

Changing the world (again)

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I was ushered into the office. The man in the suit pointed to a chair. I sat down. Four pairs of eyes stared at me. “So,” said the man in the suit, “why do you want to be a journalist?”

“I want to, er, change the, uhm, world,” I answered.

I knew it sounded twee, but I meant it. The woman next to the man in the suit stifled a yawn.

“Who do you admire most in the world?” the man in the suit asked.

Whatever you do, I warned myself, don’t say “my mother”.

“Er, my mother?” I also meant it.

The man in the suit didn’t bother to stifle his yawn.

The man in the suit was Richard Steyn, editor of *The Star*. I was being interviewed for a space in the Argus Cadet School. Unsurprisingly, I suppose, I didn’t make the cut. In journo terms, I was spiked.

There were other ways for young people to get into the media industry, like getting a journalism qualification or nag and nag and nag a news editor for an internship, but the best route into the industry was to become a cadet and serve an editorial apprenticeship.

The cadet school was a one-stop shop to acquire all reporting skills – from shorthand to touch typing, to learning how not to get your newspaper sued and learning how to find the bars that loose-lipped informants haunt.

After a stint in the classroom, cadets were sent to newspapers to receive on-the-job training – the best sort of education.

Many of our country’s editorial heavyweights went through the cadetship – Paula Fray, Mondli Makhanya, Tony Weaver, Thabo Leshilo, Justice Malala, Philani Mgwaba and Jovial Rantao. Media managers like Nazeem Howa and Mike Robertson cut their teeth there too.

The cadets of the class of 1993, which I was trying to become a member of, would be one of the last to graduate from the Argus Cadet School.

Nobody is quite sure why it shut its doors a few years later – probably something to do with a new owner taking over and a school not being seen as a “core function” of the business.

Its absence, however, left a hole. The Argus Cadet School wasn’t the only one that closed. A number of other media companies’ in-house initiatives also bit the dust in the early 1990s.

By a curious twist of fate, nearly two decades after being spiked, I find myself heading up training for Independent Newspapers SA (the new name of the old Argus company).

I know I have a tough job. Newspapers, not only in South Africa but across the world, have become shadows of themselves. Some pundits blame the Internet and mobile media, some blame the recession and some point their fingers at the owners, claiming that there hasn’t been investment in newspapers.

As my teenage son would say: “Whatever!” The fact is that over the last decade or so many newspapers have been left battered and tattered. Perhaps one reason for this is the fact that there aren’t as many gifted journalists rising through the ranks.

News editors I speak to complain that newbie reporters (even those with journalism certificates) struggle with the basics; can’t see angles; write stories with more holes than a Johannesburg road; file single-sourced reports filled with inaccuracies; and insert their opinions into news stories. But, saddest of all, news editors complain that too many reporters have become so disillusioned with the industry they feel that they can’t make a difference.

Last year, just a few months after I took up the job, I received a call from Moegsien Williams, the group’s editorial director. “Can you come up with a revolutionary training programme to make us the best learning organisation in the industry?” he asked. I swallowed hard.

When it comes to revolutions, I thought, in order to go forward you have to look back. I thought about the exceptional journalists the Argus Cadet School had produced. So, together with Chris Whitfield, Independent Newspapers’ editor-in-chief in the Cape, and Martine Barker, the company’s Cape managing editor, we proposed that the revolution was just a cadet school away.

The proposal gathered momentum. Management threw its weight (and, importantly, its money) behind it. In August the cadet school got the nod.

While architects designed the bricks-and-mortar school, we began building the curriculum.

We carved our 10-month programme into two phases. The cadets would spend three months in a classroom receiving foundational training in three core skills – reporting, writing and subbing (with add-ons such as photojournalism and new media). In addition, there would be an intensive grammar course, classes in shorthand, media law, ethics and numeracy.

The second phase, which was seven months long, would see the cadets working under supervision in newsrooms.

In September we published an advert, urging graduates, who are “insatiably curious and addicted to news” to apply to join the class of 2010. They didn’t have to have journalism degrees, they just had to be passionate about journalism.

We asked candidates to write a story about an incident that changed their life. The applications poured in. We received a metre-high mountain of applications. The 800 or so stories I read gave me some insight into the lives of young South Africans.

Most of the stories were about loss. Many were about violence. A few were about love. And one was about shoes. I was struck by how many promising graduates there were determined to become journalists.

We selected 45 people and asked them to turn one of the world’s worst press releases into a story. We also gave them a general knowledge test and checked their writing skills. Then we interviewed them. (I’m pleased to report that 95% of candidates admire their mothers most.)

We selected 12 bright cadets – people who believe that



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they can change the world and people we believe have the talent and chutzpah to become stars of our newsrooms.

On 1 February the cadets filed into the spanking new cadet school. Half an hour later they scampered around the newsroom on a treasure hunt. Clues, which they had to solve, led them along the production chain – from diary conference to reporter to photographer to news desk to content editor to layout sub to copy sub to revise sub to editor to editor-in-chief.

As they returned to the classroom I realised that we are able to draw on the knowledge and skills of our own journalists – our company has become a learning laboratory.

In addition to all the tools-of-the-trade skills we teach, working journalists from our newsrooms come into the school to share their wisdom. People like award-winning environmental journalist John Yeld; elegant writers like Graeson Haw and Michael Morris, grammar guru Melissa Stocks, subbing ace Craig Dodds, fearless photojournalist Andrew Ingram and new media star Rene Moodie give up their time to teach the cadets.

And every Thursday, in a session titled “Talking Eds”, Chris Whitfield brings in an editor to tackle a topical media issue.

During the three-month classroom segment the cadets have written a profile of Eleanor Rigby, collected extraordinary stories from ordinary citizens, hassled Julius Malema for an interview, tweeted up a storm, written and rewritten intros, dissected newspapers, covered the Jazz Fest and the Pick n Pay Cape Argus Cycle Tour, tried to keep up with a 70-year-old super-fit guide’s walking tour of Cape Town and participated in a laughing yoga session. They have produced more than 50 assignments.

After each assignment we edge closer to our goal of producing innovative, thoughtful and ethical journalists, who turn out accurate, balanced, original and well-written content.

Our aim is to teach the cadets those old fashioned Woodward and Bernstein skills – where good stories don’t fall into your inbox but require resourceful reporters to painstakingly gather the information and put all the bits together.

The cadet school’s class of 2010 won’t solve the print media crisis just yet, but it’s a giant step in the right direction. For one thing, they really believe that they can change the world.