



Passing on the baton

A big challenge for the media is to attract younger audiences; but how do the youngsters in the profession feel about the newsrooms they are working in?
Nontyatyambo Petros, asked four of them for their views.

After a decade of press freedom, the state of South Africa's media is still an intense debate which rouses conflicting emotions equally among consumers of media and journalists. In recent times though, the debates are no longer about banning orders, killings or gag-gings. They have been about recent violations, by senior journalists, of what are perceived as the sacrosanct rules of the profession about the so-called juniorisation of newsrooms across print, radio and television; and about ownership patterns.

The media are grappling with declining standards and accusing fingers are often pointed at young journalists. However, a counter argument has been that declining standards are a direct result of the relentless pursuit of profits for shareholders and the move to sensational coverage.

The recycling of senior journalists, particularly black editors, is also a point of discussion. The feeling among black journalists is that there is a lack of

training and support structures for them. Some have often said that they have to work twice as hard as their white counterparts to get a modicum of respect within the newsroom.

A big challenge facing newspapers in particular is the age of their readers. Many are old and, let's face it, will soon cease to be a viable market. And, in this day of intensely diversified news sources, the battle to attract and keep a younger generation of readers promises to be gruelling. What many editors have not come to realise is that the old generation of journalists does not understand what young people want; and to get into that market, young people need to be given platforms in newsrooms. Despite all the problems and challenges, young people have clearly not lost faith in the profession. The journalism schools at Rhodes University and Wits University are still over-subscribed by young and eager students raring to go. The challenge is how to train them and how to get older journalists to pass on the



“**Young people need to be given platforms in newsrooms. The challenge is how to train them and how to get older journalists to pass on the baton without feeling insecure about their own jobs.**”

“Having young journalists guided by those who are in their 40s and 50s, and have been through the mill.”

Le Roux might have a point, but the newsrooms of *Sunday Times*, *Mail&Guardian*, *ThisDay* and *Sowetan* are being run by people who are not in their 40s and 50s. Editorially, these publications have done remarkably well to increase the level of journalistic standards.

Vukani Mde, a political journalist at *ThisDay*, has a somewhat different take on the matter, which he first of all describes as “an interesting problem”. He seems a touch sceptical of conclusions that younger journalists equal a drop in standards. “I have always listened to people who are concerned with juniorisation in newsrooms. I have always felt that the issue is viewed from the wrong angle,” he says.

For him the issue is not so much about young and inexperienced journalists flooding newsrooms, but more about “older journalists not staying”. He says, part of the reason why older journalists have left newsrooms has to do with the crisis journalism found itself in under apartheid.

“Under apartheid, the media were split into two camps; one in the pocket of government and the other opposing government. It could be that many of the people, who have since left the profession, were fatigued because of what they went through,” he says. Mde notes that in many media establishments these days, senior journalists are those who have been around for five years, something which until recently would have been unheard of. He says: “This has a positive vibe, but also a sense of naivety.”

Nasreen Seria, an economics editor at *Business Day*, thinks the large numbers of young journalists is “not a bad thing”. Her explanation is that many senior black journalists were promoted to managerial positions because of the drive to reform the media industry; a move however, which took them out of writing roles. Seria has adopted a mercenary view on the departure of senior journalists from newsrooms. She believes that, although their editorial skills may have been lost, the vacancies they left have enabled younger journalists to move quickly up the ranks in the profession. “Ten years ago this would not have been possible; there would be a lot more barriers.”

Interestingly, the flipside of those voices criticising young journalists, is illustrated by the case of a journalist who works for an Eastern Cape-based SABC radio station. This journalist, who did not want to be named, admits quite candidly that she does not have all the necessary skills required for her job as a journalist and newsreader.

She explains that the older journalists in her newsroom have themselves not had any formal journalism education either, and are often resistant to change and new methods of operation. “Most of the journalists, I work with, are over 40 and have no interest in breaking stories. Their main concern is filing three stories a day, but the quality and originality of those stories are not something they prioritise,” she says.

Press release-driven journalism, the source of worry for any self-respecting editor, seems to have been firmly entrenched in the operation of this station. “They don’t bother to scratch beneath the surface, and when we young journalists go beyond press releases, we are seen as wanting to outshine our older colleagues.”

Her case shows that the profession often creates pitfalls for young journalists by not giving them training opportunities.

“Once you start working as a journalist, everyone expects you to know the tricks of the trade, how to interview people, dealing with difficult sources, yet no training is provided,” she points out. She says expectations are even higher when one comes from a university environment.

“When you are young, sources try to exploit you; others resent your mere presence as a journalist. But we are not taught how to handle these situations.” In her experience, staff have been sent on courses to teach them writing skills and accuracy. “The editors focus on accuracy but little emphasis is placed on producing balanced and objective stories.”

This, in her opinion, has a negative effect on a profession which is battling to cure its historical “pale and male” syndrome.

Mde says racial integration remains a challenge in many newsrooms. “I would be surprised if it was anything else. Even in a new medium like *ThisDay* it is difficult. The politics of our history can’t be avoided,” he says.

According to the East Cape radio reporter, racial harmony at her newsroom is still a long way off. “There are difficulties in accepting and working with each other. There is still a ‘them and us’ attitude.” She says often it feels that striking up conversation with a white colleague is interpreted by her other black colleagues as tantamount to selling out.

Le Roux points out that there is little integration within *Beeld*, but she attributes this to the fact that the newspaper is published in Afrikaans, making it less attractive to black journalists. Interestingly, she notes, most of its correspondents outside the newsroom are black.

Seria feels that journalism is a microcosm of society. “It is not unusually racist or sexist. The industry cannot be divorced from the broader society. The reality is that we live in a patriarchal society which is struggling with racism.”

Mde feels that as a black man he brings into his work a particular way of viewing the world. “One’s identity affects how you approach your profession, how you view the world. The challenge is to recognise one’s bias and have the humility to ask other people how they see the same thing you are viewing,” he says.

The radio journalist agrees that her female identity sometimes interferes with her work. If for example she is asked to cover a story on violence against a woman, she automatically takes the side of the woman. “I tend to put myself in the woman’s shoes, and as a result this sometimes clouds my judgement,” she explains.

Le Roux says there is an unwritten rule which results in men often being given better stories. Although she does not say this directly, one gets the sense that she feels that men generally progress faster than their women counterparts within newsrooms. “There is a preference for male journalists, and their opinion is valued as better. And that is irritating,” Le Roux adds.

All the journalists feel that English will remain the language of choice in media for the foreseeable future. “The entrenchment of English took centuries, even the National Party could not overthrow the dominance of the language. We are increasingly becoming an English-speaking country with other languages,” says Mde.

“I don’t think there’s a demand for publications published in other languages,” says Le Roux.

Adding her voice, the radio reporter says that for as long as black people feel that English is a superior language, African languages won’t get equal treatment in the media.

baton without feeling insecure about their own jobs.

I spoke to four journalists about their views on the alleged juniorisation of the newsroom, and about racial interaction. I also asked them how their identities influenced their journalism and the dominance of English in the media.

Mathabo le Roux is a confident young journalist working for *Sake Beeld*, the business supplement of *Beeld* newspaper. One almost expects her to feverishly leap to the defence of her peers in the face of harsh criticism about their inexperience, and that being the cause of declining journalistic standards. On the contrary, she strongly feels that the influx of young journalists compromises editorial quality. “The problem with newsrooms is that there’s no balance between young and older journalists,” Le Roux says.

In her two years working at *Beeld*, and previously at News24, she talks about witnessing “a proliferation of young journalists, who don’t read up on developments within their beats and consequently don’t write informed stories”.

Admittedly, they bring “new blood and fresh perspectives”, but she feels publications tend to make more mistakes when there are too many young people. And that “could be dangerous”, Le Roux adds.

In her opinion, the answer to the problem is:



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