

Push boundaries

Am I, as a white South African journalist, racist? My instinctive answer is "No". (My instinctive adjunct to this: "And now please bugger off.") But am I bound and piloted by my race, class, gender and personal experience? As a product of the postmodern academic discourse of the 1990s, my answer is "Of course. **How could anyone not be?"**

It's inconceivable to me that anyone anywhere – especially anyone who has lived through a sizeable chunk of apartheid and beyond – would have the naiveté or the temerity to claim "objectivity" as one of their virtues.

As a journalist, fairness, balance, and integrity are my aim in this country, and how any or all of this shapes my journalistic output ... these things are hard to disentangle. Most of the time, I don't much bother to try to extricate the race-specific components in this inventory from the rest. I do my job. Reporting on pretty much everything – public policy, economics, culture, luminaries and fools.

But sometimes, **over the incessant thunder of the deadline train, comes the grumble of awareness** about race in a story. My race, the race of my story's subjects, and race in the story process.

I heard that grumble most recently when I wrote a story about an orphanage. What made the orphanage different from most others in this country was that it is situated in an affluent, largely white neighbourhood, in a series of suburban homes.

The orphanage founders are white South Africans who leverage considerable financial and human resources for the project. My story described how many volunteers care for and love the children, forming deep bonds, and committing to seeing them through to university. I reported that these white women find it easy to drop by to help.

The children – abandoned, orphaned, and mostly HIV-positive – are black. On the job, I was not introduced to the black women who work there as full-time caregivers. They did not look

at me, and the managers I interviewed did not mention their role in any part of the place. As is so often the case in this country, they were silent, background.

I did not interview these women. I kept things simple, short, used few quotes, focused on the children.

So I deliberately and consciously pushed race to the background in this story, but at the same time, so much of the story was about race – explicitly and implicitly.

There are many orphanages, much less well-resourced, which could benefit from a newspaper profile. I do those stories too, and will again in the future, after all this is not PR. **So that part is a bit uncomfortable, but not very difficult for me to live with.**

I've not made my mind up about whether I handled this story the best way possible, though.

Every journalist would have written the story differently. But would a black journalist have handled the story particularly differently? Probably.

Was the situation I wrote about a racist one? Maybe, maybe not. Was I racist in my reporting? **I don't think so.**

I certainly took an easy way out, however. I did not push boundaries, or challenge the way things had been set up. Newsgathering and reporting is never a one-way process, but my story reflected a particular reality.

When I first started reporting, I was disconcerted to find that black men in rural areas would often not speak to me directly, but address answers to my questions to whatever male was in close proximity.

Negotiating barriers of language and gender in this country are an everyday part of my job. And of course, my own race (and gender) counts in my favour in some circumstances, and against me in others.

Tradition-bound white men are generally a breeze.

The politics of reporting in this country, and through our very particular transition, is unavoidable.

If I write about our economy within the post-September 11th global slump, and economic experts in this country are still by and large white men, do I spend an extra day hunting for other sources to get a more diverse information base? **The story itself is not all that matters. As a media professional I'm creating as much as I'm reflecting.**

by Caroline Hooper-Box



But how important, exactly, it is to operate at this type of heightened consciousness in my work, and whether it is important all the time, I'm not sure.

I negotiate my space as a journalist in all of this daily, not always consciously.

Perhaps as a means of working my way through it, I am attracted to stories that raise interesting questions about where we are as a nation, culturally, in the broadest sense of the term.

Blurring divisions on our traditionally racially divided dance floors; artist Stephen Cohen's representation of "colonialism" through his performances in a squatter camp; **emotions running high around changing the names of towns across the country;** small communities dealing with political and social changes in their conservative towns – inevitably, my position and identity in South Africa moulds, if not determines, the type of information that I will get access to, who gives it to me, and the form in which it is conveyed.

The way that I select and interpret the information – how I choose stories and how I get them down on paper – is also yoked to my identity, or place, race and otherwise.

I have never been trained or educated on non-racist reporting. **It wouldn't hurt, I guess.**

But I believe it's my responsibility to think about my assumptions, the language I use, the stories I pick. It is important to avoid getting too comfortable, to work hard and sometimes not to do what comes easiest or most naturally.

My work and my self are situated in my race, even rooted in it, but I don't believe my reporting is racist. **For now, that's as far as I'll go.**

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