

# Mda and the FBJ

## building power

BY FERIAL HAJFAJEE

**L**IZEKA MDA negotiates The Star newsroom with the ease of one who has arrived. There is about this dreadlocked writer a sense of ownership and chutzpah as she looks for a ream of paper, demands a key to the office where it's kept, photocopies and weaves her way to her new office with her name plaque on the door.

Mda is an executive editor at The Star in Gauteng and the chairperson of the Forum of Black Journalists. Both jobs are new. Her office at Independent Newspapers' headquarters in the centre of Johannesburg is without the photographs and bits and bobs which lend a lived-in air. Her plans for the FBJ are sketchy and there is much that's in the pipeline.

Sponsored research to audit the position of black journalists in the industry will soon be done. The organisation is tightening up on membership and plotting a role for itself. Branches have just started in the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal. "For me, the FBJ is a professional association of sorts. It's for our development as journalists. It's a place where we can let our hair down ... if we had that kind of hair."

For now though, she's involved in a spot of spring-cleaning. "I believe in sorting out your own house and getting it in order." The FBJ was started by journalists in The Star's newsroom several years ago who began the push for change at a group where power had not shifted from the pale males who ruled the roost.

It's a different story today where mahogany row is filled by the likes of the new deputy general manager of Gauteng Newspapers, Nazeem Howa and other YGBs (young, gifted blacks) like Mda and The Star's news editor Mondli Makhanya.

Across the Independent Newspapers stable of 13 newspapers and at Times Media Limited, the numbers of black journalists in decision-making positions have increased. Four of the Independent Newspapers' titles are edited by black editors. Bylines have tipped the scale. Mastheads are filled with managing editors like Mzimkulu Malunga

(Financial Mail), deputy editors like Rehana Rossouw (Mail&Guardian), acting deputy editors like Mathata Tsedu (the Sunday Independent) and deputy news editors like Jacob Dlamini (Business Day).

Indications of change are everywhere and it cannot be long before black journalists are a majority of the professional corps and not a minority. There is no longer a

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PIC BY RUTH MOTALU

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Black Editors Forum, so should there be a Forum of Black Journalists?

Mda has no existential angst about her organisation. After a trip to the United States at the end of July where she attended the glamorous annual gathering of the (American) National Association of Black Journalists, she's more convinced than ever. "They are so far ahead of us. The very fact that you can talk of 3 000 black journalists gathering annually is amazing. People actually pay a US\$250 registration fee. They want to be there." Mda wants to build an organisation of journalists who wield professional and financial power. Success, for her, equals prosperity. At the NABJ convention, an automatic teller machine was installed for delegates. "On Wednesday afternoon it was filled with US\$1-million. By Saturday morning it was finished," says Mda incredulously.

An idea she hopes to import from the convention is the job fair where most American newspapers and networks come along to recruit. She wants the FBJ to start dealing with the issues that affect journalists. "I watched them deal with everything from the big picture things like 'reporting Africa' to

mid-career burn-out as well as how to write a tight intro." While many would rejoice that somebody is going to teach local journalists to write a tight intro, Mda faces more burning issues.

The monthly FBJ imbizos with prominent people in the news will continue. For now, they are a Gauteng event where the monthly meeting at the SAB Centenary Centre in Newtown is a highlight. Mda is considering persuading speakers — who have included Kwame Toure (the man once known as Stokeley Carmichael), Patricia de Lille and Tito Mboweni — to go on-the-record. "That way the FBJ will be given a profile."

The meeting is also important, she says, because "there is a feeling that black journalists don't have access to decision-makers". News editors continue to send white journalists to do the important stories. "We need new opinions. White SA is always jumping up and down whenever something happens (like the Lesotho intervention/invasion). We need people who are in a position to say 'Hang on!'"

*Ferial Haffajee is a journalist at the Mail&Guardian*

## FORUM OF BLACK JOURNALISTS

**M**embership of the Forum of Black Journalists is open to black journalists. But what precisely is black? "Whoever feels black," says Mda.

My deputy editor (Rehana Rossouw who identifies herself as black, but is classified coloured) swears that membership is not open to her.

Several requests for an application form from Mda were unsuccessful.

Invitations to our office at the Mail&Guardian go only to journalists with African bylines. I've taken my friend Ann Eveleth (physically white and born in America but more citizen-of-the-world than most people I know) along and seen the Sunday Independent's Maureen Isaacson at imbizos. Says Mda: "They are not supposed to come."

What is a journalist? "The FBJ must be owned by practising journalists. I didn't agree with the organisation's launch because it was dominated by too many old fuddy-duddies (She can't mean Zwelakhe Sisulu, Thami Mazwai and Jon Qwelane who held court?) who aren't journalists. No media owners can become members. Membership of the FBJ is open to black (whatever that means these days) reporters, sub-editors, editors, news editors and photojournalists."

*Ferial Haffajee*

# Two unequal Americas

(and what black journalists did about it)



BY DOROTHY BUTLER GILLIAM

**S**OME PEOPLE would place the birth of our struggle at around 1968, a few years after I broke into the daily newspaper business. 1968, as a recent publication of the Freedom Forum's Newseum put it, was pivotal year. "In January, the Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive. In April the Rev Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. In June Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. In August Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. In October two US athletes were ousted from the Olympics for giving the Black Power salute on the medals stand. In November Richard M. Nixon was elected president."

But the 4 April assassination of Dr Martin Luther King would doubtless be the event that most black journalists would remember most. The anger in black urban neighbourhoods that had sporadically spawned fires in some cities, seemed to engulf black urban America after the brutal murder of Dr King. The urban insurrections of the 1960s — most called them riots — demonstrated how inadequate the mainstream media in America was in covering black America. White reporters were attacked in poor black neighbourhoods. Some papers recruited janitors and anybody black who worked in their buildings to go into the riot zones.

Then the presidentially-appointed Kerner Commission fingered the press as a main culprit in creating two, unequal Americas — one black and one white — by failing to write and report adequately on black America. The press was told to hire black reporters and editors and improve its coverage.

One response to this major embarrassment for the media came from the Ford Foundation. Recognising that more black Americans needed to be trained immediately, Ford instituted an intensive 11-week training programme at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism during the summers.

The programme worked well — it was a boot camp for journalists and produced many black journalists who are today's veterans — Milton Coleman, deputy managing editor of the Washington Post; Mervyn Aubespin, associate editor of the Louisville Courier Journal; former television anchor and now businesswoman Maureen Bunyan.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault was among those who taught in that programme along with many others. But after three years the Ford funding ended and Columbia called it quits.

The programme was scheduled to die in the early 1970s. But a small band of black and white journalists — led by Robert Maynard, Earl Caldwell, Walter Stovall and others — knew that the programme should not die. They determined to find the funding and run the programme themselves. As Bob Maynard put it: we were determined to wipe from the lexicon of journalism the phrase "we couldn't find anyone qualified".

By 1976 they had found a new home for the programme — the Summer Programme for Minority Journalists — at the University of California at Berkeley. They received funding from the Gannett Foundation — the forerunner to the Freedom Forum. The SPMJ sought to demystify daily journalism for blacks who had long been barred from America's newsrooms.

I first joined the faculty of the summer programme in 1976 and was asked that same year to become a member of the board of the sponsoring organisation which we called the Institute for Journalism Education. We carefully trained and placed hundreds of minority journalists during the 13 years we ran this successful boot camp for minority journalists. I was fortunate to become IFJ chair in 1985.

We soon found out that minority reporters weren't enough — we needed to train blacks, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans as copy editors and desk editors too.

So we conceived a new programme — the Editing Programme for Minority Journalists — and started an intensive eight-week editing programme.

We found a home for it at the University of Arizona. We recruited faculty, conceptualised the courses and began turning out a cadre of copy editors and assistant desk editors.

But soon we knew something was sorely missing — people who were in a position to make big decisions about coverage, content and direction. In 1985, under the leadership of the then president Ellis Cose, IJE instituted the Management Training Centre at Northwestern University — one of the first newspaper management training projects in America for newspaper people.

Strategically we knew the time had come not only to respond to the needs we saw in the industry but also to get industry leaders more involved in the process of creating the programme.

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