

# “Wasn’t Eugene Nyati the one who fibbed about his CV at Wits?”

The *Sunday Times* retained former University of North-West professor, GRAEME ADDISON, to set up a scheme to recruit and mentor young black journalists for long-term careers in the newspaper. He went on a 15 000km recruitment drive around South Africa, visiting most of the universities, technikons and commercial colleges that train journalists. He reached some damning conclusions...



Graeme Addison

**T**HE PHONE WENT and it was Brian Pottinger, about to assume the role of editor of the *Sunday Times*, asking me to come to Johannesburg and set up a “mentoring” scheme. I readily said yes. After training journalists for 20 years I felt confident that we would find solidly trained students in the tertiary institutions.

Eight months down the line and I can truthfully report that everything is different when you look at media training from the perspective of an employer in the midst of transformation. This will probably annoy everyone, but the simple truth is that most journalism departments are doing a poor to bad job, and the media have done little to put them right.

Indeed, the media are part of the problem. A conspiracy between past governments and newspaper owners ensured that journalists were strapped into a straightjacket misleadingly called “objective journalism”. It wasn’t objective at all.

The Newspaper Press Union, colluding with the State, forced journalists to adopt a Code of Conduct that ruled out racial or sectional incitement and called for a responsible approach to security news. Incitement and responsibility were code words for suppressing the truth of what was really going on in the townships and other “key points” hidden from public view.

Newswriting SA-style became a technical exercise in truth avoidance. Today the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is exposing what really lay under the blanket of news SA-style. Although there were still models for

young journalists to admire (Rees, Day and Katzin on Muldergate, Jacques Pauw on the death squads) training was increasingly technical. Writing became more formulaic. We taught shorthand, interviewing, the 5 W’s & H and the Newspaper Press Union (NPU) code (a form of self-defence). With the arrival of the Atex system and DTP, editors cried out for competent, but not troublesome, recruits.

Have we put all that behind us? Today we are very conscious of the sins of the past, but we face a typically South African inability to move from rhetoric to operations.

The *Sunday Times* has now made a commitment to transformation by embarking on a programme to hire black journalists for positions up and down the ladder. This will fundamentally alter perspectives on what news is and who it’s for. The paper is adjusting its sales strategy to capture masses of new black readers.

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Two generations of senior journalists have either emigrated or opted for internal exile in PR. Their loss has left newsrooms stripped bare and emotionally bleached. It’s time to revive the traditions of investigative journalism and crusading, but it will take more than formulaic teaching to achieve this.

The awareness of these changes is proving slow to penetrate our colleges.

It’s easy enough to criticise the journalism students, as if they were the problem. A belief that the products of journalism colleges can’t do the job has been an article of faith with case-hardened newspaper people for generations. Ironically, today many of the die-hards are themselves products of journalism departments. Perhaps they forget how it was for them. Perhaps a cynical attitude towards the academy is a mind-set that comes with doing the job for real.

I toured 19 institutions and interviewed 117 candidates, of whom about two-thirds were other than white, for internships at the *Sunday Times*. Six were finally selected. Another 20 are on a waiting-list to be placed with associated newspapers if I can prevail upon the editors to trust my judgements. My findings are based on 20-minute interviews and a two-hour written test of language skills and news awareness.

If I am provocative in what follows, it’s

deliberate. Most journalism students:

- don’t know how to craft a narrative
- don’t know how to proofread copy
- don’t read newspapers
- don’t follow current affairs on the airwaves
- don’t read good books for pleasure
- don’t prepare for interviews
- don’t know about critical developments in the media
- don’t know that they don’t know.

What do they know?

They know that they want a job and they understand that they must show enthusiasm for the company that’s interviewing them. They are desperately keen to impress but have little to impress with — few present books of personal cuttings or have any ideas for local stories. They lack the “consciousness of contemporaneity” as news-awareness has been called.

What are they good at? Preparing nicely typed CVs. In some cases, where the technology has had time to penetrate (such as at Rhodes and Natal Technikon) the students are whizzes at DTP and on the Internet. That’s fine, but I think we should remind ourselves that high-tech is no substitute for low cunning, a quality real journalists will always need.

Some students are very street-wise, coming from township or exile backgrounds; some are book-wise in the sense that they read for curiosity and to broaden their personal outlook on life. Most aren’t either of these things. They are what I would call laid-back legionnaires, waiting for life to happen to them. It will, of course; but it was not part of my brief to wait that long. A depressing picture of our youth? Not really.

As I said to start with, most leathery old newshounds have long ago lost the innocence of the university undergraduate. At age 20 I was no different. So I tried now to take an imaginative step into the world of the Me Generation, if that is what they are, and figure out what I would be thinking about, doing and reading in their position.

One supposes that it’s so hard to get a job in the formal sector that self-employment stares most graduates in the face, no matter their colour. An interview for a job is an unlooked-for bonus, but there are too many factors mitigating against being chosen — whether wrong colour, wrong gender, wrong ideas, wrong region, or simply wrong life. So the students go into the exercise giving off the air that they stand no chance and are just going through the motions.

The best thing about the current crop of students is that they have an excellent grasp of the democratic role of media. This was true right across the board from Peninsula Technikon to Fort Hare and the University of Zululand. Students were not defensive of sectional interests, and they were dead set on



wanting newspapers in particular to expose misdeeds in places of power.

Not a single student thought well of the way the ANC had handled Holomisa's allegations of bribery and corruption. They all damned Sarafina 2 as a cover-up by President and party. So the spirit of the fourth estate is alive, even if the skills are somewhat unwell. In anticipation of the angry letters that are bound to follow this article, let me really drive the nail in by clarifying why I say students can't write, don't read and can't think.

Most of those tested simply used the conventional 5W's & H template for news stories. That might suit a daily paper, but it's not what the weeklies are looking for. The inverted pyramid style is a necessary foundation for reporters but even the dailies nowadays are injecting a lot more interpretation into newswriting. The academics should wake up to the real changes going on in print journalism, here and abroad.

The breathless rush of a straight accident report is not really an appropriate model for the issue-orientated news that is coming to fill much of the modern serious newspaper. Business, politics, education, labour, environment and gender issues all occupy prominent places in the agenda of print news. You can leave it to the electronic media, including Internet, to deliver sound-bites and factoids. What you need is to cultivate a new generation of writers with a sense of connectedness (not just computer connectivity).

Students need to be drawn into the craft of writing multiple-sourced stories, using their own insight and stylistic flair to give the reader some bearings. After all, this is what the academics have been calling for, all these years: quality journalism.

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But if they want it, they must teach it with appropriate research and writing tools instead of peddling tired formulae that depend on a rote-learning approach to how to crowd as many facts into an intro as you possibly can.

In the Sunday papers, stories are critically angled, highly coloured by human interest, and simply not what the lecturers are teaching. The *Sunday Times* is usually accused by academic critics of being sensational and downmarket compared with more serious weekly fare.

Like it or not, the quali-pop journalism of this newspaper aims for a mass market with a taste for striking headlines, brisk intros and lots of blood and guts in the narrative. Student writers should learn to tell a story with all the emotional taps turned on but not a fact out of place. The only courses that touch on these techniques are dubbed "feature writing", which misses the point entirely.

This kind of newswriting requires a blend of

literary imagination and sheer curiosity about the details of life. It's what attracted Charles Dickens, Jack London, Nat Nakasa and Riaan Malan — and the mere mention of those names should suggest that students need exposure to what has been called the "literature of journalism".

Numerous students told me they didn't have time to read for interest's sake. I was appalled. The quote of the tour was from one who said: "I'm so tired from studying that when I try to read I fall asleep". I hope they have a job for her in the land of Nod; we don't.

It is not only a literary background that is lacking. Students are seriously out of touch with media realities. Believe it when I report that a goodly number of those attending the interviews could not tell me (in any convincing detail) what they had read in newspapers or magazines in the past week. Or, for that matter, what they had heard on SAFM's morning current affairs programme (if they knew it existed). No excuses. News files are available in the departments and everyone has radios or TV's in the residences, with the exception of those in the desperately poor black former bush colleges.

Students may have looked at the front page of the *Sunday Times*, and out of deference to my age and foolishness they assured me it was a great newspaper and they would like to work there. What do you think of the paper's investigation into Eugene Nyati, I asked. Eugene who? Wasn't he the one who fibbed about his CV at Wits? I found myself being interviewed.

Attending to the media is a habit that should become established in first year, with regular tests to eliminate the shirkers. Teaching staff probed me about the impending change of ownership of TML into black hands. What struck me is that few of the academics passed on their interest in this subject to their students.

One question in my two-hour written test related to the attempt by TML to hold the new owners to a code of editorial independence. Most students guessed at the situation and did not know of the various positions adopted by editors, unions, management and the new owners, although it had all received exhaustive coverage.

What this suggests that transformation in the media industry is seen as a very distant phenomenon. Surely this is a topic on which research by academics should be fed back both into the media and into teaching? The reality is that those lucky enough to be hired will soon encounter media transformation without having been prepared for the shock of it.

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As for English, the average level of comprehension and composition, as shown by a language test, was fair to good. But virtually all students failed the proofreading test. Precision is one of the things a university should impart; if students lack attention to detail it must be because the staff don't insist on it — or they lack it themselves, which is probably closer to the point.

The issue of "competence" looms behind

## MENTORING

**O**ur plan at the *Sunday Times* is to create a new generation of good reporters and writers by consciously mentoring them. Mentoring is a familiar technique in insurance companies. It is also familiar to most senior journalists who at one point or another in their careers have been mentored by those more seasoned in experience than themselves.

Together with the in-house programme, we are launching an internet resource page to be called the MentorLink. This will provide a site for discussion of training issues and make available training materials and ideas for journalism departments and their students.

Good mentors should impress certain standards of behaviour and professional practice on young journalists. We are also making place for junior lecturers to work in the newsroom for limited periods. Many of the institutions I visited are employing teachers who have no practical experience themselves; they have come up the theory ladder.



discussions of language. Subs become irritated by messy copy, reporters resent the attitude, and as subs are often white and reporters black the matter soon takes on racial overtones. What comes first, motivation or competence? In our situation of transition, motivation is A1-Number 1.

To quote someone who is very much in vogue in media departments nowadays, the German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas, you can't have efficiency without motivation, and you can't have motivation without legitimacy.

The legitimacy of media institutions was fatally compromised under white nationalism, by censorship, state control of broadcasting, and the co-option of newspapers by the state. Furthermore, the country lost at least two generations of senior journalists — one after Sharpeville and again after Soweto '76. Newsrooms were juniorised. Critical independence went to hell.

On the other side, a certain tone of agitprop entered the alternative press. Independence was compromised there too by the rulings of the Cultural Desk. However, the mass democratic movement as a whole bestowed a fierce belief in media independence — a belief I encountered again and again in the interviews.

If this independence is preserved and extended, workers within the media should feel motivated to do their jobs properly. If the new masters of the state and business manage to browbeat our journalists into new forms of submission, don't expect to see good writing. You can ignore all of the above and go back to the old ways.

► **OPENING WINDOWS: from page 19**

around the five-year window period during which profits would not necessarily be made on such an investment.

Partnerships with the other broadcasters, important for financial sustainability, does not necessarily mean that community television is destined to be eternally relegated to "public access" time slots on public and/or private broadcasters — a position which many think is the only future for community television. In some areas this may be the short term scenario until such time as community broadcasters build up the capacity to broadcast on their own. For other provinces, with widely dispersed rural populations, high signal distribution costs and a small advertising base, the time slots option may well be the answer in the long term.

A cursory look at the numbers illustrates that even in areas where community television is viable, the IBA is going to have to rethink its approach to the concept of "multiple micro stations" which may be appropriate for community radio, serving a small local community, but for television is unrealistic. Community television, in order to be viable both financially and in terms of programming capacity, needs a bigger broadcasting radius than the maximum 10 – 15 km presently allowed by the IBA. With the exception of perhaps the Johannesburg inner city, there is not one community which has the programming capacity to broadcast for more than a few hours per day (at the very most). Within a limited broadcast radius it is highly unlikely that sufficient advertising will be raised to cover the costs of running a community television station or that advertisers will find the limited numbers reached a particularly attractive option. Besides the financial arguments, one would imagine that the people living in Khayalisha will be interested to see the programming made by their neighbours in Athlone and vice versa.

The issue of the structure of community television is perhaps the most challenging one. The above scenario implies that a range of stakeholders, from many different constituencies within a greater community, with vastly different resources and skills, will have to come together and cooperate around community television. The Australian experience is useful in showing how limited frequencies have forced a range of stakeholders together in a consortium through which they jointly own the broadcast licence and manage airtime.

The three-pillared challenge of balancing professional service with community access and con-

trol plus the related issues of financial viability and the structure of community television are bound to be the key issues to be addressed at the IBA's Community Television Workshop on 6-7 February 1997. The workshop will bring together an eclectic range of interest groups and community television is bound to emerge as highly contested terrain.

A positive outcome could be the formation of unusual partnerships towards the mutual realisation of a unified vision in which all players have a clearly defined role to play and which recognises that we all ultimately need each other in order to achieve our objectives. *Karen Thorne is co-ordinator of the Open Window Network*

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