



Chris Whitfield combats coded language in his newsroom.

Chris Whitfield is acting Editor of the Cape Argus and Editor of the Weekend Argus.

As recently as the 1980s, race was openly entertained in mainstream South African newspapers. The colour of criminals and their victims, the fact that an event had taken place in a 'black township', the race of accident victims, were all recorded as a matter of course.

Stories were frequently weighted according to the race of the central characters: a 'white' newspaper would, for example, give far more prominence to an accident in which two white people died than one in which several more of another race had been killed.

Such overt and gratuitous reference to race faded in the years that followed. But did its overtones?

Many newspapers have worked extremely hard to rid themselves of the racism that lay at the root of such practices. Some have codes of conduct with specific reference to race and its coverage. Some editors' contracts are explicit on the issue and require a commitment specifically to further racial co-operation and harmony.

The Press Ombudsman is unequivocal, and almost all newspapers have developed informal traditions and practices designed to eliminate prejudice (an example would be an instruction from the editor to stop publishing stories along the lines of: 'For the first time, a black man/woman has been appointed as ...').

That said, it would be disingenuous to suggest that these guidelines and practices have removed all suggestion of racist content or decision-making from newspapers (or, for that matter, that blatantly offensive material does not get into newspapers through error, incompetence, misunderstanding or even malice).

The most problematic areas for our newspa-

## word wounds

pers have probably been those of stereotyping and the use of a none-too-subtle 'code' to signify race.

An example: four young whites who break a shop window could be described as a 'group of teenagers', whereas a similar group of blacks would be 'a gang of youths'. White suburbanites may be referred to as 'ratepayers', blacks as 'township dwellers'.

In Cape Town, the distinction is often made between 'residents' (whom you might find in Fish Hoek) and 'the community' (on the Cape Flats). And an old word that has taken on new shading: 'development'. This is sometimes used to indicate the race of a member of a sports team, and is quite often dropped into copy when the reporter is being unnecessarily coy about race.

Occasionally, there has been less effort applied towards humanising black people in copy. Some reporters, for example, tend to be more descriptive in feature writing about whites - describing their hair, their features, their mannerisms - than about people of other races.

Another area of our reporting which concerns us has been the resilience of stereotyping. The Pagad phenomenon, for example, took us largely unawares. We found we were not sufficiently informed about what was happening in areas of the city where Pagad was strong in order to analyse or even report on the phenomenon.

What happened was that our reportage tended to rely on stereotypes rather than on the facts or the real dynamics of what was obviously a complex situation. We found ourselves, to the ire of many, equating Pagad with the Muslim community and vice versa.

We believe that eliminating such tendencies from news copy requires a two-pronged process: the people responsible for 'processing' copy (department heads and sub-editors) have to be alive to them; and reporters have to be educated about the language our newspaper would prefer them to use.

Part of the process is best achieved through discussion. About 10 months ago the Cape Argus news editor instituted a regular Friday meeting at which such issues can be debated.

The meeting is intended as a forum for discussion on issues affecting the paper, and is generally attended by the editor or a member of the editorial management. Reporters are encouraged to question decisions on content and to wrestle with ethical, legal and other practical issues relating to their craft.

We have found the informality of the meetings conducive to unpicking the codes and assumptions inherent in the language we use, and to the decisions we make about our newspaper. On occasion, race-related issues have been vigorously aired.

We are also looking at training as an area in which these issues can be effectively addressed. In the long term, though, we hope that by making our newsroom more representative, by allowing open and frank communication and by relentlessly advocating a culture of reporting excellence, these weaknesses can be overcome.

# Media Diversity

## Who cares!



### Who needs it?

As part of a democratic country we as South Africans need media diversity.

### Why?

- Access to different media plays a critical role in underpinning the democratic processes.
- Access to information allows the public to make informed decisions.
- Encourages robust discussion and debate.

### How can this be achieved?

By creating an enabling environment to assist in the sustainable development of different media organisations.

### What is happening?

Print Media SA established a Print Development Unit (PDU) in February 2000 to facilitate the growth of emerging print media enterprises to full viability.

### The objectives of the PDU are to:

- Foster media diversity in South Africa by encouraging the development of

small print media enterprises;

- Establish support mechanisms in the areas of media management, funding, training, advertising, printing and distribution;
- Ensure that there are newspapers and magazines available across the country.

### The PDU strategy:

To establish a print fund which will provide support to:

- **Development programme:** To provide in-depth assistance to the individual print enterprises participating in the programme.
- **Training programme:** To develop and implement a training programme for small print media focusing on identified needs.
- To establish partnerships with organisations in print media and small business development to assist the PDU in facilitating the sustainable development of small print media.



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