

Rising through the ranks requires an editorial slant and orientation informed by racist

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NOT LONG AGO I was at the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg, enjoying drinks with a few colleagues after finishing a four-day course on writing about race. I was standing at a table laden with peanuts, chips, soft-drinks and beer talking with a senior black journalist I have known for some years. This brother – let’s call him ‘Themba’ – had risen in the ranks of a once whites-only newspaper and the future looked bright for him. I was in a provocative mood and was looking for his take on what determines success for black journalists in South Africa’s still largely white-controlled media.

A bit later, a CNN Journalist of the Year winner from Lagos asked what I planned to do now that I had finished the course. He probably did not expect to hear anything less than an ambitious project of leading newsrooms on how to deal with downplayed racism.

I told him with a kind of exhausted sincerity: “Man, I would be mad to think that the moguls are ready to give a black man who is not white inside a chance to do his thing.

“I will go back to my newspaper and do what I have always done: report from a black perspective in a manner that is sensitive to the negative portrayal of the black image in the media.”

He may have thought that I was joking, what with my expensive-looking casual suit and my posh car parked outside. But I was dead serious. The prerequisite for success for a black journalist is that he must be what Aggrey Klaaste calls a ‘house-nigger’, and have joined the white boys’ club with its black-image bashing and undermining of black institutions.

I have to say that Themba actually influenced my answer to the Nigerian. Earlier on Themba had admitted that when you are a black senior journalist in a white-controlled institution, especially a newspaper, you have to do as you are told by your bosses. With much patience, hard work, discipline and focus, he had moved through a succession of beats and ranks until he had become one of the editorial executives.

Of course, it is not a crime for one to follow the rules and play the game if one wants to get ahead in any corporate environment. But in Themba’s case, there was a troubling requirement that instilled a sense of guilt about his achievement.

“The higher you rise as a black journalist in the white-controlled media, the greater the expectation that you help perpetuate racial stereotypes and confirm their prejudices towards black people,” Themba said.

“For a black journalist to reach the top, you have to sell out in the sense that whites expect you to turn your back on your own people, including your fellow blacks who look up to you for leadership and direction. In fact, things are so bad that a senior black journalist or editor must be a black racist, doing exactly the same things that white colleagues do to black people.”

It would have been far easier for Themba to shut up and pretend that it was all hunky-dory. But I suppose he had simply decided to spill the beans and clear his conscience.

I decided then that he was that rare man in journalism – willing to talk about how circumstances force black journalists and editors to betray their own people, the majority of consumers of their papers.

I believe there is an urgent need to examine the psychic impact of white racism and supremacy on black journalists. It is an indictment of black journalism that very few have the guts to integrate the ideal of ‘black is beautiful’, for instance, in the agenda of their publications. Instead, rising

through the ranks requires an editorial slant and orientation that is informed by racist standards based on a system whose criteria devalues everything that is black. There are far too few men – or women – in Themba’s position who call into question the white measure of intelligence, or challenge journalists reporting as though they are writing for people in London.

In the current status quo, there exists a caste system which suggests that the more white your outlook, social mannerisms and intellectual orientation, then the greater the value you are presumed to add to a media institution, especially a white one. Even in this age of a supposed ‘African Renaissance’, a black journalist who adopts a pro-black stance is ridiculed for being “angry, frustrated and holding onto outdated philosophies”, condemned for offering nothing new in his thinking except to complain about imaginary racism.

What is surprising is the willingness of black journalists and editors to promote white supremacy, even among themselves. They do this by constructing a hierarchy of house-niggers obsessed with whiteness. And many are in denial about it. It is this pretence at ignorance that has made it easy for them not to be held accountable.

There is almost no black journalist or editor today who lives up to the example of the late Steve Biko, who sought to intervene and alter the racist stereotypes that insisted that blacks – including those in the media – can only progress if they think, behave and exhibit the same mannerisms and attitudes as whites. In fact, Biko’s brutal murder was immediately followed by the dismantling of black self-confidence and dignity among black media professionals. This naked neo-colonisation has gone unnoticed and undiscussed, largely because it has created major psychological shifts in the consciousness of black journalists, especially those who desire success and achievement in white terms.

In fact, to be black and proud of it is to invite professional handicap. If you project white views, on the other hand, you are at an advantage; everyone recognises your “mature and intelligent” point of view. To some extent, the danger of buying into whiteness has been obscured by the assumption that there is nothing ‘white’ about being successful or making it in white-controlled media.

Depoliticised and apathetic black journalists and editors have rationalised their lack of intuitive contact with the problems of the black majority by convincing themselves that they do not need to live in the townships, for instance, to report passionately about the problems of black people.

Some of us have vivid recollections of non-black colleagues who insisted on saying that Black Consciousness exponents in newsrooms are “obsessed with racism”. This charge, of course, is specifically directed at those journalists for whom racism is a worthy issue; its intention is to undermine what they have to say and call their integrity into question.

There is an urgent need for black journalists and editors themselves to challenge this sensibility, especially among themselves. When Biko embarked on *I Write What I Like*, he sought to do the same.

SANDILE MEMELA is Assistant Editor (Features) for *City Press* in Johannesburg. Memela was voted best arts journalist of the year in 1999 by the President’s Arts and Culture Trust.

‘white boys’ club’

‘house-nigger’

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# Rising Through the Ranks

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