

*It was a tough assignment. Mail&Guardian editor Ferial Haffajee had asked me, as the paper's ombud, to join her in a visit to the mother of murdered actor Brett Goldin.*

... ————— *by Franz Krüger*

In its end-of-year edition, the paper had referred to the murder of Goldin and his friend, designer Richard Bloom, in its "A to Z of cultural catastrophes". She had written to point out several inaccuracies in the brief reference, and was particularly – and understandably – upset by the comment that there was speculation about "who was more trashed", the victims or the murderers.

Most tragically, she felt that the reference had contributed to the death of her husband. When he saw the note, she told us, he hit his head on the steering wheel of his car and would not let her see the paper. He died of a heart attack soon after.

We sat at her dining room table, piled high with scrap-books, letters of condolence and photo albums. She set out her objections to the reference again at length, shared mementoes and talked about her searing grief. What was there to say? Haffajee made an unequivocal apology, saying the incident had taught her to weigh the possible effects of a piece of writing more carefully.

In the next edition, my column dealt with the issue, while Haffajee wrote a short piece about Brett Goldin and restated her apology.

It was the strongest, clearest apology I have seen. Normally, journalists find it hard to admit mistakes. As Elton John sang, sorry seems to be the hardest word. In many news organisations, there is still a sense that a correction is to be resisted at all costs. When all else fails, it will be published in a remote corner of the newspaper. Like doctors, we like to bury our mistakes.

Bring up the question of errors, and many journalists will point to the fact that a daily newspaper contains as many words as a sizeable novel. No wonder there are mistakes. That's fair enough, as far as it goes. But it can't mean that we shrug our shoulders and carry on regardless.

Audiences take mistakes very seriously. Ask almost anybody who has found him or herself as the subject of a news

report whether the story was accurate, and they are likely to have some reservations at the very least.

In a survey conducted for the Freedom Forum, Bob Haiman collected some comments from readers: "Those two streets don't even intersect. How could two cars collide there?" asked one. "That's not even the correct name for the hospital. I know because my sister works there," said another. And most tellingly: "I knew that was wrong the minute I read it... and if they got that wrong, it makes me wonder what else they got wrong." That's the point. One mistake spotted undermines trust in a thousand reliable facts.

Readers care deeply about accuracy. According to the outgoing South African Press Ombudsman Ed Linington, accuracy "is nearly always a factor" in complaints before him.

In fact, admitting and correcting mistakes builds credibility. It may be deeply uncomfortable to draw attention to mistakes, but it's better than trying to pretend nothing is wrong. There are too many people who will know anyway.

If a newspaper builds a reputation for correcting mistakes, its readers will be more inclined to trust it. Ian Mayes, the *Guardian's* soon-to-retire public editor, writes most of the paper's corrections – and has published a few book-length collections of the funnier ones. He comments: "To err is human and to correct, if not divine, is always the best thing to do."

But how to handle them? First there is the question of placement. *Business Day* bravely took a decision some time ago to give the correction as much prominence as the mistake being addressed. So when it was forced to withdraw a lead story that said that President Thabo Mbeki had clashed with his party deputy, Jacob Zuma, at an ANC meeting, the paper twice ran a prominent box on the top of page one. It must have hurt.

Ken Fuson, staff writer on *The Des Moines Register*, says: "I like having (corrections) right out front. We got it wrong;

# How to regret

... ————— *by George Claassen*

*It is a very radical move to place even a few inches of your own newspaper beyond your direct control.*

The international Organisation of News Ombudsmen (ONO) was established in the early 1980s as a discussion forum to enhance the standard of ethics in journalism. It now has members from six continents across the media disciplines of radio, television and the printed media.

At ONO's conference hosted in May by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, more than 50 ombudspeople discussed various ethical aspects. The keynote address was given by Alan Rusbridger, editor of the London daily *The Guardian*. His paper was the first in the UK to appoint an internal ombudsman, called a reader's editor, a decade ago, but only one other UK newspaper followed the same route, *The Observer*.

In the US the same lack of ethical transparency is reflected in the fact that only a little more than 50 news organisations regard the appointment of an ombudsman (reader's editor or reader's advocate) as an important method to raise ethical awareness in their journalists and transparency, accountability and responsibility with regard to their readers, listeners and viewers. Important news organisations in this country which follow the ombudsman route, are *The Washington Post*, National Public Radio, Public Broadcast Services, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Boston Globe*.

*The New York Times* appointed its first internal ombudsman, called the public editor, in 2004 shortly after the Jayson Blair scandal of story manufacturing and plagiarism rocked this prestigious publication.

In South Africa only two news organisations have had, until very recently, internal ombuds: the Western and Eastern Cape daily, *Die Burger*, and the *Mail & Guardian*. In April Media24 decided that other newspapers in the company

we want you to know we got it wrong.”

*The Guardian* has a different approach: there is a daily column of corrections in a fixed place on the leader page. That way, argues Mayes, people will always know where to look.

Then there's the question of who takes the rap – does the correction name and shame the writer or editor? Pressure to allocate blame sometimes comes from a writer whose byline appeared on an article into which an error was introduced in the editing process. Corrections are sometimes formulated accordingly, not to point fingers at a sub as much as to exonerate the writer.

In general, Mayes says, blame and retribution is not the point of the exercise. Except for unusual circumstances, the paper takes responsibility – the operative phrase is “we made a mistake”. He writes: “The column is called ‘Corrections and Clarifications’, not Crime and Punishment.”

Does everything deserve a correction? Skip Foster, editor of *The Shelby Star*, says: “There is a ‘basement’ to something correctable. There is a land of miniscule errors that would not be corrected.” However, the cut-off line should be fairly low, I think. Most errors matter to somebody, who would appreciate the correction. On some big papers, it becomes a matter of capacity. *The Guardian's* column carries around 1 500 entries a year. Mayes says there is simply no space or time to carry more.

Corrections online have their own complexity. There is always the temptation to simply fix the error or remove the incorrect article, and pretend it never happened. But more responsible sites add a note to the original article explaining what was done and why, to preserve the public record accurately.

A research report by Wits University journalism programme postgraduate student Bev Tucker found generally poor practice around corrections on SA news websites: “It ap-

pears that the ethical details of error and correction have been skimmed over by most South African online news media,” she writes.

When we think of corrections, we think of a name misspelled, a person wrongly identified in a photograph, a garbled number. And the generally accepted format to deal with a slip of this kind is a small box, headed something like “Matter of fact”.

But there are other tools available, particularly where it is not a simple matter of fact that is at issue. The simplest and least painful way of accommodating somebody who is unhappy with an aspect of coverage is to publish a letter from them. It signals that the paper acknowledges the person has a viewpoint, but does not admit any wrongdoing.

The next step up would be a “right of reply”, a device the *M&G* uses more than other papers. This is similar to a letter, but is given additional weight by greater space and prominence, and is accompanied by a “right of reply” strap headline. Important stakeholders who dispute the interpretation given to a report about them are usually given this kind of facility. The paper does not usually reply to the reply.

Occasionally, more prominent treatment is in order – when things have gone badly wrong.

Probably the biggest correction in living memory was carried by *The New York Times* in the wake of the Jayson Blair affair, the young reporter found to have invented stories on an industrial scale. A team of reporters picked over Blair's reports in minute detail, and the paper published a painfully detailed analysis of what had gone wrong in their organisation to allow such gross misbehaviour.

In the wake of the Iraq war, there has been significant introspection by US papers about the ease with which they fell for the myth of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. It's not known whether any apologies have resulted, although *The New York Times's* public editor called it “very

bad journalism”.

US papers have also recently woken up to the fact that their coverage of the civil rights movement may not have been up to scratch. A fascinating website, [regrettheerror.com](http://regrettheerror.com), provides some examples. Craig Silverman, who set up and edits the site, says he collects corrections to help journalism. “I work in the press and my motivation is to make it better. I think that's a big difference between Regret and a lot of other sites. When I discover an instance of plagiarism it honestly upsets me. I don't get off on it,” he said in an interview with the site Media Orchard.

According to his site, the *Tallahassee Democrat* last year put together a special section to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a local anti-segregation bus boycott. One of the articles was headed, “Fifty years in coming: our apology.” It said: “Leaders in that journey toward equality should have been able to expect support in ending segregation from the local daily newspaper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*. They could not. We not only did not lend a hand, we openly opposed integration, siding firmly with the segregationists. It is inconceivable that a newspaper, an institution that exists freely only because of the Bill of Rights, could be so wrong on civil rights. But we were.”

In 2004, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* published this correction: “It has come to the editor's attention that the Herald-Leader neglected to cover the civil rights movement. We regret the omission.” The Regret the error website commented on the Lexington correction: “Simple, elegant, brave. Better late than never.”

One wonders whether any SA newspaper might be moved to deal with its role in the apartheid years in this way? But no, not one of them was ever racist. Silly idea.

In any event, if they find it so difficult to correct simple matters of fact, imagine what it would take to tackle bigger mistakes.

# the error

should preferably also each have an ombudsman. Most of them are in the process of appointing them.

At the ONO conference at Harvard University Rusbridger tried to point out the reason for news organisations' lackadaisical attitude towards ethical openness and accountability. He gave two reasons why editors or managers are unwilling to take this plunge:

“The first is that the editor him/herself is responsible for the content and that outsourcing the complaints department is a way of outsourcing responsibility. I don't think this is a negligible argument. The editor is, indeed, ultimately responsible – morally and in law – for everything published in his or her name. It would be wrong if s/he washed his hands of all incoming complaints and concerns, or became distanced or anaesthetised from what readers felt by not having day to day dealings with them,” Rusbridger said.

He said the second explanation why editors resist having an independent ombudsman or equivalent is doubtless the loss of control implied. “The traditional model of a newspaper over the centuries is usually a top down one – with a proprietor or publisher at the pinnacle. This model gave the editor an immense amount of power. Of course, there has always been recourse to the law for people who were unhappy about what had been written. In Britain we have a form of voluntary self-regulation. But (depending on the owner) editors have been omnipotent figures, in sole charge of who is allowed a voice in their newspaper and who isn't.”

Rusbridger equated the functionality of an internal ombudsman to greater transparency. “It is, I now appreciate better, a very radical move to place even a few inches of your own newspaper beyond your direct control. It does mean

that your judgements, actions, ethical standards and journalism can be held up to the light. The more space you allow, the more prominent you make it and the more you give licence for someone to make their own judgements about the journalism, the more you lose your previously omnipotent control.

“And, of course, it makes you think twice in advance. All reporters will tell you: if they know their work and methods are going to be held up to independent scrutiny it makes you think twice. That, of course, is the very argument we, as an industry in Britain, make for self-regulation via the Press Complaints Commission. The fear of an adverse adjudication keeps people on the straight and narrow. But there's a difference in some minds between a centralised mediation service and the much more devolved form of regulation or scrutiny involved in having an ombudsman.”

For the past six years *Die Burger* has been applying the internal ombudsman principle with obvious success. An ethical code of conduct was drawn up and the ombudsman makes corrections regularly on page 2, and his telephone number, inviting complaints and comments, is published every day. He writes a regular weekly column about complaints.

It leads to a transparent and accountable form of journalism. And research has shown that an internal ombudsman can drastically reduce libel suits and other similar actions against the paper.

As Rusbridger explained, “the existence of an independent ombudsman within a news organisation speaks to recognition of a profound shift in how we – and the wider public – think of journalism... I think a refusal to have some kind of independent system embedded within news organisations, as we all come under more and more intense scrutiny, looks increasingly odd.”