

# fast track freeze-frame of the



**MATHATHA TSEDU**  
Sowetan, Political Editor

## SPEEDSTERS

### HARVARD TEAM

- Dennis Cruywagen, Deputy editor, *Pretoria News*
- Ryland Fisher, Deputy Editor, *Cape Times*
- Rich Mkhondo, Independent Newspapers Foreign Correspondent, Washington.
- Kaiser Nyatumba, Political Editor, *The Star*
- Kanthen Pillay, New Enterprises Manager, Gauteng Newspapers
- Tyrone Seale, Assistant News Editor, *Cape Argus*
- Mathatha Tsedu, Political Editor, *Sowetan*
- Esther Waugh, Senior Political Writer and Parliamentary Correspondent, Independent Newspapers.

### LOCAL TEAM

- Tyrone August, Features Editor, *Sowetan*
- Thabo Leshilo, Business Editor, *Business Report*
- Sol Makgabutlane, News Editor, *The Star*
- Prakash Naidoo, Senior writer, *Sunday Independent*
- Praveen Naidoo, Deputy Managing Editor, *Daily News*
- Colleen Ryan, Chief of Staff, Editorial, *The Star*
- Chris Steyn, Editor, Independent Newspapers Investigative Unit

**I**NDEPENDENT Newspapers, South Africa's biggest English newspaper group, recently embarked on a training programme for senior black and women employees who could be earmarked for senior executive positions such as editors in the future.

The programme was in part due to a realisation by Independent Newspapers that if they are going to survive in the coming years, they need to train people who would run their papers.

While white journalists had access to training and advanced education in the past, and this was sufficient because the papers were in the main directed at whites, the future of papers is now black. If papers are to survive, they must woo more black readers and this means more black journalists, editors and other executives are needed and needed now.

The programme was also due to the pressure by civil and trade union organisations that pointed out that of the over 13 titles that the company owned, until very recently, only one, the *Cape Times*, was edited by a black person.

In a South Africa ruled by Nelson Mandela, how could this Irish-owned and -controlled company still continue, while it purports to have come into South Africa to help the democratic process?

The combination of these two factors saw Independent vote R1 000 000 to the training programme that brought 11 staff members, nine blacks and two white women and myself as a *Sowetan* employee to the programme.

As a functional and public relations exercise, the programme was designed to draw as much attention to itself as was possible, for this would help offset the questions of the absence of blacks in senior positions that the company's executives had grown tired of answering.

Press releases were therefore the order of the day, and part of the year-long programme included a six-to-seven week stint in the United States as part of the prestigious Nieman Foundation, which runs a world renowned programme for journalists.

The programme also included seminars at the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) where various topics of interest to print journalists were dealt with. These included an assessment of the advance of broadcast media in South Africa, and how these developments impacted on the way newspapers reported news.

For example, one seminar on the broadcast media came to the conclusion that the changes at the SABC have made radio and television

news more credible. Thus, while in the past many people would only believe what they heard or saw on radio and TV after checking it out with the newspapers, many people now believe what the radio and TV broadcasts. These stations are also on-the-ball with news, and as such, breaking news becomes history by the time any paper prints the story. Newspapers have to come to terms with this, and many have not yet cottoned on to this change, and write breaking stories as if the readers have not yet heard about the event.

Discussions were also held with other journalists, and the programme participants were enlisted into the IAJ's programmes of planned conferences such as the African editors come-together, sometimes sparking debates amongst participants that they were being used by the IAJ to pursue its own interests.

The programme in the Boston and Cambridge in the US included a field survival exercise called Outward Bound which was a bonding exercise under duress, leadership training programmes by tutors associated with the Harvard Business School, journalism leadership programmes by Dr Bill Boyd of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and discussions on ethics and other challenges of the media today with people like Nieman Foundation curator, Mr Bill Kovach, Freedom Forum technology expert Adam Clayton Powell III, Boston Globe columnist Derrick Jackson and many others.

Boyd's programme was the longest, covering budgeting, coaching, choosing news stories, and exercises of critically assessing the Boston newspapers as well as three award-winning series run by different newspapers in several parts of the US.

The upshot of all this was discussion around the relevance of these issues to our own circumstances, and many of us felt that the process had opened our eyes to new areas and avenues of work that we had been neglecting.

These new areas included planning projects that could take a year to cover, where instead of just running with a story, you could choose a topic and go for it, research it and write. In other words, not just one good story but a series that could go for the whole year. Discussions on budgeting and advertising were areas that many of us had not dealt with before, having been content with just our journalistic abilities.

Before returning home, the group spent a few days in Washington, where they also visited the *Washington Post* and the Centre for International Journalists. The programme

ended in December, after the rest of the group (and new members added later) went through a gruelling process that included spending days at each floor of the company's main headquarters in Johannesburg learning how finance, advertising, circulation and printing work.

They also went through the other main centres of the company, Durban and Cape Town, learning the different ways in which these parts are the same as well as different.

A big debate, however, rages. What happens with the group since completing the programme in December? As the programme had been sold as 'editor material' for those from Independent Newspapers, (*Sowetan* did not make any such promise and I went in with no illusion of an editor's job waiting) what now?

It is quite clear that there are no editors' jobs waiting out there in those papers. Many of us understood that the rhetoric of the selling of the programme had much to do with the public relations exercise and as such had not sufficiently emphasised what this programme was really about: training.

And for those of us who saw this, we felt it was a situation that should be understood for what it was: A group of white executives trying to save their consciences and take off the load of accusations of no black advancement in the company by spending R1 million.

Blacks in the programme had to also understand that they sorely needed the skills that the programme gave them, skills that they could use as editors if they were appointed, or as senior editorial executives which many if not all of us were.

And herein lies the way to the future.

To approach the training programme as nothing more than what it is. And for other companies to realise that senior editorial executives need to be prepared for the tasks ahead, especially companies such as the New Africa Publications Limited and the new owners of Times Media Ltd who must establish their own programmes, and for NAP to stop playing kiddyback like we did with my presence in that course.

It is a challenge that not only faces companies, but educational institutions too, to prepare curricula and programmes not for four years study at the university or technikon, but short gussy courses, focussed and directed at specific categories of trainees.

Are media owners, media workers and media teaching institutions ready for this challenge?