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Measuring quality in journalism: how and what for?

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By Christoph Spurk



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Introduction

It is self-evident for all of us at this conference that the business models for good journalism are under immense pressure, albeit to a different extent in different countries and contexts. In general, I am convinced that better knowledge about media products can be helpful to identify new opportunities and improve businesses. In the following presentation, I want to show how data on media quality can be gathered and how they can be used to improve the product and how they can be used in business.

Defining quality of media content

Quality is a **fuzzy notion**. Almost everybody understands something different under quality of journalistic content. This makes it difficult or impossible to measure. However, we use an approach mostly developed by German-speaking scholars, who have broken down the overall quality

into **various qualities, or quality criteria**. These different criteria can be more easily assessed or measured in journalistic texts or units, be they print articles, radio emissions or TV videos.

In our research, we have elaborated on those quality criteria jointly with editors and reporters. It is important to note that there are some **basic** quality criteria – applicable almost universally – and some **specific** – contingent upon the type of media, or the topic of reporting. For example, we have some specific criteria for science journalism that are not required in general journalism. So the template can be adapted to specific requirements of media houses.

Basic Quality: method of content analysis

In Tanzania, we did a pilot project in 2017 called “Yearbook on Media Quality in Tanzania”, and we are now conducting the fully-fledged Yearbook 2018, with a large sample of participating media houses.

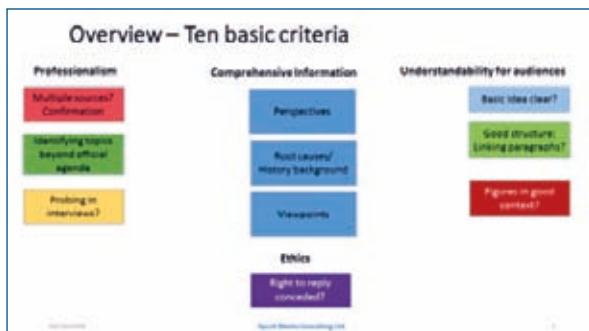
In Tanzania, we use 10 basic quality criteria to measure the status of quality. They fall into four broad categories, which are:

- Professionalism
- Understandability for the audience
- Comprehensiveness of information, and
- Ethics

Those ten criteria are (see also overview)

1. Multiple **sourcing**
2. Identifying **topics** beyond the official agenda
3. **Probing** in interviews
4. Units need to have a basic **clear-cut idea**
5. Units need to have a good formal **structure**
6. **Figures** need to be put into good context, and are understandable for the ordinary media consumer

7. Units should contain various **perspectives**
8. Units should contain information on **root causes** of problems and historical background
9. Units should contain various opinions and **viewpoints**
10. If relevant, the **right to reply** needs to be included.



Source: Spurk Media Consulting

Content analysis

The actual assessment is done by content analysis, which is a well known method in media research. It has the advantage of being very structured and systematic, as all journalistic units in the sample (print, TV, Radio, online) are assessed by the very same criteria, and in the same way. This makes the results comparable between different media genres and different media houses.

This assessment is actually done manually by assistants from Tanzania, that are called “coders” (a technical term as they give answers to questions by providing codes like 1 for “Yes”, and 0 for “No”). The researchers from the University of Dar es Salaam are intensively trained by myself for at least five days, sometimes seven to eight days, with a lot of examinations in between and a tough selection process.

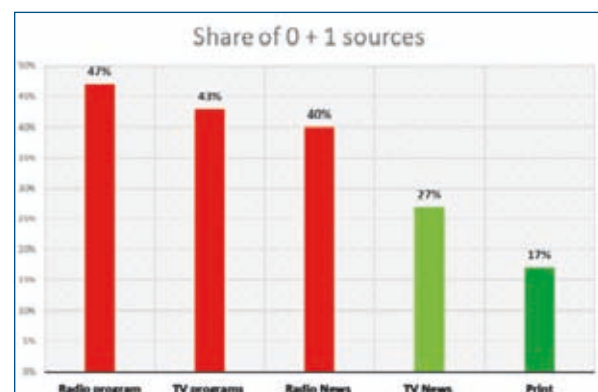
This is done in order to achieve a common agreement of assessing the different quality criteria. This guarantees that the assessment is as “objective” as possible.

Results: Examples from Tanzania

In order to get a feel for how this looks in reality, I will show you some examples from the Pilot Yearbook in Tanzania with regard to average results

assessing the average quality in Tanzania. We found some rather challenging findings. For example:

- Far too often we find units with only one source, especially in radio news, and programmes. This is a major shortcoming, with regard to journalistic standards.
- Far too often, the Tanzanian media use government and other local authorities as sources. This is not to say that they should not use those authorities, but it calls for the use of other sources as well.
- Trigger of reporting: almost half of the journalistic units had press conferences and official launches of events as the initial trigger of reporting. The share of articles or units that used media’s own initiative to report an issue was rather low. It looks like the Tanzanian media mostly follow the official agenda; meaning they hardly set an agenda on their own.
- Information in the Tanzanian media is generally superficial. Only a quarter of articles reported, to some extent, about the causes of a problem or the reasons of events.
- Opposing viewpoints: only 13% of units contained opposing viewpoints; all the rest had only one viewpoint, or various viewpoints, but who supported the same position.
- Figures not in good context: three quarters



Source: Spurk Media Consulting

of articles did not put the figures into good context, which means there was no attempt to try to explain the figures to the media consumers.

In addition, for each media house we produced individual performance sheets, which show the media house's performance for each quality criteria and compares it directly with the average and the highest performer in this category.

Usefulness: the obvious

We think quality assessments can be useful for media houses in various ways.

External check on quality

First, this external assessment is sort of a "brutal evidence of shortcomings", as it analyses content from a consumers' perspective. It is a mirror of what is actually presented or broadcast to audiences. This view was confirmed by most of Tanzania media houses which said that the Yearbook is a good reflection of the reality on the ground, although the media houses in Tanzania currently face a difficult situation, with lots of insecurity and self-censorship. But, even now they could report better. Thus, the main reasons for the shortcomings were negligence by reporters, editors and managers. Therefore, those results can obviously be used in training of reporters and editors. We have already had a few sessions with different media houses in Tanzania, and one has now decided to use our quality criteria to systematically train their reporters and editors in those quality criteria (and others).

Business perspective

On the other hand, the results on quality can lead to better financial outcomes for their media firms.

Increasing credibility with readers: There are many efforts to get more revenue directly from media consumers as advertising revenue is going down for many media houses. Some of these efforts are already successful. So, if quality is improved by external checking, it opens up new opportunities, for example, to increase credibility, to monetarise credibility ("we provide the background") with readers or viewers, by, for example, increasing subscriptions or charging a

higher prices for existing subscriptions. This may especially work in times of doubts about many social and other non-professional media. It could also support online-only media efforts to start membership models to gain revenue for their media products, which is very close to subscription models.

Increasing Credibility with advertisers: It may open up opportunities to increase media houses' value with advertisers, especially if brand advertising is connected to the credibility of the medium environment.

Revitalising traditional advertising models: Based on data about the quality of content, plus better data about media consumers, for example on purchasing power and investment interests, a traditional advertising model can be created. That might, for example, work for local radio stations, which have a very local and, therefore, niche market, but could demonstrate that their programmes are of high quality and thus they could attract audiences of interest to the advertising industry.

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