The lessons we learnt from Pagad

By RYLAND FISHER, editor of the Cape Times

Rashaad Staggie was killed at about 10.30 on a Sunday night. Our deadline for first edition is 10.30. Our deadline for second edition is 1am. From the minute Benny Gool's excellent and graphic pictures of the killing came into our newsroom at around midnight on that Sunday we were faced with all kinds of dilemmas, the first being whether to publish the pictures and possibly offend some of our sensitive readers.

Our next big dilemma came a few weeks later. Police, unable to make progress in their investigation into the Staggie killing, decided to turn their attention to the media and (on August 23) served subpoenas on several journalists, including the editors of the Cape Times and Cape Argus.

They were ordered to hand over photographic and written material related to Pagad. The law the police used (Section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act) allows magistrates to jail people who refuse to comply. It was a popular tool of the apartheid government who used it to intimidate supposedly negative journalists.

We decided we would not hand over material to the police and would launch a united court challenge against the subpoenas. Our feeling was that Section 205 was in contravention of South Africa's new Constitution which guarantees media freedom. Also, however much we support the police in their fight against crime, we believe that journalists are not and should never be an instrument of the police service.

We had another, more urgent, consideration. The situation in Cape Town had become extremely volatile, and journalists had been threatened by gangsters and anti-gang campaigners alike. If newspapers had been seen to be colluding with the police, we could have exposed our journalists to grave danger and undermined the trust they enjoyed in the community.

Frank Kahn, the Attorney-General who had issued the subpoenas, withdrew them after a few days. However, the matter is still unresolved. There are still senior members of the government and the judiciary who believe that the press should not have special rights beyond those enjoyed by ordinary citizens. We have to convince them otherwise.

But there are other, possibly more important, lessons to be learnt from the Pagad experience, and this relates to our ability or inability to report on a diverse community in a transitional society.

Shortly after the Pagad story broke, I was asked if we had any idea beforehand that this story was brewing. I had to admit that, while we had heard about anti-drugs protests in the week before the Staggie killing, we had no idea of the extent of the anger in the Cape Flats communities where drug dealers and gangsters rule.

Since then, the Cape Times has taken great strides in its attempts to get closer to the community. We met with as many community groups as possible and invited their criticism and ideas.

We extended the same kind of invitation to Pagad, but it was seemingly not enough and, after weeks of unhappiness during which they tried unsuccessfully to influence our coverage, they called for a boycott of the Cape Times, because of what they termed the anti-Pagad bias of our reporting.

The easy option for us would have been to respond with the traditional and old-fashioned approach of "the press is always right". However, we asked whether Pagad was justified in their criticism, and whether we had failed to report accurately and fairly on their activities.

At a meeting where Cape Times staff raised concerns about the possible effects of a boycott, we threw this question open for discussion. We also asked our staff how many of them knew where the Gatesville mosque, Pagad's regular meeting-place, was. The response was quite eye-opening. Apart from those people who had reported on Pagad activities, only three or four others said they knew.

How does one deal with a situation where a newspaper is meant to serve a particular community, but most of its staff do not know or understand that community? And not only that, how do you deal with prejudices ingrained through years of apartheid and separation?

South African newspapers have always been quick to label people or organisations. And once a label has been attached by one newspaper, others often see this as an excuse to perpetuate this without investigation into whether this is justifiable. And of course, with labels go certain perceived group characteristics.

In the case of Pagad, the organisation has quickly become known as a militant Muslim organisation. The danger of this is that the word militant becomes synonymous with Muslim, leading non-Muslims to suspect all Muslims as militant. I have seen how ordinary people wearing a muslim skull cap or a red scarf are suddenly suspected of being "militant Muslim members of Pagad".

There has been much talk about the need to make our newspapers more representative. The developments around Pagad have shown that we do not have too much time. Our society is already diverse. Our newspapers not. If we want to argue for more time to make our staff more representative, we need at least to show sensitivity in our reporting to this diverse society. And that goes for all our staff, irrespective of their colour.

The biggest lesson we at the Cape Times have learnt is the need to be sensitive to our readers, their needs, religions and cultures.

This will take us a long way towards becoming more relevant to our readers and the broader community. This is not only a matter of being politically correct. It is a commercial imperative. It is necessary if we want our newspapers to survive. We need to understand our readers better if we want to sell more newspapers.

Our task now is to interact with our communities in such a way that our newspapers live and breathe with them. We must, in the truest sense, become the pulse of our communities.

In the end, we must be able tell our readers what is going to happen, and not only record what has already happened.

The challenges we face

1. Do we understand our society? Do we understand the people in our target areas or provinces? Their cultures? The social, political and economic dynamic?
2. What are we doing to address this?
3. How sensitive should we be to our readers? For example: should we have published the pictures of the Staggie killing? Should we have published the pictures on an inside page? How do those pictures differ from the pictures of Princess Diana dying in a car crash?
4. When crimefighters engage in criminal activities (because the justice system is ineffective) how should we report on this? How does one report on gangsters, reformed or otherwise, without turning them into heroes and promoting a gangster culture?
5. How important is it for us to get the story? Is journalism a profession or a calling? If it is a calling, how much should we be prepared to sacrifice? Is it fair to ask journalists to risk their lives in pursuit of a story?
6. What role can editorial managers play in ensuring the safety of our reporting staff? How about bullet-proof vests, getting the facts right, not using bylines?
7. What happens when all your journalists have been threatened and/or are in danger? Can you ignore the story when the people involved are still generating news?
8. Today, many people have identified crime as one of the biggest problems in our country. Should we as journalists play a role in fighting crime? What should that role be?
9. How should we respond to police requests for assistance from journalists? Can we rightfully expect not to co-operate with the police when we may be the only people who can help them to solve certain crimes? Will we still be able to criticise the police for not doing their jobs when we don't want to help them? What are the implications for journalism if we co-operate with the police to solve crimes?
10. Should journalists have a special status in society?