

# A new paradigm

## for journalism in South Africa

**W**HEN journalism trainers and SA National Editors Forum council members met to talk through the need for the industry to be more involved in the education of future journalists, one issue all agreed had to be on the agenda was "a new paradigm for journalism".

It's the phrase both trainers and working journalists have been bandying around for years over tea-time – as in "you know what the problem is, of



Joe Thloloe

course, we need a new journalistic paradigm". So six of us seized the job with alacrity when asked to form a task group.

We had to come up with a workable definition of what kind of journalism we think South Africa needs now.

The only way to do this was backwards: start with what we have and don't want and work out – by looking at the opposite – what we would rather have. Then at the end we drafted the definitive statement!

### Old paradigm features

- Eurocentric – an assumption of a homogeneous society, anybody who doesn't fit the mould is rendered invisible.
- Authoritarian.
- Male-focused.
- Fragmented into content areas; no links between these areas for sense.
- No context to events.
- Reactive information not reflective (reflective in the sense of analysed, thought about, interpreted).
- The "mirror" notion in which the media is just a reflection; non-ideological; it provides facts with no point of view; objectivity (the impossible task) is upheld.
- The notion of "balance" which presents issues as having two sides only (pro and con); it denies the complexity of issues.
- It provides information alone which has low value, at the expense of contact and community. The focus is on information not audience, ie: not on what the information really means to people.

- Little recognition of different audiences.
- Stories without meaning and relevance
- The manner of the telling ("story-telling") is absent.
- Stories dictated by sources and not receivers.
- Ownership: monopolies, the bottom line dictates.
- Adherence to party political views.

The old paradigm also struggles to understand how to situate itself within major imperatives such as globalisation and nation-building.

So by studying this we looked at the mirror picture and speculated that a new paradigm would have these features:

### New paradigm features

- As journalists, we have a role in society, we link the individual to the world. We need to give our audience a sense of what it is to be South African on the African continent and connected to the world.
- There needs to be a consciousness of diversity: not just in terms of race and gender but also class, rural/urban and youth/aged.
- Our audience is diverse and complex.
- We must emphasise context; interpretation; research; investigation; complete reporting and analysis.
- We must foreground the storyteller (the individual and the media organisation).

**The new paradigm was workshopped by a group consisting of Joe Thloloe, chairperson of the Sanef training and corrective action committee, Francois Nel of Cape Technikon, Rob Meintjies of Pentech, Chris van Gass of the Independent Newspapers cadet school, Robert Nkuna from the Freedom of Expression Institute and Anthea Garman and Lynette Steenveld from Rhodes University Journalism and Media Studies Department.**

- We should use African voices (modes of communication rich in narrative).
- We should respect our audiences and engage in dialogue.
- In our use of sources we should move beyond "the authorities". Audiences are also sources. We must remember to foreground and situate who the sources are.
- Ownership: symbolically the audience needs to feel they "own" the medium.
- Ownership: economic – this needs to be diverse and needs participation by all stakeholders in media.
- Control and structures within media organisations – there should be respect for storytellers and storytelling and these should be given status and compensation.

From this we drafted the policy statement which reads:

"In recognition of our role in society as storytellers; as the link between South African citizens and the world; we strive to promote:

- stories, told in a multiplicity of African voices, that are well researched; contextualised; analytical; interpretive; in dialogue with, and respectful of,
- an audience that is complex and diverse,
- through media that are owned:
  1. Symbolically by the audience and
  2. Economically by a diverse group of stakeholders,
- enabled by newsroom structures that empower storytellers.

The group felt that before we could successfully move from the old ways of journalism into something like the new paradigm, research would have to be done to underpin this shift. We need to know more about: the role of journalism in society; diversification of media ownership; audience needs; processes and structures of making news; new forms of storytelling (in both words and pictures) and the skills needed for that; and new technology.

We concluded: these findings must be disseminated to those in training institutions and in industry and should result in new curriculum and materials development as well as exposing current practitioners in journalism to information which will alter the way they operate.

We were accused at the consultation of being idealistic, but we think it's a good start to get some serious thought going on an issue that needs attention.

**W**ith sponsorship from Independent Newspapers, representatives of 13 institutions involved in journalism training met at Rhodes University on 6 and 7 September.

They agreed on more communication with industry (including exchanges and developing trainers); developing a new paradigm for journalism in this country; and a conference for all stakeholders was mooted for early 1998 so that the discussions can be related to a wider group of trainers and stakeholders.

A listserv for interested participants was launched and Graham Greer of Natal Technikon was elected as the group's representative for decisions that must be made around the National Qualifications Framework.

Thirty-five people were involved and included: Joe Thloloe, chair of the Sanef sub-committee on training and corrective action; Sam Isaacs, executive director SAQA; Professor Betty Medsger, author of *Winds of Change*, a definitive report on journalism education in the US; Chris Vick, group training director for Independent Newspapers; Nora Paul, trainer from the Poynter Institute, US; Peter Verwey, journalism trainer from the Utrecht School of Journalism, Netherlands and Stephen Quinn, journalism lecturer from Deakin University, Australia.

The institutions represented were: Technikon Northern Gauteng; Technikon Pretoria; Peninsula Technikon; Cape Technikon; Fort Hare University; Rhodes University; Centre for Cultural and Media Studies; Natal University; University of the North West; Rand Afrikaans Universiteit; ML Sultan Technikon; Applied Broadcasting Centre; Independent Newspapers Cadet School; Times Media training; Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the Freedom of Expression Institute. Get the report of the conference at <http://journ.ru.ac.za/j-schools/papers/sanef1.html>



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