

The Commonwealth Press Union brought journalists from 40 countries to a conference in Cape Town in October 1996. The following six-page focus presents selected papers delivered at the occasion.

# editor or publisher:

## DEBATE

**TON VOSLOO**  
Executive Chairman  
Naspers

**M**ULLING OVER the title of our discussion, editor or publisher and the invidiousness of deciding which of the two shall survive, it seems pretty obvious that without the editor there is no publisher!

Seen from my perspective as a life-long journalist/editor turned publisher, one should take a holistic view and say: the publisher is there to complement the editor, and as a team they should address the taxing problem of survival of the fittest.

That is the philosophy of the publishing house I run and there are no real energy-sapping debates between "them" and "us". From both sides we work towards the same end result. The better your publications, the better the bottomline of the group.

What is certainly true, is that only the fittest will survive the encroachment of the immediacy brought about by the revolution in information and the on-line technology. We are well and truly linked to the global information village and the concomitant internationalisation of our business.

The best way to survive is to roll with the punches. Speaking as a South African publisher, one has the slight advantage of not being at the bleeding edge of technology. That is the prerogative of the technology fonts of the world in the USA, Japan and Western Europe. One is able to utilize the best proven technologies and apply it to your advantage.

But we have our own difficulties common to developing or lesser developed nations. One has to contend with a lack of skills, or the costly business of training or re-skilling people; the general back-log of literacy in society; the lower level of economic attainment of the nation in a plural society.

How does one then shape a viable publishing business in such an unpromising environment? I'd like to share a few thoughts on coming to terms with what could be viewed as a glorious opportunity.

- Don't waste valuable time by delaying the introduction of time-saving technology. Time saved in production in the editorial and other production run-ups, leads to improved products and better marketing opportunities.

- Don't fret too much on the clamour by unions on job retention. In my tenure of 14 years we have created a thousand more jobs (16 per cent) in total through the new opportunities that were brought about by new technology. We have cut hundreds of less productive

jobs, retrained hundreds and through natural attrition and constructive agreements with the unions, reached a situation of being leaner and meaner than ever before in terms of productivity.

- Adopt the holistic approach to publishing. If you have no stake in pay television, it's probably too late! By that I mean that the key to great areas of business lies in digitization. The break-up and immediate transmission of words and figures and their reconstitution create new opportunities in publishing, and we are only at the beginning of that phase in communications.

Publishers have to be alert to these opportunities and unfortunately we outside the so-called G7 nations, have no place to hide. The big guys are in a position of moving in.

That bad news can be off-set by virtue of the fact that in nations on the road to modernisation and fuller literacy there is scope for integrated paper-bound publishing. In South Africa millions of people are only now getting electricity and better schooling. I don't think they will all be weaned to the PC at home and totally away from paper in the next decade or two, and besides if you take the holistic view, you'll gear yourself to be represented in the opportunities available in both avenues of publishing, that is on screen and on paper.

We have had fantastic success in turning the challenge of multilingualism to the publishing environment to huge profit by cloning an Afrikaans weekly magazine into English. Both are now the top sellers in their mass market.

We have done the same with our Afrikaans financial weekly, publishing it in English, and we have just successfully relaunched a monthly aimed at the main upcoming market into a weekly in English and Zulu (the last being the language spoken by most South Africans).

Publishing can only flourish in a profit-driven environment and I am happy to state that we now have more media freedom in all respects than in our total recorded history of 346 years! A darkish cloud looms in the misguided perceptions of influential people in government that imbalances in press ownership, printing and distribution can brought about through penalising successful groups by compelling them to undertake unprofitable tasks.

The quickest route to media balance has been taking place at breath-taking speed the last two years, in which whole chunks of TV,

radio and print media have been resourced to the previous have-nots. We are in the throes of a media revolution and a wise government will let that action take its course.

The absolute and overriding qualification is that publishers should always attach more importance to good editorial talent than even editorial people think they



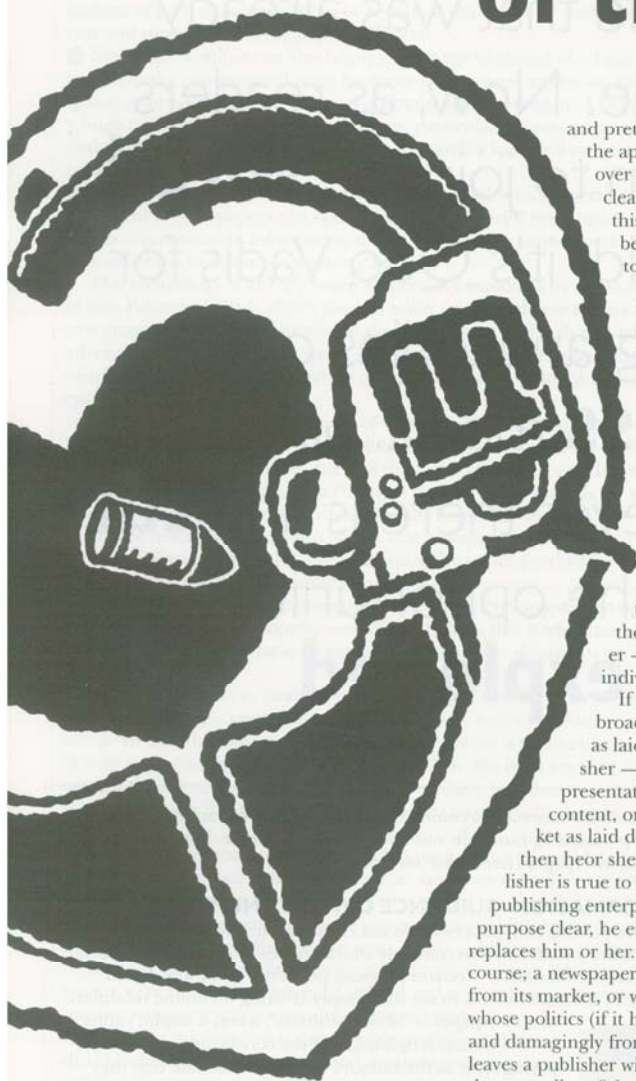
deserve! Publishing is about marshalling intellectual capital and building valuable titles and products around those circles of intellectual capital.

Once you have these priorities lined up in their correct sequence, you can look forward to surviving the challenges of the technological revolution we are experiencing. Let no one who says newspapers, magazines and books on paper are history go unchallenged. In printed form they provide the yeast for all other forms of publishing.

So the editor and publisher are of necessity in the same straitjacket. They both have a 100 percent interest in joint survival, not at the exclusion of the other.

# survival

## of the fittest



and pretty well everything else in the apparatus of newspapering over the last 45 years — I am clear on one thing at least and this is the pecking order between publisher and editor.

The publisher personally takes on the rights and responsibilities of a free press, or a half-free press, or a press quiescent to the centres of power, depending on where he or she lives, the moment the newspaper is launched. The publisher delegates these rights and responsibilities to the editor. The editor crafts the news-paper to reflect the policies and perhaps, the ideologies of the publisher — who may of course be an individual, a board or a trust.

If the editor strays from the broad mission of the newspaper, as laid down by the publisher — be it in terms of politics, presentation, quality, balance of content, or identification of the market as laid down by the publisher — then he or she cannot survive. If the publisher is true to the stated purpose of his publishing enterprise, and has made that purpose clear, he either redirects the editor or replaces him or her. There can be no middle course; a newspaper aimlessly meandering from its market, or whose quality is falling, or whose politics (if it has any) veer significantly and damagingly from the will of its publisher, leaves a publisher with no choice. The editor is the controller of the product, its public reputation, and its market success. If those fail, so has the editor.

But, of course, within that clear framework lie many subtleties, frequently tensions, and sometimes conflict. As managing director of Times Newspapers in London, I well recall Harold Evans — that icon for campaigning editors everywhere, and a fellow-director —

casually divulging to the whole editorial staff of the *Sunday Times* the outcome of a mighty confidential board meeting which had taken place only an hour or so before.

Taxed with what I regarded as indiscretion bordering on the betrayal of his duties as a director, Harry Evans expressed a personal conflict caused by his being both an editor and a director — effectively editor and part-publisher. He felt strongly, he said, that he had to keep faith with his hand-picked and highly talented editorial team. There was tension between his staff and the policies of the board and, though he was a party to those policies, he felt a strong obligation to his journalists not to withhold important information which might affect them. He offered to resign from the board, to protect his integrity as editor.

Harry's offer was not taken up, but the incident illustrates the conflict that can arise when an editor/director has such strong ideals.

Should an editor also be a director of his newspaper? There is an argument, and it's cogent enough, that he shouldn't sit on the board. This is the "ivory tower" point of view: Don't burden him or her with business worries, don't deflect energies by requiring attendance at board meetings. Keep him or her content to do the job, editing the newspaper, blissfully unaware of rising newsprint prices, impending industrial action, pressroom problems, escalating property costs, growing pressures on advertising revenues....

I must confess that, all things being equal, I hold the opposite point of view. If the editor has the publisher's trust, has proved to be consistent, and can adapt his or her considerable intelligence and decision-making abilities to the broader aspects of the business, why consign this asset to the outer circle?

Of course, on the board, an editor will promote the case for more editorial space, higher paging and a bigger budget. But, again within reasonable bounds, the editor surely has the right to protect the means of his or her own success which is measured more often than not by the cold declaration of the monthly ABC return. The priorities of the business as a whole shouldn't be endangered by an editor's argument; that, after all, is surely why the chairman and the chief executive are there!

### DEBATE

**DUGAL NISBET-SMITH**  
Director  
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**T**HE QUESTION, of course, is a non sequitur. Publishers need editors; without publishers there would be no editors. But the question also implies a competitive, even a combative, relationship — and one has to accept that this can exist.

As both an editor and a chief executive —

# newspapers & the 'net online future

## Print is not dead.

Against the hype-mongers who see paper publications going the way of the dodo, print still has a long future. It is true that circulations of newspapers have fallen in first world countries: the UK down 18% — or more than four million newspaper buyers less each day — since 1990. But in developing countries, sales are booming. Between 1991 and 1995, India recorded a 33% increase; Malaysia 24% and Singapore 15%.

And although advertising market share continues to shrink in the majority of countries, ad revenues are still continuing to increase almost everywhere — again especially in the developing countries. It is the case that these developing countries are moving off a small base, but let us not ignore the fact that India, for instance, with almost 30 million sales a day in 1994, stands third, behind Japan and the USA, in the world's top circulation statistics.

These trends look set to continue for at least ten years, with newspapers more than holding their own against competing media. Yet, if editors and publishers are shrewd, they'll put energy into going online, even if the threat to their advertising or readership is still medium-term. The reason: the Internet is, for now, less a threat than, first and foremost, an immediate opportunity to complement print publishing.

Newspapers in the Commonwealth, at least, have not stood still, including even those whose existing print readers are still far from having online access. It appears that just 20 of 49 Commonwealth countries have no Web presence as yet<sup>2</sup>, although online publishing is bursting out at such a rate that this information is probably superceded as each new week unfolds. The point is that even the world's poorest nations are getting their newspapers online.

And it is not just national publications entering cyberspace. There is also the online publication, *India Journal*, which has its content created in Bangalore in south India, then gets wired across to the USA where it is designed and edited in New York, and is finally distributed via two hypermarkets in New Jersey where many expatriate Bangaloreans are settled.<sup>3</sup>

Nor does the picture of national newspapers going online reflect things like the experience of the London-based *Electronic Telegraph*, where an entirely unexpected and rather large constituency of readers was discovered: "wired" Asian immigrants on the east coast of the USA with a passion for cricket coverage which American media failed to quench. Then there is the Shri Lankan *Sunday Observer* paper whose online version (<http://www.lanka.net/lakehouse/>) takes adverts from local families seeking would-be bridegrooms in the diaspora.

Why should newspapers be going online — especially when most see little early prospect of financial payback? Overall, there are four distinct rationales, followed in varying and implicit degrees around the world. These are: an infor-

As latecomers to the Internet, newspapers found a **medium** and a world that was already made. Now, as readers begin to join the **wired** world, it's Quo Vadis for the granddaddies of the **mass** media. **GUY BERGER** believes there is a **future** — if the opportunities are fully **exploited**.

mational-guidance rationale, a community-communications rationale, a guardianship-watchdog rationale and a journalistic rationale. Put these all together and newspapers need have no fear of the Net.

### THE INFORMATION-GUIDANCE OPPORTUNITY:

"Although we publish newspapers we do not consider ourselves newspaper publishers. ... we are an information company which creates information products to satisfy information needs," declares Mexican publisher Alejandro Junco.<sup>4</sup>

The logic of this statement is to say that simply creating an online rendition of a newspaper is "shovelbusiness", when it ought, rather, to be a radical redefinition of the core business of newspapering. Just as the railways discovered too late that they were in the transport business, and motorised vehicles rendered them near obsolete, so too do newspapers have to consider what business they're in.

Now, some, like Junco, see themselves as fundamentally in the information business. In this scenario, a printed newspaper, an online service, even a fax service — these are all just so many ways to execute the business. There is some value in stressing information. But British internet commentator, Ray Hammond, believes if this means competing

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Africa:	25
Asia:	10
Caribbean:	12
Pacific:	16
Canada, UK:	60
Malta:	4

# newspapers and the 'net: the online future

in hard news, newspapers will die. In his view, if a newspaper deals in tabloid style entertainment: it has a hope of surviving.<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, as Birgir Magnus, Swedish chief of McKinsey and Company, observes, for newspapers the entertainment business entails powerful competition from television, magazines, CD-roms, video and online services.<sup>6</sup> And Jorgen Ejbol, editor of Denmark's *Morgenavisen Jylands-Posten* says: "If you repeat what is on television or in magazines, you devalue what newspapers can do. Let them do what they do best. The solid foundation of a newspaper is information; entertainment is only a small part of it."<sup>7</sup>

Newspapers, then, are in the information, rather than the entertainment business, and this is their strength. So what are the advantages of extending this business to online publishing? Several major benefits stand out:

- Online delivery makes distance defunct, meaning that far-flung potential audiences such as emigrants can be recruited to the reader ranks without the cost and time of delivering paper products.
- Newspapers online can also begin to leverage value out of all the information wasted in the conventional print business: stories need not be cut to fit paper space; information can be archived and sold again and again. I believe there is a huge market for online press clippings, particularly if newspapers collaborate and establish 'one-stop' search engines to search a specified range of newspapers' archives.
- Internet allows for personalised information delivery, converting "Le Monde to Le Moi."<sup>8</sup> Newspapers can open a new and powerful front against mass media competitors in information delivery by using a sniper service rather than a blunderbuss in terms of targeting readers.

This technology is already being successfully exploited by a non-newspaper player, Pointcast, which allows users to tailor a news delivery service that arrives continuously on their computers in the background and is displayed (along with adverts) as a screensaver. In South Africa, *Business Day* offers a similar service which delivers requested content, (eg. information on gold mining) as it emerges, as e-mail.

What this narrowcasting version of online publishing also signals is the likelihood of newspapers establishing online partnerships with stock exchanges, press release clearing houses, tax and finance advisers, etc., to deliver a package containing a range of data on a Pointcast model, which extends far wider than the information that the paper traditionally marshals by itself.

- Online news publishing also means that newspapers can begin to differentiate their information outlets — specialising the paper product for a market that is different to that for the online market.<sup>9</sup>

This all sounds excellent, except for one thing. Newspapers do not have sole custody of information supply, even if they believe this is what they do best. In particular, they do not have an exclusive franchise on doing this on the Internet.

To go on Internet as another string to the bow against other media competitors is to find these same players — plus entirely new competitors — also in this arena. In fact, the most popular news service online is said to be not any of the 800 or so newspapers now on the net, but CNN. Far from keeping the line against the merchants of images, newspapers have had their text-based territory invaded. Others like the mighty Microsoft are moving into the online information business.

It seems, then, that newspapers can't ignore the wired world, but nor are they guaranteed information hegemony there, any more than they are often losing it in the battle beyond.

Also online is a massive range of raw, unmediated information produced by groups whose prime activity is not mass media publishing, but who with online technology can now get into the business at minimal cost. Whereas once newspapers were the public sources of (edited and summarised) government information, company statements and pressure group pitches, much of this information is increasingly available online direct from source, and unabridged for those wanting the detail. Information on the Internet is, in short, no monopoly preserve for traditional mass media, let alone newspapers. (This is not even to mention businesses, many of whom now steal from their print-ad budgets to pay for their own direct, online publicity).

All in all, the Net is crowded with information suppliers, all potential rivals to newspapers. Indeed, because of the global nature of the cybermarket, each individual online newspaper is now partially competing with every other

**Not even big brand print will transfer status to the anarchic, youthful, churning, promiscuous and wild world of the web.**

paper, and even your unique local information may not attract readers in the nether-regions who have interests in more general, global matters on the one hand, and their own localities on the other.

Going online is to enter a context that is a great leveller, and not even big brand print products will necessarily transfer their status and appeal to the anarchic, youthful, churning, promiscuous and wild world of the Web.

So what does this mean for newspapers redefining themselves as information companies and going into online publishing? Frankly, it means refining this definition of the business, by drawing on other characteristics that are currently part of the print newspaper business. One of these is the narrative role of newspapers: the way in which they turn data into meaning.

Basically, the amount of information and entertainment online (and offline) means that users may look to a trusted newspaper and its team to help them navigate the net, to make sense of it and of the data available online and elsewhere. Says British journalism professor, Peter Cole: "The superhighway needs sherpas and guides. ... Use the Net if you must. Exploit the various new forms of distributing information. But remember this, the most adept collectors of information, the best organisers and electors of information, the best explainers of information, the best analysers of information are print journalists."<sup>10</sup>

In this point of view, newspapers are not only in the information business, but in the guidance (and even informal education) business. Certainly, the Internet makes it easy for papers to play this role: with hypertext, it is easy to supply background to the news for those looking to make sense of a scattered universe. And even where the journalistic function of packaging and telling may be bypassed, there is a role to act as an information broker. This means providing services for sorting out and selecting from the daily avalanche of information, and placing hotlinks precisely to the full-length original documentation now offered online by governments, companies and pressure groups.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is a special twist to the informational opportunity, highlighting how a newspaper on the Net needs to go far beyond simply putting its news online. Indeed, it may highlight a similar lesson for print products: giving guidance to the reader in a context of info-overload.

## THE COMMUNICATIONS-COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITY:

Another rationale for a newspaper to publish in cyberspace is not the information component of the business, but the communication aspect. Basically, newspaper content, whether online or on print, is dead, inactive information. As noted by futurist, Paul Saffo, the web is full of captured, pinned-down information, as if in an information-mausoleum. This is not without value, but it is insufficient for the online medium. The Internet, he points out, is now coming alive with Java software and Virtual Reality Modelling Language — opening up the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a three-dimensional newscast.<sup>12</sup>

As Net technology continues to explode, newspapers online increasingly will experience the opportunity, indeed the necessity, of competing with television and radio in visual and audio terms. It will not be enough to defend text territory against these media: offensive approaches will be necessary, and the distinction between them will begin to blur at the centre.

This is a start, but not yet the fully-fledged communication business, however. Saffo remarks that a reader accessing an online publication may guess there are 200 other people reading (viewing?) the same, but you only know they are there because the server is so slow. For him, the next chapter in the Internet is interacting with them. Not connecting people to information, but people to people in information-rich environments.

A number of newspapers are already expanding from online information services, into communication as well — by running bulletin boards or newsgroups linked to their online service. For South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, this has proved a vibrant forum for discussion by a small — but influential — sector of its readers. For the *Electronic Telegraph's* Ben Rooney, it has meant two hours a day answering e-mail. But he opines, it's good for his marketing because the readers tell him exactly what they want.<sup>13</sup>

All this is great stuff in the Saffo perspective. Because, in effect, in this view, newspapers are not so much in the information or communication businesses, as ultimately in the community creation business.

This is a theme echoed across the board, particularly in industrialised countries. Winning papers, says Sheldon Lasda of US Gannett Rochester Newspapers, are those who are reworking their relationship with readers, in a context

**The next chapter in the Internet is not connecting people to information, but people to people in information-rich environments.**

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where these people have more and more choices and alternative relationships.<sup>14</sup> By attracting readers into its discussion group, the *Mail & Guardian* entrenches its relationship with them through a dynamic, interactive service.

The paper, in other words, positions itself as the metaphorical centre of a community. It can do this because online newspapers are not just online, but communicative.<sup>15</sup> The technology itself enables newspapers to build relationships within and between readers in ways that go far beyond what unidirectional print publishing can do. The reader, in this view, is an allrounded human, with not only information needs, but communication needs that a newspaper can also help satisfy. This is far from a relationship with a mere sales-price paying customer.

According to Young and Rubicam executive Michael Samet, if a newspaper is a representation of its community, it should consider literally becoming an internet and telecoms service centre in its community. This is the potential awaiting Nasionale Pers, the first newspaper group in South Africa to get into the service provision business. "Instead of being 'newspaper-centric' on the Internet, the newspapers should be 'community-centric'." This has advertising spin-offs, says Samet, because it can help advertisers get personal with their target markets.<sup>16</sup>

To be in such a position is also, in Birgir Magnus's view, to be able to act as gateway to the Internet — and as such to develop a unique, marketable space as well as an understanding of where users are going. Like Internet guru Nicholas Negroponte, he points to the possibility of newspapers getting into transactional services through their online activities. When readers can order books or book plane tickets through their trusted online community paper, newspaper publishers will be able to take a cut.

This kind of role links the newspaper business outside of itself, and indeed many commentators today are signalling the need for newspapers to form partnerships with a range of other companies. Of course, high amongst this is the ease of joint-publishing partnerships between newspapers across nations, made possible by online technologies and the growth of transnational information markets. Such an instance in South Africa is the *Mail & Guardian*, a fusion of the local *Weekly Mail* and the UK *Guardian* into an entirely new product with both a print and an online version.

But there are more opportunities than only being a community-creator and consolidator. Just as well, seeing that although newspapers may have an accumulated historical advantage in this, they are by no means the only actors creating communities online. The very technology itself has a myriad of communities constituted by listservs and newsgroups where millions of people talk to each other quite independently of mass media institutions.

The bulk of readerships of many countries' newspapers may be nowhere close to being potential online communities, but one should not underestimate the potential for the cosmopolitan, upper-end of readerships to be drawn into online communities — and even developing countries' editors need to consider what will make their papers' specific online community the primary one for this group. In this respect, there is, fortunately, something special that newspapers can bring to the cybertable.

## THE GUARDIANSHIP OPPORTUNITY:

Modernity and the new media have had a profound impact on what is closest to the hearts of editors, i.e. not only on newspapers as media institutions, but on newspaper journalism as such. Most important here is the ethic — the mission, indeed the imperative of journalism — and this is what signals the guardianship opportunity.

Swedish researchers Peter Dahlgren and others, observe that there has been a weakening in recent years of media's traditional boundaries between politics and culture (high/pop), advertising, PR, entertainment and journalism.<sup>17</sup> They believe that the classical paradigm of journalism is waning. The craft, at least in ideal terms, has traditionally been seen as providing independent reports and analyses of real events and processes, addressing a public that has the same public culture. There has been a narrative of accuracy and impartiality. Now all this is less clear-cut.

TV is partly to blame for having destabilised the classic notion that journalism provides as its main function, information, and particularly rational information. Journalists have turned into experts and media stars, and experts and media stars have become journalists — not least the appointment of the UK's very own Sarah Ferguson. TV's discourse,

**Newspapers can bring something special to the cyberspace — the ethos of journalism.**

**In the medium term, cyberspace will be more valuable for the input, rather than the output, side of journalism.**

say the Swedish researchers, addresses spectators and consumers rather than citizens, thereby even altering the political relevance of journalism.

The situation today then is one where the vast majority of media output is not journalistic in nature, and the competition for attention to the media must also be understood partly as one between journalism and non-journalism. But it is also a situation that has led to a blurring of the distinctions between journalism and non-journalism — to infotainment, Larry King Live and Oprah Winfrey.

Whether the Internet proves to be primarily an entertainment rather than an informational medium remains to be

seen. Either way, though, there is one special area where newspaper journalists can strike a blow for classic journalism online. There already are many pretenders to acting as guides, gateways and community-creators on the Net, but few will venture into the turf traditionally occupied by the press: viz, that of fourth estate.

Newspapers have always played roles greater than gleaners, interpreters and disseminators of information.<sup>18</sup> They have done something more than create communities. They have represented these communities, reflected the public interest in its manifest forms, by taking on the role of trusted tribunes of the people and watchdogs on the powerful. Certainly, pressure groups will use online technology to prosecute their particular cause. But the beauty of newspapers is that they do not play a sectarian role.

The fourth estate will not be immune from scrutiny by the fifth estate — the globally linked millions of people who make up the Internet. But newspapers alone amongst other institutions, including other media institutions, undoubtedly bring a uniquely critical quality to bear in the online world — and indeed also upon the online world. This is a core journalistic ethic, and perhaps one providing greatest leverage in both print and electronic arenas for newspapers.<sup>19</sup>

## THE JOURNALISTIC OPPORTUNITY:

Online technologies impact on newspapers beyond highlighting their watchdog role. The journalistic imperative of guardianship stays the same, but the form, content and methods of journalism in Internet production change.

As regards form, the Netmedia conference at London's City University recently suggested: "Journalists want to be freed from the need to fill holes around advertisements, and they want to be creative with multimedia and hypertext — but many readers just want fast facts without the fuss."<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the time will arrive where in all likelihood, "we won't just be print journalists, or radio journalists, or television journalists. We may well be digital, multimedia journalists."<sup>21</sup>

Will the audio-visual potential on the Net come to predominate over the purely textual, and what will this mean for traditional wordsmiths? Will stories be written (produced?) to screen-bite length, with other layers behind? What will be the designs, colours and graphical qualities that succeed in online publishing?

All this is still in process, and it is too early to say. Some of the results may trickle through to print versions in ways we do not yet know, in the same kind of way that music video language, with simultaneous diverse distracting messages that compete for attention, has come into CNN television news. It may be that the very multi-media functionality of online publishing will reinforce the worth of words on a page in the print world. All this remains to be created — by newspaper journalists and their audiences in particular. A missed opportunity if it is left to the e-zines, the business websites and the other newsmedia online.

What will be different, has to be different, will be journalistic content. If online publishing eventually pays, could it subsidise print? Could the money it saves on paper, printing and distribution costs, lead to a greater percentage of budgets being allocated to journalism as such — with better quality content as a result? There's an opportunity, albeit long-term.

Content anyway needs to better reflect the escalating developments of our times. Newspapers, whether online or on paper, need to acknowledge that their readers' experiences, identities and media exposure are changing. Editors will need to take not a traditional newspaper-centric point of view, but a reader-centred point of view: be pull-driven in their editorial contents, not push driven. A regular column on web surfing means less space for other information, but it is becoming as essential as the TV listings. Another opportunity.

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# Newsvalue

**Don't simply follow the fashion of *The Sun*, says NEVILLE STACK, editorial consultant, syndicated columnist and former editor.**

**T**HE TALK ABOUT the Internet reminds me of the story of the early days of the telephone, when the mayor of New York made his first phone call. He put down the phone and declared to the assembled press: "Wonderful. This invention will change our lives. One day every city will have one."

The Internet may be regarded by some newspapers as a threat to their future, but my concern is the enemy within. The enemy of mediocrity, confusion, professional incompetence — or worse still, complacency. Complacency is a terrible disease, you don't know you have got it until you die.

In a changing society, the press has not kept pace. Design has changed, yes. But papers are now design-led, not ideas-led.

There is a problem of too much competence, of what Marshall McLuhan called the tyranny of professionalism. In its name, we accept universal techniques and wisdom. But are they still valid? The professional is what tends to be copied, it becomes the fashion. Fashions come and fashions go. The personality of the newspaper is essential, but is the paper going to be always the same? Or will it change as fashion dictates?

The bowler hat is no longer fashionable in society, but it is still worn in many newspaper offices. Not physically, but in spirit.

There is only one direction newspapers can go: forwards. But go back and see if the language and content of the press has altered since 1937. You'll get an unpleasant shock.

Our communication skills have not evolved. If transportation had evolved as "fast" as our newspapers have, foreigners would come to conferences in Cape Town by ship, possibly rowing.

People pay for their paper in advance, taking it on trust. We have an implied contract with the readers to give them what they want; to surprise them and add value to their lives. Yet too often journalists are writing for one another, mentioning obscure people and in jokes — patronising readers by making jokes for the sub-editor sitting alongside. That's bad for the personality of the paper. It produces a split personality.

The tyranny of professionalism requires that we must evolve with our craft. But where are we going to?

Rupert Murdoch, that prince amongst philosophers, once quoted the pundit who said: "You don't lose money by underestimating the public's taste." His direction is down. Undercutting the opposition by giving even more naked ladies, awful scandals, more fun.

But down we go too. Trivial news agendas. Bigger pictures and smaller news. Space is occupied by rubbish for design's sake. What information and comment are left out?

Too many newspapers clone from the worst in journalism, not many are looking for a higher form. Alas, those that are looking, are failing.

We need to look at a different set of values. Not only the body count and the formula "if it bleeds, it leads". What is the news value that the readers want? Leadership, original ideas, lateral thinking, oblique points of view. It boils down to adding value to the reader's life.

That's what news really is. When a reader puts a paper down, he or she doesn't say, or even realise, but life is that bit better. Maybe in something as trivial as getting a recipe or as important as advice on how to vote.

The ephemeral media don't work as well as print. Entertainment and snap news coverage is great for TV, wonderful for radio. In South Africa, these are the most important means of essential communication. But you have to be physically present to receive it. Or you have to ask your neighbours to tell you what they think it said. But print is permanent, accountable. It can be kept, checked and discussed. This is why South Africa — and other countries — urgently needs more newspapers, with properly trained and motivated journalists.

A journalist need not be a dissident, but should always be a dissenter. When I talked my way into my first job, my training was to be insulted and humiliated by old men who smoked and drank and passed on outdated

practices. I got fired for insolence.

When I became an editor, I resolved I would not let my staff go through that wasteful experience. I argued that the chairman would not let his Mercedes be driven by a driver without experience or training, so why then did he let incompetents drive his newspaper?

Today, in the name of economy, managements are letting loose children to do grown-up jobs. Managements must be made to realise that untrained staff are false economy.

In my editing days, we ran an induction course, and exposed young people for two weeks to ideas and some principles of journalism. At the end, they were not competent journalists, but they had, in effect, a licence to learn. They could go further then, with our help.

The philosophy of managements today tends to regard the newspaper not as a living thing — a creature that is greater than the sum of its parts — but as a product. I use the product argument to say that wanton slashing of budgets would result in a corrupted product. Too many of today's managements don't hesitate to compromise the product, by cutting staff and foreign bureaux.

But when the price of cocoa beans goes up, the makers of Mars bars willingly pay the price, not cut the specification, because they care desperately about the quality of their product. And because of that concern, the sales are buoyant.

In the current newspaper management culture, the first imperative is to slash budgets and the first casualty is usually the editorial training scheme. "Where's the training scheme?". Most of us have suffered very badly in this way, and for some the false economies resulted in terminal decline.

In South Africa, protest journalism developed into an art-form. But after protest, what? We should be going for service journalism. We should uphold the principle of adding value to people's lives. Not following the degraded practices and the worst excesses of the gutter papers.

*The Sun*, the British tabloid, sells more papers per day than all the quality papers put together. But is it really acceptable journalism to run a competition around the royal scandal with the words: "Who would you rather date — Fergie or a goat?"

That newspaper has a very clever, professionally brilliant staff. But what are their values? Are they trained in professional principles and personal scruples? No. It is said that the editor of *The Sun* thinks that ethics is a county in England.

If you are a brain surgeon, before opening a textbook, you have to subscribe to a code of ethics. So why cannot journalists have standards they can be proud of?

Put all these points together, and you have guide to the nature of the complacency disease.

"It is said that the editor of *The Sun* thinks that ethics is a county in England."



## HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR NEWSPAPER?

Here's a checklist of questions an alert editor should ask every morning:

- is my newspaper ideas-led or a follower of old-fashioned fashion?
- is my newsdesk a powerhouse of ideas, or just a passive processor of what comes in?
- does my staff realise that bad news comes unbidden, but good news has to be sought for?
- are my journalists hunters?
- do our follow-ups and supplements always read like last year's?
- do we challenge the intellect of new staff in an induction course? Or is our training policy to sit them down next to the most incompetent, de-motivated journalist because he or she is the only one with time to talk to them? (Thus perpetuating a downward spiral of ignorance and de-motivation?)
- do I try to find out exactly why my staff leave (it isn't always money)?
- do we have a skill development programme, so that our journalists become more competent all the time?
- is our problem thinking up ideas?

# A case for constructive journalism

**New Nation editor  
GABU TUGWANA  
says that  
emphasising  
development news  
strengthens the  
media watchdog.**

**I**T IS INDISPUTABLE that popular mainstream media still dictates many column centimetres of editorial space to sensational reporting rather than democratic debates on reconstruction and development of our new society.

For instance, there is insufficient publicity on activities of Parliamentary portfolio committees. Yet these committees are a powerful instrument of our maturing democracy. They have vast powers which enable them to summon army, police and even intelligence chiefs, to publicly account for activities or expenditure within their departments.

There is also a lack of detailed coverage of government delivery of social services. Many communities who previously had no access to clean piped water now enjoy a service taken for granted all over the developed world. Some of these communities had to travel kilometres in search of water. But when they were provided with water taps within reach, their story was summarised and buried deep in the newspapers or simply treated as a caption and a picture. An unusual water provision project of a rural community of Winterveldt in the North province scarcely drew attention when the community joined hands with the government and private sector to secure clean water.

It is true that news is, by definition, about events out of the ordinary. But this should not be seen in a one-sided way which only sensationalises issues. Self-initiatives of a society taking advantage of new conditions created by our young democracy is also part of this unusual story. People in many developing nations tend to wait for government to bring development to their door step. It is rare that the community approaches government to provide necessary material and expertise to enable them to change their situation. This is, therefore, an unusual story to be told in a two-year-old democracy.

However, this is not to suggest that the media should be like a tame dog in a young democracy. A self-respecting media will chose to cover all aspects of society in order to reflect a complete picture. And emphasising development does not compromise, but in fact strengthens, a true watchdog of society. South Africa has entered a long and hard journey to social equity which deserves good coverage in our media.

There is no doubt that our country is faced by big challenges. These challenges were heightened by great praises showered by the world on our "miraculous" transition to democracy. Ironically, the challenges have also created flashes of tension between the government and the media. The government has been complaining that the media is not presenting a fair and balanced view of the changes taking place in the country.

But one must also point out that government tends to be its own worst enemy on certain occasions. This is particularly true when entangled in a controversial issue. It either holds back information or releases conflicting views. One of the recent examples is its handling of the aids awareness play and the manner in which the contract was awarded. Another matter was the donation made to ANC by a hotel magnate said to have donated to the ANC and the organisation's deputy president handsomely, and believed to be running away from prosecution for bribery. The government has been quick to blame the media on these issues but has also failed to praise the media on constructive news coverage.

Our media operations tend to spend too much time admiring our own footwork. With our attitude, we risk losing focus on our goals. Media was one of the important partners in the struggle for freedom.

Reflecting the desires and aspirations of society at the time was enough to make us enemies of elements who resisted democracy.

The task of reflecting society is harder today because we have lost a sizeable number of skilled journalists to the private sector and government service. Our newsrooms are today largely staffed by younger and inexperienced journalists. Of these, there are far fewer with writing skills. This is particularly the case with journalists from disadvantaged communities. Lack of opportunities, both at education institutions and in the profession in the past, hampered their progress. Added to this, is a disadvantage that English — which they are expected to use at work — is not their mother tongue.

Faced with competition from the Internet and other sophisticated means of communication, newsprint needs to stay ahead by putting a lot of emphasis on writing and analysis. For this, you need journalists who are well-trained and equipped to read and interpret the situation correctly. This special species of personnel is an asset to the community — especially a community like ours which is going through transformation.

This is where training comes in. However, except for the emerging press during the country's states of emergency which put emphasis on in-house training, the mainstream press was not interested. The mainstream used their economic power to snatch some of the good students from the emerging press.

With the demise of the emerging press, one of the

great challenges facing our media is to meet the urgent need for large-scale training of journalists countrywide. Although we have training provided by the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) in Johannesburg, I doubt that it can singly meet the current big need.

With the advent of our democracy, there is a growing number of free sheets and small community stations countrywide. Journalists and administrators of these projects will need good skills to sustain their projects. The responsibility of the newspaper, radio and television in covering and understanding issues in a trans-

forming society like ours, is greater than before and only skillful personnel can succeed to perform well.

We need more technicians, universities and even in-house training schemes to be able to adequately meet our needs. Maybe this is also an area where the Commonwealth Press Union can come in by providing resources and equipment. Here I'm talking about training in South Africa — where most people who need the skills are

**We need journalists to  
strengthen democracy, by not  
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transformation.**

based — rather than the present exchange programmes which take journalists abroad. I have nothing against overseas programmes, but I think they will be more effective if they are done as advanced training catering mainly for journalist trainers or role model journalists who will impart skills to younger cadres.

The young South African democracy which has been described as a miracle worldwide, need not fail. One of the elements of supporting this model society is to produce skilled journalists. These are journalists who will help to strengthen democracy, by not only being sensationalists, but rather constructive foot-soldiers who will be good custodians of transformation. They will be well-equipped to monitor progress and help shape debates that create challenging direction to our democracy.

While keeping healthy markets to bankroll our publications, radio and television stations, our journalists should never lose sight of a much greater responsibility — participating fully in social and economic transformation of our society. True development of human beings involves much more than filling the cash tills.

There is an urgent need to give people a new sense of dignity, a new community experience and enjoyment of a fuller life in our newly-attained freedom.

If journalists fail in this regard, then our struggle for freedom would have been in vain.

# newspapers and the 'net: the online future

► continued from page 30

Finally, journalistic methods will change. Journalists can now benefit from being able to join global communities of journalists in specialised discussion groups. This interaction — on ethics, tips, techniques, etc. — is already impacting on journalist competencies. Even more, however, journalists can be empowered by having access to online information. In the medium-term at least, it is probably likely that cyberspace will prove more valuable for the input, rather than the output, side of journalism — whether that output is on paper or online. We often forget that journalists are also consumers of information, and indeed to be a good producer of information, a journalist needs to be a good consumer.<sup>22</sup>

As Canadian journalist Tom Koch argues, the future of journalism — especially in a global eruption of online publishing — may lie in finding and explaining the causes and consequences of events. Very often, he continues, journalists have been forced into sheer reportage of what politicians and experts have to say, because they do not have the knowledge or background to question it. With online information resources, they can now shift the balance in their favour.<sup>23</sup>

An empowered journalist is an empowered communicator. That is a real opportunity for newspapers in electronic or paper versions.

## CONCLUSION

Information, guidance, communications, community, guardianship. Changes in journalism as a practice. These are the opportunities. To go online does not mean to shut down print by any means. It means to identify and leverage the key characteristics of newspapers into a world where the benefits are many and the cost is comparatively low.

It is the right time for newspapers to get onto the Net. Done comprehensively, newspapers can get on top of the Net. Missing the opportunities will mean the Net gets on top of the newspapers, leaving society that much the poorer.

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