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Reflect critically on your investigative report film

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Investigative reporting

"Reporting, through one's own initiative and work product, matters of importance to readers, viewers or listeners. In many cases, the subjects of the reporting wish the matters under scrutiny to remain undisclosed."

Steve Weinberg – *The Reporter's Handbook: An Investigator's Guide to Documents and Techniques*

Investigative journalism is very well defined by Steve Weinberg, a well-known crusader for the merits of investigative journalism. Although our investigative report into commercial shark fishing, *Beneath the Surface*, is not the usual 'publish-and-die' investigative report like the *Arizona Project* (Weinberg 2012). Still, I believe this story falls under the category set out by Weinberg, especially in that it appeared to us that people in the shark fishing industry would much rather keep it, and themselves, out of the public eye, apparent in our difficulty to secure sources and subjects. That deals with the second part of the definition. The first part was actually our main of our story – to inform the South African public of an industry that could have negative repercussions for marine life if it continued to go unchecked.

We got wind of this story through one of our crew members, Thomas, a local from St Francis Bay, where the local newspapers ran a story on Marius van Heerden, a businessman whose fishing boats laid a fishing long line for sharks near the beaches of St Francis, and his run-in with the locals, who had no idea that this kind of industry was even legal, let alone happening in South Africa. This as the 'sniff' (TV Reader) and we wanted to find out more about this industry, the lack of awareness surrounding it and the regulations in place to keep the industry from overharvesting South Africa's sharks.

Throughout our report, we showcase the varying opinions of the different stakeholders in the industry, as well as look at regulations and their enforcement. In accordance with the age-old journalistic tradition of 'objectivity', "a view of the world free of bias and self-interest and represents the truth" (Abercrombie et al 2007:255), we decided early on that we were going to try to keep to a variety of perspectives, and not try to advocate one view over another, as done by journalist and shark-conservationist Lesley 'Shark Warrior' Rochat. In her documentary, *Sharks in Deep Trouble* (2007), she advocates the complete ban on shark fishing, with focus on shark finning. We wanted to focus more on the legal side of the shark meat industry and let our viewers decide where they stand on it, but all sides do agree on one

thing, and that is the need for a re-writing of regulations and their enforcement. This would be the only bias in our story structure which we wish to advocate.

Research

According to Trisha Das (10), research “is directly related to the ‘value’ of the film”, and this is very true for investigative reporting. Our process for finding information on the shark fishing industry started with finding more about Van Heerden, and getting in touch with him and others involved in the story. We also got hold of some fishermen and fishing businesses to get more contacts that are involved with the shark fishing industry. After finding more about the legality of the industry, and the fact that legality is questioned due to its lack of regulations and advertising of the industry, we developed our hypothesis (TV Reader) that public awareness is needed to make this industry more sustainable, due to the sensitivity of shark populations and the consequences its depletion would have on all South Africans and other industries. We used the following methods to obtain information: telephone calls, Skype interviews, online research (our major one), e-mails, snowball sampling, field research and getting hold of contacts/source through other contacts.

Das (10) notes that curiosity is important when doing research, because how would you make someone excited about a story that you are not excited about? No one in the group knew anything about this industry, and that it even existed, so every new piece of information we found was new and interesting. Unfortunately, at one point we had an ‘information-overload’ where we started hearing the same information over and over and we were losing grip with our focus. What the story is about should always be kept in the back of your mind when doing research and “the quality of research is far more important than the quantity” (Das 11). With the deluge of information, we had to start separating the important from the irrelevant and we did this through separating our sources into categories, namely the following: fishermen, suppliers, restaurants, conservationists, MCM and the Department of Fisheries officials/official sources, academics, import/export sources and those who will give us access to footage.

We did a lot of location hunting before any shoots, especially in St Francis Bay and Port Elizabeth, where all our filming took place, and alongside this we did pre-recorded interviews so we can find out what we want from sources. This process was very vital in finding interview subjects and information; as we scouted we asked people in the areas and this was how we happened upon many of our interview subjects. Also, online research can only get

you so far, as some people we found did not have an online presence. This is important to remember, especially in a society where Internet access is limited to the privileged and visibility to large businesses. We would never have known about the Besters if it were not for field research.

Stylistic codes

Documentaries claim to be a window of the world, a mirror of the world we inhabit, unlike its Hollywood counterparts where the world is constructed from the imagination, where there is less focus on aesthetic pleasures for the audience and more on “an aesthetic of content” (Breitrose, in Nichols 1981: 171). This “documentary-equals-reality” (Nichols 1981:172) notion is evident in investigative reporting, as many claims to truth are made. *Beneath the Surface* also makes these kinds of reality-claims, but there are many holes to the reality as lack of time and resistance to our questioning left many questions unanswered. In regards to the Marius incident, his side of the story left a really big gap in portraying all sides of the industry, but we managed without him quite well through the techniques of persuasion espoused by Nichols (1981:174), “the discovery of source to support any particular case”, namely invention. These sources are divided up between ‘inartistic’ and ‘artistic’, the former consisting of hard facts and the latter referring to suggested evidence. Inartistic proofs would be our interviews, visual shots of the processing factory and the restaurant. Artistic proofs are divided further into three kinds: ethical, emotional and demonstrative (Nichols 1981:174-174).

The narrator and interviewees form an important part of artistic proofs. Firstly, the narrator, important for ethical proofs, gives any documentary a “logical principle ordering the whole which the narrator usually makes manifest” (Nichols 1981:184) and is an important “contextualising voice capable of introducing perspective independent of any character’s” (Nichols 1981:198). Our narrator, Thomas Mills, does exactly this by being a source of credibility, joining the many threads and remaining the objective voice of the story. Like Nichols’ (1981:177) reporter in the field who signifies “‘on the spot’ presence”, Thomas, through the various stand-uppers in varying locations, becomes an embodied character in *Beneath the Surface* and demonstrates his presence and proximity. This ethical proof is bolstered by the variety of interviewees from different sides of the industry, and they contribute to the emotional proofs as well.

Interviews...provide elaboration. They also contribute emotional and moral proofs – we align ourselves for and against characters according to their apparent credibility. By giving us access to ‘ordinary people’, the narrator’s own moral status rises: their testimony invariably bears out the narrator’s thesis (Nichols 1981:202).

The narrator makes the first appearance in the story, establishing himself as the voice of reason. The story then moves onto vox pops, ‘ordinary people’ that showcase the lack public awareness around the shark fishing industry. This raises questions surrounding the availability of shark meat in the industry, leading to our phone call to a fishing company. Ethically, we tried to stick to being honest with most of our sources, but this honesty is not so common in traditional investigative journalism surrounding Public Interest. In the end, we had to be somewhat deceptive when it came to the telephone interviews in search of companies that sold shark meat in order to get information without resistance. In a way this made the proof more authentic as the woman on the phone did not know she was talking to a journalist and gave information more freely, but selling a product that is not illegal does not place her or the company in danger of prosecution.

Moving on, the story goes to the beginning of the chain of the shark industry with a fisherman who catches shark, to the processing factory where St Joseph, a type of shark, is processed, to the restaurant owner that buys it from them and sells it to his customers. This whole sequence of the process of shark moving from the sea to a dinner-plate becomes a demonstrative proof, as we show that we know what we are talking about because we went through the process, showing it as a completely legal industry contrary to popular belief. One thing missing from this sequence, however, and something that would have added to our lacking emotional proofs, is visuals of the actual capture of sharks on the boats (like in Rochat’s documentary mentioned earlier). This would have given the story shock value, but perhaps on the other hand the lack of gruesome visuals of sharks’ heads being cut off helped the viewers see it as a normal marine industry and not a mindless slaughter. We left the most ‘shock factor’ visuals we had for last, namely the shots of confiscated dead shark carcasses in the Department of Fisheries’ office, bringing finally home the concept of the ‘killing’ of sharks’. It juxtaposes well with the visuals of live sharks in the ocean, helping to create an emotional response from the viewers. As mentioned, we hoped to maintain objectivity in this story, with the aid of our narrator, but this does not mean that there were times where our objectivity was taken out of our hands.

The main difficulty we faced in keeping in keeping to this objectivity, especially through our representation of the two sides involved in the Marius-incident. On the one hand, we had the shark conservationists, Sam and Rob Bester, who went out to investigate the shark long line. They call for a complete ban on the industry and attempt to pressure the government into changing their regulations. The Besters were the most helpful sources we had, giving us contact details of other relevant sources, as well as providing us with shark footage they shot themselves. On the other hand, Marius van Heerden was a difficult source to deal with, refusing to let us showcase his side of the ordeal, not letting us film despite explaining in detail that we wish to remain objective about the industry and subtly threatening us as he tells us about how he threw a man's camera into pieces. The main issue of course was trust, and the trust between the media and Van Heerden was tarnished before we came along with our story. Trust between journalists and sources are very important and in investigative journalism this becomes even shakier.

Trust is a fundamental parameter for the interaction between journalists and their sources... The sources must have faith that the journalist will use information and quotes in a sensible way. If mutual trust does not exist between the two parties...the opportunity to maintain the relationship diminishes. Thereby the source loses a communication channel. And the journalist may lose an important informant. (Sparre 2008)

Although not through a fault of ours, this is what happened with Van Heerden, and his lack of communication made it difficult to remain unbiased, leaning more towards the Besters' side of the story and almost agreeing with their view about Van Heerden's character.

Conclusion

The process of coming up with an investigative story was something that was very daunting, as you had to try and come up with a story that has not been reported. Although our story came from a news article, this only provided an intro to an industry that not many people know of and that was it. From there we were on our own and I found the value of research, but also the value of relevant research. Another important characteristic for any investigative journalist is persistence. Many of our sources were difficult to get hold of, and we either called or e-mailed them every day until we got a response, and then we persisted to convince them to do on-camera interviews. Charlene da Silva, an important source from the Department of Fisheries, was reluctant to do an interview on camera, but we got around it by

having a Skype interview with her. Persistence is important for any journalist, and can either make or break a story.

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