

THE ERODING STATUS OF EDITORS

... by Raymond Louw

When I became an editor, that legendary editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* Laurence Gandar, who had been in the hot seat for some 11 years, told me that life as an editor was very different from that of our predecessors. He said that G Rayner Ellis, who was editor from the early 40s to the mid-50s, wielded considerably more power than he did or I was likely to be able to command. He mentioned that Ellis could – and did – request the advertising department to remove an advertisement from a page so that he could use the whole page for an editorial display. “Not a hope of an editor being able to do that today,” observed Gandar wryly.

We were in the mid-60s so it showed how the power of the editor on that newspaper had been eroded in something like two decades and, of course, the reason was quite simple. In Ellis’ day the fight for financial survival, though a factor in the life of the newspaper then, was not as intense as it had become during Gandar’s tenure and certainly during mine (1966-1977). Also, the editor then, especially on the big name titles, had an almost godlike status. They tended to isolate themselves in their ivory towers communicating with the rest of the paper through their secretaries or senior assistant editors.

I started my career on the *Mail* during Ellis’ editorship after he had overcome his aversion to my Afrikaans name. He was highly regarded by his peers and senior staff. He would frequently change the content of the front page on deadline, or even rewrite his leading article on deadline and pay no attention to the anguished cries of the production staff watching the clock, deadlines and the production and distribution schedules. An editor of the grand old order who, however, as many of his successors were to, and some of his predecessors did, suffer the ultimate diminution of his status in the conclave where ultimate power and status were wielded, the boardroom.

But, since then, even while acknowledging that there has been no change in the ultimate power of the boardroom, the status of editors has declined. The editor is now part of the staff and the once single-minded devotion to news of the day and the other editorial features has been expanded to take note of the demands of the new aristocracy, the advertising department and the other closely following in its tracks, the circulation department. Editors now have to take especial cognisance of the commercial side of their paper and of managerial demands to

ensure that not only financial viability is maintained but profitability is boosted.

The editorial requirements have been increased to encompass a lower form of “advertorial” – the place where the despised adage that the news is used merely to keep the ads apart is actually practised and where lofty ideals of editorial independence and objectiveness are seriously bent. That Chinese wall between the commercial interests of the paper and the editorial has been slimmed down and though the editor may try stoutly to maintain it between his staff and the advertising sellers, s/he has had to mould himself or herself into a kind of multi-faceted person staring at editorial integrity with one eye and the cash register with the other.

And what is the status of this multi-headed person? No revered godlike figure here. The management looks upon him or her as a workhorse in a profit centre while the advertising and circulation departments see the driver of the vehicle which enables them to increase their successes and break sales records which have little to do with editorial excellence.

And in the overcrowded part of the building, still overcrowded despite the staffing cuts that have taken place while news coverage demands have grown and the gaps continue to grow between what can be covered and what reporters would like to cover, are the journalists. They anxiously watch the editor, the senior assistants and departmental heads and see their standing in the editorial sphere diminishing – and with it their own.

In a brief SA National Editors’ Forum survey conducted on how editors felt about their status, three replies were received. One editor complained about the intrusion of the managing director into his newsroom, questioning reporters about what they were doing. The MD may have been motivated by sheer curiosity but to the journalists this amounted to unacceptable conduct; it is a clear case of the management not only intruding on the editor’s domain but reducing his authority and thus his status. In another newspaper, the management decreed that the human resources department of the paper would interview and hire journalists, not the editor; yet another instance where the editor is not given command his or her operation and again status diminished.

One editor found that when he was appointed he reported to the chairman of the board, but gradually that changed until he was reporting to the managing director. Of course, there are issues that need the managing director or the publication manager and the editor getting together for a discussion, but there are certain areas such as policy where that kind of discussion should be with the chairman of the board.

Then there is the question of advertising supplements or other advertorial operations. While on papers such as London’s *Financial Times* these are regarded as they are elsewhere as income-generating operations, they are also regarded as flagship, high-quality, editorial surveys of countries and companies which add stature to the paper. Those supplements enable in-depth assessments of countries and companies to be made with an allocation of editorial space not available otherwise.

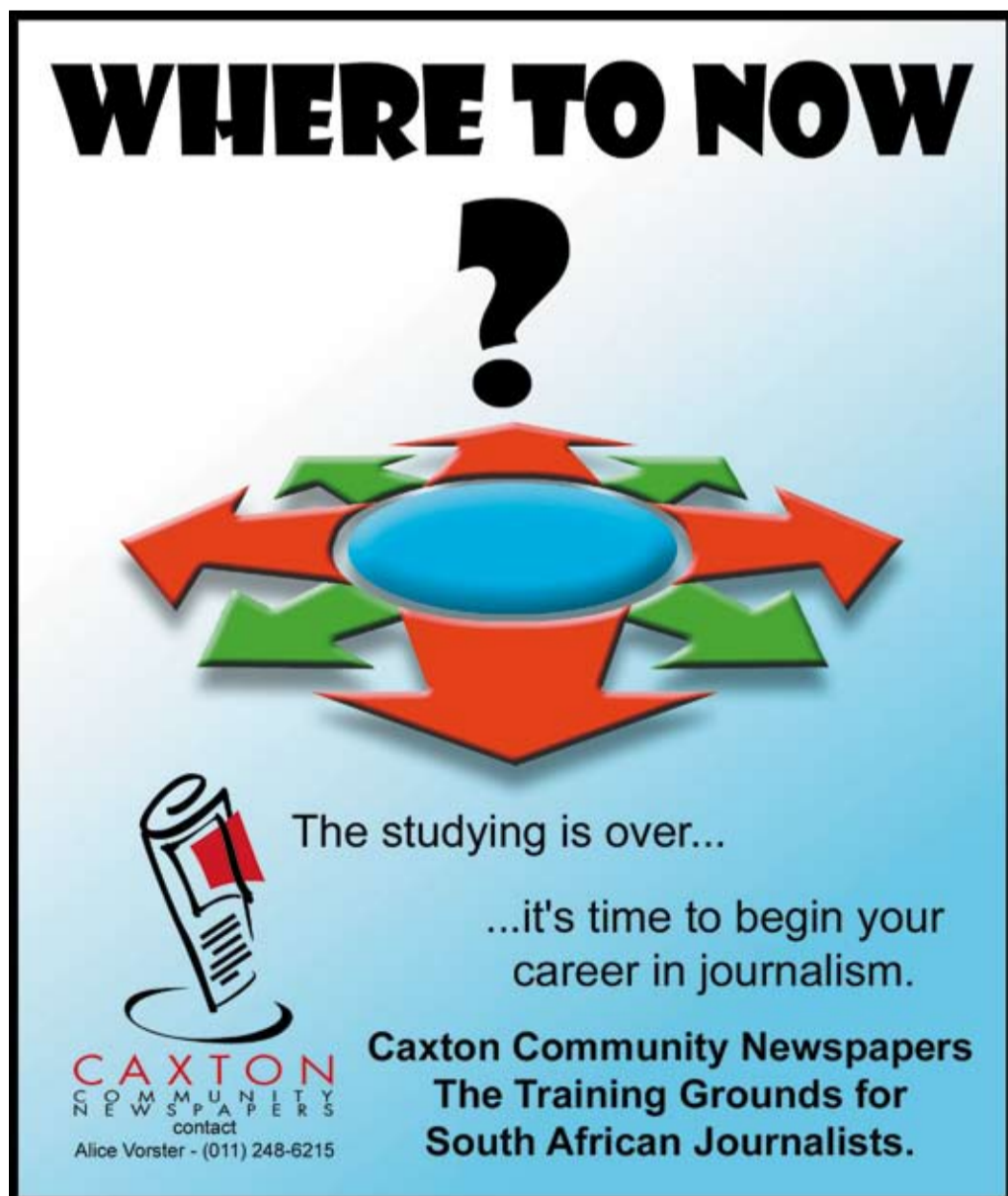
But in South Africa, these features are generally purely money-making operations with editorial content verging on puffery rather than informed critical assessment. And editors watch the proliferation of this material noting that it absorbs staff resources that could be used for important news gathering.

The question that is raised, and which editors are reluctant to discuss, is whether they really have control of their staffs when these supplements are prepared, or does it lie with the advertising department? Another question that arises is whether an editorial department has the quality of staff with the skills, experience and background knowledge to do a survey of a region, or a country or an industry or commercial sector of the economy in an informed manner as it is done on the *Financial Times*.

But that’s print journalism. In broadcasting there are several editors at the SABC but the chief executive officer is the editor-in-chief to which all controversial editorial discussions are referred for final decision. Apart from the ethical and professional considerations involved, there is the effect on the staff who see their hands-on editors diminished. And then there are executive producers who in many instances act as editors. Does this enhance their status or detract from it?

On pure creature comfort points do editors of major newspapers fly business class or economy? Surely a major title editor should fly business class in the same way as the managing director of the company? Is the pay gap between the managing director and the editor too large? And does one drive a top-of-the-range car and the other a middle-range? Such personal job add-ons as cars should reflect the status of the editor as being as senior as the managing director and if they don’t, does this detract from the status of the editor?

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