

Potential: Who's got it?

THE RANT is a much-underestimated and underutilised form of journalism. It goes alongside that other form of creative intervention in human affairs – nagging. Nagging has a specific gender dimension and both, I suppose, attached to a female byline in public, are going to get one branded a harpy.

So here goes:

I've been alternately enraged and silenced by disbelief at Ivan Fallon's statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that when Independent bought the Argus the new managers could find no blacks and no women within the entire company who could be promoted to leadership.

So they did something – created a fast-track programme and now have some black men at the helm of their newspapers in Cape Town and Durban.

So where are the women?

On the third day of the TRC media hearings the newspaper boys' club was out in force. Backslapping and being jocular about their flights from the far-flung corners of the land to be together and be brave about facing up to a very ignoble part of their history. Such male bonding, such a united force, and not a single woman in all those management teams.

The only women to give evidence to the TRC – Juby Mayet, an activist and journalist from the 70s, and Nomavenda Mathiane, who pointed out that she is of the same generation as media tycoons Thami Mazwai and Jon Qwelane – did so individually and couldn't speak for powerful media organisations.

And were their words reported in the newspapers and on the radio stations? Nope.

Twice invisible.

While sitting at the TRC I rumbled to the other women around me about how irritating this all was. But I didn't decide to get into rant mode publicly until I attended the Gender Commission's seminar on the media later that month.

Two things stand out:

1. From both an Australian study on women's buying power and media consumption; and local studies by the Media Monitoring Project and the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (Case), it's clear as daylight that most editors make choices about who they aim their stories at in the dark based on their own whims. Straight research shows that they're completely out of touch with the market place. They ignore half the population every day of the year. Local research by Case for the SABC Women's Forum (and it's backed-up by Australian research) shows that of five newspapers studied last year for nine days, 79% of all stories were about men, 21% about women. According to the study "if we look at the four most important topics covered by newspapers, women almost vanish from the picture". In photographs 63% of people pictured were white men; 19% black men; 15% white women; 3% black women. Yes I know, this is a simplistic stating the case in one sentence and plucking stats out of context. Go and read the whole Case study for yourself, you'll be raving mad by the last page.

2. A panel of editors, print and broadcast, joined the debate to talk about whether they see the media playing a role in gender transformation in this country. To my mind, the male editors were way out of touch. They didn't see the issue, didn't get the issue, didn't look like they wanted to engage on anything but the most unemotional, abstract level. Yes, change is important, of course gender transformation is as important as race transformation but "I personally don't have a problem" seemed to be the attitude.

Now this is where I get personal and drag in some of my own history.

What managers always seem to be looking for is the perfect candidate for leadership – the person visibly bulging with potential. This a quality singularly lacking in women and always obvious in men.

I've worked on four newspapers under six

different editors. Let me tell you about three of them. The first was appointed an editor as a 30-year-old lawyer with no journalism experience at all. He had married into the family of the owners. He turned out subsequently to be a damn fine editor. But was he obviously filled with potential as a candidate for editorship? How would they know – his school record, his university degree, his miniscule work experience? My guess is the board took a risk. A very risky risk and it paid off.

The second was a friend of a departing editor. This time he had slight newspaper experience but huge experience of the diplomatic circuit. He was awful. Eventually his senior staff were running the newspaper and plugging the holes he made in his role as PR supremo.

Number three on my list had less experience than many of the senior staff working on the paper. There was no advertising of the post, no open discussions. I would have thought that in the wake of the democratic revolution this would be the time to make a strategic appointment, black or female. No, obviously the glowing potential of having been educated at one of the country's elite schools was the swaying factor here.

So. What is my point? Just this: potential is in the eye of the male beholder.

I would like to direct my next remark to Mr Fallon. Next time you can't see any women with any characteristics that shout "editor material" why don't you ask me for my opinion? I can give you a long list of women I think are eminent editors-in-the-rough.

I've never believed in quotas, but after sitting through the TRC hearings and the Gender Commission seminar, I've started to feel that the only thing that will satisfy me now is if half of all the editors appointed in major media houses in the future are female.

So don't give me that stuff about potential. It's clear from all the highly-talented people in this country that you've ignored, that you wouldn't recognise it when you see it.

By **ANTHEA GARMAN**



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Recognise the female majority

telling that a stronger representation of women in the reporting front lines has not translated into greater coverage of women's issues and interests. Where women reporters overcome culturally prescribed self-censorship to cover women's news, their stories are often downgraded or subbed to make room for "hard news".

So what?

So what has changed for women in the Australian media as a result of establishing a set of research facts about our portrayal? Independent research has provided the basis for shock value in our media institutions. Firstly, it galvanised women activists to renew their pressure tactics. In 1994 Helen Leonard founded the National Women's Media Centre – a co-ordination point

and clearing house for women and media issues. This organisation continues to keep the heat turned up on media organisations, government and regulatory bodies.

Secondly, the research has provided a greater public sense of the inequities perpetrated. There is now significant public consciousness about the issue. Also regulatory authorities have been forced to acknowledge the dramatic patterns of absence, misrepresentation or stereotype which characterise the content of media and advertising.

We now have a basis for ongoing monitoring and challenge. Detailed comparative research has allowed for continuous dialogue with regulatory authorities. While I cannot report in glowing terms about the enthusiasm of these bodies for their task, some progress is visible in the advertising and broadcast arenas.

In South Africa

It is my objective that regulatory bodies (see in South

Africa will see the social and economic sense of media evolution. Ask them for their commitment to truth, objectivity and accuracy in reporting. Then through the Commission on Gender Equality establish an ongoing mechanism for review of progress to chart the effectiveness of that commitment.

In addition, we need to pressure the media to report on the lives and interests of women more accurately and comprehensively. The rhetoric of truth and objectivity in reporting has been a traditional defence against proactive responsibility.

Media organisations must commit themselves to recognising, researching and reflecting the changing lives and aspirations of South African women with a conscious commitment to building women into the picture. The onus for this task lies with editors and the most senior staff in media organisations to establish work cultures which will facilitate this type of social change.