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## NEWS

### Whose story is it anyway?

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**Wadim Schreiner ponders the pros and cons of news agencies.**

During the recent International Media Forum South Africa in Bryanston, many of the speakers – some of them from international news agencies such as Reuters or afp – focused on the international perception of South Africa in the media.

Barry Moody, the African Editor of Reuters, particularly emphasised the wide availability of news on Africa on the company's website. Similarly, the Africa Editor of BBC News, Joseph Warangu, shared his experience at BBC News in developing content on Africa. Both journalists highlighted the importance of agencies in spreading the word on Africa – a significant and valuable undertaking indeed.

The problem I see, particularly with agency content, is that it is one thing having the content available, and yet another to convince sources to utilise the content. I know very few non-media individuals who have direct access to the news-wires – it is an inaccessible information overload.

This made me reconsider the purpose of print news. Certainly the traditionally held belief of "informing" the people, no longer applies. For that, there are way too many sources – there are blogs, TV, internet – out there, all of them "informing". No, media, especially print media, should encourage a dialogue - or in other words, display a range of opinions on a particular story.

In my opinion, this makes a newspaper important or influential. The fact that it either reports on a story that no other paper has reported on or alternatively offers a range of views which other media don't carry.

Having said that, what does it imply for agencies? The job of agencies is less about bringing opinion or analyses and more about hard facts: The traditional SWs and the 1H. Then it would be up to the journalist or editor to take the story further. But "taking the story further" is hard work and agencies are convenient: The content is there, and you can quickly fill the pages of your paper without needing to leave your desk.

Reciprocally, agencies depend on other news sources to use their articles. This generates money to pay for more and better staff, which in turn generates more stories and so forth. If there were no agencies, newspapers would have a daunting time, as they would have to generate all the content themselves. For news-generating corporates, agencies are convenient. Hand them the information and let them do the job you are supposed to do: Spreading the story.

I then decided to have a look at the impact of agency content on newspapers. Having analysed all the articles in 21 print media from 2002 until June 2008, Reuters emerged as the most cited news agency (50 328 reports), followed by Sapa (42 427 or a share of 21 percent of all agencies), followed again by Bloomberg, even though at a distance (17 348).

On average across all media, 20 percent of articles were agency sourced. But the average is misleading: *The Citizen* for instance, had a share of almost 60 percent attributed to agencies, but on the other end the *Mail & Guardian* had less than 4 percent.

Over time, the agency "take up" has generally increased for most media, but *Beeld* and *Sunday Independent* significantly reduced their share of agency content. Interestingly, the research also showed the same media who have the least agency content end up being the most quoted media by other media, in other words, their stories are so insightful and newsworthy that they are drawn upon by other media.

Among those are *The Sunday Times*, the *Mail & Guardian* and the *City Press*, as well as some Afrikaans media. These papers have managed to build a reputation for their unique and nuanced content. Coverage in these publications could possibly be instrumental in changing governmental policies or potentially alter stakeholder's opinions.

Conversely, what is the impact of the newspapers with high agency content? I would say very little. Their circulation figures might be increasing (although after previous controversy at Media24, are these figures still to be trusted?) with advertising money rolling in – but are these publications really contributing to making a difference to a much needed discourse?

The high uptake of agency material also poses a challenge to the agencies themselves. With increased uptake comes increased responsibility: Accuracy, fairness, balance and setting the agenda. If Sapa "gets it wrong", this will have a greater impact because other media won't check the validity of the story due to their intrinsic confidence in agencies. The agency sending out the incorrect information will become even more of an agenda setter – and I am not sure if, for instance, Sapa is geared for this challenge. Content, yes. Responsibility? I doubt it.

Agencies are not yet agenda setters in South Africa for local content. But international agencies are when it comes to shaping the perception of South Africa globally. Very few overseas media have their own correspondents in Africa. They rely on agencies to generate the information. This information is selective - but this is not the fault of the agency, as it cannot influence which of its stories are selected.

My thoughts could be interpreted as saying that agencies are obsolete. Nothing could be further from the truth. Agencies are an integral part of the news process, in generating content and being "eyes and ears" in many respects. So they are paramount to news flow. Without agencies, stories would never reach the farthest corners of this planet. However, I reiterate that agency content should not be used at the cost of generating own content.

Furthermore I am concerned with the increase of reports in the media attributed to "agency and own staff". What does this mean? How much was the staff contribution? One line? Five lines? Is it not merely a convenient way to pretend that the story is the source's own copy when in fact it actually is not?

Agencies, apparently, can make a journalist's life easier. But they should never be an excuse for media-ocracy.

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