

# Honing Your Skills and Finding Your Path: An Interview with Luke Feltham

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Luke Feltham was a guest speaker to the [HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps](#). He is based in Johannesburg, South Africa, and serves as the Acting Editor-in-Chief at the Mail & Guardian.

How do you position yourself as an author when writing a commentating piece?

"Comment pieces" – broadly speaking – frighten me; I think that all journalists should be frightened by them. Op-Eds carry the danger of entrenching your biases into the minds of readers. If handled untactfully, jeopardizing the trust they have in your work. If I am going to venture into the comment realm, I prefer "analysis" or "news analysis" instead of the traditional comment/opinion piece.

It's a subtle but important distinction. A good analysis considers all relevant information and objectively scrutinizes it for the reader. The journalist uses their experience and expertise to make sense of the situation and produce an evaluation that is digestible and fact-based. An analysis should never feature "I think" or any hypotheses that are not built on deductively sound reasoning.

You mentioned that becoming a journalist wasn't always your plan. What advice would you give to young journalists seeking reassurance in this field?

The beauty of journalism is that there's no defined path. You can be whoever you want to be. It's good to emulate people you admire at first but embrace your own calling and voice when it does find you. In journalism – perhaps more than any other field – your

idiosyncrasies and life experiences shape your craft. That simple realization is immensely fulfilling.

The field can be daunting. And invariably will be difficult. But being a journalist puts you on the front lines of history; the responsibility that comes with that is exhilarating. You will have unmatched experiences, speak to incredible people, and find yourself in weird and wonderful places.

What are your thoughts on citizen journalism and its impact on the field?

Diversity in our knowledge economy is rarely a bad thing. There are also no barriers to entry in journalism – mercifully, you do not have to pass a Bar exam or survive an initiation. Beware the industry gatekeepers that say differently.

That all said, anyone hoping to do "citizen journalism" should not exempt themselves from the exacting standards of a professional. That means holding an uncompromising respect for the truth and reporting it with integrity. Similarly, the discerning consumer should always retain a healthy scrutiny of everything they take in – whether it's from a small blogger or legacy media institution.

With highly anticipated elections coming up in the United States, as well as South Africa, what would your advice be to student journalists and journalists fresh out of university who are looking to cover these events?

Go where no one else is. Everyone covers results, rallies, and the big candidates. If you swim with the crowd then your work will drown in obscurity.

There are thousands of people whose voices go unheard every election cycle – we in the media too often wilfully ignore them in favour of chasing headlines. Find these people, talk to them, and you might just find the true stories of the election.

Who are some up-and-coming African journalists you would recommend looking towards?

I'm sorry if this is a cop out but I could never produce a list without dreading that I've left out some of my incredible colleagues. In any case, I always advocate following as many journalists as possible – especially those you disagree with.

What are three vital skills that helped you when you first got into the industry and catapulted you to the position of editor?

I wouldn't necessarily credit these with "catapulting" me, but here are three attributes I've always done my best to cultivate:

1. Curiosity. By far a journalist's most valuable weapon. Simply being curious about the world will give you the questions no one else thought to ask.
2. Reading. A writer must first be a reader. And a good one at that (yes, reading is a skill). You cannot hope to produce good work if you first do not know what good work is.
3. [B.S.] Detection. Never forget that everyone has an agenda. A journalist scrutinizes everything and never takes anyone's word at face value.