

# Shifting the reference point to SA

By Patrick Burnett

**W**hen Francois Nel returned from the US in 1992 and got a job teaching media studies in Cape Town, he was shocked to find that there was no material to teach with. In desperation he phoned Gavin Stewart (then head of the Rhodes University journalism department) and asked: "What the heck do you guys do?"

Nel thought it was "crazy" that no local material had been developed and immediately began compiling material for his own classes.

By 1994, his compilations had evolved into *Writing for the Media*, and this year a second edition of the book was released entitled *Writing for the Media in South Africa*.

Based on five years' reporting experience with the *Charlotte Observer* in South Carolina, the second edition follows on the success of the first, containing chapters dealing with the nature of news, the news writing process, story ideas and sources, interviewing and note taking, newspaper style, editing, feature articles, public relations and ethics.

It also provides a link to everyday journalism – bridging the gap between the practical and academic – through the contributions of journalists such as Denis Beckett, Chene Blignaut, Ryland Fisher, Les Aupiais and Charles Mogale.

Kerry Swift, founding editor of the *Rhodes Journalism Review* and contributing editor to *Writing for the Media*, calls it a "brave book", saying, "the need for journalism training in South Africa has never been greater".

Nel is more modest: "I think I was probably

foolish attempting to write something for writers and would-be writers about how to write.

"I was simply trying to contribute to a documentation of the basic body of knowledge necessary for our profession, which is not only about how-to information, but also about building a frame of reference."

As a lecturer in media studies at Cape Technikon, Nel believes the greatest challenge facing journalism educators in South Africa is to break out of the "them" and "us" mentality, and move closer to the industry.

Part of this involves "taking the next step" and becoming industry leaders rather than industry followers, while at the same time catering to the needs of the industry, he says.

"Journalism has been viewed as a trade for too long, much like your corner tailor who makes suits the way his father made suits, in the way he learned from his grandfather.

"In professions such as medicine the local GP turns to the academics, who gather data and analyse it to find out how to do things better. It's a symbiotic relationship, built on mutual respect and an understanding of the roles played by everyone."

Nel also believes newspapers have a strong social duty to perform.

In *Writing for the Media* he says: "The mission of newspapers should not just be to deliver information but rather to bring people together. For journalists this means stories need to help people relate to their neighbours, help foster a sense of community, help bring the political process within the reach of the individual and the control of the electorate."

South African journalists have yet to fulfil this function, says Nel.

"I think we're trying. But good intentions alone are not always enough. We still have a long way to go towards articulating a news paradigm that is appropriate for our society."

Part of the problem is that journalists still see themselves as information providers in a time when information is plentiful. And widely available things are cheap, says Nel.

**F**rancois Nel obtained a BA at North Park College in Chicago, and an MA from Winthrop University in South Carolina. He worked as a public relations writer and editor as well as in television and radio production before becoming a reporter on the *Charlotte Observer*. His recent awards include the Specialist Press Association's 1995 Asom/Prisa Award for Consumer Journalism and a fellowship to the Poynter

Institute for Media Studies. In 1996 he was named the Public Relations Institute of South Africa's Educator of the Year. He is a senior lecturer in media studies at Cape Technikon, and head of the Department of Tourism Management.



"Only things that are rare, such as diamonds and caviar, are considered to be of high value. We need to tie what we do to what is rare in our society – knowledge."

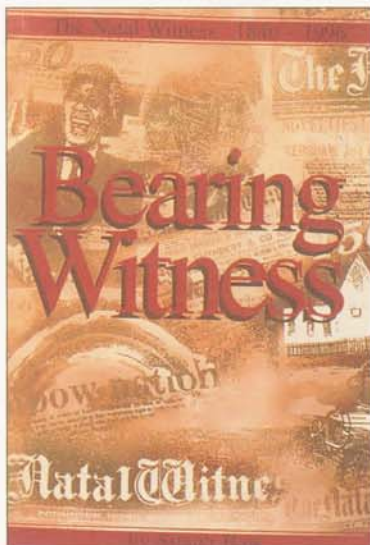
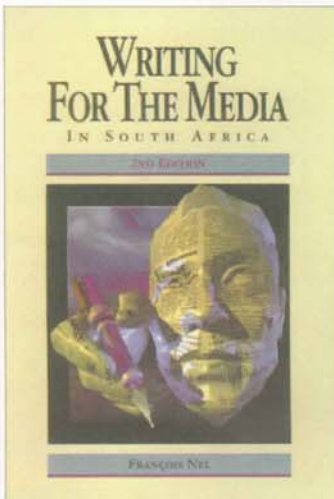
To do this journalists need to go beyond "he said she said reporting" and assist the reader in understanding what things mean, he says.

"It's a helluva responsibility. And we can't do that until we have a clue ourselves."

Another problem is what Nel refers to as the "complex" facing South African journalism, a result of the constant reference to overseas standards.

"The most obvious effect is that we end up imitating rather than creating, and transposing values into a South African context which are not necessarily appropriate," says Nel.

As a result, you don't pick up a newspaper and recognise a truly South African style. We



## 150 years of the Witness – warts and all

**T**he writing of company histories is beset with pitfalls. The most common temptation, perhaps, is to keep the skeletons locked away in the cupboard. The result is often an essay in hagiography, lacking credibility, attracting few readers, and doing the company no good at all.

The Craib family of Pietermaritzburg, proprietors of South Africa's last newspaper to stand outside the big corporations, has done well not to fall into this trap. In the newspaper business, credibility is all. The Craibs have acted in the best traditions in commissioning Simon Haw and giving him a free hand to tell the story.

The result is a frank and always readable account. As three of the first five editors of the *Witness* served prison sentences – one was given to bar room brawling – there is no shortage of skeletons. The paper's internal battles and personality clashes, inevitable in a history of 150 years, have not been glossed over.

The dilemma in writing a newspaper history is whether to make it a social history of the times, as reflected in the newspaper, as much as an account of the newspaper's own fortunes. Inevitably it is both and a political history as well. A good newspaper – and the *Witness* is one of South Africa's best – is so deeply involved in the community that its story would make little sense otherwise.

Simon Haw, an educationist, succeeds in writing a reasonably coherent narrative, albeit in a style at times rather more chatty and verbose than a newspaper sub-editor would approve.

The narrative is held together by the course of South African history from the pioneer days in Natal, the Zulu War, the Boer wars, the rebellion, the First and Second World wars, the surge of black nationalist resistance and finally liberation. Haw builds his story around the key people – the editors and proprietors – and the relations between them.

David Buchanan, founder and first editor in 1846, was an upright and straightfor-

# Rich history

have not sourced our rich local traditions, he says.

For Nel, getting newsrooms to be demographically representative is a start towards fixing the problem.

"The key is to get people to tap into the zeitgeist of our society and that goes beyond colour, gender, age and sexual orientation," he says.

While training and affirmative action programmes can assist in this task, Nel argues that people on these programmes also have to be treated well so that they stay.

"Time will tell if media managers are capable of this – or if they're investing lots

**'Journalism has been viewed as a trade for too long, much like your corner tailor who makes suits.'**

of energy and money in the public relations practitioners of the future," he says.

Still, training programmes are a sign of good things because it shows that "the folk at Independent, Times Media Limited and elsewhere are keen to make things better and know that pretty design is not enough."

But industry training programmes are also an indictment of academic institutions, warns Nel.

"When media houses have to move away from their core business maybe we're not training the right people, or offering training in the right format."

"Ideally," he says, "we who are in the business of training should be market driven and so responsive to industry that when they itch, we scratch."

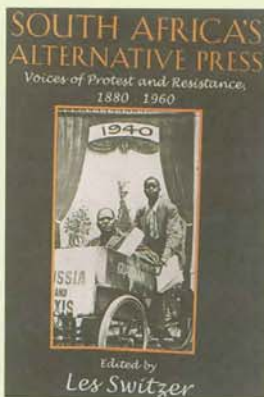
Nel believes his book is a small step towards the development of South African journalism. "There are a lot of people who should add to it. I hope it is a small contribution," he says.

*Writing for the Media in South Africa* by Francois Nel, R125.95. Published by International Thomson.

It is almost 115 years since John Tengo Jabavu founded the paper *Imvo Zabantsundu*, drawing on the financial backing of white Eastern Cape English-speaking settlers. His publication subsequently faced stiff competition from *Izwi Labantu*, set up in 1897 and bankrolled by Cecil Rhodes and supporters. With these opposing white influences, it was not surprising that when the South African war broke out, *Imvo* urged the British to reconcile with the Afrikaners, while *Izwi* slammed the Afrikaner insurgents.

If white interests were critical in both the dawn and the direction of these two papers, they also determined their demise as well. *Izwi* editor Alan Kirkland Soga developed an anti-capitalist tone to the paper, as a result of which his backers fell away and the paper collapsed in 1909. Jabavu, and later his son, ran *Imvo* as a personal political mouthpiece with an ever-falling circulation (just 2000 in the 1920s). The decline culminated eventually in a full-scale sellout to Afrikaner capital in the form of *Perskor*.

In Les Switzer's book, one can also read how talented black journalist Sol Plaatje helped build up the *Koranta ea Becoana*, founded in 1901 by the white editor of the *Mafeking Mail* by, for example, setting up news



exchanges with 61 publications across the world. But when the boss went bankrupt in 1907, the paper staggered on for two years before dying.

The book also tells of the *Bantu World* (predecessor of the *Sowetan*). Founded by a white man, Bertram Paver, in 1932, more than half the initial shareholders were from the African community. But after 14 months the paper was bought up by the *Argus* company. A partial

exception to the pattern of white finance was Natal newspaper *Inkundla ya Bantu*, founded in 1938 by African entrepreneurs Paul Knox Bonga and Phillip Goduka Katamzi, owners of the *Verulam* press. The paper had Govan Mbeki as its effective editor in the early years, and was run by the (then) outspoken Jordan K Ngubane between 1944 to 1951. It succumbed to market pressures after publishing for 13 years.

Today no South African journalist can be oblivious to the issues of black ownership, black audiences, black editors and black reporters. But very few of us know that there exists a rich history to these questions, selections of which are given by Switzer and other contributors to his book.

However, for the reader who wants to sample the language and style of journalism entailed, or chew on meaty details on circulation, readership and finances, Switzer's book is somewhat sparse. One reason is that his concern has been analysis, rather than narrative description.

Certainly, it is of interest (and not only historical interest) that the content of the black press reflected not only the interests of white financiers, but also – and increasingly – those of the urban black middle class. There was the corresponding absence of rural or working class concerns. This was evident not only in *Imvo* and the others, but also in the *Industrial and Commercial Workers Union* paper, the *Workers Herald*, and publications like *Drum* and *Ghandi's Indian Opinion*.

It is of further analytical interest that – as Switzer's content analyses reveal – the gradual construction of a multi-class African nationalism has been reflected in the black press over the past century. The papers became less exclusively middle-class in character as African, Indian and Coloured middle classes were compelled to reach downwards and sideways in search of allies. Switzer himself periodizes the "alternative press" as the mission

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By Guy Berger

ward man, according to his contemporary Saul Solomon. As Haw notes, the *Witness* under Buchanan could be described as a liberal paper, by colonial standards at least. It says something about those standards that Buchanan also advocated shooting "bushmen", if all else failed, and condemned the colony's recruitment of indentured labourers from India "in terms strident with racial animus". As a paternalist Natalian of his time, Buchanan had a regard for the Zulus, though, and he opposed those who would keep them hewers of wood and drawers of water.

P Davis and Co took over the *Witness* in 1862 and thus began a dynasty that endured into the 20th century. Peter Davis junior was at the head of the company for 41 years. A brusque man of sarcastic manner and outwardly rather cynical, Davis' contribution to the *Witness* was immense.

From an editor's point of view, he was a model proprietor. Horace Rose, editor from 1904 to 1925, said that Davis recognised that continuity of policy was the basis of all journalistic influence. Having selected a man as editor and discussed with him the broad policy of the paper, he would allow that man a free hand until his confidence in him waned.

Most of the editors – the outspoken liberal Desmond Young (1926-1928), Barnett Potter (1930-1935), GH Calpin (1936-45) and Mark Prestwich (1953-1956) among them – have been distinctive and powerful personalities.

Calpin fell out with James Craib and was summarily dismissed in 1943. Craib, as managing director, had become the power on the *Witness* board. The editor and MD did not get on, an untenable situation in any newspaper office. Calpin's successor, Robert Johnston found Craib's style intolerable, and concluded that he was constitutionally incapable of getting on with any editor. He soon left.

In 1946 the *Witness* turned 100 and in the following years the Craib family became the second *Witness* dynasty, presiding at the newspaper's 150th anniversary in 1996.

Perhaps the most significant editorial voice in the post-war years was the academic Mark Prestwich who contributed beautifully-crafted leaders throughout, and in 1953 he was persuaded to take the editorial chair for the next three years. The *Witness* became an eloquent and outspoken voice denouncing injustice and defending human rights. Prestwich continued writing leaders until 1961.

Desmond Craib came increasingly to the fore as his father's health failed. He expanded the company's operations and in 1974 appointed Richard Steyn, a barrister with no newspaper experience, as editor of the *Witness*. It was an inspired choice. Steyn's editorship steered the paper through years of economic stringency and unremitting political tension. As Haw notes, in conditions of great difficulty the *Witness* not only survived, but prospered. Steyn's short-lived successor, David Willers, did not do as well.

Steyn's record at the *Witness* attracted the interest of the *Argus* company who recruited him as editor of their flagship, *The Star*. When the international Independent chain bought *Argus*, Steyn soon resigned. This was hardly surprising, considering the difference in corporate culture between a multi-national giant and a family-owned independent.

In a newspaper era of increasing domination by big corporations, the story of the *Witness* is an important one. Simon Haw has told it well.

*Bearing Witness* by Simon Haw is published by *The Natal Witness*.



By Gerald Shaw

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The service has millions of clients demanding correct, cutting-edge, and far-reaching intelligence about the world – daily. Comprehensive and qualified in-depth analysis is presented with graphics, statistics and footage. The intelligence often leads to political implications and sometimes it causes governmental crisis.

"We have managed to do our job using open sources for 200 years. I'm an investigative journalist, and the bureau I talk about is my newspaper. Welcome to the club!"

The reporter continues. He describes how he participated in writing a book that some of the audience remember well. It shocked the intelligence community world-wide when it was published. The book was about a fanatic, rich and well-organised sect with access to weapons of mass destruction. Through their world-wide network they planned to wipe out Earth. The authors describe how advanced their plans were, and how far they had actually come. The authors also describe how little the intelligence community knew about the sect.

It took the international team of journalists four months to complete the "intelligence operation" with a budget of \$150 000. Oh – and the majority of the information was acquired through open sources such as public records.

Agents, police and the military scribble plenty of notes. The reporter has their full attention. Someone asks: what could he do with a million dollars? The journalist answers with a smile: "A lot of damage!"

Code name: Michel Bajuk  
Field operator for Rhodes Journalism Review

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press (1830s – 1880s); protest press (1880s to 1930s); early resistance (1930s – 1960) and the later resistance (1970s – 1980s). The turning point, he credibly argues, is in the 1940s, when exclusive "petty bourgeois politics" fade in a crusade for the rights of all (1997:35).

If Switzer gives us analysis, it would probably require a different

book to delve into the colour, texture and flavour – in short, the "story" of the black press. This is not to belittle the value in his book, which sadly has had very little exposure in South Africa. A sneering review by former Rand Daily Mail editor Benjamin Poggrund did appear in the Mail&Guardian in 1997. Poggrund has his particular axe to grind. But it may be that journalists *per se* are not necessarily the best reviewers of books about journalism. They should, per-

haps, stick to what they do best: ie, researching and writing in an accessible way.

Switzer's book calls out for journalists to do their kind of story-telling about the fascinating history of black journalism in South Africa. Any volunteers out there?

*South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance 1880 – 1960* edited by Les Switzer. Published by Cambridge University Press.

## Targeting the Editors

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"Silence is for the drug lords what water is for the fish," says a visiting Colombian editor. We are going to raise some hell. Maybe we can make them think twice before they try to shoot one of us next," says Rossana Fuentes, chief of the special assignment staff at Reforma in Mexico City.

Contraband from South America crosses the 3 000 km long border of Mexico on its way to the biggest drug market in the world – the US. With Juárez, Tijuana with its population of two million is the largest metropolis in Mexico for drug traffickers.

If you are a serious, critical, investigating journalist you must sooner or later write about the wide-spread corruption. A pair of interfering traffic police costs 20 pesos. The brother of the ex-president costs more than a \$100 million.

If you start digging you will inevitably embark on a collision course with the narcotics business. Still alive? Then you have nine lives, luck, a bullet-proof vest and military protection. Or else you're not too strict about the truth – out of the will to survive – or in for the money. If you're untouchable you're probably already dead.

"Some say I'm crazy. But I have to go on," says Jesús Blancornelas who is healing from the bullet wounds that almost put an end to his ability to walk for ever.

Crazy or not, he is a source of inspiration for a new generation of Mexican journalists who distance themselves from

bribes, self censorship and blind loyalty to the government.

Twenty heavily-armed elite troop soldiers and special force policemen guard Blancornelas' humble middle class villa. The security police and military secret service have confirmed that one of the drug syndicates still has a hit order on the editor.

Blancornelas sold his house to start Zeta in 1980 with his best friend, the columnist Hector "el Gato" Félix Miranda. They wrote in-depth stories about drugs and corruption, issues that the government-controlled press didn't dare write about.

Félix was murdered in his car in April 1988. Thousands of people demonstrated against the attack and against the careless way in which the authorities handled the case. Journalists who criticised the investigation through other media were fired or put under pressure.

Zeta's examination of the murder led to the arrest and imprisonment of two killers. They worked on a race track owned by the son of a powerful politician. The police were never able to clarify any motives for the crime.

Even today Zeta is printed on the American side of the border to make sure it comes out every Friday.

Behind the newly-built 10-foot tall brick wall Blancornelas is planning "Proyecto Tijuana". The idea is that Blancornelas will lead about 20 Mexican and foreign reporters on an intense investigation into the drug mob and corruption. Blancornelas slowly massages one of his large bright red scars. Mexican journalists need to create their own life insurance. "If I don't do it someone else has to take over. It is extremely important to speak and write about the truth in this country. There are many newspapers, but very few are truly independent."

His spine is damaged, but not broken.