makes the great newsreader? Certainly it is the voice ... it also has something to do with timing, the way in which memorable or terrifying events are presented to the listener with diffusing normality. Indeed the greatest newsreaders have all given the listener a tremendous sense of reassurance, as war, disaster, royal divorce, scandal and sporting triumph rolled out over the airwaves.'

— THE GUARDIAN, 5 May 1992

16 'On air!'

'Television is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living room by people you wouldn't have in your home.'

– DAVID FROST

Performance

Newsreading is the point where the business of information and the game of show-business meet. But even among the 'heavy' set of newsreaders most outwardly disdainful of TV's gloss and glamour, the act of being oracle to perhaps millions of viewers will always have something of the ego trip about it . . . however hard they may try to deny it.

TV presenters have to live with fame, but while being a public figure might massage the ego when the public is on your side, that same fickle audience will be as quick to complain as they are to compliment, not only if your performance begins to falter, but if they take offence at the cut of your suit or the shape of your tie.

Similarly, presenters' mannerisms can sometimes draw more attention than the stories they are reading. Leaning back or forward, swaying from side to side, scratching the nose, licking the lips, blinking hard or waving the hands about, are all tics which the budding anchor may have to iron out by patient practice in front of a mirror, or better still, a video camera, before risking his or her reputation before an audience.

Presence

In the hot seat of the TV studio, with flooding adrenalin and a wildly beating heart, the newsreader might find it difficult to remember that real people are sitting the other side of the screen anxious to hear what he or she has to say.



Figure 16.1 Preparing to go live with the lunchtime news. Note the autocue, script and laptop – belt and braces. (Courtesy: Katherine Adams/BBC)

The camera must cease to be a single staring eye set in a metal face, and become an acquaintance or friend. You would not talk *at* a friend, so you should not talk *at* a camera. Speak *to* it. It *likes* you. It is on your side. But what you say and the way you say it will need charisma and the force of confidence to carry through the lens to the viewer the other side. This is the x-factor that marks out a good newsreader. It is called *presence*.

'Anyone can be trained to read an autocue, but to present a news bulletin you have to know what you're talking about.'

– NIGEL CHARTERS, MANAGING EDITOR OF BBC TV NEWS

Adrenalin can be a problem – either way. While the first-time presenter might have to fight to bring it under control, the older stager might have to fight to keep it going. One radio newsreader used to deliberately wait until the last moment before hurrying into the studio. Often the show's presenter would have fired the 7-second signature tune into the bulletin before the newsreader even sat down. All this was to keep the adrenalin going. Not recommended. Brinkmanship can, and does, lead to disasters on air. But a steady stream of adrenalin, always under control, could be the mystery ingredient behind that all-important and indefinable commodity – presence.

Getting through to the audience – rapport

'One of the simplest tricks to help you sound natural on air is to remind yourself that you are talking to someone: one person at a time. Make it a real person, someone you know and feel comfortable with, and whose intelligence you respect. Think of them as sitting across the desk from you, and tell the story to them.'

– JENNI MILLS, BROADCAST VOICE TRAINER AND AUTHOR OF 'THE BROADCAST VOICE'. FOCAL PRESS

BBC trainees are given the following pearl of wisdom:

Information + Presentation = Communication

Successful communication is largely a matter of presentation, and that depends on the way the copy is written, and the way it is read. Good newsreaders are ones who establish rapport with their audience.

Such rapport defies satisfactory definition. It is a kind of chemistry that exists between newsreaders and their audience. Where it is present, both presenter and audience are satisfied. Where it is absent, the information seems to fall short or fail to connect, and the presenter, cut off behind a barrier of electronic hardware, will usually be aware of the fact.

Trainee newsreaders are encouraged to *'bring the script to life,'* to *'lift the words off the paper,'* to *'project their personalities,'* to *'establish a presence'* or to be *'up-front'*. What's needed is a kind of focused energy, a summoning up of your vitality and the projection of that energy towards your audience.

But rapport begins with never regarding a mass audience as simply that. Each listener is an individual who has invited you into his or her home. You are a guest; an acquaintance or even a friend, and you have been welcomed in because you have a story to tell.

Newsreaders, particularly in radio, can easily forget about the audience. Cooled within the four walls of the studio, they can begin to sound as though they are talking to themselves. They are going through the motions, their concentration is elsewhere and their newsreading will begin to sound stilted, singsong and insincere.

The solution to strident anonymity or mumbling into the microphone is to remember that you are not reeling off information or reading from a script, but *telling* someone a story.

Radio newsreaders have an added disadvantage. In normal conversation, the person you are talking to will be able to see your face. Your expressions will reflect your story. If it is sad, you will look sad, if it is happy, you will smile. Your hands may do the talking for you, gesticulating and adding emphasis. You may have a tendency to mumble but people will make up with their eyes what is missed by their ears by watching your lips.

Now imagine you are talking to someone who cannot see your lips, your eyes, or your hands. That vital part of your communication has gone. This is how it is in radio. This handicap is overcome by working to put into your voice all the expression that would normally go into your face and hands.

A word of warning – overdo the intonation and you will sound as though you are talking to a child, and talking down to the audience is something no newsreader will get away with for long.

Another handicap for the radio newsreader in particular is the unassuming nature of most radio sets. Most people regard radio as a background activity.

The news trickles out of a tiny speaker from a tinny tranny in the kitchen while the audience is washing up. So to encourage attention for your news bulletin you have to reach out across the room with an energy and a tone, which cuts across the distractions.

What helps is that most radio bulletins begin with a news jingle. But to reach out and grab your audience you should picture your single listener some distance from you, summon your energy and focus it on that point.

Know your material

Confidence comes from experience, from being in command of the bulletin and thoroughly familiar with the material. An inexperienced newsreader should spend as much time as possible reading and re-reading the stories *aloud* so when they go on air they are on familiar ground. This will also highlight phrases which clash and jar, mistakes, unfamiliar names that need practice, poor punctuation and sentences that are impossibly long. All these problems are easily missed by the eye, but are likely to be picked up by the voice.

Many newsreaders rewrite their stories extensively to make certain the style suits their voice – the best way to be familiar with a story is to write it yourself.

'This may sound like stating the obvious, but make sure you completely understand the story you are reading. If you don't, chances are no one listening to you will either. So don't try to bluff it!'

– LINDA WRAY, NEWSREADER, BBC NORTHERN IRELAND

Ad-libs

Few professionals rely on ad-libs to see them through a programme. Back-announcements, station identities, comments and seemingly casual links are usually scripted. When the programme is running against the clock, a live guest is settling down in the studio to be interviewed any moment *and* there is a constant stream of chatter in your ear from the control room, even the snappiest quips and witticisms thought up before the show tend to be driven from your mind. The best



Figure 16.2 Preparing to go live with the radio news. (Courtesy: Katherine Adams/BBC)

way to avoid embarrassment is to script *everything* barring the timechecks, and even these should be handled with care.

'It's thirteen minutes to two' is the sort of phrase a presenter can take for granted, but trying to glance up at a clock yourself and try to give an immediate and accurate timecheck and you will see how difficult it can be to get right. From the half past onwards, the timecheck can involve a little mental arithmetic.

Always engage your brain before putting your mouth into gear – think before you speak.

After newsreaders have rehearsed the bulletin, they should try to insist on a few minutes peace and quiet before the programme to read it through again, though in TV this can be a vain hope.

In the end, performance is everything. What would you prefer to hear – a newsreader stumbling through an unrehearsed bulletin bursting with up-to-the-minute stories and failing to make sense of it, or a smoothly polished delivery of material that may be as much as 10 minute old but makes complete sense?

The gate

Some newsrooms operate a gate to give readers a chance to compose themselves. This is a bar on new copy being handed to the newsreader later than 5 or 10 minutes before a bulletin. Old hands might scoff at this – they can pick up a pile of scripts and deliver them sight unseen without batting an eyelid, but for the less experienced

reader, a gate can make the difference between a smooth performance and wishing the studio floor would open up and swallow you.

Making a swift recovery

'Before opening mouth, engage brain. Make sure you understand what you are about to read. If you don't understand it, how can you expect that the listeners or viewers will?'

– JENNI MILLS, BROADCAST VOICE TRAINER AND AUTHOR OF 'THE BROADCAST VOICE'. FOCAL PRESS

When things do go wrong, the anchor or newsreader is expected to stay cool and professional. Whatever the ferment beneath the surface, no cracks must appear in the calm exterior. The coolest recovery on record was probably that of a wartime BBC announcer who pressed on with his script after a bomb fell on Broadcasting House.

The answer is to immediately and completely dismiss the mistake from your mind and focus your total concentration on the rest of the bulletin.

Most fluffs occur when newsreaders are expecting trouble, like a difficult foreign name, or when they have already fluffed and their mind is side-tracked. The irony is that the difficult name is usually pronounced flawlessly, while the reader stumbles over the simple words before and behind it in the sentence.

'A flash from Washington . . . the House of Representatives Jurish . . . Judiciary Committee, which is considering, em, a, the impeachment of President Nixon has voted unanimously . . . unanimously to call Mr Nixon as a witness. Of course, whether Mr Wick . . . Nick . . . Wixton . . . winwhether Mr Nixon . . . Ahh! (tut) Sorry about this! (laugh) whether Mr Nixon will agree is quite ano-nother matter.'

– BRITISH RADIO

'When a programme has been tricky and you think you have done it reasonably well, that's a very exhilarating feeling,' says long-time ITN presenter Trevor McDonald. 'But there are times when you know you haven't done awfully well and you feel really bad about it and wish you could go home and forget it, only you can't. My own mistakes always loom much, much larger in my own mind. When I talk to people about them, they haven't noticed them sometimes, but even the little mistakes always loom. You have to aim for perfection. There's no other way.'

Perhaps it is this striving for perfection and quality for merciless self-criticism that turns a broadcaster into a top professional.

The art of the accomplished recovery is to prepare for every contingency.

The worst mistake any presenter can make is to swear on air – don't even think it; otherwise you will probably say it.

The commonest problem is the recorded report that fails to appear. The introduction has been read, the presenter is waiting, and – nothing. Next to swearing, the broadcaster's second deadliest sin is *dead air*. Silent airspace is worst on radio. On TV, viewers can watch the embarrassed expression on the presenter's face.

If an item fails to appear the radio presenter should apologize and move smartly on to the next. In TV, presenters will usually be directed what to do by the control room. Up to 3 seconds of silence is the most that should pass before the newsreader cuts in.

'Police are finding it difficult to come up with a solution to the murders ... the commissioner says the victims are unwilling to co-operate.'

– US RADIO

'Well, the blaze is still fierce in many places, and as a result of this fire, two factories have been gutted and one homily left famless.'

– AUSTRALIAN RADIO

'Following the warning by the Basque Separatist organization ETA that it's preparing a bombing campaign in Spanish holiday resorts, British terrorists have been warned to keep on their guard ... I'm sorry (chuckle) that should be British tourists ...'

– UK RADIO

'The ... company is recalling a total of 14,000 cans of suspect salmon and fish cutlets. It's believed they're contaminated by poisonous orgasms.'

– AUSTRALIAN RADIO

'The President is alive and well and kicking tonight, one day after the assassination attempt, just two and a half months into his pregnancy ...'

– US TV

'And now here's the latest on the Middle East crisis ... crisis ... Lesbian forces today attacked Israel. I beg your pardon, that should be Lesbanese ... Lebanese. (Laughter)'

– ANON

Confusing the audience with technical jargon can compound the problem, like: *'I'm sorry, but that insert seems to have gone down.'* Or, *'We don't seem to have that package.'* Practise what you are going to say when something goes wrong until it becomes almost a reflex action.

When that report does eventually arrive, the audience will have forgotten what it is about and the presenter should re-introduce it by re-reading or paraphrasing the cue.

Where you stumble over a word or phrase, you should judge quickly whether to repeat it. If the sense of the item has been lost, by saying, for instance, *'Beecham pleaded guilty to the murder,'* when he pleaded *not* guilty, then the sentence should be repeated. Avoid the cliché, *'I'm sorry, I'll read that again'* – *'I'm sorry'* will do. If the mistake is a minor one, let it go. Chances are the audience will quickly forget it, whereas drawing attention to it with an apology might only make it worse.

Corpsing

There are few threats greater to a newsreaders' credibility than that of corpsing on air. Corpsing is not a literal occurrence but it can feel pretty much the same. It means to dry up, grind to a halt or, worse, burst out laughing.

These are signs of nervousness and panic. Such laughter is seldom sparked off by genuine humour; it is the psyche's safety valve blowing to release a build up of tension. Anything incongruous or slightly amusing can trigger it off.

The audience doesn't always see the joke, especially when the laughter erupts through a serious or tragic news item. Where professional self-control is in danger of collapsing, the realization that untimely laughter can bring an equally untimely end to a career and that a substantial part of the audience may write you off as an idiot unless you pull yourself together, can often have the same salutary effect as a swift sousing with a bucket of icy water.

Self-inflicted pain is a reasonable second line defence. Some presenters bring their mirth under control by resorting to personal torture, such as digging their nails into the palms of their hands or grinding the toes of one foot with the heel of the other. A less painful way to prevent corpsing is to not permit yourself to be panicked and pressurised in the first place.

'Finally, the weather forecast. Many areas will be dry and warm with some sunshine . . . It actually says 'shoeshine' on my script, so with any luck, you might get a nice light tan.'

– BBC RADIO

Relaxation

The key to the confidence that marks out the top-flight professional is the ability to be in command, and at the same time relaxed. This can be a tall order under deadline pressure and the spotlights of the studio.

Tension can manifest itself in a number of ways, especially in the novice newsreader. The muscles of your neck and throat can tighten to strangle the voice and put it up an octave. Your reading can also speed up. Try stretching the shoulders and arms like a cat before relaxing and breathing deeply. This should reduce this tension. (Note: Do this before you go on air!)

Another problem is that beginners can sometimes – literally – dry up. Tension removes the moisture in the throat and mouth and it can become impossible to articulate. Relaxation helps and a glass of water – sipped slowly to prevent the splutters – will usually be sufficient to moisten the lips, mouth and throat.

A word of warning – drink nothing containing sugar or milk. Hot, sweet coffee is out. Milk and sugar clog the palate and gum up the mouth. Alcohol should be avoided for obvious reasons.

The same goes for eating food just before going on air. A bolted sandwich before a bulletin can undermine the coolest demeanour. Stray particles of bread

and peanut-butter lodged in the molars are a sure way of turning on the waterworks and leaving the newscaster drooling with excess saliva – and there is always the risk of going into the bulletin with a bout of hiccups.

Tiredness can also ruin otherwise good newsreading. Broadcasters often work shifts and have to cope with irregular sleep patterns and, for early birds, semi-permanent fatigue. Weariness can drag down the muscles of the face, put a sigh in the voice and extinguish any sparkle. Gallons of black coffee – without sugar – may be one answer, limbering up the face by vigorously contorting the lips, cheeks and mouth may be another. But don't let anyone catch you doing that on camera, unless you want to end up on the Christmas collection of out-takes.

17 Newsreading mechanics

'Radio news is bearable. This is due to the fact that while the news is being broadcast the DJ is not allowed to talk.'

– FRAN LEBOWITZ

Speed

The right reading pace is one which is comfortable for the reader, clear to the listener, and which suits the station's style. That could be anywhere between 140 and 220 words per minute. British radio usually favours 3 words per second, or 180 wpm, which is a natural and pleasing pace. TV can run a little slower.

Three words per second is also a handy formula for timing a script – a 20 second lead becomes 60 words, a 30-second story is 90 words, and so on.

The ultra-slow 150 wpm, which finds favour on and off in America and on foreign language stations, permits a delivery which is almost Churchillian in its portentousness, and highly persuasive. It is the pace popularized by broadcasting giants like Edward R. Murrow who critics used to say took 10 seconds to get through his wartime dateline: *'This . . . is . . . London.'*

Pace is less important than clarity, and one of the most helpful aids to clear reading is the pause. The pause is a cunning device with many uses. It divides the copy into sense groups and allows time for an important phrase to sink in. It permits a change of style between stories; can be used to indicate the beginning of a quote, and it gives the newsreader time to replenish their oxygen supply.

Breathing

Newsreaders, like swimmers, have to master the art of breath control. Good breathing brings out the richness and flavour of the voice.

First you have to sit correctly to give your lungs and diaphragm as much room as possible. The upper half of the body should be upright or inclined forward, with the back slightly arched. Your legs should not be crossed.

Air to the newsreader is like oil in an engine. Run out of it and you will seize up. The aim is open the lungs and throat as widely as possible, so breathing should be deep and from the belly instead of the usual shallow breathing from the top of the lungs. Never run into the studio. Breathless readers will find themselves gasping for air or getting dizzy and feeling faint.

'Every newsreader has to know that they are performing. It's like being on stage, you mustn't forget that you are entering people's homes and trying to engage millions of people across the country. So don't shout and don't patronise people or they'll be put off. Pause between each news story so it's clear where one ends and another begins and if you stumble don't worry. Tell the news naturally.'

– HUW EDWARDS, BBC NEWS PRESENTER

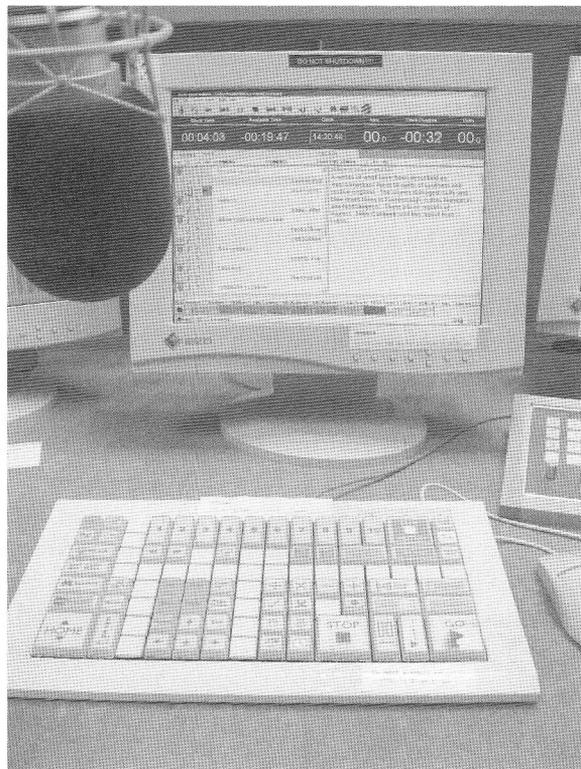


Figure 17.1 The radio newsreader's view of the mike, keyboard, autocue and audio playout system. (Courtesy: Peter Stewart/BBC)

A newsreader should take a couple of good breaths before starting and another deep breath between each story. You can top up at full stops (periods) and paragraphs, and, faced with a long sentence, can take shallow breaths where the commas should be. If you have time, rewrite the story and break down those sentences; but failing that, you can insert slash marks to indicate where you can safely pause while still making sense of the copy:

'UNICEF has criticised world governments / for waging an undeclared war on women, / children and adolescents. According to the UN Children's Fund, / more than 600 million children / are now living in poverty / – more than at the start of the decade. The world's poorest / survive on less than a dollar a day, / and around a quarter of a billion children / aged between 5 and 14 / are sent out to work. / Armed conflict has killed or injured 8 million since 1990. / But the biggest child killer in the developing world is not warfare / but AIDS.'

Breathing through the mouth permits faster refuelling than through the nose, but beware of snatching your breath. Avoid gasping by opening your mouth wider and taking the air in shallow draughts.

Projection

There are different schools of thought about whether newsreaders should project their voice or talk naturally. In television a conversational tone is more appropriate to the illusion of eye contact with the audience, and projection matters less because television audiences offer more of their undivided attention than do radio listeners.

Radio presenters have to work harder. They should project just enough to cut through distractions and get attention. Overprojected newsreading makes the listener want to back away from the set or turn down the volume. Under normal circumstances there is no need to bark out the story like a war correspondent under crossfire.

If you can picture yourself at one end of an average sized room with a single person at the other whose attention is divided between chores and listening to what you have to say, then your projection will be about right.

The radio newsreaders' voice often has to cut through a lot of background noise before reaching the listener, especially if you are being heard on somebody's car radio or in a living room full of hyperactive 2-year olds. **Yelling is not the way to make sure every syllable is heard** – clear diction is.

All too often newsreaders can be heard running words together, swallowing the ends of words and leaving sentences trailing in mid-air because their attention has already drifted on to the next story. The newsreaders' eyes can't move from the page so neither should their mind. There should be a kind of magnetism between your mind and the script if you are to have any feel for the copy and sound sincere about what you are reading.

Emphasis

Copy should be read aloud to establish which words should be given extra emphasis. These are usually the key words and descriptions. For example:

'Canada's FISHERMEN are preparing for the BIGGEST EVER SEAL CULL in their country's history. The government has declared OPEN SEASON on HARP Seals. Up to a QUARTER OF A MILLION are to be SHOT and CLUBBED TO DEATH as they BASK in the sun on the ice floes off NEWFOUNDLAND. The QUOTA for the annual HARVEST has just been INCREASED. Now ANY Canadian citizen, not just FISHERMEN, can JOIN IN the seal hunt.'

These words can be capitalized, as shown, or underlined. Some readers favour double underlining to highlight different degrees of emphasis.

Shifting the position of the emphasis in a sentence can completely alter its meaning and tone. This can have a dramatic effect on the story:

'HE said their action had made a walkout inevitable.'

Stressing the word *he* might suggest there are others who would disagree with *this* statement.

'He SAID their action had made a walkout inevitable.'

Emphasizing the word *said* casts doubt on the truth of the statement, implying there are grounds for disbelieving it.

'He said THEIR action had made a walkout inevitable.'

The speaker now sounds as though he is pointing a finger in accusation at another group of people.

'He said their action HAD made a walkout inevitable.'

This has an intriguing double-meaning. Does *had* suggest the possibility of a walkout was true earlier, but is no longer the case, or is the stress on *had* a rebuttal, as though denying a suggestion that the action would not lead to a walkout? Think about it. The answer would probably become obvious from the context, but it highlights the importance of having a clear understanding of the item before attempting to read it on air.

A common failing of untrained newsreaders is to imagine that due stress and emphasis means banging out every fifth word of a story and ramming the point home by pounding the last word of each sentence. This is about as elegant as tap-dancing in jackboots. Each sentence must establish its own rhythm without having a false one stamped upon it. Stress exists not to make the copy punchier, but to bring out its meaning.

Pitch

As well as having rhythm, the voice also goes up and down. This is called *modulation* or pitch, and some readers who are new at their business or have been doing it for too long can sound as though they are singing the news. The voice goes up and down a lot, but in all the wrong places. You will be familiar with this style from air stewards/esses and those on the Tannoy at your local supermarket. Modulation can add interest to the voice and variety to an item, but random modulation coupled with universal stress can make an audience grateful for the commercial break.

Sentences usually begin on an upward note, rise in the middle, and end on a downward note. These are known as uppers and downers. But what happens to the downers when the last word belongs to a question?

Read this sentence yourself to find out.

These uppers and downers are signposts to the listener. They subconsciously confirm and reinforce the way the sentence is developing and help convey its meaning.

Microphone technique

Next to swearing on air, the important things to avoid with microphones are *popping* and *paper rustle*. Popping occurs when the mouth is too close to the mike and plosive sounds, such as Ps in particular, produce distortion. The radio newsreader can tell this is happening by listening on headphones, and can prevent it by backing away or turning the mike slightly to one side.

Incidentally, the best way to tell your sound levels are set correctly is to always use headphones, and to have them turned up high enough to drown out your normal speaking voice. Anything too loud will cross the threshold of pain and soon have you reaching for the volume control.

Different microphone effects are possible. The closer the mike is to the mouth, the more of the voice's natural resonance it will pick up. Late night radio presenters use the close-mike technique to make their voices sound as sexy and intimate as someone whispering sweet nothings into your ear. Where a voice is naturally lacking in richness, close mike work can sometimes help compensate.

Conversely, standing away from the mike and raising the voice can make it sound as though the presenter is speaking live on location – useful for giving a lift to studio commentary over outdoor scenes or sound effects.

Most directional mikes give their best results about 15 cm from the mouth.

The microphone, being closer to the script than the reader's ears, will pick up every rustle and scrape of the page, unless great care is taken in moving the paper. Use thick paper that does not crinkle, or small pages, which are less prone to bending.

The best way to avoid paper rustle is to carefully lift each sheet, holding it in tension to prevent it bending, and place it to one side. To cut any noise that even

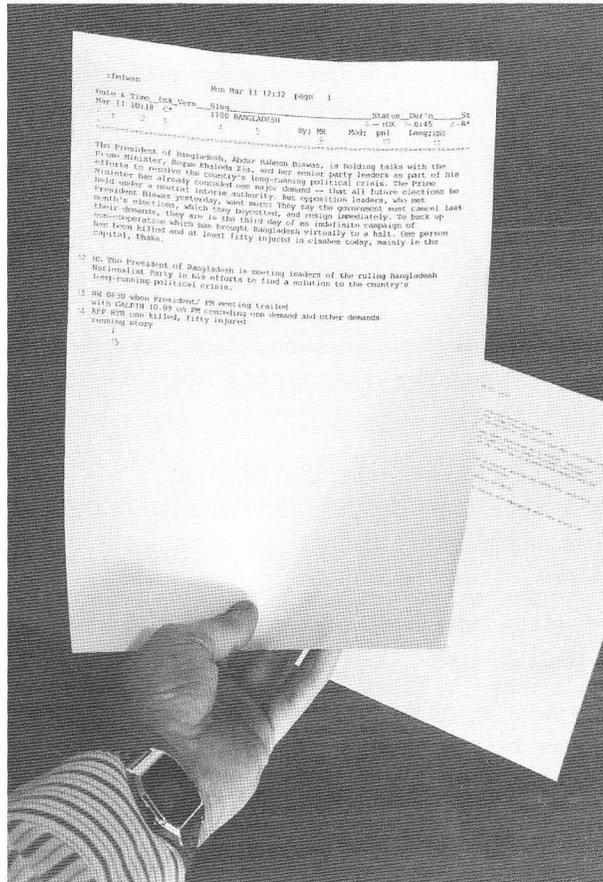


Figure 17.2 Preventing paper rustle. If you brace the script between your thumb and fingers the page will be held in tension. (Andrew Boyd)

this might make, lift the page while it is still being read and place it down *after* you begin reading the next item. The sound of your voice will drown out any paper rustle. This advice though, is becoming increasingly irrelevant as even radio news presenters read off an autocue screen.

Using the prompter

'Bad spelling and bad grammar can easily confuse the newsreader ... a comma in the wrong place can even change the meaning of a sentence. Good grammar is not a luxury it's essential.'

— HUW EDWARDS, BBC NEWS PRESENTER



Figure 17.3 Half the battle in TV news is being able to read the autocue . . . clearly and confidently. (Courtesy: Stephanie John, Allen Martin, CBS 5 San Francisco)

Most TV stations use devices to project the script on to glass in front of the camera so presenters can give the impression of eye contact with the viewer as they read the news.

The intention is to make it appear that they know their material off by heart and are simply telling the story to the audience. What frequently spoils the illusion is the way some newsreaders stare woodenly into the camera, as though trying to make out a spot on the end of the viewer's nose. Worse still is when they screw up their eyes to peer at some mistyped or corrected word on the prompter.

How often do you see junior newsreaders with their faces frozen in a permanent scowl of concentration, eyebrows never moving, as though permanently glued in an ingratiating arch across the forehead? If the camera is the newsreader's best friend, then the prompter has to be seen as the smile on your best friend's face, and responded to as such.

But newsreaders cannot afford to relax too much – they might destroy another of TV's illusions. TV stations often display computer pictures or stills in a box or window to one side of the newsreader. To the viewer the box appears to be behind the reader, but often the reverse is true and readers who are prone to fidget are liable to disappear behind the window.

Noise, noise, noise

One blight the TV newsreader has to live with is the constant babble of noise injected directly into the ear through the earpiece, which keeps them in touch with the control room. Into the ear comes not only her countdown but everything said to the cameracrews, videotape operators, graphics operators, caption operators, etc. Putting it mildly, it can be a distraction.

Bringing the story to life

Once a script has been written and handed to the newsreader it becomes hers alone. The reader must identify with the story and transform it from being mere words on a page. The copy has to be lifted off the paper, carried through the microphone, transported over the airwaves and planted firmly in the listener's imagination. And that is done by *telling* a story.

The test of whether communication has taken place is audience reaction. A new story should produce a response of pleasure or pain. If you were to tell a friend about a family illness, you would expect her to react. If she listened to you with a deadpan expression and turned away unmoved, you would wonder whether she had heard you right.

News should be the same. The audience will respond to you as they would to an actor on stage. As actors strive to give life to their lines, your task is to bring your copy to life. Newsreaders' talents lie in perfectly matching their tone to the storyline. Skilfully done, this makes the story more accessible by signalling its meaning, significance, importance and relevance – the emotions in the voice reflecting in part the emotional response that the story should produce in the hearer. For most experienced newsreaders this process is automatic, but for many new to the business it is a skill that has to be learned.

The skill lies in the subtlety of the storytelling. If newsreaders were painters, they would use watercolours and washes, never lurid oils. Histrionics over the airwaves will result in the listener diving for the off-switch. Only a ham goes over the top and a poor actor fails to do justice to the script. So this is the task of the newsreader – to do justice to the script.

A simple tip – when you are happy, you smile, so when you smile, you sound happy. If a story is light-hearted, then crack your face and smile. But if the news is grave, then the newsreader could do little worse than to sound as though the unfortunate victim has just won the lottery. Hearing, *'Four people have died in a pit disaster,'* read by someone with a broad grin is not only embarrassing, it is insulting. If you want to convey gravity, then frown. If the story is sad, then look sad.

'Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.'

– LEWIS CARROLL

Part Two

RADIO

18 Story treatment

'In July 2003, Microsoft banned Internet chat rooms. This story, as covered in the ITN 5.45 p.m. bulletin, is family-based. It includes issues like the threat of 'grooming', paedophilia, and so on. The same story at 10.45 p.m. has a 'business' treatment – that is, Microsoft quit chat rooms to avoid the predicted stream of expensive legal actions against them.'

– ROBERT BEERS AND PAUL EGGLESTONE, quoted on ukjournalism.co.uk

There are many different ways to present a news story for radio from the simple copy story to the full-blown documentary. Television and radio techniques differ because of the use of visuals, but in many respects are similar in the way they package information as news. This chapter explores the different treatments radio gives to news.

What follows is a storyline that represents what *could* happen at two mythical radio stations when a big news event happens. In practice of course it's unlikely that a station would follow every single treatment (way of covering a story) that is outlined below. That's because much depends on the station's format (speech to music ratio) and target demographic (age and income profile), as well as other issues such as budget, equipment and staff availability.

It is a quarter past two on a quiet summer afternoon in Guildford, Surrey, England. The only news worth reporting is that it is hot. The phone rings. Three hands grab for it but only the news editor's practised reaction connects. Relief is at hand. News has broken. News editor Ian Hinds is grilling the caller with all the zeal of the Spanish Inquisition:

'When did this happen? Just now? How many dead!? Are you sure? Where . . . ? Outside Guildford station!!?'

Fuelled by adrenalin, the news machine leaps into life. A story that develops quickly with new information coming in is known as *breaking news*, or a *running story*. Below are the various treatments that two fictitious radio stations might give to this equally fictitious – but feasible – story of a train crash at Guildford. One

station is a mainly speech BBC- local type station (target demographic 45 years old +), the other a commercial radio station playing mainly chart music to a target audience aged 15–24 years.

Breaking news (bulletin US)

News editor Ian Hinds lingers on the phone for only as long as it takes to check the details with the police officer on the phone, then bashes out a few lines on the newsroom computer. Another reporter is putting in calls to the fire service, while a third is grabbing a recorder and the keys to the radio car.

The story is flashed on ‘wires’ the BBC internal message system, which will alert the main London newsroom as well as other stations around the country. This will cause an initial wave of calls from other reporters at ‘network’ wanting to know more about what’s happened, but it may also lead to additional staff being deployed to the scene to help in the newsgathering process.

Staff are requisitioned from other parts of the building to help in making and taking calls. One or more is put with the producer of the on-air programme to deal with the influx of calls from concerned listeners. Other producers, presenters and managers put in calls to check the information and gather new facts.

The story will be given to the national news provider Independent Radio News or Sky News Radio who will flash it to other stations in the network as well as alerting their TV colleagues (ITN and Sky News). Again, there will be calls for additional information and although it’s likely the TV stations will send reporters to the scene, it’s unlikely they’ll be able to assist the radio station much more than providing clips of audio that’s going to be broadcast on TV. That’s because unlike the BBC, the commercial radio and TV broadcasters are different companies.

There are likely to be fewer staff to call upon, and those that are unlikely to be as journalistically trained as the producers and managers in the BBC. (That’s not a criticism, it’s because of the different business models used: BBC producers, presenters and managers are more likely to have journalism backgrounds because of the high speech content of their output; commercial radio presenters and managers are more likely to come from music and sales backgrounds.) Those who are available are deployed to staff the phones and given instructions of who to call and what to ask to gather more details on what’s happened.

Hinds strides across to the studio, moving quickly, but not so fast as to become breathless, and glancing to check the on-air light is off, he opens the soundproof double doors, informs the presenter he has breaking news (the term 'newsflash' is something of an over-used cliché) and parks himself in the chair in front of the guest microphone.

As soon as Hinds is in place, the presenter Jenny James dips the music she is playing, and says, 'And now over to our news editor Ian Hinds with some breaking news', before firing an 5-second news headlines jingle (sounder) and opening the microphone for Hinds:

'Two trains have collided just outside Guildford station. It's thought at least three people have been killed and several others injured or trapped in the wreckage. The accident, which happened in the past half-hour, involved the delayed 1.51 from Guildford and the 1.18 from Waterloo. The names of the casualties and the cause of the accident are not yet known. An emergency number for relatives is being set up. We'll be bringing you that number as soon as it's announced.'

'Thanks Jenny. This just in: there's been a train crash near Guildford station. At least three people are dead and several others are injured or trapped in the wreckage. The crash happened in the past half-hour, involving the delayed 1.51 from Guildford and the 1.18 from Waterloo. The names of the casualties and the cause of the accident are not yet known. An emergency number for relatives is being set up, and we'll be bringing you that number as soon as we have it.'

'That story again ... Two trains have collided outside Guildford station, killing three, and leaving others trapped and injured. More news on that crash as we get it, here on Surrey Radio.'

'That story again ... Two trains have collided outside Guildford station, killing three, and leaving others trapped and injured. More news on that crash as we get it, here on Surrey Radio.'

You'll note the slight difference in the script. Although the information remains the same, the commercial station's is slightly more urgent and colloquial in style.

Jenny fires another instrumental jingle, thanks Hinds on air and plays another song from the computerized playout system, this time something more downbeat in keeping with the sombre news.

Such a 'breaking news' bulletin is news at its most immediate, and highlights the task that radio does supremely well – getting news on air almost as quickly as it happens, and sometimes while it is still happening.

In the script Hinds took care to give the accurate departure times for the trains to limit needless worry from friends or relatives. At the end he repeated the information for those who may have missed or misheard it, at the same time seizing the opportunity to promote his station's news output. Listeners are left in no doubt that if they want to catch the latest on the crash first they should stay tuned to Surrey Radio.

Now Hinds has to make sure he and his team can deliver that promise.

He's already back in the newsroom badgering the rail company for that emergency number, while those in the phone-in/programme production area are getting calls from anxious friends and relatives of passengers.

Holding on for Surrey & Hampshire Trains, whose press office is permanently engaged, Hinds barks out instructions to his team of reporters, which has been galvanized into action. One is on to the police, another is alternating between the fire brigade and the hospital.

Just then the Surrey & Hampshire Trains' emergency number comes through.

Hinds toys with the idea of a second 'breaking news' bulletin, but quickly drops that in favour of extending the headlines on the half-hour which is now less than 3 minutes away.

Hinds decides not to do a second 'breaking news' bulletin, but instead to put in extra news headlines on the half-hour which is now less than 3 minutes away. The commercial station doesn't usually do bulletins at this time, as it's a mainly music-based station but because of the nature of the news, it's decided that running them is appropriate. He informs the presenter via the office-to-studio intercom, the 'talkback'.

A reporter is making their way to the scene of the crash and it's hoped there'll soon be some audio to put on air.

Headline

The story makes the lead in the headlines on the half-hour. A headline is usually a brief summary of the main points of the story, and is seldom longer than four lines, or 48 words. In the case of the train crash, Hinds dispenses with convention and gives a fuller version.

'A train crash at Guildford has killed three people and injured four others. Several more are feared trapped in the wreckage. Rescue workers are now at the scene, about a mile north of Guildford station.'

'Both trains were travelling on the northbound line and collided head-on. They were the London-bound 1.51 from Guildford and the 1.18 from Waterloo. The names of the casualties are not yet known. An emergency phone number has been set up for relatives to call for details. The number is 01483 000 000. That number again ... 01483 000 000.'



Figure 18.1 A self-opped presentation studio, with line-of-sight to a producer through the glass on the left, and a mirror-image studio through the other pane. (Courtesy: BBC/Peter Stewart)

'Train services between Guildford and London are suspended until the track can be cleared. More news on the rail crash as it comes in.'

Headlines (or *highlights*) are often read at the start of a major bulletin or news programme to signpost the news and encourage the audience to keep listening. They may be given again at the end to recap on the major stories, or, as in the case above, be read on the half past or quarter hour in lieu of a longer bulletin.

Copy story

This is an amplified version of the four-line headline, giving the story in more detail, but without an accompanying interview (actuality). Copy stories are usually short – about 20 seconds, depending on house style. Hinds' 'headline' on the train crash was really a copy story.

Normally on a major story a voice report or interview extract would be used, but the briefer copy-only form comes into its own when:

- The story is breaking and no interview or fuller account is yet available.
- There is not enough time in the bulletin for a more detailed report.
- A fuller account or interview has already been used, and a shorter version is required to keep the story running without it sounding stale.

Voicer or voice report

Reporter Julian Alleck is driving to the scene in a radio station staff car. (The days of radio cars, fitted with broadcasting equipment and a giant mast are fast disappearing. It's due to modern technology: the mobile phone means a journalist can report from almost anywhere. Connect that to a device such as the 'Matrix' from company Comrex, and the signal will sound even clearer and semi-studio quality.)

The reporter may have been able to take with them a helper to carry equipment and set up the interviews, but there is some doubt whether they'll be there in time for the 3 o'clock news. The other reporters back at base are on to the police, fire brigade and Surrey & Hampshire Trains to get information and try where possible to record interviews on the telephone.

A station with more journalists will certainly be 'phone-bashing' but will also be able to send out staff either to the scene of the crash or gather audio from other locations (perhaps at the station, the hospital to where the injured will be taken and so on).

Phone clips are hugely important. The quality of lines is increasingly good, without the crackles and pops of years gone by. That makes them easier to listen to on the radio. Indeed using phone clips gives a greater impression of speed and reaction than a 'quality' recording. Many commercial stations have telephone headsets at journalists' desk so they can record calls immediately, without having to divert them to a studio.

With more information coming in, Hinds is not prepared to settle for a repeat of the copy story at 3 o'clock, so he asks a reporter to draw the facts together and turn it into a voice report.

GRINDLE/OWN 19.8 14.55 RAIL SMASH

'The death toll in the Guildford crash has now risen to four, and rescue workers believe more people could still be trapped in the wreckage of the two commuter trains. Lesley Grindle has the details ...'

INSERT: Rail smash
DUR: 40"
OUT: be to blame

'The 1.18 from London smashed head-on into the delayed 1.51 Guildford to Waterloo train just outside Guildford station. Four people died in the forward carriages, including the two drivers. Nine others are known to be injured, two seriously. Rescue

workers say several more are still trapped in the wreckage and they're using cutting equipment to try to get them out.'

'The names of the dead have not yet been released, but the police have set up a number which relatives can call for more details. It's 01483 000 000 – that's 01483 000 000.'

'The cause of the crash is still uncertain, but Surrey & Hampshire Trains say early indications are that points failure may be to blame.'

Voice reports are very useful but can be rather dull. They can convey a lot of information on a complicated story or when there are no interview clips available (such as a court case). And their inclusion means the newsreader is not ploughing through a local script without a change of voice, perhaps that of a specialist (business or sports correspondent for example). They can be dull as they are often over-long and recorded in a studio with no atmosphere. It would be misleading to play sound effects under a 'voicer' such as this, but many stations record them in the car park or out on the street to lift them a little.

Voicers are usually used when there is more information than can be used in a copy story, but where no actuality is yet available. They would usually run for about 20 seconds, excluding the cue, and longer in the case of a major breaking story.

Most commercial stations have dropped voicers, and sometimes along with them the complicated (often court) stories that they are often used for. Instead bulletins often include live reports, or a live 'two-way' with the bulletin reader interviewing a colleague (either in the studio or out on location) about a story. This lifts the bulletin much more, and can be particularly effective in heightening interest in breaking news.

As soon as the voicer is recorded, it is filed to network for inclusion in the national news feed to client stations for them to include in their *home mix* of national and international news.

Most stories that use a clip (or 'cut') of audio (from an interview) or voice report, require a *cue* or *lead-in*, to introduce the speaker.

Above and below the cue is a set of information about the story. This is the *marking-up*. Individual stations have their own ideas about how this should be done, but usually includes information such as the name of the report ('Rail smash/Grindle'), its duration and out cue (the last words spoken). The audio file

He begins with a teaser:

'A train crash at Guildford claims four lives . . . passengers are still trapped. That's our top story on Surrey Radio at 3 . . . good afternoon I'm Ian Hinds'

Urgent, present tense and brief, the teaser is an enigmatic abbreviated headline used at the start of a bulletin or news programme to act as a lure by giving a taste of the story to come and teasing the audience into listening on to find out more.

A collection of three or four teasers is called a menu. It serves the same purpose as the menu in a restaurant – to whet the appetite. Ian would usually tease several other stories at the start of a bulletin (*'Inflation is up again and Big Bobby quits Working for retirement'*) but it's going to seem anachronistic to include other stories in an hour with such a strong local lead.

Voice report from the scene

It is now 3.02. Less than 5 minutes ago, the radio station's car pulled up as close as it could to the crash, and reporter Julian Alleck has got even closer to the action with the use of a portable transmitter. (Many BBC stations have these, transmitters about the size of a small suitcase on wheels which can be taken almost anywhere and which will transmit audio to a receiver on a high building, and then on to the station.)

Alleck's brief is to go live into the news with a minute-long report. After snatching a few words with a Surrey & Hampshire Trains official and a fire officer, Alleck phones the newsroom and says he is in position. In as few words as possible, Lesley Grindle gives him the latest information from calls made back at base, and Alleck stands by to go live. Through his headphones he can hear the station output. Hinds has begun reading the bulletin, and the voicer by Grindle is going out on air.

A few seconds later he can hear Hinds beginning the cue:

'So the latest we have on that crash: four people have died, and the number of injured is now up to twelve. More passengers are still believed to be trapped in the wreckage of the two trains, which collided head-on on the northbound line just outside Guildford station. Julian Alleck is there now and joins us live . . . Julian, describe the scene . . .'

'The picture here a mile up the line from Guildford is one of devastation. The two trains are twisted together beside the track and firemen and rescue workers are cutting open the wreckage to free any passengers who are still trapped.'

'It seems both trains were on the northbound line when they hit head-on. Their front carriages were torn from the rails by the impact, and are now lying locked together. Both drivers were killed in the crash. It's known that two passengers have also died, both on the London train, where firemen with cutting equipment are now working.'

'The remaining five carriages of that train have also overturned and are on their sides, while all four coaches of the Guildford train have concertiaed together in a zigzag off the track, but are, remarkably, still on their wheels.'

'Ambulance crews say they've taken twelve other passengers to hospital where they're being treated for injuries, and are now standing by while rescue workers