

Pushing the paradigm



Does transformation of the media mean replacing white staff with black staff to make media more representative? Or does transformation mean a mindset change that involves a new approach to journalism, a new approach to covering our very diverse society? And does this mindset change, this new approach depend on whether your newsroom is entirely black or entirely white? Ryland Fisher, former editor *Cape Times*, probes the issues.

I do not think that transformation simply means replacing white staff with black. However, it is important for newspapers to roughly represent the demographics of the province or the country that they serve. This is important for the Western Cape, for instance, where the majority of the population can be classified as coloured. In this province, would it be advisable to have the majority of a newspaper's staff being African?

But it is important to have a significant number of Africans on any newspaper's staff, even in the Western Cape. There are very few Africans employed at Independent Newspapers Cape.

It is in cases like these, that one understands the necessity of transformation, of affirmative action, of anything just to change the demographics of a company.

This is a pity, because we have become so concerned about getting the demographics right that we have overlooked the need for real transformation.

And that need is reflected in the way our newspapers continue to report from a mainly white, privileged paradigm. Most South African newspapers, even those with black editors, continue to perpetuate this paradigm.

Look at how the media reacted when allegations surfaced about Hansie Cronje's match fixing. Because the allegations came from the Indian police, they were roundly dismissed by almost all media. Now, if Scotland Yard had made those allegations, would we have seen the same condemnation from our media?

Look too at how most black editors and journalists have been fairly sympathetic to Alan Boesak, while most white editors and journalists feel that he should fry for his sins. Now I hold no brief for Boesak, but I must admit there is some merit in the argument that asks why he must sit in prison when so many apartheid era murderers are walking free.

How do we change all of this, how do we encourage a situation where newspapers will be more sensitive to the predominant views in the black community? I believe that only when newspapers employ a significant number of black journalists, including Africans, coloureds and Indians, will they begin to address this issue.

But it should not stop there.

We have to change the way we practise our journalism.

It is difficult to be democratic on a daily newspaper where decisions have to be made in a hurry, often under tremendous pressure. But it is possible for news editors to treat reporters with respect, to discuss sensitive issues, to take time out to listen to a guest speaker on topics like gender and race. In fact, if you do all of these things, you will probably produce a better quality newspaper daily.

We also have to explore different kinds of journalism.

Since I joined the *Cape Times* in 1996, I broke new ground with some initiatives.

"One City Many Cultures", for instance, was an ambitious project to promote tolerance and understanding in

violence-plagued Cape Town. We explored, on two broadsheet pages every day, how different religions and cultural groups relate to rites of passage and other important issues in life. President Mandela launched the initiative and Archbishop Tutu signed the first pledge to promote tolerance in Cape Town. It culminated in a major "One City Festival" in September 1999.

This was an important initiative in our city at the time, when racial and cultural intolerance was at its highest.

Of course, all of these projects will come to nothing if the money is not found to make them happen. And therein lies much of my frustration, not being able to get our group to be serious about making a commitment to making these kinds of projects happen.

I worry too that a newspaper like the *Cape Times*, which had changed quite a bit under my editorship, is going back to what it was before 1994: basically a newspaper aimed at white liberals.

Hard work we had done to reposition the paper, with projects such as "One City Many Cultures", is being undone.

I understand the need to position newspapers in a way in which they will have maximum circulation. But if the changes to the *Cape Times* are to grow circulation, they have not been very successful.

I believe part of the reason for this is the inability of my successor, a white male, to understand the need to change the paradigms of our journalism.

And here I speak respectfully about John Scott, who is probably the best satirical writer in the country. However, he is limited in his ability to create newspapers with which the majority of people can identify.

Most newspapers in this country are afraid to lose the old while tentatively reaching out for the new. And yet for long-term survival, we need to reach out more aggressively for new readers, at the risk of losing some of the old.

Our newspapers must become more South African, in feel and content.

I have been asked whether my leaving Independent Newspapers is a reversal for transformation.

I suppose it is, because they will be losing a senior, high-profile black editor. But more than that, if I may say so myself, is the loss to the group of someone who has consistently tried to re-define the parameters of our journalism.

After 20 years of journalism, I am braving the big bad world as an entrepreneur, trying to make money as a communications consultant. I am hopeful that I will still make an impact, as an outsider, on South Africa's media.

Maybe, just maybe, some day things will change.

"Most black editors and journalists have been fairly sympathetic to Alan Boesak while most white editors and journalists feel that he should fry for his sins"

JOHN SCOTT, EDITOR OF THE CAPE TIMES, REPLIES:

It grieves me that Ryland Fisher, my former colleague with whom I had a reasonable working relationship for more than two years when I was his deputy, should now question both my own and Independent Newspapers Cape's commitment to transformation.

He more than anybody should know that leading black members of our executive including Moegsien Williams (executive editor), Ishmet Davidson (general manager), and Bonnie Jutzen (HR executive), would not tolerate anything less than total commitment to employment equity in its fullest sense. To suggest otherwise is an insult to their integrity. Nor would I have been appointed editor of the *Cape Times* had I not enjoyed the fullest confidence of Cape MD Shaun Johnson in my own resolve and ability to play a major role in this process. For the past six months we have all put a massive effort into producing a comprehensive five-year employment equity plan.

Ryland mentions the "One City Many Cultures" initiative. I have promoted this fine project at every opportunity, and since assuming the editorship have spent many hours co-chairing (with the City of Cape Town) joint venture meetings to bring this year's "One City Festival" to fruition. And far from reverting to some imagined racial exclusivity and losing circulation, the *Cape Times* has in the first six months of this year not only held its circulation steady but in fact increased it.

While the departure of a senior, high-profile black editor like Ryland Fisher is to be regretted, he was not necessarily God's gift to journalism. He was innovative and full of new ideas, a point I was the first to make to his many critics. But he also alienated many people, both on the *Cape Times* staff and among its readers. People management is at least as important an aspect of editing a South African newspaper as understanding the need to change paradigms.

