

Tools to transform



The HRC inquiry prompted the *Sunday Times* to take a soul-searching look at how it handled the news in a changing South Africa. The paper's **Phylicia Oppelt** reports:

In March this year, as the Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the media gained momentum, we at the *Sunday Times* began exploring where we stood in relation to both the hearings and racism.

It would have been short-sighted and irresponsible to retire to a defensive position, declaring the Commission useless. And it would have been equally foolhardy to exempt ourselves — as one of South Africa's biggest and most influential media institutions — from introspection.

Our newsrooms in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth are populated by journalists from diverse backgrounds and when we sit behind our computers to write or edit stories, our concerns, personal prejudices and backgrounds accompany us.

It was early in March, at one of our Tuesday morning general news conferences that *Sunday Times* editor Mike

Robertson suggested the idea that a committee — comprising a representative group of staff members — explore the possibility of establishing a race charter for the newspaper.

Through volunteering, we formed a committee, comprising Mzilikazi wa Afrika, Herbert Mabuza, Andrew Donaldson, Andrew Trench, Thabo Kobokoane and myself. When we met for the first time, we explored the objectives of a race charter; examining how to maintain our independence as a newspaper and as journalists while carrying an awareness of potential sensitivity surrounding race and racism.

Journalists were united in their view that while we should not shy away from addressing racism, we should not place ourselves in a position of political correctness.

We assigned ourselves tasks that included examining other newspapers' codes of conduct — particularly the US ones since they have a longer tradition of civil rights — as well as looking at the content of the *Sunday Times* and drawing up a list of questions for reporters along the lines of an 'accuracy checklist' that the paper had introduced some time ago. We also used the Ombudsman's Code of Conduct to which the *Sunday Times* subscribes.

We agreed that most of the issues to be covered in the race charter were likely to be seen as self-evident, since

reporters — using their discretion and operating as responsible professionals — would not consciously make themselves guilty of perpetuating racist, religious and cultural stereotypes.

Once we had collected the information, and drawn up the checklist, we circulated the charter among staff members through the *Sunday Times*' staff association, followed by a discussion of the document at our Tuesday news conference.

SUNDAY TIMES CHARTER

Code of conduct for Sunday Times staff in dealing with issues of race, religion and cultural difference.

The guidelines that follow address aspects of how we practice journalism — our treatment of the subjects of news stories, our responsibilities to our society and our responsibility for the effect of what we publish. It is important that we acknowledge that, while South Africa enjoys a democratic government, its past still lies with us especially as far as race and racism are concerned. We have to acknowledge too, that South Africa is a multi-racial and multi-cultural society and we have to allow ourselves to portray different practices and beliefs in a fair and honest manner in our reporting, news gathering, editing and presentation of information.

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THE JEFFREY DWOSKI ROOM (COURTESY: TONY)



(If only life was as honest as the Financial Mail.)

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SUNDAY TIMES STAFF:

- Will act independently when reporting issues of race, but will take note of sensitivities regarding race, or other issues, in their work;
- Report on these issues where there is a demonstrable public interest; when race is a central issue of the story, racial identifications should be used only when they are important to the readers' understanding of what has happened and why it has happened;
- Will not unjustifiably offend others in reporting on sensitive issues relating to race, religion or cultural difference;
- Will not use language or pictures which are offensive, reinforce stereotypes, fuel prejudice or xenophobia;
- Will actively seek diversity in sources which represent the whole community;
- Will be sensitive to cultural differences and values and will actively seek to ensure that reporting takes these considerations into account;
- In crime reporting, will not make mention of the race or religion of either victim or alleged perpetrator, unless that information is meaningful and in the public interest;
- Will uphold the newspaper's principles of fairness, especially when dealing with issues of race; and
- Will, in dealing with the public, be sensitive to cultural differences and not conduct themselves in any way which might unnecessarily offend.

Race Checklist for Reporters and Editors

- What is the public interest in this report?
- Has this report been treated differently because of race? If so, why? Is this justified?
- Is the report — even if factually correct — likely to fuel xenophobia or prejudice? If so, is this justified? Is there any way around this?
- Is the report likely to offend people? If so, why? Is this justified?
- What about the language used in the report? Does it unnecessarily reinforce stereotypes? If so change it!
- What about the voices in the story? Have we actively sought out diverse opinion from ordinary people and experts alike?
- Are there quotes in the story that are racist or possibly offensive? Are these comments balanced by others? Are we justified in using these comments? If so, why?
- Is the report sensitive to possible cultural differences or values? How do we know? Should anything be changed to be sensitive to these differences? If so, why?
- In crime reporting, have we mentioned the race of perpetrators and victims? If so, is it information which is meaningful and in the public interest? Why?
- Has any pressure been brought to bear in reporting this story? Has the issue of race been mentioned? If so, what and why? Do any of these arguments have any bearing on the reporting of the story? Why?
- Have we been fair in the report to all parties?

Racial ID guidelines

In the USA, Keith Woods urges journalists to flag every racial reference and ask these questions:

Is it relevant?

- Race is relevant when the story is about race. Just because people in conflict are of different races does not mean that race is the source of their dispute. An article about interracial dating, however, is a story about race.
- Have I explained the relevance?

- Journalists too frequently assume that readers will know the significance of race in stories. The result is often radically different interpretations. That is imprecise journalism, and its harm may be magnified by the lens of race.

Is it free of codes?

- Be careful not to use welfare, inner-city, underprivileged, blue collar, conservative, suburban, exotic, middle-class, Uptown, South Side, or wealthy as euphemisms for racial groups. By definition, the White House is in the inner-city. Say what you mean.

Are racial identifiers used evenly?

- If the race of a person charging discrimination is important, then so is the race of the person being charged.

Should I consult someone of another race/ethnicity?

- Consider another question: Do I have expertise on other races/cultures? If not, broaden your perspective by asking someone who knows something more about your subject. Why should we treat reporting on racial issues any differently from reporting on an area of science or religion that we do not know well?

Keith Woods is with the Poynter Institute, Florida.

Calling South African journalists, media trainers and media scholars:

COME TO THE COLLOQUIUM

TRAINING FOR MEDIA TRANSFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY:

A joint project of SANEF (South African National Editors' Forum), and the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University.

DATE: October 18th-20th **VENUE:** Johannesburg

- ▶ This colloquium seeks to explore the problems, issues and potential regarding media training.
- ▶ It draws together key stakeholders who have the power to determine the course that media training will take: media CEOs, media editors, journalists and trainers from various sectors.
- ▶ It attempts to forge smart partnerships between these constituencies.
- ▶ It aims to commit participants to a programme of action that can be implemented.

BACKGROUND:

There have been significant changes in media ownership, in the labour market and education/training dispensation, and in attention to racism in the media. All of these have far-reaching implications for South Africa's media, and its role in developing our democracy.

- ▶ Will the changes in ownership and management foster a journalism that can promote participatory democracy and human rights? Will the changes entail greater diversity of media enterprises?
- ▶ What impact is the Employment Equity Act having on staffing of newsrooms, and what are the implications for the output of journalists — the representation of South African reality? Will changing content have an impact on the race and gender of media audiences?
- ▶ The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Skills Development Act compel the media (amongst other employers) to develop standards and fund skills plans and learning activities. How will standards will be set under SAQA, and how will journalism training be defined, implemented, accredited and funded by the media sector education and training authority (MPPPSETA)?
- ▶ The Human Rights Commission inquiry into racism in the media got the media debating what constituted racism in media content and practice. What implications will the final report of the inquiry have for diversity, freedom of expression, media staffing and media training?

In the context of these new developments, the focus of this colloquium is on the way in which media training can impact on media transformation and democracy.

Training is at the heart of the Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act, and is implicit in the media problems attested to at the HRC hearings into the media. This necessarily raises some of the following questions that the colloquium will explore:

- ▶ What kind of training?
- ▶ With what kind of resources?
- ▶ What are our training priorities?
- ▶ Who needs the training?
- ▶ What kind of impact do we hope for?

The key issue is media training as a strategy towards excellent South African journalism that can contribute to building and deepening our nascent democracy. The various stakeholders will be canvassed in advance, in order to develop a draft declaration of intent on the role of training in media transformation and democracy. This declaration will inform deliberations, and provide the foundation for a final statement to be adopted at the end of the colloquium.

7 STEP COLLOQUIUM PROGRAMME:

Day one 18th October (evening only):

1. The vision of media companies (panel discussion).

Day two 19th October:

2. Speaker on the role of the media in South Africa's 21st century democracy.
3. A critique of South African journalism.
4. The vision of news media editors (panel discussion).
5. Training: Improving the quality of South African journalism (panel discussion).
6. Smart Partnerships: making training effective

Day three 20th October:

7. The mechanics of effective training: working groups dealing with Research/journalism; Industry relations; MPPPSETA/funding; Train the trainers; New paradigm; SAQA.

The colloquium will be recorded, and the aim is to produce a booklet which could:

- ▶ act as a record of the views of key media players about their vision for South African journalism;
- ▶ be a sourcebook for implementing training as an ongoing feature of South African newsrooms.

COLLOQUIUM OUTCOMES:

1. A vision for South African journalism that the various stakeholders can agree to.
2. Statement of intent from stakeholders — owners, editors, journalists, and trainers — outlining ways of collaborating around training to attain this vision.
3. 'Handbook' for trainers.

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