The third side

SPECIAL

CHALLENGES: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM (EVELYN GROENINK); ARTS AND CULTURE REPORTING (GWEN ANSELL); GETTING IT RIGHT ON GENDER (LIZETTE RABE) AND RACE (CAROLINE HOOPER-BOX); MAKING POVERTY EVIDENT (GUY BERGER) AND KEEPING IT ON THE NEWS AGENDA. THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT STILL NEED ENERGY, THOUGHT AND ATTENTION FROM EDITORS AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS. IN ADDITION WE FOCUS ON THE REWARDS FOR GOOD JOURNALISM: DO AWARDS AND CASH PRIZES REALLY ENHANCE THE OVERALL QUALITY? THE QUESTION WAS POSED TO A VARIETY OF WINNERS AND OBSERVERS BY LUCY SIEBERT, MARITA KRITZINGER AND HOWARD DRAKES.

by Evelyn Groenink

I became an investigative journalist in 1988. On the 30th of March 1988, to be exact: the day after ANC representative Dulcie September was murdered in Paris, France, 500km away from Amsterdam, where I lived. Until then I had been a reporter, quite an ordinary sort of reporter. Interviewing people, going somewhere, writing up what I saw. Now, from the moment I heard the news on the radio, the morning after the murder, I had to find out something. Something really difficult. Who killed Dulcie September?

No, I am lying. I did not become an investigative journalist on that day. Because I, like the anti-apartheid movement in Holland and the ANC, thought I already knew who killed Dulcie. It had to be apartheid death squads – who else? There was nothing much to investigate, I thought. I planned on writing a story about death squads in Western Europe and the lax, permissive attitude of the Western governments, which did not protect South African exiles from racist killers. For a year or two I tried to write that story, **running around in circles, desperately grasping at every bit of gossip** printed and stated elsewhere, anything, anything containing the words "apartheid death squad".

I only became an investigative journalist much later, after editor after editor had rejected my carefully constructed stories, pointing out that a list of rumours and whispers attached to an assumption did not amount to evidence of murder. And why, they asked, why would apartheid death squads have killed this woman? Why would they have come all the way to France to do that? Well, that's easy, I would say. **Because they are evil, that's why.** And every time I said that, yet another editor started to smile and **told me to come back when I had grown up.**

It took me years, numerous flat falls on my face, and an intercontinental move to become an investigative journalist – that is, if I am really one now. To learn that: there are no easy answers; nothing is simple; assumptions are deadly; rumours are often mongered to deviate the press on purpose (why, there are entire state agencies dedicated to doing just that); **one rarely benefits much from deep throat-type sources** and that there is a lot more, and more real, information out there, ready to be grabbed, from statistics, budgets and tender documents. Numbers are of course not nearly as exciting as a meeting in a dark alley with one's own Deep Throat, but often a lot more revealing, let alone reliable. My biggest discovery in the Dulcie September investigation was the Registrar of Companies in Pretoria; it was there that I found the arms dealers she, Dulcie, had been on the trail of shortly before she died. If only I had had a proper investigative journalism course back then, in 1988….

But my own lack of skill and training was not the only reason why this investigation took 12 years. There was also the problem that archives and record systems were often in disarray; **police dockets vanished**; government departments seemed to be run on the instruction that **"under no circumstances is the taxpayer to know what is going on here"** and no institution or well-resourced

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newspaper had ever bothered to keep an eye on powerful elites who had been plundering tax coffers, and/or were involved with international interests ranging from mildly exploitative to **decidedly shady.** Many journalists competed with each other, each with their own Deep Throat, too much racing against time to actually bother about the truth. And that was Paris. Pretoria was, I found when I arrived in 1990, much the same.

Over the years I also discovered some great investigative journalists. They were quite used to coping with all those obstacles, and did so on a daily basis. They were here in South Africa, and also further north: there was Carlos Cardoso in Mozambique, the Angolagate investigators in Luanda, the "Namibian" crowd in Windhoek, Nigerian journalists publishing in the face of pressure from both army and oil companies. They were journalists who faced **murder, crime, corruption** and other abuses of the public interest all the time. When I visited some of them last year, in the context of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) project on investigative journalism, the skill and dedication of many of them took my breath away. As did the obstacles and pressures they encountered every day. There was the guy who lived with daily personal, often hurtful, attacks from a democratically-elected government he had always supported, and still, **politely but stubbornly**, continued to inform the public every time public money was wasted. There was the woman who relentlessly brought fraudsters, with evidence presented and gift wrapped, to the attention of police and courts, often to see the same fraudsters back at work the next day, free to laugh at her. Another was sentenced to death by a druglord (and saved by a government official who was so close to the druglord that he knew about the latter's plans), and continued investigating. A fourth worked a day job so he could do investigations in his spare time. **A broadcaster spent much unpaid time to dig behind what people said, to find out where the truth was behind the words, against the wishes of her bosses,** who kept pressurising her to merely present what was called "both sides of the story": what one party said, and what another. A sixth regularly exercised the legal right to information provided for in his country, approaching government departments and parastatals in the appropriate manner, using all the correct forms, only to be told, time and time again, "sorry we don't have this type of information, go try elsewhere". The law said you can go to court if this happens, but where does one get the money to do that? Still, he continues. Number seven broke the story when a rural landlord took away land from her village to sell to a foreign company; the radio broadcasted her programme and the government stopped the sale. The reporter still does not have a proper job; she is only a woman in a rural area who knows a bit about radio.

Then there were the journalists caught up in the struggle between state and independent media. Just as much as the pro-government journalist working for the independent newspaper, there were countless journalists in state radio stations and other government media who did their best to work in the public interest and were not at all happy to be seen as the enemy by the independents. "Why must I feel guilty to work for public radio?" asked one. "Granted, the government does not always welcome investigations, but we try to do them all the same. And some of the independent newspapers' owners also don't like prying into their affairs. They are not neutral entities either."

"I don't know to which camp I

Turn over for more...

belong," said one investigative journalist.

"I found that there was a government department that was actually cleaning up its act and fighting corruption with good results. To me it was news. The public has come to expect corruption, nobody blinks an eye at another corruption story. A clean up is surprising, that is why I thought this was news and a great story. But the independent newspapers were not interested, and in a government newspaper it would look like propaganda. I could not publish it."

It is a miracle that there are still so many investigative journalists in Africa.

Of course there are not enough. In a continent where foreign powers, unmonitored and unaccountable, freely sell arms and take out mineral resources as barter; where international donors contract their own companies to be – often quite in-transparently – in charge of "development", where "privatisation" often means a clean flow of finance into a Swiss bank account; where international organised crime plays to its heart's content, laughing at weak state structures; where records of tenders, transactions and expenditure are hard to come by; where many areas are not even reached by any media channel; one would think there would be a need for as many investigative journalists as for medical doctors.

Alas, because of all the obstacles, many aspiring and professional journalists know that it is really not advisable to do too much investigating; as opposed to writing scandal. **Scandal is nice, scandal sells.** Allegations of this and that, corruption, child abuse, rape, whatever, are easy to print as long as one source makes the claim and the accused party is given space to deny it. It is cheap and quick and for that reason, some editors like it. As long as it gives "one side and the other side", it can be called proper journalism.

When the subject matter is scandalous enough, especially when it involves the word corruption, it can even be called investigative journalism.

Scandal journalism is of course very far from being investigative. It doesn't assist the public to make up its mind (even though the reader is often exhorted to do precisely that), because it doesn't give reliable information. On the contrary: it gives anybody with a grudge or an agenda a chance to manipulate the public by phoning a journalist. It clouds, rather than clarifies, issues. Investigative journalists in Mozambique complained, when I visited them, bitterly about the daily avalanche of scandalous corruption stories in their newspapers. There was so much of it that it would make any reader dizzy. It left a monumental question mark on all news reporting. It might all as well be fiction, for all the good that it did in matters of transparency and good governance.

"There are three sides to every story," someone (I forgot who) said. "One party's side, the other party's side and what actually happened." Investigative journalism is about that third side. It is costly, both in time, in energy, in resources and often costly to one's mental and physical wellbeing too. And sometimes so dangerous to print that editors won't even buy it for the R800 you were initially promised for what was going to amount to three months' work.

But **there is hope** for investigative journalism. Increasingly, editors seem to be willing to dedicate a bit more time and resources to those who show promise in this regard. Training institutions such as IAJ and Nordic SADC Journalism Centre in Mozambique, are focusing on investigative journalism, giving tailored courses. Internationally, global investigative journalism networks are being set up. With all of this happening it becomes feasible to think of more initiatives assisting investigative journalists, or those who want to become "IJs", with practical skills and other support. What we need now is more sophisticated Internet search training, so that we can learn where to find what in the least possible time. In the US, IJs are taught to work with balance sheets and spreadsheets, so that they can discover more than isolated events: they now discover **trends.** This is important for Africa, too: we don't know, for example, which sectors of our economies are increasingly drained and unprofitably so for the public. New analysing tools and IT skills can help us to deepen our skills in this regard. We need to learn to analyse society in a way that will help us seek out stories that affect the public interest. Where is something rotten likely to occur? We want to learn to dig out the stories with the least possible dependency on eager rumour-mongers. If we could be taught to be more effective and proactive; to use tip sheet formats and manuals, and to use legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, maybe we could do better stories in less time.

And then maybe there could be more of us. Maybe the growth of investigative journalism as a profession can be assisted even outside urban areas. Maybe it could become less male, less white, less national capital-centred. Donors, NGOs and training institutions could support the spread of IJ skills, including Internet technology, training and resources in countries, areas and social sectors where people up to now have no means to question events affecting them. Gender sensitivity is not only right in theory: in the light of the regularity of attacks on the public interest in areas where mainly women live, it is a must. **Where training is difficult to give, maybe promising individuals could be assisted to find placements. And childcare.**

The more of us there are, and the more connected we are, the more we can work to publish and broadcast stories which will assist the public to find out what is going on around them, and what the powers-that-be in their areas and countries are up to. Networking will help us, here in Africa, to break bigger stories: after all, the oil company that bribes government leaders in one country in the sub-Saharan region, will most likely do that in another country too. Instead of having one story about one corrupt local official, we could have a much bigger, more complete one to publish simultaneously in several countries.

Networking on the internet will assist us to link to professional skills and other support worldwide. Which is what we hope to achieve through the recently formed Foundation of African Investigative Reporters (Fair). Through Fair – and its website to be – investigative journalists will be able to contact each other, mentor each other and even co-ordinate cross-border investigative projects. Hopefully, Fair will put an end to **the despondent isolation** in which many investigative journalists, especially in countries and areas lacking in infrastructure, operate. It aims to assist the establishment of investigative journalism as a profession in all areas in Africa, including rural areas.

Of course there is still competition among us. It would be silly to ask a journalist to share a scoop before s/he has published it. It is not going to work like that easily, or without hiccups, but **one thing I know for sure: there are more than enough stories out there.** And, if Africans are to know what is really happening around them so that they can vote and act wisely, these stories desperately need to be recorded.

The book Murder in Paris, on the murder of Dulcie September, was published in the Netherlands in 2001 and will be published by Jacana in SA later this year.

The Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) in Johannesburg contracted Evelyn Groenink to do a survey on the situation and needs of investigative journalists in Southern Africa last year, and has recently assisted an inter-regional group of investigative journalists to form the Fair network.

Evelyn Groenink is a journalist and researcher, having published several books on South Africa in the Netherlands. She currently functions as the facilitator of Foundation of African Investigative Reporters, a professional association of working journalists committed to improving pan-African reporting standards and access to information. Groenink can be contacted on pinkie@intekom.co.za