



By Thomas Fairbairn

Last Review's report on 4th wave technology at the Pretoria News ruffled a few feathers at other papers with similar systems. The "allegation" (you could tell that this was a newspaperman complaining) that Pretoria News piloted electronic pagination was a "ridiculous lie", he noted. (The

article didn't actually claim that, but let's not let facts get in the way here.) The first daily to pilot electronic pagination, my correspondent notes, was The Sowetan in 1991. Anyway, apparently The Sowetan crew toured Pretoria News to view their new system, and were treated to a demonstration during which Pretoria News subs boasted about blowing up a page 200 per cent to get fine detail. "We get 400 percent," noted Thumbsuck's Sowetan informant. "We didn't tell her. Just smiled."

The Rhodes Journalism Department is hosting a Freedom of Information conference in February (you're all invited) and, trying to be organised about this, a secretary telephoned Parliament (the one that's still in Cape Town) to ask for an address list of MP's. After establishing there is such a list the logical request followed. Secretary: "Please post it to me..." Parliamentary person: "Sorry lady, it's confidential." Roll on Freedom of Information.

Emeritus professor Ian Gordon's masterful piece on punctuation in the last Review stung a senior (very senior) and respected (very respected) journo to fax the editor to complain. While the journal had a "lot of blerrie nice goed" in it harrumphed said

journo, why had the editor failed in his duty by allowing Gordon to get away with a reference to Sprat's (1667) "often-quoted sentence", without actually giving the sentence?

"We're all supposed to know, maybe?" queried our journo. "Ah, we say, yes, Sprat's often quoted sentence, of course. Twak, man. That's like those old-style Brit books that kept sneaking in French in italics, as if to say that anyone who dared to be reading so high-class a book as this must of course know French."

The editor, faced with the above attack, admitted he thought everyone (especially senior, very respected journo's) did, in fact, know about the Royal Society and, if they didn't, they would (upon being puzzled by the reference) at least have looked it up in their dog-eared, well-thumbed copy of the Oxford Companion to the English Language. If they had, they would know that the Royal Society was a largely Puritan venture that, despite its name, received little royal patronage and, as a result, enjoyed great freedom of expression.

In its early years the society showed a brief inclination to improve the English tongue and set up a committee on which sat, inter alia, John Dryden, Bishop Thomas Sprat, and diarist John Evelyn.

In his history of the society, Sprat continued the discussion by arguing the Society should require of its members "a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness; bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants, before that of wits and scholars". Sound advice, and a pity South African journalists have yet to take it to heart.

But then, if they haven't read Sprat, what can we expect?

The SABC has been subjected to a number of consultants lately, some of them from Oz. Apparently the top team at Awkward Park is taking the Aussies seriously. Worrying, when you consider what their print counterparts did to British newspapers...

Heard about parliamentary correspondents complaining they can't keep up with all these open sub-committees? Relief was short-lived when a recent meeting of the finance sub-committee was declared closed. The would-be closet MPs forgot to turn off the internal television - their proceedings went straight to the press room.

## DEATH BY ACRONYM

South African newspapers, beset by acronyms, stories that lack context, and photographs of scantily clad women, are not reader friendly, argues American journalist Richard Dudman.

As a news junkie visiting in South Africa, I find the newspapers here puzzling at times and occasionally absolutely mystifying.

For example, the papers have printed dozens of stories lately about the finrand, its ups and downs and its likely future status. But what exactly is a finrand?

I can — and did — ask an acquaintance what the term meant, fortunately knowing someone who knew. But the newspaper should have told me, since it holds itself out to be a mass source of information.

Another puzzler: When I was in Cape Town, the newspapers there were full of daily developments in a shooting war among taxicab drivers at the railroad station. The stories reported bystanders fleeing in terror and gave names of the killed and wounded. But most of the stories gave no clue as to what the fighting was all about.

Eventually one of the papers quoted a policeman as speculating that rival cab companies had organised hit squads and were conducting Mafia-

style gangster warfare. But I found no serious effort by the papers to get to the bottom of the disorders. Presumably the cabs were struggling for position, as happens among cabbies in many cities of the world. But I should not have to presume an essential part of the story.

Then there was Joe Slovo's achievement in reaching some sort of agreement that was said to have broken a deadlock and opened the way for large-scale construction of low-cost housing. The news stories that I saw gave no background to enable the reader to understand the significance of what was described as a remarkable breakthrough.

Now, I appreciate that fact that South African editors can't edit their papers for the benefit of foreign visitors. But it seems to me that there is a broader interest at stake. Growing numbers of prospective South African newspaper readers must be in the same boat as a befuddled foreigner.

In this transitional period, when millions are experiencing freedom of movement and freedom of information for the first time, the newspapers are seeking a whole new crop of young readers. The newspapers can either entice these prospective new readers with clear, understandable stories or turn them off by filling stories with unexplained jargon.

A successful, growing newspaper will make the news reader feel welcome. One technique consists of trans-

lating the pig-iron prose of bureaucrats, politicians and economists into clear and simple language that ordinary readers will find interesting and understandable. In the United States, we call the bureaucratic jargon gobble-dygook and try to strain it out of our newspaper stories.

This horde of potential new readers is by no means a captive audience awaiting clever moves by the newspapers. Radio and television are easy, attractive alternatives, especially now that people are learning that, for a change, they can trust the news they get from the SABC. As a veteran print journalist, I prefer good newspapers to radio or TV as the best means of keeping well informed.

To return to the finrand problem, the term may have come into use as a bit of insider slang, marking the user as being in the know. Its brevity also may seem to carry a sense of efficiency. Newspaper writers, chronically confronted by constricted news holes, are always looking for short-cut expressions.

In the United States, our best papers are in a similar fix: They must both condense and clarify. Some of them solve the problem by routinely inserting a phrase or short sentence to explain the meaning of some term like balance of payments or cash flow. Why not write out "financial rand" on first mention and spend five or six words explaining the terms?

Even worse than finrand, from the

point of view of both the foreign visitor and the South African would-be newspaper reader, is the constant stream of acronyms. I already knew about Codesa, but I have had to ask again and again about MK and Cosatu. Too often, the person I ask can't remember what the mysterious letters stand for.

A remedy here would be to require that all acronyms be written out in full on first mention, with the initials in parentheses. Or, if the story is a short one, in which the name in question may not appear more than one or two more times, why not skip the acronym altogether?

On second thought, maybe South Africans (and, I regret to add Americans) have become so addicted to acronyms that there is no use fighting them any longer. One of my associates at home likes to send me efficient little memos that ask for a reply "ASAP", meaning "as soon as possible". I am tempted to answer with "WIGTI", meaning "when I get to it".

If you share my distaste for all these short forms in the name of pseudo-efficiency, come join my new organisation. I call it ICESA — short for "I can't stand acronyms".

Richard Dudman, former chief Washington correspondent and foreign correspondent for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, spent two months in South Africa under the Knight International Press Fellowship Programme.