

a tale of

# 2 investigations

AT RHODES UNIVERSITY JOURNALISM STUDENTS ARE TAUGHT TO RESEARCH AND PUBLISH QUALITY INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM ABOUT PUBLIC PROBLEMS. BUT, IS THIS ENOUGH? THE CENTRAL IDEA OF THE CLASSIC 'MOBILISATION MODEL' OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM – THAT CITIZENS, INFORMED BY THE MEDIA OF WRONGDOING, WILL MOBILISE AND EXERT THEIR WILL ON AN ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT – OFTEN BREAKS DOWN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT. SOME INVESTIGATIONS ARE IGNORED BY THE PUBLIC, BUT HAVE LED TO EXTRAORDINARY CHANGES. OTHER INVESTIGATIONS ARE SUCCESSFUL IN MOBILISING PUBLIC OPINION, BUT FAIL TO ACHIEVE ANY CONCRETE SUCCESS. DRAWING ON TWO RECENT IN-DEPTH INVESTIGATIONS BY GCINA NTSALUBA, AN AWARD-WINNING DAILY DISPATCH JOURNALIST, **ROD AMNER** ARGUES THAT STUDENTS WOULD BENEFIT BY BEING TAUGHT A THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT SOUTH AFRICA'S UNIQUE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT AND BY DRAWING ON OTHER FORMS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING-ORIENTED JOURNALISM, LIKE PUBLIC JOURNALISM AND DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM, TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED RESULTS.

**T**his is a tale of two in-depth stories, both produced by one *Daily Dispatch* journalist, Gcina Ntsaluba, in 2009. One was wildly successful – it helped change the face of the government's housing policy and won Ntsaluba SA Story of the Year at the 2010 Mondi Shanduka Newspaper Awards. The other was deemed a dismal failure by Ntsaluba himself. Why? And what can these stories teach us and our students about doing journalism in South Africa?

## The best of times

Towards the end of 2008 small teams of *Daily Dispatch* journalists lined up for a guilt-free perk – a chance to travel in luxury vehicles sponsored by Mercedes Benz for one week each over 14 weeks. The project, the "Dispatch Adventures", helped the *Dispatch* build a unique repository of Eastern Cape travel and tourism stories. But, for editor Andrew Trench the idea was also to "consciously broaden our reporters' appreciation of the area that we cover and to physically make contact with people in areas that are outside our daily beat coverage".

Current news editor, Brett Horner, was adventuring way up north near Oviston when his team came across a township called Backstage, a ghost town of uncompleted or abandoned RDP houses. In the weeks that followed, several other "Dispatch Adventure" teams were distressed to find thousands more RDP houses in ruins – this in a province already crippled by a backlog of over 800 000 houses.

The *Dispatch's* discovery laid the foundation for a very successful three-month investigation by reporter Gcina Ntsaluba into widespread dysfunction and mismanagement in the Eastern Cape housing programme. "Broken Homes" drew into the spotlight 20 000 unfinished and/or "broken" RDP houses across the province abandoned by "emerging contractors".

After his investigation, but before publication, Ntsaluba gave the MEC for Housing an opportunity to comment. "She gave us good feedback and admitted that there were problems," says Ntsaluba.

It was at this point the new national Minister of Human Settlements, Tokyo Sexwale, stepped into the frame and publically commended the *Dispatch* on its story – much to Ntsaluba's surprise. Chris Vick, the minister's special advisor, later told Ntsaluba that the investigation was the only tangible research about the housing situation they had in South Africa, an alarming admission given the enormous resources at the state's disposal to conduct or commission research on one of its top political priorities.

Sexwale proceeded with a series of far-reaching steps: first he met with all nine national housing MECs, and then with municipal managers and mayors.

Then he directed the parliamentary portfolio committee on human settlements to visit the Eastern Cape to do their own assessment of some of the places Ntsaluba had written about.

Thereafter, says Ntsaluba, houses were demolished in and around Port Elizabeth, contractors were blacklisted or fired, new houses went up "all over the place", and a new project was started for emerging contractors, the Emerging Contractors Development Programme.

"So we got a national policy intervention, new programmes –

I didn't expect them to go to that extent, I really didn't."

Ntsaluba's analysis of this unprecedented government response to the *Dispatch* investigation was that the story had presented Sexwale with "an opportunity to show his mettle" and "make some noise" in the Eastern Cape.

### The worst of times

In 2009, the *Daily Dispatch* hosted four non-partisan, town hall-like public meetings – called the "Community Dialogues" – in suburbs and townships in East London. In the build-up to hosting these dialogues the *Daily Dispatch* issued a simple call to local residents: "What issues need attention in your neighbourhood? Tell this newspaper."

At the lively third dialogue, held in the decaying inner-city area of Southernwood in April 2009, more than 200 residents launched a fusillade of complaints about crime, grime, drugs, illegal shebeens, slumlords and the appalling state of the local parks which had become a haven for criminals and drunks.

Editor Andrew Trench made a personal promise to residents about the parks and the slumlords: "You could see that there were these two things that if you could do something about them, then it would make a big difference to the way people felt about their community."

Trench entrusted Gcina Ntsaluba – fresh from his "Broken Homes" investigation – to deliver on the newspaper's promise to cover the slumlords story.

Ntsaluba went undercover in Southernwood and in King William's Town, where tenants, many of them students, were being overcharged to live in overcrowded, unhygienic conditions. In Southernwood, many are paying rent for the privilege of living in backyard shacks. High density, slum-style living had led to the decline of property values in these areas and also encouraged other social ills – noise pollution, crime, garbage on the streets, and other signs of urban decay. Some neighbours of slumlord-owned houses have been trying to sell their properties for years.

For Ntsaluba, the underlying problem is that "not enough decent working class accommodation" has been built in these areas to cope with demand". Many students from Lovedale College and Fort Hare stay in these places because they can't afford residence fees (which are over R17 000 a year at Lovedale). Slumlords know that these people have nowhere else to go. For Ntsaluba, the resulting exploitation amounts to "a human rights issue".

Early on in the investigation, he got the legal department of the Buffalo City Municipality (BCM) to acknowledge that they were required by law to prosecute slumlords.

He then approached notorious slumlords directly to rent rooms in their houses for a month each and spoke to the tenants to make them understand that he was not doing this to help himself, but ultimately to help them. He says it was "a humbling experience to see how the tenants lived".

In late 2009 the *Daily Dispatch* published online and in the newspaper the detailed results of Ntsaluba's three-month-long undercover investigation, including the naming and shaming of slumlords in King William's Town and in Southernwood.

The response from readers was overwhelming, with hundreds of readers commenting enthusiastically on the investigation online. Ntsaluba believes readers "made a big fuss" about the slumlords investigation because it was a story that was "relevant to them as they see it every day as they drive by".

Unfortunately, however, this overwhelming change in public opinion did not translate into the application of pressure on the municipality to act. Ntsaluba waited for a response from the BCM, who are required by law to enforce the regulations controlling slumlords.

But, no legal action was ever taken and no proposed plan of action was ever put forward. Indeed, until the time of writing this in April 2010 (half a year later), not a single word has emanated from the BCM on the matter.

Trench believes that Buffalo City's political institutions

are so smothering that local government bureaucrats are either too afraid to act or feel that they can't move without a clear message from their political bosses. Ntsaluba believes there are "clearly political interests at stake". He wonders how many of the 'higher-ups' in the BCM are themselves slumlords.

### What's the story

The classic "mobilisation model" of investigative journalism states that:

1. Vigilant journalists use their contacts and innovative research methods to bring wrongdoing to public attention (through published media investigations).
2. Their journalism leads to changes in public opinion: an informed citizenry responds by demanding reforms from their elected representatives.
3. Policy makers take corrective action (policy reforms) (Protest et al 1991: 15)

The central idea in this model is that citizens, informed by the media of wrongdoing, will exert their will on an accountable government. It is notable that neither of Ntsaluba's investigations followed this mobilisation model to the letter:

- While the successful "Broken Homes" investigation followed steps 1 and 3, there was very little reader response to the stories and no overt pressure was brought to bear on politicians by the public for housing reform.
- While the excellent (although spectacularly "unsuccessful") "Slumlords" investigation led to discernible changes in public opinion, it could not effect step 3 of the model as there was no response whatsoever from policy makers.

While ironic, the lack of interest from the public in the "Broken Homes" investigation tallies with Protest et al's (1991: 19) revision of the mobilisation model of investigative journalism. They argue that if, as suggested by the mobilisation model, the public is a necessary link between the media and policy changes, then that link is often weak and unreliable.

They argue that while investigative journalists and officials would appear to be natural adversaries their relationships may, at times, be more complex, less adversarial – and considerably more "collaborative" – than is usually understood.

Policy-making changes often occur regardless of the public's reaction and may be triggered by other factors – in this case, a new national minister out to make a name for himself cosying up to a newspaper that hands him a fortuitous piece of research exposing a dysfunctional provincial housing department and some useful clues on how to solve a nationwide policy problem.

Despite the glaring differences in "success" achieved by these two investigations, then, they share a common critical weakness: even when South African journalists go beyond the call of duty in unearthing public problems in dialogue with citizens (in the *Dispatch's* case, through the community dialogues and the *Dispatch* adventures), they proceed to leave citizens out of the problem-solving equation.

In the case of "Broken Homes", it was a national minister who stepped in to solve the problems with seemingly very little regard for public opinion or reference to solutions citizens themselves might have deliberated on and proffered. Aside from helping to set the news agenda in the first instance, citizens were not required to play any further role in the process of finding solutions to housing problems. The *Dispatch* may be accused of failing to help citizens develop the capacity to solve future problems themselves.

In the case of "Slumlords", there was an overwhelming public response to the story, and silence from officials and policy-makers. Why did changes in public opinion not translate into accountability and action from government?

Some South African journalists are coming around to the idea that to find lasting solutions to public problems – for example, policy changes that promote democracy, efficiency or social justice – journalists may, given our conditions of unaccountable governance, need to go beyond the classic watchdog/information dissemination role.

*Dispatch* news editor Brett Horner is one of them. He feels "deeply unsatisfied with the notion that we should just put stuff out there and if the world ignores it, too bad". He believes that citizens are becoming "much more aware of what they should be doing" and that there is "a new activist sentiment running through the country at the moment".

He says that in a smaller city like East London the *Dispatch* has to play an active role in prodding civil society into life: "We can't do everything for [civil society], but we can get it going."

Ntsaluba agrees and suggests that a second Southernwood dialogue be convened, both to report back to citizens about what the "Slumlords" investigation revealed, but also to allow citizens the opportunity to deliberate on the problem themselves and help find solutions.

However, no-one is entirely clear about how a second dialogue should be framed, organised or structured. Should the famously unhelpful BCM be allowed in the room? Should the newspaper invite "experts" who could help citizens find solutions?

Who should be responsible for applying pressure over time – and what sort of pressure – in order to find solutions? Should journalists encourage citizens to continue their deliberations – and act upon their outcomes – within the institutions of the wider civil society?

Could journalists offer mobilising information to citizens – for example, information on how to join relevant civic organisations? Could they also describe what citizens in other localities have done in the past or are doing to address similar problems; create spaces for citizens to deliberate about those problems among themselves; encourage citizens to join existing or create new (local or larger scale) civic organisations; and publicise citizens' application for resources?

These are just some of the questions testing the leadership of the newspaper as they gear up to find an effective model of investigative journalism in the South African context.

Ultimately, editor Trench says he wants the relationships between the newspaper and the officials to evolve "so that the paper isn't just a yapping watchdog – it also needs to be moving things forward and having an active role in the solutions".

## References

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