

editorial

It's a whole new world: will journalism survive?

Journalists are under pressure, and this thread runs throughout this edition of Review.

In part, the tension is due to the uncertainties and stresses from that strange new animal called competition. But there's more at stake.

Largely, the pressure on journalists today is the product of change. There is a surfeit of turbulence that is putting our patterns and procedures to the test. A new and unknown world is taking shape in ownership and control, in politics and technology.

You might be working for a JCI-owned TML publication today; tomorrow Nthatho Motlana or Don Ncube may be your boss. The Star's Richard Steyn could not live with Tony O'Reilly; will Ken Owen and Nigel Bruce survive their new employers?

You may have been a humble hack, hidden away on an Argus paper (or what used to be called Argus): nowa-

day, even you dare not dally in the chase for dollars.

Those journalists working in the erstwhile alternative press last year are mostly now employed in the mainstream. Magazines too are in turmoil: new titles come tumbling forth; there is intense rivalry – including from kindred newspaper supplements and magazines.

Things are no different in broadcast: you're here today, moved tomorrow. It is "all change" on the SABC's "fast-track", where the centre of gravity has lurched towards African-language broadcasting and projected regional programming.

At the same moment, the doughty IBA is weighing up the future size and scope of the public broadcaster. Audience ratings fluctuate wildly with AMPS figures in seeming disarray.

Community radio competition begins to burgeon, with the commercial big boys close behind. Not to mention the satellite factor. Who will be joining, and who will be trying to beat, these new broadcasters on the block?

Then, affecting everyone in the media, there's the new political scene. At times it's impossibly fluid, at others, brittle and fragile. One minute, the government pledges itself to press freedom, the next it's pressurising the press. Hot, cold. Cold, hot. How about the freedom of information legislation on the cards? It's a new, and in some ways scary, vista – dotted with delights as well as dangers.

And not to overlook the technological change overtaking media as we know it. What DTP is doing to print, digital non-linear editing is starting to do to radio and television. Distinctions in all media are fading between those who report the message, and those who massage it. Journalists all over are having to learn new skills. Approaching at a moderate, but inexorable, pace from the horizon, there is interactive multi-media. How do you report and script for stuff that will go out on CD-Rom? How will a wordsmith work not only with graphic artists, design artists and photojournalists – but with colleagues spe-

cialised in sound and moving image?

In this incredible, unprecedented flux in South Africa's media, one question remains constant: What will journalists be in this process? Subjects – or subjected? Keeping and extending our limited control over our space in this society, or surrendering it to commerce, state or technology? Do we treat the changes as threats or opportunities?

Hostages of history, or makers of history: that's the choice for South African journalists.

A reactive, defensive response to the new conditions is better than none at all. Far better, however, would be a positive stand that seeks not only to defend, but also to advance, the cause of journalism at this threshold of the 21st century.

As individuals, South African journalists will no doubt survive the changes. But the treasure of journalism – of mastering the world through messages and meanings – may not. It's time to put the mission of journalism upfront.

guest editorial

Discovering the noblest of all careers

One of my profession's more prevalent misconceptions is that journalists in their anecdotalism have pearls of advice for their fresher colleagues. Believe me, it is a misconception. Anecdotes about long-forgotten and much-embellished scoops are often all the tyro reporter will get if he innocently seeks advice.

So, anecdotally, when my luck changed and I discovered journalism was the noblest of all careers, the two most important pieces of advice I received from more-experienced colleagues were:

Use your thumb for the bar; and

The first question to ask is: Why is the lying devil lying?

Thumbing the bar more than doubled my typing speed. And I have reported the second inaccurately. Devil was not the word used. More accurately, the noun reflected the marital status of the liar's parents.

That was advice. As I grow older and wiser – crabbier and more cynical, you might say – I've come to realise that a journalist is only as important as his newspaper. No more, no less. That might be pretty difficult for a journalist to get his head around. Most of us are so involved in our work – driven by the chimera of uncovering this, that or the other scandal or scam – that we often choose to overlook the fact that many of our sources are far from altruistic. They have axes to grind. And where better to grind them

than in the columns of a newspaper? Many a poor journalist fails to realise that, far from doing him a favour, his informant is generally after something.

Before we go any further, for the purposes of this article the male gender shall be taken to include the female, the intermediate and the indeterminate. This is not the moment for political correctness.

But to get back to the point (I hope), Ambrose Bierce neatly summed up the glory of our profession in his Devil's Dictionary definition of the press:

A mighty magnifying machine which, by the aid of "we" and printer's ink, changes the squeak of a mouse into the roar of an editorial lion, on whose utterances the nation (presumably) hangs with bated breath.

Bierce is unstinting with his tart observations. A few entries before, he defines politics as:

A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage.

Remember that Bierce was an American and has been dead this eighty years or more. Times have changed, for the better. These days they define an honest politician in America as one who when bought, stays bought.

Where is all this getting us? Nowhere, if it is failing to reflect that most important of the journalist's qualities – deep-rooted cynicism. Perhaps I should use the expression "healthy curiosity". But curiosity seems, to me, to imply merely turning over the stone.

Cynicism implies an ability to deal with what comes crawling out from under it. If it is a writ, perhaps you got the story right. Fulsome praise from anyone but your editor (and he is generally short on that commodity as most journalists will know) implies that somehow the informant pulled the wool over your eyes.

The easiest people to deal with, of course, are the foreign politicians. Those that are not venal, and many that are, are past masters at prevarication, dissembling and all the other life skills needed in their clamber up the political heap. Naturally, this crass generalisation only applies abroad where politicians are regularly exposed in three-in-a-bed sex romps or fiddling state money. It never happens here.

Nor, I might hasten to add, are there any crooked businessmen here. They flourish only in the more decadent nations of Europe or America – not here, heaven forbid! If you do not believe me just ask when anyone has been caught insider trading through the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Ten out of ten for those who gave "Never" as the correct answer. Which plainly proves my thesis that probity is second nature to the entire South African business community.

Perhaps I am being unfair. Business reporters spend a great deal of time reporting the affairs of well-run companies competently operating in their own particular markets. So they should admit most companies and businessmen are like that. More satisfying, though, is when the journalist is

uncovering affairs that the perpetrators would rather keep under wraps.

But I am getting ahead of myself. There is no excitement or adrenalin rush and as all journalists will know, our profession is dreary humdrum. Why? Because our politicians, businessmen, clerics, lawyers and other professionals are, to a man, honest as the day is long, there can be no scandals to uncover and report. There is no point in probing because no creepycrawly will scramble for cover when you turn the stone over. If there were any scoundrels, they scarpared.

And, if you believe all this, you will also believe that I did not scramble to write this article five minutes ahead of deadline, that the editor did not have to nag me for copy and that I only started writing after I had thoroughly researched the subject and interviewed all the experts.



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