

# TRANSFORMATION

## SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

by Anthea Garman

For years I've wanted to write about transformation not the high-sounding concept, the actual on-the-ground reality. Unlike affirmative action, "transformation" has a healthy ring. It sounds wholesome and good for you, it sounds inclusive. But when I was in a newsroom, which was definitely changing even if it was doing so without plan or guide, there was so much turmoil, so much emotion, that even when an official "transformation committee" was put in place as a vehicle to guide change it soon floundered.

Then I was part of an all-white editorial management team. The two highly capable, highly credible black journalists at this level were poached away to better jobs with better opportunities and better salaries. Their going left us lily-white and horribly conscious of not representing our readers or communities. In the meantime the newsroom floor was rapidly changing complexion. Young, feisty black reporters were being hired for just about every job that became available. They were coming with high expectations: they wanted career paths, recognition and upward mobility. Not a management meeting or news conference went by without the subject of race being brought up. But when a transformation forum was finally put in place, after the black reporters pressured the company management, it became clear we were all talking past each other, and had been doing so for years.

## The transformation of the media From what, to what?

by Lynette Steenveld



*I write this article with caution. I write too, as a formerly disenfranchised South African, Marxist, feminist, media theorist. These are some of the positions with which I identify, and which constitute my identity in this debate. This is the place from which I speak. I raise this issue at the outset, because I believe "identity politics" is at the centre of the fraught issue of transformation.*

The discussion around transformation often surfaces in the media as a race debate. Race essentialism is the premise for most of the arguments about the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of particular journalists for the task of communicating to South African audiences.

The basis of this flawed view is that only black (or white) journalists "know" what the "black (or white) experience" is. My argument is that this perspective ignores how structural conditions such as class, gender, sexual orientation, educational background, etc construct the frameworks for "making sense" of any experience.

The term "transformation" begs the question "from what, to what?" It necessarily implies a

particular understanding of the kind of society we live in, and a vision of where we want to go. The ANC government's position is clear: it supports a capitalist state that is non-discriminatory with respect to race, gender, age, sexual orientation etc, in which "affirmative action" is applied as a policy with respect to race and gender, but not to class, sexual orientation, age, etc.

South Africans have been raised on "identity politics": we were divided into "groups", with Berlin-like walls dividing us. Each group was said to have its "own identity or culture" which was deemed inherent, God-given, biological, unchanging and therefore *essential*.

There is another version: here identity is not inherent, not biological, not fixed. According to



The "problem" we all agreed was the white complexion, white culture and white management of the newsroom and the news. But when we began to talk about how we understood it, how we could change it, we started to open up a chasm between the races and between reporters and management that became very difficult to bridge.

People who had slugged it out through the 80s together in the newsroom, found themselves on opposite sides of that chasm. Young white men who had resisted the call-up and risked their lives in the townships to report on security police shenanigans found themselves lumped with the old white reactionaries. Mid-career people (all white) had to revise their expectations: they might not be the ones in the jobs they had always seen waiting there for them. In the meantime the frustration among black reporters was palpable. The company didn't have a plan to change, it was hopping from one foot to the other making ad hoc decisions depending on where the pressure was coming from.

That was two years ago. Since then some major impetuses have become reality in the media world. The SABC has undergone drastic racial and gender change. Independent Newspapers has obviously also adopted a fairly aggressive approach. And on the horizon are the Employment Equity Bill and other legislation, making other bosses nervous about quotas and government intervention.

Despite the numbers (the SABC staff is now exactly 50% black, 50% white) and the confidence (for instance evidenced by Tony O'Reilly who sees things from a very removed position) my sense from talking to people all over the country is that transformation is a very complex process with some very painful effects.

So I've come back to writing about it. Partly because writing for a writer is a way of making sense of things. Partly because I feel that if some things are talked about openly and honestly it will help clarify them. I'm incensed at the style of management that makes social engineering decisions at high level and fails firstly to consult and then secondly to communicate the plan or purpose to those on the receiving end. While a lot of the drastic change that is happening looks very impressive it has this double-edge. The numbers look great. The embittered and angry people as a result may be as numerous.

Review, because it's read by a majority of South African journalists in print, radio and TV newsrooms, can be a place to talk about these issues. With the help of two postgraduate journalism students, Lineke Moen and Françoise Gallet, I decided to try and get on record people's personal experiences of how they understand and see transformation.

We made the assumption that at this stage of our history in South Africa, and with so many obvious appointments of black people in positions of power, it would be easier to talk honestly about what's happening. Well, we don't think so.

In the space of a month Moen and Gallet phoned, faxed and emailed 24 journalists across the media spectrum from broadcasting to print media. Journalists were contacted from Times Media Limited, Independent Newspapers, Mail & Guardian, Natal Witness, the SABC and the freelance sector. The journalists interviewed ranged from reporters through lower management to editors. There was also a cross section of male, female and the races.

We found it really difficult to get people to stop mouthing their company's policies and to say: "This is what is happening to me". The reasons ranged from fear at being fired for being out of line through to anxiety that new working relationships would be jeopardised.

Some of the interviewees were happy to be named while some felt it would complicate

**It's a tightrope because you're trying to change but still meet deadlines**

the delicate situations they are in. What we want to see is much more debate on how transformation is brought about, what form it will take, and where it will take us, with maximum communication and minimum alienation between races in our newsrooms.

## Management and communication

One editorial manager told us about his company's new hiring policies. He'd received very specific instructions: no more whites; no more coloureds; no more Indians; only blacks. And if he was going to employ women they would have to be blacks too. We asked him how he felt about his own future in the company and got a mixed and very emotional response. I asked him to write something for Review. He was terribly nervous: "At least I'll receive a written warning, at worst I'll be fired."

We were disbelieving. But, Sam Sole, working at the Sunday Tribune, told us: "The problem lies with the lack of transparency and fairness of management. There is uncertainty about how affirmative action is applied and to what extent people are automatically disqualified in terms of their skin colour and their sex. The truth is that policies are quite complicated, are often not well articulated and some of the greys have not been explored, ie how are disadvantages judged, targets met. This translates into insecurity and demotivation."

"The position taken by Independent Newspapers at a national level is that of Africanisation. There are a number of perceptions as to where they are going but we don't know if they have articulated or even thought through what their policy is on the floor. This is regarded with a degree of cynicism on the floor, which is not entirely unjustified."

"There is also a lack of clarity. Old issues and benchmarks may not be wrong but the issues haven't been clearly debated. A proper framework hasn't been laid. As a result the debate doesn't work properly. Transformation is really a meaningless concept unless you provide a framework for debate."

Another senior journalist at Independent Newspapers confirmed Sole's feeling: "There seems to be little doubt that the senior management of Independent Newspapers is quite serious about transformation. There is less certainty, however, among existing black and white staff about the company's real motive for such change. A popular view is that the main reason the company is tackling employment equity with such urgency is the need to protect foreign investment."

Lizeka Mda from the Mail & Guardian said: "The problem is that the process is driven from top down. The staff does not seem to be involved. And as far as affirmative action is concerned, many want to poach people who have been trained by others."

"None of them develop their own people so they can move them up. Especially now that there are no training programmes on the job. Of course the newspaper takes in a couple of students each year, but that is not really developing people who are already there."

Chris Vick, Independent Newspapers training manager, said: "You have to recognise that it is as much about style as about content in other words, it is about how things are done, not just what is done."

and "black" have been constructed in South Africa, what we need, in Giroux's words, is "to create a new political vocabulary and project for rethinking a politics of cultural difference predicated on broader conceptions of race and identity". This task cannot be overstated. If we fail, it seems to me that we either descend into a politics of race (racist) essentialism, or some variant of seeing whites as the victims of racial inequality.

Stuart Hall and David Held usefully link this understanding of identity politics to a broader politics of citizenship. Their argument is that the significance of the struggles over relations of power, identity and culture relate to the wider struggle over questions of membership, community and social responsibility. In South Africa we are faced with the problem

of constituting a new national identity. Who belongs? How do we belong? What are our rights and obligations? How historically do individuals see their past racial/gender/class constructions and relations to various communities? and how does this impinge on their membership of the "nation"; with what rights and responsibilities?

The media play a crucial role because, as Hall notes, they "construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be".

The problem with race-essentialism is not only that it ignores how class, gender, sexual orientation, educational background, etc construct frameworks for making sense of experience, but it also presumes that there is a singular "black" or "white" experience which can be "objectively" represented.

However, an underlying concern within this discourse seems to be the desire for "other voices", other perspectives, other discourses, and other languages. The questions then

**No one asked the colour of the alternative press of the '70s and '80s**

media theorist Stuart Hall, it is being continually formed and transformed in relation to the way we are addressed by the different social, political or cultural systems which we inhabit. We may be subject to contradictory, shifting identities: woman first? working class? lesbian? free marketer? Muslim? While each of these categories could be said to represent groups of people, a single person could have a changing sense of self which crosses them all: not all women are woman-identified women; not all lesbians have the same class identity, or religious affiliations.

Hall argues in relation to race, that we need to acknowledge the "end of the essential black subject". The identity "black", cannot possibly describe the array of political, social or cultural positions that could be taken up by

**'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category**

someone whose skin colour is black. Black feminist, gay, middle class, homeless, unemployed persons may all share a similar skin colour, but the politics these persons identify with, or articulate may be different from each other - and may have more in common with particular persons whose skin colour is white. His argument is that "'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category" - as is "white". According to Henri Giroux, another media theorist, "the relationship between identity and being black is no longer fixed, static or secure".

What this suggests is that race in and of itself is not a given; it is not a thing that we can physically take hold of. Rather, what we understand "it" to be, depends on the way in which "it" is constructed and "made to mean" through a multiplicity of discourses which have changed, and are changing in different places, at different historical moments.

Given this understanding, and given the complex ways in which the categories "white"



## Setting people up for failure

One new female manager said: "Everything is exacerbated because I am the visible representative of change." It's a very telling statement. She holds a position a woman has never held before, her company has put her in the vanguard of change as the embodiment of something new and when the flak comes it hits her first.

A newseditor said: "Recently we had two vacancies in our operation. We received eight applicants, two of them senior white journalists who met all the professional criteria required for the jobs (that is, years of experience and qualifications). With one exception, all the others were very junior and none of them, if we adhered strictly to the professional requirements, would have got the position.

We hired two black applicants because they showed enormous promise. They were self-motivated, talented and had a good sense of what was required of them. Clearly, they will do well and, if nothing else, will grow into their new jobs. Nevertheless, our operation like most South African newsrooms is small and there is a great deal of pressure on everybody to perform. Our only concern is that we might be setting people up to fail by promoting them too rapidly into positions that they are not able to handle."

**If you scratch deeper, you hear encouraging noises from women & blacks**

## White anxiety black frustration

A white editor of a regional paper said: "While my immediate environment is relatively secure, the same cannot be said for an increasingly alienating industry that is transmitting some ominous sentiments. Racism is simmering and on the rise, comments about 'people who are not wanted must look elsewhere' are casually uttered within earshot of those they are aimed at, inexperienced staff are shuffled into positions they are not qualified for and experienced journalists, writers and subeditors are looking to get out.

"No newspaper, irrespective of its ownership is insulated from the forces of transformation. But, transformation is a strange being capable of endless transmutation for a host of reasons including expediency, political correctness and nationalistic affirmation."

Lerato Kojooana, editor of the SABC's internal magazine, said: "The introduction of an affirmative action policy in 1994 had predictable results. White staff members suddenly saw no future for themselves in the corporation. Every post which was advertised or became vacant, they assumed, would automatically be filled by an incompetent black person just to make up the numbers. White people did not see themselves as people with a role to play. They sulked and resolved to give no co-operation to the new appointees."

Mda says: "There are no black subeditors on this paper, and I believe that is the case with other newspapers as well. Why is that? Subediting seems to be the reserve of white women. There are no black people in management either, and the advertising executives are always white."

Kojooana: "The many fresh starts of the corporation were all too evident. Loss of revenue, loss of skills, loss of audiences. People didn't want to commit themselves to anything – not their jobs, not participation in organisational processes. People erected barriers around themselves. Everybody was caught in the standstill – unable to move forward, a very frustrating position for those with ambitions to further their careers despite transformation."

## Now add gender...

Zubeida Jaffer, who co-ordinates a parliamentary team working for 13 Independent newspapers, said: "Coming into a male-dominated arrangement, and essentially white, I tried not to see it in these terms. I had to invest a lot of time and energy into interpersonal relationships with people coming from completely different world views.

"Their attitude is: 'Who are you?' I had to overcome that. At first I thought it was only me, until I spoke to another new manager. She is also subjected to these attitudes. You don't just have to deal with your job; you have to deal with all these issues. Sometimes I think that it is a gender issue, because when you speak to other women there is always tension in a change situation."

Another woman, anonymous, said: "Because I was one of only two women on an executive I was privy to a lot more information, expertise and key decision-making than the majority of my women counterparts. It was at times lonely and difficult working with some men who tolerated my presence, and who thought my input was marginal. They were never openly hostile, only excluding. The managing director was enormously encouraging and actively promoted my involvement, saying that I brought a unique perspective to certain matters.

"I began to make my approach to business more 'masculine'. That is, I spoke in a point-form manner, never prefaced a proposal by 'I think or I feel' which had them rolling their eyes. I kept my points brief, numbered and devoid of feminine frills.

"I was never sure whether this made them more open to my ideas or suspicious that I was behaving out of gender!

"A corporate environment can be enormously hostile to an ambitious and entrepreneurial woman. If, God help you, you are considered attractive or smart, it is even worse. If you are assertive, you are excluded. If you are a push-over, you lose out horribly."

## A view from above

Vick said: "In our situation, the owners and shareholders obviously have the last word in how change happens, where it happens and why it happens. Sure, there's a moral imperative and a legal imperative (the Employment Equity Bill, the Labour Relations Act, etc) which compel business to change. But there has to be a financial imperative too – we have to show that it makes good business sense to transform.

should be: "Where could these come from? What conditions would enable these voices? What conditions constrain diversity of perspective?"

It is instructive that an "alternative press" emerged in South Africa at a time of increased government repression between the mid-70s and mid-80s. No one asked the colour of this voice. It took various forms: community newspapers; trade union newspapers and newsletters; feminist journals; magazines for children; newsletters and papers from various non-governmental organisations and political organisations. In other words, it did not have a unitary identity.

What was significant was that these media were non-commercial. They were not dependent on advertising for their economic survival. They were either funded by agencies that shared their political agenda or, where there was advertising, it came from those who supported the politics of the publication. Another aspect of these alternative publications was that some of them

experimented with organisational structure. It may be instructive to have another look at these publications, to see how they addressed the current concerns about the representation of various voices.

Nelson Mandela's critique of the media is based on a race essentialism marked by the rather disturbing phrase "our own people" (see below). As Hall has noted, race always appears as part of a historically contingent discourse, in which other issues are harnessed to the web of meaning about race that is being constructed. Mandela's discourse begs the question "who are our own people?" and relates directly to the point concerning the relationship between identity politics and citizenship.

Mandela makes the following points:

- The mass media are opposed to the ANC;

**Woman first?  
working class?  
lesbian?  
capitalist?  
Muslim?**

- they campaign against both real change and real agents of change led by the ANC;
- a history of repressive rule has suppressed a mass media genuinely representative of the voice of the majority;
- the majority of South Africans have no choice but to rely on information and communication from media representing the privileged minority;
- to protect their privileged position the media oppose transformation;
- the media use the democratic order (brought about by the sacrifices of our own people) to protect the legacy of racism;
- the legacy of racism in the media is graphically shown in ownership, editorial control, value systems, and advertiser influence;
- because the media don't give timely access to reliable information, citizens are not empowered to participate meaningfully in the process of governance, thereby limiting the frontiers of democracy.

While Mandela, correctly in my view, points to the ideological role of the media in maintaining the status quo, he wrongly attributes this to white ownership. The critique he makes of the media is one that has been made of most commercial media in liberal democratic, capitalist societies. The commercial media are capitalist enterprises, and this conditions how they operate; who their audiences "have to be", and whose interests they serve. As journalist Joe Thlooe has noted, the colour of capitalist involvement in the media has made very little difference to the diversity of voices or perspectives on offer: precisely because colour is not the all-determining factor.

The main critique of the media concerns the political and cultural impact of their "white" ownership. There are two issues here: whiteness and ownership.

**We need to create a new political vocabulary**



"As long as the owners and shareholders are supportive of the broad thrust of transformation, there is consistent pressure to change. But if the owners start to feel concerned about the impact of change on their bottom line, transformation may be threatened or slowed down. Managers tend to see the bottom line and transformation as two separate processes. They may also fail to see the benefits of managing people better. In addition, those threatened by change tend to make the most noise. The objectors out-shout those who are encouraged by change, so we only hear the negative.

**The corporate environment can be enormously hostile to an ambitious woman**

"We've heard grumbings from white men who feel their jobs are threatened. They predict a drop in standards or are unable to see the benefit of reaching new readers – young people, women and black people. But if you scratch deeper into our organisation, you hear encouraging noises from women, who currently feel marginalised but seem to believe that there are greater opportunities now for advancement. We hear encouraging sounds, too, from black people who feel the value systems and organisational culture might change, and that they may one day work in a company which provides equal opportunities for all. (We do not hear encouraging sounds from the disabled, but that is probably because we only employ a handful of disabled people. Or it could be that disabled people often can't get into our buildings to make their views heard.)

"On a personal level: transformation is a painful process. I'm really encouraged by how many people are committed to this process. The unions, too, are demonstrating a very real commitment to bringing about a better work place with better newspapers. It is clear that there remains a body of people out there who will dislike what you do and who are determined that you will fail, and will do all in their power to protect their own system."

## When the reporters try to drive...

Malcolm Ray, now working at the Labour Bulletin, talks of his experience at a newspaper when the black reporters lobbied management for a transformation forum: "One fairly senior white reporter brazenly remarked: 'You want to get rid of the whites? Take the bloody newspaper to the townships! I don't care.' A subeditor commented that the workshop did not concern her because she 'had nothing to gain from it'.

"Meetings rapidly degenerated into grievance forums. Individuals felt uncomfortable with the (misleading) notion that long-awaited promotions and career paths would be prejudiced by their participation in the transformation process.

"Despite rigorous discussion and a remarkable degree of consensus by management, the initiative did not progress beyond the first workshop. Reporters, by nature, are not amenable to organisation. A culture of upward class mobility shatters nascent unity. Race and racism are deeply entrenched phenomena in post-apartheid South Africa. Moral diatribes about transformation, deracialisation and restructuring cannot escape the reality that race is at the core of radical change. The absence of a legislative framework puts the onus on the goodwill of management and staff to restructure the workplace."

The former can be analysed in terms of theories about identity politics; the latter in terms of economics systems, in this case, capitalism. The analysis in itself begs the question of the relative merits of, and relationship between, a politics based on colour, and one based on class.

My critique of this race essentialist view of the media is that it attributes the cause of the problem to the colour identity of the media, rather than to their economic foundation. My argument is therefore that "the problem with the media" is not the "whiteness" of their ownership, but the fact that they are capitalist enterprises. My contention would further be that it is illogical to castigate the media for being capitalist enterprises when the national economy operates on this basis.

This brings us back to the issue of transformation and the nature of the "new" South African state. In my view, it begs

serious reconsideration of what is socially and politically possible, given the economic foundations of the state.

*The full text and references are available from Lynette Steeveld at Rhodes University Department of Journalism and Media Studies, phone (046) 6038338 or email steenveld@thoth.ru.ac.za*

## Those hoary old standards

Jaffer: "There are two different experiences that if brought together could be rich, but are up against self-centred attitudes that say: 'everything that is new, different or other is lowering the standards'. The race issue is tough; you try for equality and team spirit, but sometimes people – the old order – feel that change is not better. It is a tightrope because you are trying to change but still meet deadlines and produce a newspaper."

An editor of a community newspaper told us: "Instituting changes wasn't simple. Much lobbying and motivating were needed to persuade and reassure certain staff members who expressed concern over the new (black) appointees. As it transpired, their progress surpassed all expectations and their pioneering courage have done much to allay the detractors' fears."

Kojoana talking about the SABC: "The challenge for the corporation was to motivate staff enough to carry on their duties and to get them to buy into the new policies which were necessary."

## Something's happening!

Masheila Sewpaul, radio newseditor in Durban: "I joined the SABC in January 1992 as a radio news journalist. For a long while I didn't feel comfortable in this environment. The radio newsroom was too Afrikaans, too bureaucratic.

"But as the years progressed so did the SABC and I started to feel more comfortable and started to see the SABC as my home. Maybe it was also because I became more confident in my job. And the newsroom started changing. The older staff (whites and Afrikaners) retired or took packages. A new breed of people started coming in, younger people of all colours.

"The approach also changed with people having younger, fresher ideas. The news management team (of which I am part) also become more representative. Younger people can adjust more easily to change and this has been the case. However, there have been problems with other staff members who cannot accept that non-whites do occupy management positions.

"Retrenchment and staff changes also took place at the SABC after the McKinsey Commission. This really put people in a dark hole. People were not sure whether they were going to lose their jobs, which departments were shutting down. But that is over now and people are crawling out of the hole again.

"Sometimes people think that people of colour are incompetent but the realisation is beginning to dawn that this is not the case and work has to be done. There is a lot of cultural diversity at the SABC and one of the skills people have to learn is how to respect other people's cultures and beliefs."

Jaffer: "I am excited because I do feel that change is happening. We are able to co-ordinate work together as a team far more than before. Working as a collective and not just as individual reporters is standard practice abroad. I feel far more at ease now we can pay more attention to quality, systems and policy. I've seen a lot of progress."

Kojoana: "On the positive side, blacks and whites, and even the same race groups from different political kraals, have been forced to work for a common vision. This meant putting differences aside and tackling the task of institutional survival as a unit."

## UPDATE

### Rhodes & Independent Newspapers create Chair of Transformation

Rhodes University is establishing a Chair of Media Transformation to be based at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies.

The chair has been underwritten for three years by Independent Newspapers. CEO Ivan Fallon said transformation was the highest priority for the media in South Africa, and Independent Newspapers was pleased to be able to make a contribution to benefit the entire industry, and therefore the country.

Prof Guy Berger, head of department of Rhodes journalism, said: "The Chair will research the successes and problems in transforming journalism and journalism training in line with our changing society."

A board representing a range of media companies will act as reference for the Chair. Its members include Aggrey Klaaste (Sowetan), Fana Titi (Kagiso Media), Shaun Johnson (Independent), Irene Charnley (TML/Johnnic), Ntombi Langa-Royds (SABC), Nomazizi Mtshothisa (Midi), Peter Matlare (Primedia), Zubeida

Jaffer (Independent), Pearl Mashabela (Penta), Anthony Sampson (writer) and Jabu Sibisi (M-Wet)

Fallon said that in the discussions preceding the sponsorship the company had insisted that the company exercise no control over the Chair. "Transformation is bigger than inter-company rivalry," he said.

The challenge to achieve properly representative and relevant media companies, producing journalism of the highest quality, is a national priority.

The aim of the Chair is to make available research, skills and human resource development to the industry. "By working closely together, the media industry and the academic world have a great deal to contribute to tackling the problems that still lie ahead."

The position is expected to be operational by August. The successful candidate will initiate high-profile research and publishing and training programmes targeted at journalism teachers, entry level journalists and mid-career professionals.