

# How journalism ought to restore its **SUST**

In 1955, Henry Nxumalo, the famous “Mr Drum” as he was then known, published an article under the headline **I WORKED AT SNYMAN FARM**. To write the report, Nxumalo went undercover as a labourer so that he could reveal conditions of backbreaking work for pitiful wages. His report documented, in searing and pointed detail, the horrors black Africans endured as they were “contracted” (hoodwinked and bullied in many instances) to work on farms across the country under deeply exploitative conditions. As hard-hitting then as it remains today, the report represents in-depth and unflinching writing in the face of arbitrarily exercised power: journalism at its finest.

By Vinayak Bhardwaj

**A**s newsrooms continue to hemorrhage jobs, with advertising revenues vanishing and circulation figures steadily plummeting, the search for a sustainability model for journalism has become urgent. Added to the systemic challenges, the threat of increased private and state interference with editorial policies of newspapers, the promulgation of draft laws that are poorly conceived and frankly draconian – represents an existential threat to media freedom and ultimately its ability to hold private and public power to account.

Confronted with this perfect storm of events, can journalists with the chutzpah of Nxumalo and the Drum generation offer any lessons in guiding our media towards the shores of financial viability and editorial independence?

Three lessons appear salient in offering a tentative, affirmative answer, followed by an exploration of what taking heed of these lessons might look like:

- Remain relevant
- Be bold, experiment!
- Pursue the truth (with a small ‘t’)

### *Be relevant*

While this article explores some of the ways in which newsgathering and content packaging can be improved, a focus on gadgets and gizmos alone will not replace the time-tested role of journalism to attract readership: remaining relevant and indispensable to ordinary citizens’ democratic decision-making.

Post-apartheid journalism has recorded tremendous successes and provided proud examples of journalists scrupulously uncovering important and uncomfortable truths that have illuminated corruption, malfeasance, criminality and abuse by the powerful.

From exposing the illicit “profit-shifting” between Lonmin and its offshore investment sites to unraveling the ongoing kickback payments made by Transnet, to its relentless and vital scrutiny of key state institutions, post-apartheid journalism’s ability to expose deficiencies in governance has been exemplary. Indeed, it is arguable that, together with the judiciary, the post-1994 media landscape has served as nothing short of a people’s commission of inquiry: into the Arms Deal, Nkandla, Travelgate, FIFA, stadium fraud, SADTU’s selling of teaching posts – the list is long. Indeed many whistleblowers in public and private sectors often indicate that the press is a more reliable ally in their attempts to expose wrongdoing than many of our appellate bodies or internal complaints’ mechanisms.

Yet, as the current revenue model is pulled from underneath our media houses, the search for relevance must be renewed. An exclusive focus on palace politics and factional reporting (often through leaks and dossier-journalism), appears to have diverted focus away from establishing how factional battles and the squabbles among the powerful play themselves out in the policies affecting our daily lives. Beat reporting has all but disappeared and specialist reporting on poverty, rural life, education, science or immigration has been almost completely neglected. The first draft of our history is therefore insufficiently explored and inadequately presented. To the extent that sustaining this faithful first draft

# AINABILITY

is a lodestar to aim for, can the immense promise of technology help realise journalism's promise?

## *Be brave, experiment*

New forms of storytelling abound – explanatory journalism, various types of long-form reporting, mobile, crowd-sourced, first-person narratives, journalism focused on providing primary sources to accompany full-length news articles – that challenge old ways of news reporting and reach new audiences through any available platform. Yet South African newsrooms – under-resourced and ill-equipped – appear sluggish in catching up with international trends. Systemic factors most certainly explain much of this: the impermissible cost of data and the poor rollout of broadband internet due to regulatory failures, for one, extenuates the potential impact of online mobile journalism. Advertising revenues accrue at a slow drip for online advertisers. It is indeed difficult to invest in innovation amid the crisis in cash flow facing established newspapers.

Yet the rapid, increasing rate of mobile penetration, the proliferation of platforms for crowd-sourcing funding and the important possibilities these represent for independent reporting, behoove at the very least some bold experimentation. We are yet to see concerted attempts by South African journalists to use mobile platforms to deliver content for which micro-payments can be made (using, for example, vouchers used to pay for airtime). In terms of content too – the vast opportunities presented by digital mobile technology appear underused.

What of creating mobile applications that allow reporting on whether hospitals are experiencing stockouts, for example, or whether municipal officers have reported for duty, or whether particular hospitals have enough beds? Storycorps, the international project that allows individual users to record each other's stories for broadcast on radio platforms, has proven a revolutionary method of newsgathering quite amenable to the South African market – and yet it remains to be experimented with, even by established outlets with revenue to spare.

## *The pursuit of truth*

Journalism remains the business of discovering important facts and reporting them in a way that allows posterity to create as rich and complex a record of lived reality. A famous edict in my old job at AmaBhungane, allegedly borrowed from Orwell, was “truth is that which is suppressed, all the rest is advertising”. Yet truth itself is provisional, certainty is temporary, facts and people change. In South Africa, mainstream reporting has sought to remain faithful to its forebears' legacy. Journalism has – for the most part – been a shrill, irrepressible check on the hubris of the (temporarily) powerful. In its renewed form, with a new business model, it may bear few similarities to anything we know. But one hopes that the animating spirit of irreverence – a charming 'tjatjaragness' that one can only speculate Nxumalo himself would have recognised – that infuses our media (with all its faults) will forever remain its distinguishing characteristic.



*Vinayak Bhardwaj is a programme manager at the Open Society Foundation and was formerly advocacy co-ordinator at the M&G Centre for Investigative Journalism where he was part of the award-winning team that reported on Nkandla. He writes in his personal capacity. [vinayak@osfsa.org.za](mailto:vinayak@osfsa.org.za)*

JOURNALISM  
**NEXT>>**