

The Last Word

A Hadland

Looking for a new South African journalism: is the next generation ready for the challenge?

Just over ten years after South Africa became a democracy, the media is still struggling to understand and fulfil its role in the new dispensation. The state is no longer simply the enemy. Now the media is required to be more nuanced in its responses. It must not only be a watchdog and corruption-buster, but it must also nurture goodwill and support national unity. It must be critical but also be constructive. It must not only reflect mainstream opinion, but also work especially hard at giving voice to the voiceless. It must uphold ethical and professional standards while creating a more diverse workforce. These at times conflicting demands have inevitably led to tensions, frustration and an environment in which excellence has found it difficult to be heard.

But South African journalism has far more than its own unique context with which to deal. Globally, change various types of change are forcing media institutions to re-examine working practices, staff skills, profiles, audiences and equipment. Commercialism is constantly threatening the bounds of editorial independence. Rapidly advancing technologies and, in particular, their convergence, are challenging media institutions to reconsider training, infrastructure and investment. The concentration of ownership, the dumbing-down of content and the parochialisation of news agendas have all been the consequences of the trend known as globalisation.

All this amounts to a tough, new world for young journalists entering the sector and hoping to make their mark. It is a world of difficult choices, moral dilemmas and sophisticated technical demands. And while there has been so much of which to be proud in South African journalism over the years and while there is so much talent in evidence, all too seldom the practitioners of such quality are forced to sit down to write about their experiences and their art. A former editor will occasionally write an autobiography or, like Gerald Shaw, publish the history of a title like the Cape Times. The danger is that the lessons of a lifetime run the risk of being lost and the institutional memory of the media is allowed to forget the sacrifices and achievements of those who have gone before.

One of the country's most famous moments of investigative journalism was probably the "Infogate" or "Muldergate" scandal of the 1970s. The coverage unquestionably amounted

Adrian Hadland is a Chief Research Specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). He is the editor of *Changing the Fourth Estate: Essays on South African Journalism* (HSRC Press, 2005)

to one of South Africa's great political scoops and caused the fall both of the then president, Mr BJ Vorster, and of his heir apparent, Dr Connie Mulder. The story of how a group of investigative reporters unravelled the complex plot involving secret military slush funds, cabinet ministers and an extraordinary and costly propagandistic drive to improve apartheid South Africa's global image ranks right up there in South African journalism's hall of fame. Though many contributed, the names of Mervyn Rees, Kitt Katzen and Chris Day remain foremost as the reporters who broke Muldergate.

The Muldergate scandal again reaffirmed the role of the Fourth Estate in exposing the excesses of those in power. In this instance, however, it did more than merely topple a president. It gave many the first real sign that the nationalist government was vulnerable and that opportunities existed to pursue a different path. Allister Sparks who was the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* at the time said: "Muldergate has shattered the image of leadership in the eyes of the traditionally patriarchal Nationalist volk. The fall of the father figure John Vorster and his heir apparent ... (has) all added up to a national trauma. What will emerge from that trauma is still uncertain, but there are already signs that the old monolithic unity has been shaken up. There are new tensions and cracks appearing. A new leadership has taken over and is moving in a more reformist direction. But ... perhaps the most significant thing of all is to be seen at a simpler level. It is just this: Surely, in a country where the press and the judiciary can still beat the odds to expose a massive government scandal and bring down the most powerful political figures, there must still be hope for the forces of peaceful change" (Rees & Day, 1979: xiv).

In a newly published book, *Changing the Fourth Estate: Essays on South African Journalism*, some of the country's best-known journalists have been asked to set down their experiences and wisdom in a series of wide-ranging articles on different aspects of their profession. It is pointed out that in the book South African journalism needs to balance the traditional role of the Fourth Estate finding a South African paradigm particular to our developmental needs, while embracing new communication technologies.

One of the Fourth Estate's most important responsibilities has traditionally been the uncovering of corruption and the enduring effort to keep politicians honest on behalf of the citizenry. More often than not, it has been through effective investigative journalism that this role has been fulfilled. In this vein, *Sunday Times* journalist Mzilikazi wa Africa warns how tough things can get when practising investigative journalism. "I have been bombarded with various insults and I have received more death threats than gifts ... I always tell my friends that investigative journalism is like working for the bomb squad – we all know that it is a dangerous job but someone has to do it because it is for a good cause". Investigative journalism remains a field, argues Wa Africa, where the threats are real and where important decisions have to be made not only about your own future but also about the safety of your family.

Though investigative journalism will continue to operate as the nation's conscience, exposing graft and forcing the abusers of power to take responsibility for their actions, the environment has changed very much compared to the apartheid era. Now academics and practitioners alike are debating the features and merits of a new journalism more suited to a new democracy.

Esteemed South African journalism academic Guy Berger suggests in his essay that while a decade of democracy has seen major improvements, a truly South African paradigm of journalism has yet to emerge. This contrasts with other forms of media such as television shows, he argues, in which for instance Yizo Yizo is breaking all sorts of new ground. “Too much of our reporting is dull, dry and predictable – and of interest only to a bunch of middle-aged elites,” writes Berger.

He goes on to provide some important tips to help us on the long, hard journey to a new South African journalism. These include a sensitivity to the importance of race but an acknowledgment that other factors are also important; an understanding of the importance of Africa and its commonalities; a determination to grapple with poverty, its consequences and its solutions; an agreement that journalists must still play their part in nation-building; and an enduring commitment to the traditional Fourth Estate roles of watchdog, empowerment and giving voice to the voiceless.

The South African context thus asks for a unique journalistic paradigm, amid the new global context of rapidly developing new communication technologies.

For most of his career, Irwin Manoim, one of the co-founders of the Weekly Mail back in the mid-1980s and now head of publishing and design consultancy BIG media, has occupied the cutting edge of media technology. He was one of the first to design and put together a newspaper making use of the then revolutionary technology of desk-top publishing. Manoim suggests in this essay the use of cellphone technology as being a key feature in the future of newspapers and the media. “The future of news is within easy reach,” he writes, “Dig into your pocket and take out your cellphone”.

Cellphone and computer manufacturers have been converging on the same point for a few years now, Manoim says in his chapter entitled Tomorrow’s News: “Each is midwife to an electronic mongrel that is both cellphone and Palm Pilot. The device is the size of a traditional spiral-bound reporter notebook, small enough to slide into a pocket, but bigger than a cellphone. The device is a cellphone, radio, camera, music and video player. It will offer email, web browsing, a diary and a calendar, and has a screen sophisticated enough to write on and display lots of small text.” It is to this small piece of equipment, this platform, that the delivery of news is inevitably shifting.

The notion of a cellphone driving the news does not sit well with most journalists, argues Manoim, just as the notion of a television set delivering the news did not sit well with their grandfathers. “Which is why the first companies to provide news services on next-generation cellphones tend to come from outside journalism,” he writes. “The danger of the cellphone news device is that it will nibble away at the boundaries of what has been traditionally newspaper turf. With each nibble, readers will be lost”.

More hopeful, perhaps, is the plan David Hazelhurst, now the creative director and executive editor of The Star, presents in his essay. Hazelhurst – who has been in South African newspapers for almost 50 years – leads the way in proposing a new way of looking at newspaper design. It is a strategy that is underpinned by a belief expressed frequently

in this collection of essays that there is no substitute for quality. In essence, the news design method suggests the creation of news teams for major stories, including photographers, reporters, sub-editors and designers to ensure the report reaches its full potential and impact. Designing news is not about pretty pictures, says Hazellhurst, nor is it about layout or the size of headlines. "This is about living with the story from the start, helping design the content, the words, the visuals, the headlines and, finally, the projection. The page is the destination; the journey, the exciting challenge that makes it all possible."

News design is a new concept in newspapering adopted successfully by The Star in recent years. It has already led to the winning of several major journalism awards for its treatment of news stories, and a couple of these (including the immensely powerful HIV-Aids series entitled A Fall of Sparrows) is illustrated in detail in the book.

Arrie Rossouw is another South African journalist who has found himself at the sharp end of change in the sector. On his return from a stint in Washington DC as correspondent for Media24 in the US, he joined a team that planned and executed the group's international Internet strategy. He was given the responsibility of starting News24 and several other web operations before becoming editor of Die Burger. Rossouw was also involved in conceptualising and launching the massively successful Afrikaans tabloid, Son. In his essay on Journalism and the Internet, Rossouw grapples with the enormous impact the Web has had and will continue to have on South African journalism.

After dabbling with the Net for more than a decade, Rossouw suggests the future path to survival and prosperity in the news business is fairly obvious. In his essay, he outlines a series of pointers to assist in designing a strategy for growth in the digital age. These pointers include:

- Rule Number One for all print publications should be to do what you do best, i.e. produce quality content. This is one of the most important lessons.
- Never compromise on your credibility in an effort to get the news out first – stick to the basic rules of journalism regarding accuracy and multiple sources. Check the facts before sending off the report into cyberspace. Do not let the adrenalin rush entice you into publishing a breaking news story, which could be an embarrassment to the trusted brand into which the company has invested millions.
- Your strength as a local newspaper is your local content. All newspapers are basically local in nature. Stick to this and give your readers even more of the relevant local news and information. Leave the international scene to the international online news services.
- Integrate the print and online newsroom, or do not attempt to make a distinction, because it is a superficial divide, which serves no purpose. Treat all the news as content that should be available to be published at any time and in all media platforms. Every print reporter should become a web reporter as well.
- Extend your trusted brand to the different media platforms with the aim of engaging your readers/customers even more than before. Your existing readers/customers change with the times and their favourite newspaper should be following them or adapting to their new demands. By diversifying onto new platforms, newspapers can

reach new markets, such as younger people and online readers not yet buying the print edition.

- Distribution, whether in print or online or via wireless channels, is the most important factor in the survival of newspaper brands. The dictum should be: news any time, any place, anyhow. Customers expect to have access to your content wherever they are, in the form they require, whenever they want it. Content is indeed king, but distribution is King Kong – it means nothing if you have excellent content, but it is not readily available to customers. They will simply log on to a competitor.
- Newspapers must find a balance between their traditional, loyal readers of their print editions and the new, modern generation of young readers who are growing up on Playstation, X-Box, SMS, DVD and mp3. Do things online that you cannot do in print, and be more “hip” or “cool” in the way you present your content online.
- Online publishing in general has unfortunately become synonymous with shallow, fast information, and snappy breaking news. It need not be like this, though. Punchy, short news reports do not have to be unsubstantiated gossip and sensationalism. The challenge is to repackage the same quality content carefully prepared for print for other distribution channels and platforms into a format fitting that media. The same rule of accuracy applies.
- The dictum in the newspaper industry should be “create once, publish many”. Create content once and distribute that report or information for publication in as many platforms as you have available. It makes business sense as well if you can sell the same information over and over.
- The Internet has brought with it major advantages. One of them is the ability to manage digitised content and create a digital database of users and subscribers. With it comes the possibility of tailored content, customer relationship management (CRM), better service and increased loyalty, and hopefully increased circulation and advertising revenue. Herein lies the real beauty of the new digital world.

Remember, says Rossouw, newspaper publishing is not about printing ink in 24-hour cycles on chopped down trees anylonger. “It is about distributing content in all platforms – print, online, television, radio, cell phone, etc. Journalists have to adapt to this philosophy and the new demands and accompanied working conditions.”

The pursuit and attainment of excellence in South African journalism is nothing new. This country has produced great journalism and great journalists for the best part of two centuries. From the war correspondents of the Great South African War to the writers of the Drum generation, from the practitioners of the alternative press in the 1980s to those who rise to the challenges of today, the industry has been blessed with people of talent and courage.

However, a new century and a new country both demand different responses and different skills from current and future journalists. One root principle remains the same: excellence will always further the project of democratic consolidation, will inevitably deepen transformation and will naturally be a prominent characteristic of the new South African journalism.

References

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