

# Cultivating a culture of reading



by Dumisani Ntshentshe

**B**ona is a uniquely South African magazine with a wide reach in all senses – it's distributed nationally (we have about two million readers) and it's also sold in Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mauritius.

It's celebrating its 50th birthday this year. It was founded in 1956 by the Hyman family and in 1964 incorporated South Africa's first black magazine, *Zonk!* founded in 1949.

We've stayed in touch with our readers and continued to flourish in the new, democratic South Africa. Our chief editor, Force Kashane, was a soccer player for Orlando Pirates and he is now a practising sangoma and the writer of our *muthi* column.

At first, *Bona* was published only in English, but a gap in the market was spotted so it was decided that the magazine would be translated into three major indigenous languages, isiXhosa, isiZulu and seSotho.

*Bona* was, and still is, a family magazine. This is a wide-ranging category that no longer exists in many overseas markets such as the UK, US and Australia. To produce the magazine successfully we must know who our readers are and we have to keep updating this by finding out where they stay, their incomes, their education, their hobbies, likes and dislikes. Readership surveys, letters from readers and readers' events such as our highly-successful *Bona* Empowerment Project all help us stay in touch, and this also helps us understand the type of language that our reader is most comfortable reading.

Our readership is fairly evenly split between males and females and most of our readers fall into the age group 16 to 35. Even at this age, the values and the environments they've grown up in make *Bona* readers highly family-orientated. They often have children of their own and their values are generally a bit more conservative. Often they've moved from rural areas into urban areas and they usually value their cultures and traditions highly.

They have lots of aspirations, especially for their children. The readers themselves may think some of their options are limited because often they aren't highly educated, but they like *Bona* because our articles are about people like them who have achieved great things, or they get advice on how to empower themselves.

Our readers' average income is about R3 500 a month but a fair proportion are not formally employed. This is another reason why articles on business opportunities and empowerment are so important to them. From the feedback we get they are also keen to know as much as possible about consumer rights and managing their finances.

They make time for fun in their lives too, so we make space for it as well. Both male and female readers are keen and well-informed sports fans. Popular music (kwaito, R&B, gospel, jazz and hip-hop), watching TV, radio and, of course, churchgoing, are other important interests.

To keep costs low we keep the cover price low by not using full-colour except on the cover. We also use exactly the same layouts for every different language edition. The type is run in black – called a black plate exchange – and so, for example, to change from the isiXhosa run to the seSotho run, the printers swap only

one of the three-range cylinders on which the magazine is printed. This means instead of using up to 40 cylinders per section, we only use a grand total of 56.

There are many challenges in the production of *Bona* in four languages. Everything we do in production as translators depends on the fact that articles must fit into the same space in each language, giving the same information with the same impact. Once the editor has chosen the themes for new articles, whether they're assigned to staff or freelancers, they all start where *Bona* itself started – in English. That is the base working language of most of our texts (although letters, the legal advice column and the *muthi* column are in vernacular).

We also have to remember that many of our second-language English speaker readers prefer to buy the English-language edition in order to improve their English. That means the English must be clear and our contributing writers are instructed to write without frills and word play.

In translation, of the three vernacular languages, isiXhosa poses the biggest problem in terms of space. This causes frustration for our translators as they feel their creativity is hampered because they cannot play around with words. There are two of us in each language department, so of course, we check each other's translations. Especially when dealing with technical matters, such as medical or financial issues, writers and subeditors work to make sure the language is as clear and simple as possible while still being enjoyable to read. Our translators must also ensure that the translated text has the same impact as the original English text, and must be accurate and precise. Sometimes they work together with the writer and subeditor to achieve this.

Translators have to be widely knowledgeable and culturally-aware. In general, *Bona* is careful to cover issues of interest to all our cultures and tries to avoid favouring one more than others. We also have to work with an awareness of dialects and township lingo, keeping up with the times is important, and not only technologically. African languages are developing new terminology and we keep ourselves abreast of these developments by sending our translators to workshops.

Translators and interpreters of various languages of this country are the wheels of development and proper presentation of our languages. Their involvement in renaming and new terminology is crucial if it is to get to the people it is designed for. Our Sotho department particularly battles to find good working dictionaries, especially in spheres of terminology relating to technology, medicine and politics. At times we are forced to use words borrowed from other languages.

We are still fighting against the odds, even in this post-apartheid era where previously marginalised languages are now accorded the same status as English and Afrikaans. One of the biggest challenges that needs urgent attention is instilling a sense of pride in our languages among our youth.

The next challenge is cultivating the culture of reading in indigenous languages in these young people, which seems to be fading with the school system and TV. School children converse and play in English to the detriment of their mother tongues. When we interact with them in workshops and forums organised by *Bona* they tell us they prefer the English edition because the other versions are difficult to understand and "boring".

Despite these challenges we are interested in the possibility of adding more languages to our publication range. We are also looking at introducing short stories as a platform for aspiring young writers. ■

