

Find bright new ways to connect to readers

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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News reporting followed a tight style and format for decades, largely driven by technology and deadlines. We call it the inverted pyramid: the most important information should be at the top of a report and the material that can most easily be cut out sits at the bottom...

There is a debate among newspaper historians about where this originated. Most say it came with the early days of the telegraph, where reports had to be as brief and succinct as possible and you had to get to the hard news quickly for fear that transmission might be interrupted at any moment. Others have found this style in earlier US military reports, which were written under similar time pressures.

Another factor was that typesetting was done in hot metal. You could not cut and paste easily, so you had to be able to cut from the bottom.

This formula also made it easier to write under pressure. When you had to dictate a story over a public phone from your notebook, with others lined up behind you to use the phone, you needed an efficient way to get the story into shape. A formula helped.

As a result, many journalism schools still teach students the inverted pyramid. Then - hopefully - they teach them to upset the pyramid and tell their story more imaginatively.

But elements of the creaky old style of news writing persist in many of our news products, even though new technologies have given us much more flexibility. Our South African news outlets cater mostly for their ageing and shrinking audiences. Few are doing much to attract younger readers to news, whether in print, broadcasting or online.



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The audience has changed. They are finding their news in different ways, mostly online sharing of material through social media. Our news products have changed a bit, but not nearly enough to attract and keep young people.

We hear complaints all the time that millennials are not reading, especially in SA. The truth, though, is that they do read and do consume news, but don't want it dished up as it was for their parents. They want sushi and we are offering them spaghetti bolognese.

The news site most cited as catering for millennials is *Vice*, which calls itself "the coolest magazine in the world". It started out as the Voice of Montreal but later dropped the "o", moved to New York and now publishes 10 internet channels and a magazine and has a record label and publishing imprint.

Most striking is the success of *Vice News*, which provides hard-hitting, topical news with an attitude. Their reporters - all young - feature prominently, as do their own feelings and attitudes. They do a lot of immersion work: putting reporters into difficult situations - such as North Korea - and reporting first-hand. Their magazine often dedicates a whole edition to immersion in one tough topic, such as living in Iraq, or "I went undercover in America's toughest prison".

The surprise was the success of hard-news reports. One of their team said: "The content that outstripped everything else by a huge margin was our most serious hard-hitting documentaries. There was a very well-connected global young hungry audience which wanted to experience big complex global stories in a way that was accessible, and no one else was doing it."

What did they do differently?

"It's made by young people for young people. If our journalists are scared, that makes it into the film. What our journalists are feeling is a huge part of our vernacular."

I am not suggesting that our news outlets should mimic *Vice*. But - as I yawn through most of our news outlets saying much the same in the same way week after week - we do need to find more interesting ways to use all the new tools we have to tell our stories.

Source: *Business Day*

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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