

CATHY O'Dowd has recovered from the strain of climbing Mount Everest, but she's still sore about media coverage of the expedition. The 27-year-old has done reporting – and studied the subject at Masters level. Now she's "cheesed off with journalism".

This is what happened when she climbed Mount Everest. "I discovered that her life had changed: from having covered the news and become the news. "It's a thoroughly educational experience I would recommend to any journalist," says O'Dowd. "It really makes you realise the absolute importance of accuracy and objective reporting."

In short, O'Dowd got a bad press from the print media during the Everest expedition. Her ensuing sense of grievance extends beyond the *Sunday Times*, the paper that shifted from sponsoring the climbers to shafting them. Several other publications that covered the story are equally culpable in her view.

Part of the problem in the press coverage was logistical: the mountaineers spent much of their time up a crevice without a media paddle, so to speak. Not contactable, they could not communicate their side of the story to a world getting another side.

Yet, says O'Dowd, their inaccessibility was far from absolute. The group was always contactable by phone while at base camp and at Katmandu. The problem, she says, is that scant few journalists made an effort to get hold of the climbers there.

That is sloppy, lazy journalism, she charges. It reflected a lack of interest in getting to the first-hand sources. "Newspapers were happy to publish allegations of misconduct, and to report what each other had said – and if the first report was inaccurate, the rest then repeated the mistake."

To compound things, she argues, many publications picked up negative reporting by the *Sunday Times*, without questioning that paper's own agenda. "The *Sunday Times* was a player, it was not simply reporting from the outside."

One magazine which "didn't bother" to speak to the sources, ended up with a one-sided version and factual inaccuracies, says O'Dowd angrily.

Isn't the one-sidedness also a result of her group deciding not to talk to the *Sunday Times* after the paper pulled out of the expedition?

"Once the *Sunday Times* withdrew its sponsorship, we had no reason to trust what they would say. In the short term we could not win with the paper out to get us. It would have been us slinging allegations in return, and the public then gets no reason to believe any of you."

O'Dowd denies that she is confusing the messenger with the message. According to her: "There is nothing wrong with being a messenger carrying negative messages, or even being critical yourself. But you need to be accurate."

The case of Ken Vernon, *Sunday Times* reporter, especially riles her. He wrote that she had banished him from the camp and even refused



him a cup of tea at a time when he had been lost and freezing on the mountain.

Simply not true, says O'Dowd.

In giving her account, O'Dowd says that it is hard to convey things through soundbites or 200 word articles without some distortion. "I guess that applies to all sorts of stories," she reflects. And, in this instance, she feels like a victim of an unfair selection of facts.

"First, Ken said that the incident was observed by Deyshun Deyssel (her fellow climber), implying that there was a witness to the exchange. She wasn't there.

"Then, he never mentioned in his story that I did offer him shelter in the mess tent. We could not set up a new tent for him at that time of day, and without any notice that he was arriving.

"Some journalists wrote that the tent we offered him was not insulated – the point is that tents are not insulated: you have to carry an insulation mat.

"It was a heated exchange, the result of growing tensions and Ken's attacking me for sticking with (expedition leader) Ian Woodall. In the course of it, he asked: 'So don't I even get a cup of tea, then?'. I said: 'No!'. Then he went off and got one from the kitchen tent anyway."

What was thus published bore little resemblance to what actually happened, she insists. Certain facts were picked out, other facts were not mentioned. "It puts a spin on events that makes it sound terrible on my part. That is where you see the power of the media being abused."

O'Dowd says it does not take great specialisation to do mountaineering journalism. However, at least some research is needed, and where this was lacking, numerous inaccuracies resulted.

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THE HIGHER YOU CLIMB THE FURTHER YOU **fail!** Everest doesn't loom as large as the mass media. That's what emerged when GUY BERGER interviewed the first South African woman to reach the peak.

HIGHTECH communication on Mount Everest

The team had planned to transmit live video and two way radio from the summit to South Africa. Only the link to Radio 702 was transmitted, not the video.

I spoke twice daily to Phillip, Deshun Deysel and Cathy at the Everest Base Camp and at Camp Two. At a heart-stopping 42 rand a minute for the satellite calls and faxes, it was even more frightening as the pause between call and response was, at times, nearly half a minute.

At the beginning of the expedition, Philip was a solitary figure struggling in the Kathmandu hotel courtyard with the computer setups from Apple Computers and the digital video links.

He was working on the satellite transmission system, which failed to connect with Inmarsat and the Eastern Satellite system.

As he said in his first fax to me from the courtyard, "I'm sending this via the Inmarsat, hopefully." He used

the satellite link-up from the middle of the courtyard, independently of the hotel fax/phone setup and it succeeded. He continued this amazing technological feat far up the trail, at the Everest Base Camp, all of five kilometres up.

Nearly 200 kilograms of computer software, hardware, cameras and satellite add-ons were hauled up the long trek path to the Base Camp by over a hundred yaks.

The power of e-mail journalism was really brought home to me recently in Grahamstown when I interviewed the team via international telephone link-up in Kathmandu on their return.

I then wrote the copy for two newspapers, in Johannesburg and in Cape Town, and sent it via email, page by page to the Cape Town office. The first copy was on the stone within thirty minutes. The copy was then transmitted almost instantaneously via e-mail

attachment to Johannesburg. At the end of it all, though, this dazzling technology provides a faster vehicle for journalists, but can never really be a substitute for great copy and great pictures.

Montgomery Cooper, Rhodes Photojournalism lecturer, accompanied the South African Everest Expedition from Kathmandu to Pheriche. On his return, he covered the team's progress for the Independent newspaper group and followed them through daily phone satellite calls up the Ice Fall, through blizzards and tragic deaths of other international team members to the team's triumphant, if bitter-sweet, conquest of Everest, more than five kilometres high.



The higher you climb the further you fall *continued from page 5*



"The media missed the boat. The splits were part of the story, but they missed the story of the climb. They misjudged it completely."

CATHY O'DOWD

"It was reported that Bruce Herrod had been asking for directions on his radio, shortly before he died. In fact he was on a knife-edge ridge with an 8000 foot drop on either side. He did not have a lot of options. Anyone who had studied the maps would have known this. We have the log of the radio calls, and Bruce never asked anyone for directions."

Another example of poor media research that O'Dowd cites is the confusion by journalists over mountaineers climbing with and without oxygen.

"With oxygen, it is like being at sea-level - you are perfectly capable. By confusing the issue, it was easy for journalists to say our decisions were bad because we had no oxygen. We did have oxygen."

O'Dowd's assessment is that the news media often did not know enough about what they were talking.

Is there some kind of mountaineering code journalists needed to know in order to evaluate how the climbers related to each other? "There is no code, only your basic standard ethics," says O'Dowd. "If someone is in danger, you do something to help. We didn't think Bruce Herrod was in danger in our judgement. (Herrod who was still ascending met O'Dowd, Woodall and sherpas who were descending).

"When you say a member of the team is dead because of the leaders, that has massive implications. The basic underlying assumption by some journalists was that Bruce was in danger and we abandoned him. He was not in especial danger - except inasmuch as being on Everest is dangerous."

The Everest story as carried in the media typically seemed to be one of human conflict, rather than one of humans clambering across crevices and conquering the world's best-known mountain.

O'Dowd agrees: "The media missed the boat. The splits were part of the story, but they missed the story of the climb. They misjudged it completely. Radio 702 simply reported on our progress, and this had people in Gauteng glued to their radios."

She is bitter that the media "missed the story" about the *Sunday Times'* involvement in the expedition. "To some extent they protected their own; they were not prepared to take on the *Sunday Times*." No one asked, she argues, why the paper gave Woodall \$70 000 in the beginning, or why it was nearly a year later that they got around to investigating his CV.

Similarly, she says, no journalist asked why *Sunday Times* reporter Ken Vernon had not been at base camp much of the time, and why he apparently preferred to report at a distance from Kathmandu.

Aside from the controversies in the coverage, what does O'Dowd make of the way journalists conveyed the experience of Everest? After all, *Carte Blanche's* Derek Watts, interviewing O'Dowd on the mountain, confessed to the camera that he could not find the right words to describe what it was like.

Her answer suggests a sense of media having met its match in the Mountain. "It is difficult to report on Everest, especially for an audience not schooled in mountains. It is not easy to convey how big it all is, or the conditions and difficulties you face. To get it 100 percent right is probably impossible."

She considers, though, that 702's Patrick Conroy did convey a lot of dramatic sense by painting pictures with words. "But I am not sure that journalism can ever do the experience justice," she concludes.

Burnt by her brush with the press, O'Dowd does not see herself working on a newspaper in the future. But the journalist within her is still there. She's commencing work on a book.

That much press coverage went wrong is a huge loss, muses O'Dowd. She does not hold out much hope of a belated correction. "There are other ways for us to tell what happened, and in the long-term, the public will hear and decide."

Her book is one of these ways. It is a means for her to reconcile the experiences of reporting and being reported on. The journalistic issues entailed in such a work are somewhat different to those she experienced on Everest. They are no less complex and challenging. No doubt, the journalists she now criticises will be among those who read the work - and respond in their pages with an assessment of O'Dowd's own journalism.