Racism in

Former *Sowetan* editor JOE LATAKGOMO tells of the treatment of black journalists.

MUCH of the debate has been muddied by people talking about whether the companies employed black journalists full time, whether they had separate toilets, whether they were promoted or weren't promoted. We must first of all accept that in the political situation of the time, most companies were guilty of that kind of discrimination against black people. So it is not as if journalists were selected for that kind of abuse.

I was the first black journalist to get onto the Argus cadet course. I had been a journalist for seven years before I got onto the programme and the reason I actually persisted was that I wanted to make the point that I could cope with it. The truth of the matter is that black journalists were never given the kind of training they should have had. They were considered to be not up to scratch for the cadet course, but at the same time no alternative programmes were arranged.

I think it was part of the policy of the company at the time that the two black newspapers in the company had what was called editorial directors. *Ilanga* had an editorial director in Arthur Konigkramer and *The World* had Charles Still. It was clear that the black editors did not have the kind of control over the content of the publications that they should have had. We had to steer clear of the contentious things, steer clear of political things. Black executives were in fact toothless on *The World*. During the time I was editor, if I had to write a leader, it had to go to Charles Still. And if he didn't like it, it didn't go in. So whose voice was the newspaper actually representing? It seemed to me a conscious policy to keep the paper out of trouble. Throughout that period, they had no confidence in their black editors.

Things were beginning to move and I was not able to reflect it in the paper. Any time we needed to do that, there were these tensions between me and Charlie Still. After *The World* closed, he was moved to the *Daily News* and I went to make a courtesy call. He said: "Listen my boy." (that is how he used to speak) "Listen my boy, I'll tell you something. I warned the company that unless we were careful, this newspaper would be closed down." And he pulled out a piece of paper and said: "Here. I actually wrote this memo ..." And he said he had warned the company that black editors were going to get the paper closed down. I said to him: "What was it that made you uncomfortable?" He said: "Listen, leave politics alone." As far as he was concerned, if he had been there, *The World* would not have suffered that fate.

A lot of people were turned into activists by their experience of the horrors of 1976. A lot of them haven't quite recovered from that experience. I was on the news desk and often they would call and they would be crying and saying: "I've just counted X number of bodies." During that period when we were reporting X number of people killed, the police version would invariably have a far lower number. We were seen as stirring up conflict, because I asked the journalists to take photographs of as many bodies as they could, because we needed to have the evidence. Then some police officer accused us of taking people who were alive and making them lie down just so we could take the photograph. It was a sad situation. We didn't get the backing even of our sister publication *The Star*. It often ran a lead story to say that perhaps 10 people died in Soweto riots and somewhere in the story they would say: "However the black newspaper, *The World*, puts the figure at 40". It is almost as if they would rather believe the police version than our version. Eventually, we were vindicated.

"... everyone spoke about the incompetence of black reporters and their advocacy. Even then what was happening was the black guys would get the stories and feed in to some white journalist who would write the story."

I think perhaps we didn't probe deeply enough to find explanations for a whole number of activities, whether it was attacks on trains or petrol bomb attacks on activists' homes. Virtually every time there were attacks, people would tell us about a car that looked like a police car. Section 27b of the Police Act made it very difficult for us to link those attacks to the police. The onus was on us to prove it.

Sometimes we got telephone calls, people telling us what was happening. But we knew our telephones were being bugged. If we got a call like that and published it, it could be somebody sitting in security headquarters giving the impression he was from Tanzania or Lusaka, giving you disinformation and you would end up publishing what would eventually be untrue information. They would prove that you published false information and therefore discredit you forever. So we were very careful. I don't know the number of times that, while you were talking to a contact, somebody would interrupt and in a very famous kind of way would say: "Julle praat maar kak, man."

The mainstream papers accepted too easily the police version and it always left publications like *The World* and the *Sowetan* out on a limb, because they looked the odd man out, and therefore there must be something wrong with their reporters. And in addition to that, everyone spoke about the incompetence of black reporters and their advocacy. Even then what was happening was the black guys would get the stories and feed in to some white journalist who would write the story.

Black journalists suffered all ways. Poor training on the one side, pressures from the community on the other side, pressures from the police on the third front, so it wasn't as if they weren't trying to tell the story.

Excerpts from Independent Newspapers' submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

the newsroom

Daily News editor DENNIS PATHER recalls having to run the gauntlet of racial prejudice.

I was called in for an interview and told I was the best candidate available, but I had to come back in a couple of days. They needed to check on my background. When I came back, they said they were given to believe that I was a political hothead, that I had been in trouble with the special branch, that I had associated with people like Steve Biko and Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper, something I thought would have been of benefit to my application. I asked whether they thought I was going to get subversive material into their columns surreptitiously. I was told it was a large company and they couldn't afford to take chances and that I should wait for my letter of acceptance. Up to today the letter has not come.

Two years later, I applied and was asked the same question by the same person. My answer was the same as two years earlier. I think by then they had matured sufficiently to accept it. About a year ago I spoke to the person who interviewed me. It turned out they had consulted the special branch. The crime reporter went to the news editor and said: "Do you want to know about that guy's background, I'll find out." It turned out he went to the special branch.

The first day I joined, I got hungry and went to the canteen. They told me I couldn't be served. I showed the guy my staff card and he said: "Sorry these are the regulations." He pointed me to another room that was darkened and had a shelf and pigeonhole through which they served blacks after they had exhausted the white queue. I bought my meal and sat down at one of the tables and then got rude insults from staff members from the works department. I had a choice of avoiding this and taking my meal to a table or just insisting on my rights.

I carried on eating at these tables. It was lonely at the beginning, but a few years later there were others who also used the canteen facilities and stood up to these guys who passed racial insults. The company then divided the canteen into two with the strategic placing of pot plants. One was whites only and the other was international, which was totally unacceptable. We sat where we liked and a number of whites joined us in defying the regulations.

Those were the times. We were living at a time when a lot of white people refused to associate with black people and were victims of racial stereotypes.

In terms of socialising in the newsroom, our colleagues were very slow. Whenever there was a birthday or some reason for celebration, all of them on a Friday afternoon trooped off to the Osborne Hotel and then regaled us with stories on Monday morning. Then one day the penny dropped. One of the journalists asked me: "You weren't there. What happened to you?" I said: "I'm not allowed into the Osborne Hotel." It had not crossed their minds.

For a black person to be noticed, you had to outshine any white man. I was nominated to take over as political reporter. It took the editor a long time to decide on my appointment. Whether a black political reporter would be able to work effectively with white politicians, and whether white politicians would feel comfortable, were political aspects the editor had to put his mind to. I take my hat off to him that he eventually did agree to it, because for the first time a newspaper in Natal had decided to take this step.

"... whereas a white political reporter would have leanings to one party or another, as a black person I had no sympathy for any of those parties. So perhaps I was more impartial than the others."

In the beginning it was difficult. Some of the politicans felt uncomfortable. They trusted a white person more easily than a black person. What was to my advantage was that, whereas a white political reporter would have leanings to one party or another, as a black person I had no sympathy for any of those parties. So perhaps I was more impartial than the others.

I remember saying to my white colleagues on the *Daily News* that I had once lied under oath, and I did not think it was wrong. They were aghast. I said if you were in my shoes you would have done the same. The police had called me into the police station and said that a person who had been banned had come in to see me at the newspaper office. When asked whether my friend had come into the office, I said no. I was prepared to take an oath and say no.

Some whites accused us of being over-sensitive, but they did not go through the same sort of experiences as blacks did. Black journalists were more prone to arrest, house arrest or confiscation of passports or restrictions in travel than most of the white journalists.

I would go and attend a meeting and on my way back be waved down off the road, have all the things confiscated from my car, my notes, whatever I had picked up from the meeting. That happened at least half a dozen times.

I was then secretary of Mwasa (Media Workers' Association of South Africa) in Natal, and on more than one occasion I was aroused in the early hours of the morning and the house was searched. The police had also visited the offices of the *Daily News* and went through our desks and took whatever they wanted.

At that stage I did not even expect anybody on the newspaper to take up the cudgels on my behalf. There would have been an editorial expressing criticism of bans on organisations and so on, but not down to the behaviour of policemen searching your homes.

While some editors at that stage did a sterling job in opposing apartheid, others believed that editorials criticising that obnoxious system would suffice. I believe there was more for them to do: they should have tested the government to its limits. The aim of the editors was to "stay alive". But I think some of them were deliberately soft. Black people invariably took a stronger line because they were the victims every day of their lives.

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