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How to make better TV news inserts?

Report from a workshop with SNTV staff
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Mogadishu, Somalia



Assignment

Vikes has helped SNTV to build television news studio in Mogadishu and to develop the studio work in news broadcasts. As a logical continuation to that cooperation it was mutually agreed

between Vikes and SNTV to arrange a workshop with the aim of improving the quality of the inserts in SNTV's television news.

During the workshop week the Ministry of Information and Vikes arranged a seminar on public broadcasting. The topic is of relevance in Somalia just now, as the new media law has defined that SNTV's programming is going to be arranged in line with the principles of public broadcasting. Thus, discussing the idea and practice of public broadcasting was also an integral part of our workshop.

Vikes crew

The facilitators of the workshop were Pasi Toivonen, Wali Hashi and Peik Johansson. I personally have 20 years of experience in news and current affairs TV journalism, in service of Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE. Wali Hashi is a freelance journalist and has been cooperating with me since 2009, producing current affairs inserts for our programme "Ajankohtainen kakkonen". Peik Johansson is an experienced free-lance journalist and the coordinator of Vikes project in Somalia.

Participants

Journalists, cameramen, editors and producers from SNTV News (listed in attachment 2).

Programme

Vikes team arrived in Mogadishu on Saturday the 21th of May, which gave us two days to get acquainted with the TV news process in SNTV, under the guidance of SNTV producers. This was especially important to me, being a first timer in Mogadishu and SNTV.

The workshop had a very practical approach, with the idea of learning by discussing and doing. On day one (Monday) we used the morning hours to introduce ourselves and discuss our motives of being journalists. In the afternoon we looked selected TV news and current affairs inserts from YLE and SNTV, analyzing the structures, making comparisons and discussing the differences.

On Tuesday morning we started the practical work of insert production. The SNTV participants were divided into three groups and each group defined a number of topics they thought would be of value and interest to their viewers. We had an editorial meeting discussing the possible topics, trying to find a consensus and finally – like in normal journalistic work – the producer (in this case myself) gave a go-ahead to the groups to continue with one selected topic. In Tuesday afternoon the groups worked independently, gathering background information of the topic, writing the first versions of the scripts, looking for interviewees and arranging the practicalities of filming.

Day three (Wednesday) was the day for the Seminar on Public Broadcasting. The participants of our workshop also took part in the seminar. One of the workshop groups was already filming its insert, the topic of it being public broadcasting. Here we had the idea of producing a conventional SNTV seminar news report in a slightly different manner.

On Thursday we had all three groups out filming, preparing the script and editing their inserts. Thanks to the strong working motivation of the participants all three inserts were ready to be screened on day four, Friday. We spent the morning hours of Friday screening and evaluating the first edited versions of the inserts. A lot of positive things were found, but also room for

improvement. The participants will do further editing and produce the final broadcast versions of the inserts. Subsequently, they will be broadcast in SNTV on a date and time the responsible producers decide.

In our final session on Friday we also got a surprise visit on the highest level: The President of Somalia Mr. Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud walked in to our classroom, looked through our insert on the Somali traditional culture disappearing – and gave good credits to it. “This is something we haven’t seen in Somali television”, he said. The work that now was started and will be carried on by the SNTV staff seems to have a presidential approval!

General recommendations

1) Less inserts from seminars, conferences and meetings

This is an issue I even raised with President Hassan. Having arrived to Mogadishu I followed the 21.00 TV news on SNTV on Saturday and on Sunday and collected some rough statistics: There were altogether 31 inserts in those two newscasts, out of which stunning 23 were of meetings, seminars or conferences. Only three inserts had been filmed outside meeting rooms or airport lounges, dealing with the floods affecting parts of Somalia. On Sunday’s news I counted 40 persons talking in meeting rooms, only two in real life situations (flood reports).

Seminars, meetings and conferences are part of real life too. Many of them deal with topics which certainly are of importance to the viewers. In some cases the meeting in itself can be newsworthy. But still: this overwhelming emphasis on seminars, meetings and conferences doesn’t give a true picture of life in Somalia.

There are many explaining factors for this dominance of conference news: pressure from the politicians and other people arranging the meetings and conferences (everyone wants his/her meeting to be portrayed, every speaker wants to be shown in television), the security situation (security of the journalists is taken care of by the organizers of the meetings), lack of time and resources (it is an easy and effective way of filling the airtime), even the old tradition of sharuur (journalist being paid for covering a seminar/conference/meeting by the organizers of that event).

All of these are obstacles that are not easily removed. But, luckily enough, the biggest obstacle is one that can be quite quickly changed. It was put to words by one of the workshop participants: “We haven’t been required to do more than conference reports.”

By now I know that there is a lot of willingness and professional ability to do better amongst the SNTV staff. If the leadership of SNTV requires more, they will deliver more.

2) Better inserts from meetings

In many cases the meeting in itself is not that much of importance, relevance or interest to the audience. But the topic of the meeting could be just that.

I encourage the journalists to take the inserts more to their own professional hands. To produce inserts not of the meetings as such, but of the themes of the meetings, using the meeting only as a starting point or venue for their journalism.

Going to a meeting or conference, recording soundbites of the speeches and putting them together is not enough. What is the theme of the conference? What is its relevance to my viewers? What

should I ask the experts that I can conveniently interview in the conference room? My pieces of advice to the SNTV journalists:

- Use clips from speeches rather as effects, not as main content of your insert.
- Interview the experts, make them answer the questions you think are of biggest importance to your viewers. Make them serve the theme and structure of your insert.
- When possible, combine shots and interviews from a meeting with shots and interviews from real life (seminar on tuberculosis + hospital, conference on women issues + women group in a village, meeting on fishing economics + fishermen ashore, public broadcasting + news anchor + viewers in a bar...).
- Don't take a seminar as news. Ask what is newsworthy in the topic of the seminar. Go after that.

3) Get the cameras out there - more inserts from the real life

A public broadcast journalist needs to think from the point of view of the viewer: what is important, interesting and relevant to them. His/her task is to give a voice to the voiceless and to create public arena where the best arguments can be heard and freely compete.

For TV journalists this means taking cameras out there. Not only to the studios and conference rooms, but to the everyday life of Somalian people. To document and bring to the public discussion their concerns, problems and solutions, joys and sorrows. This is in the core of the public broadcasting and this will create better programming.

During the workshop it became clear that the SNTV journalists are ready to meet the people and document the real life, to "look for the heartbeat of the society" – in the words of one of the participants. Doing journalistic work outside the guarded government areas is a demanding and even risky task in present day Somalia. Therefore, the journalists and cameramen should have all the support they need from their superiors in accomplishing this task.

Structural recommendations

The SNTV news inserts often follow standard structure: they begin with the journalist's voiceover and muted video, normally from the seminar/meeting/conference. Next will be a section of somebody's speech on the podium or interview. And the rest of the insert is combination of those two elements.

During the workshop I suggested some ideas that could give enrich the SNTV news inserts, give them more expressive and informative power:

- 1) Make your insert have a beginning and an end**
- 2) Don't start your insert with a voiceover**
- 3) Don't use muted video behind voiceover or interview. Always use the natural sound on a reduced audio level.**
- 4) Use a narrative story. Voiceovers and interviews can be placed to inbetweens of such a story.**
- 5) Use live effects. They will give expressive power and rhythm to your insert.**

These five points were discussed in length in the workshop with the help of YLE examples and will also be portrayed in the detailed feedback I have given about all the three inserts produced during the workshop (attachments 5 and 6).

Technical recommendations

The technical workflow of SNTV News is beyond the scope of this report. But there is one remark I have to do: I strongly suggest there would be a bigger emphasis on collecting full broadcast quality audio.

In my opinion all the cameras should have a separate mounted shotgun microphone on top of them, securing the basic quality of the sound. For the interviews I recommend using tie clip microphones whenever possible. Wireless tie clip microphones would be of great value when building narrative stories to inserts with main characters.

In YLE News & Current Affairs all the camera crews have a combination of good mounted shotgun microphone + two sets of wireless tie clip microphones + one (often wireless) hand microphone. I see no reason why this set would't be appropriate also in SNTV News.

Workflow recommendations

I only got a very quick glimpse on the workflow of SNTV News. It could be of use to study it more carefully and compare with the routines in Yle News & Current Affairs. At this stage I only want to emphasize the need of discussion and feedback. The producers should be there for the journalists, ready to comment and approve their ideas and the scripts of the inserts from the first drafts to the final edit versions. Journalists are in the service of the people, producers should be in the service of the journalists, helping them to reach the best possible results.

Thank you all.

Thanks for reading.

Thanks for your cooperation, this was a very important week for me. I learned a lot.

I wish you all the courage, strenght, resilience and luck in your work.

My heart is with you, I send you my deepest condolences for the loss of Sagal Salad Osman.

Pasi

Moro!



Attachments:

- 1) List of participants (docx)
- 2) How to make better TV News inserts (power point)
- 3) Insert process (docx)
- 4) The first edit versions of the inserts produced during the workshop (3 videos)
- 5) Detailed comments on the first editions of the inserts (docx)
- 6) My life as a public broadcaster (power point)
- 7) My life as a public broadcaster (docx)

