



ZUBEIDA JAFFER

NOT  
BY DREAD  
ALONE

*Thoughts about our journalism*





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*In Memory of Johnny Issel*  
(1946 - 2011)





*“You cannot prevent the  
birds of sorrow from flying  
over your head, but you can  
prevent them from building  
nests in your hair.”*

Chinese Proverb.





When they shot Andries Tatane, they shot me. His face in death will remain etched in my memory. His is the face of all that has gone before. His is the face that provokes a memory that fills us with dread. A man stands up for the right to dignity and is wiped out. A man in his death lays bare our truth: we are a nation that in the depths of our souls yearns for freedom that remains elusive.

His death reminds us that seventeen years after we broke free from the shackles of apartheid, many of us continue to cry out for the possibility of true self-determination.

I write quietly on Freedom Day, 27 April, 2011 choosing to deflect my attention away from the public display





of ceremony that usually marks this day. Barely four months of the year have passed by and I am drenched in loss. Since 3 January, I have had a number of loved ones dying in quick succession draining me of all sense of being celebratory. Andries Tatane's untimely death wedged itself into this fog of sadness forcing me to search deep inside of me to find some inner strength. It is a difficult time to remain connected to what lies at the depths of our souls. We live in uncertain times in the world. At home, we are on the cusp of a period when the hype of the elections will consume us.

We have to endure a noise of opposing voices that pit different egos against one another. This is the system that we settled for. This is what we have created to manage our public life. We have to live with it and hope that through our argumentation we will emerge whole.

But how does one emerge whole when one is faced with such different impulses, such differing experiences, and such different stories of who we are as a people?





I am painfully aware that as a journalist and writer, my profession and I play a substantive role in telling our stories and through these stories providing us a way in which to understand who we are. Our stories make sense of our lives and help us cope with the small and large tsunamis that creep up on us.

I am also aware that a strong current is washing along challenging me as a journalist. This strong current is demanding change in the media landscape of our country. At first, I did not pay too much attention to the demands for a media tribunal to regulate media coverage. I thought that there are so many people screaming and shouting that somehow through it all we will once again work it out and pull back from the edge.

However slowly over the past few months I have become more conscious that what is unfolding before me is not just a tussle between elite actors in our society but it is a disagreement about the very essence of our story and how we choose to tell it.





When Andries Tatane was shot, we saw every detail of the violation on national television. While it filled us with dread, it also marked our saving grace. The story was told and no one can deny the injustice - so unlike the days of old when news was suppressed. We cannot go back to those times. Any attempt to roll back the gains we have made for free expression and media freedom cannot be supported.

However, a chance encounter aboard a flight a few months ago sent my thoughts about this drama in a different direction. I was travelling from Johannesburg to Cape Town. To pass the time, I was scribbling down some of my observations in a small notebook I usually carry in my handbag. I became aware that the man seated beside me at the window was glancing at my activity from time to time. Usually I am reluctant to start a conversation on board a flight. I prefer using the time to curl into myself. He appeared to want to have a conversation so I thought, let's talk. He tells me he is from the West Coast of





Cape Town and an engineer in the mining sector. We talk about his work. Then I share what I am doing. That I am a journalist and writing down my thoughts on the present drama between journalists and the government. I am careful not to express an opinion. I did not really need a political discussion that late Friday afternoon. I just wanted to get home at the end of a long week. I was surprised by his immediate reaction: “I like what the president is saying,” he says. “This has been going on too long. The truth is not being told at all.” These were not his exact words but he said something to this effect. I sat up. What do you mean? And he goes on a long explanation of the conditions in the mining sector and the lack of opportunity and progress for people of colour. The media does not write about our experiences. They only write for a few people. They scare us. It is about time someone does something about it. Look at the World Cup. We did well. We don’t want to go back to apartheid. We don’t want to go back to being nothing.





I am seldom surprised having heard and seen so much in my life. But this was not what I was expecting to hear from this mild mannered man sitting next to me as he softly expressed his point of view. I had been wrong to make an assumption that this debate raged selectively amongst politicians and media professionals. I needed to understand the polarity I was witnessing more fully. Would you mind if I quoted you? Not at all, he said. His name was Neville Ferreira.





## *Being a journalist and writer*

**P**rofessionally I am nothing else but a journalist. It is me to the core. If I were to live my life over again, I would choose the same profession. I am proud of the work that South African journalists have done over many years and cannot in good conscience support any measures that would leave me or my colleagues vulnerable to a jail sentence. I would like to enjoy every freedom possible in order to fulfill the requirements of my profession. I don't want to have to look over my shoulder as I had to do before.



How then, in a democratic South Africa could I ever support any legal intervention that would sanction journalists being restricted in their work?

I want us to be able to work freely, to play the role we are meant to play to make our society and country work. But, this is not all that I want.

I did not choose journalism as a career. It all happened quite by chance.

During my second year at university, my father encouraged me to write to different companies to ask for a holiday job. I wrote seven letters to various companies and received only one reply. The reply came from the Argus Company asking me to come for an interview. Before going to my classes one morning, I trotted off to the interview. At this stage, I had fixed my mind on becoming a clinical psychologist. It was September 1976 and the country was in an uproar.





We had experienced the Soweto uprising and some of the impulses were now playing themselves out in our own part of the world, Cape Town. I was careful not to indicate any sympathy for these protests when asked. This was a white man interviewing me and I assumed he would not be approving of stone-throwing youth and marching students. I skirted the issues when questioned and instead focused on the titles of the books I was reading. At the end of the rather pleasant interview, I was offered a job for one month, December 1976. I was thrilled and set off for campus happy as a lark.

That night when I got home and joined my family for the evening supper everyone wanted to know what had happened. Did you get the job? Yes, I said, smiling broadly. And what job is it? For a moment I was taken aback and then said: I don't know. This set off a string of jokes and teasing. Are you going to pack away newspapers? I don't know. Could it be that you will file the editor's documents? Could it be





that you will be a messenger or a secretary? It went on and on. By then my eldest brother and only sister were married and no longer at home. Around the table were my parents and three brothers. The teasing did not stop. Strangely not one of them suggested that I would perhaps have the job of a reporter. It was way outside our experience or our ambit of awareness. I only discovered my role a few hours after reporting to the Argus early on the morning of 1 December, 1976.

There was no turning back. Thirty years later, the days are gone when a reporter could spend an evening with underprivileged children at a summer camp. Gone are the days when the reporter visits the local hospital, the morgue, the fire station, the harbour as I did in the seventies in Durban. Everything is done with great speed and mainly from a desk in an office with a telephone. The body language and expressions of the one you interview are completely lost in the formulation of an impression. Now one has to close ones eyes and become an expert in tones of voices I



guess. So much of what is said verbally is only a part of the information that the journalist gathers. After meeting Neville, I started listening more closely to what people were saying around me. This was not just about a handful of people protecting their own interests. Rather it seemed to be unfolding as a widespread rejection of the way in which journalism presently functions.





# *Listening and hearing the whispers*

I found myself having to deal with those around me who were not charmed at all by the role of my profession. I could find no one in my immediate family who was opposed to demanding that the media change. They all started telling stories of their bad experiences with the media and how relieving it was during the World Cup Tournament to hear good things about the country, how journalists



twist the reality, how they prefer not reading the newspapers. It went on and on. My friends were the same. Amongst my colleagues at work, there was agreement that something had to give, that journalism defined itself simply as opposition, and not as providing citizens with information so they can make informed decisions. They were polite when journalists were around but I was more attuned to hearing the rush of whispers.

As a communication specialist, I have been serving a short stint as a media spokesperson for one of our cabinet ministers. Perhaps it was a case that I was surrounded by people with a particular point of view which impinged on my ability to see the wood for the trees. So I tried my neighbourhood; I tried the poets and writers that I knew. I attended a gathering of women writers in Johannesburg and had the opportunity to speak to a wide range of people.





Then I read “Quite Footsteps” the latest work of poetry from our celebrated poet Dr Mongane Wally Serote, searching for a way in which to get a sense of what the thinking was out there. I would say the piece challenges the definition of how we have fleshed out our role in practice. It does not accept the role we have carved out for ourselves. He writes:

*“the dogs bark and bite even in cartoons  
they inflict wounds in the silent soul  
They bark as they tear the soul apart...”*

It cannot be that those whom I meet all supported the government’s actions uncritically? How can this be possible? No. They do not support everything or even much of what the government does but they share the same experience of disquiet about what they regard as the monolithic and abrasive tone of the media. The general pain and trauma located deep in the South





African psyche is not recognised. The only thing that matters is the principle of free speech! Not the fact that people have done battle to end a pernicious system and are trying to create something inclusive and move away from a past of exclusivity. Dr Serote is expressing what I sense is a very deep feeling amongst many South Africans, a feeling of pain that is allowed very little expression. It is this that makes it easy for those who want to clamp down on the media, to get popular support.

As I listened, the feelings were intense, rushing in from all over. Does it help to write in this situation where everyone is screaming at one another? Are we really listening? I decided then not to say anything publicly and instead to continue my listening exercise. Those who were opposed to the government's measures were concerned about issues of free speech and freedom of the press. Their concern, which I shared, was understandable. Those who supported the government's thinking were essentially expressing





a feeling that had been there all along, a feeling of extreme frustration with the media, which I could also understand. No prisoners were taken. No shades of grey were permitted by either side. And in the din of mutual slanging, no serious dialogue took place.

Is it something about the paradigm of journalism that is being challenged by critics of the press? What is the journalistic paradigm? I am not always so sure anymore. Thirty years ago, I believed that journalism is about giving a voice to the voiceless, it is about speaking for those who cannot speak, it is about finding a way to tell the story of a community and a nation which helps to keep the disparate threads together. It is about not being afraid to speak up. It is about describing “the birds of sorrow flying over our heads.”

Since 1996, I have been able to add that it is about upholding the Constitution of South Africa and being committed to its values. Before 1994, I was not a citizen of this country, had no vote and was essentially





excluded from the political system and excluded largely from the economic system. Apartheid declared me Cape Malay and tried very hard to imprison my life within this limited identity.

Now I am free to be whoever I want to be. I am free to tell my story and the story of my neighbourhood, my town and my country. Why is it that though sometimes I read an article and feel that it raised issues accurately, based on fact, but often when I look at a newspaper or read an article, it appears so far from what my truth is that I can only shake my head?

One cannot throw a blanket over all journalists and place them in one bed. Just as in government where there are those civil servants who are outstanding and those who give their institutions a bad name, so too in my profession. My colleagues in other ministries warned me. Write down everything that you say. Ask for queries in writing and give responses in writing. Keep a record of all your transactions.





Goodness. Can it be so bad? I was sure that if one built a good relationship with the key journalists then this problem could be solved.

I thought back on the days when I started my career at the Cape Times. I knew that a large part of my work depended on the strength of my contacts and on establishing a reputation of trust. I spent an inordinate amount of time ensuring that my stories appeared largely as I had written them. The subs on the desks at night came to know that I was following with keen interest what they were doing with my stories. I was 22 years old, a young reporter, and believed strongly that I had the right to fight for the words that had flowed through my fingers because that was my truth. And anyone who messed with them was messing with my truth.

I remember coming into the newsroom in the late afternoon one day and finding my editor seated at one of the terminals there. When he saw me he called me





over to show me that he had placed a letter in the paper complaining about a story of mine. The letter was from one of the chaps from the Coloured Representative Council. At the end of the letter, my editor had penned a response which provided an explanation for the complaint raised. I was not happy, and explained why. I convinced the editor that each sentence in my story was accurate and could be justified. He listened to me and then changed the response at the end of the letter to read that he stood by his reporter's account of events. I was very pleased. I had a voice not only out there in the public, but had a voice in my newsroom. And often today when I listen to the difficulties of my colleagues, I am conscious of the fact that they do not have a voice in their newsrooms. They have to accept and live with decisions taken on the subs desk and move on.

I am not suggesting that it would be practical for every decision to be questioned and argued out in a newsroom. That would be absurd. But the journalist





has to know that his or her words are trusted by those around in the newsroom. No one can claim that he or she has the monopoly on truth. However what we all have to strive to do is to bring the facts to the public as thoughtfully and honestly as we can.





## *Different narratives*

We cannot hide from the fact that we individually have different narratives running through our minds. But at a broad level I would say the dominant story in the minds of many South Africans is that they want this country to succeed and move away from all vestiges of the old Apartheid system. They want to be genuinely proud of South Africa. This narrative was vividly illustrated last year in the glorious month of the World Cup when we were lifted for a short while above the mundane and



experienced a heightened level of togetherness and positivity. And it is for that sense of togetherness and positivity that we yearn at our core. Life is fractious at its best, but there are those moments that we all live for when everything combines as one. When the different impulses within us flow together and make us whole and a part of the whole.

Yet it is far from being the only, or even the dominant, narrative of the world we live and work in. There is another narrative, all the more powerful because it is largely unstated, even denied. It is expressed unconsciously, almost automatically. It infuses itself invisibly as the major underlying premise of a vast amount of media reporting.

This second narrative affirms and perpetuates a colonial interpretation of history and whatever follows from that. This story says blacks and the former disenfranchised community are incompetent, even while it claims we have irreversibly entered the





post-colonial kingdom. Blacks don't know what they are doing. They did not create the wealth of this land and when they rule themselves they are hopeless. Added to this is that the working people of this land are ignorant and will only make poor decisions. Those who are in business and own the economy are the ones who should be most trusted. Anyone else is an incompetent fool not understanding how to make a community and a nation work. The men in the construction industry that have so shamelessly stolen from us and stand accused of uncompetitive behaviour are not exposed to public scrutiny. Who of us knows the name or have seen a picture of any of these men? How quickly the transgressions of the Mark Thatcher's of the world are overlooked. How acceptable it is to forgive Hansie Cronje and to sympathetically tell his story in film.

The first narrative links in with a story of yearning for a proud African future where the people who live in this country determine their own destiny and create





a society that is theirs and not the mirror image of a distant land. This impulse has gripped the imagination of millions of us for more than a century. This story believes that it is the vast majority of South Africans who over past centuries have given their energy and skill to build the country up to this point. They have mined the earth, they have raised the buildings, they have carved roads through mountain passes and they have in their ancestry a close connection to the land and its spirit. Above all, it is they through their idealism, courage, intelligence and generosity, who envisaged the possibility of democracy and freedom.

We come from a long history where the views and feelings of most South Africans were ignored. Why would we not want to acknowledge our own accomplishments? If we don't, why should anyone else bother to do so? It is to capture both the sun and the storms, to see the rays that penetrate through the clouds as well as the clouds that block out the light.





I am proudly South African, and know for us to function as a country I cannot speak down my own future. At the same time, this does not stop me from wanting to cast the spotlight on those who destroy what we are building, those who are corrupt and acquisitive. On the contrary they live as parasites off our efforts. They must be exposed.

We have to have the courage to stop those who are rotten or those who have the tendency to destroy communities. But we should not discount that there are huge numbers of people in any one town or suburb whose main activities are positive and helpful to their community. Through my fog of sadness, it is always those many who act with kindness daily that provide the greatest inspiration for me to cope with life's difficulties. All around us there are constant reminders that all is not bleak. There are flashes of self-affirmation. There are so many South Africans prepared to go well beyond the call of duty when it comes to reaching out and helping one another.





Governance and social relations are uneven across the country. How can it not be, when we have had decades of an anti-democratic manipulation of our lives? We have been governed by a system that took away from us completely any right of agency. Government did not mean expressing what we wanted as a people. It was only a system of tight control. Those controls have been loosened and now we slowly make our way to choose our self-imposed controls. In some instances we are doing really badly and in others we are doing well.

We have fought to be free, to be who we are and not what others define us to be. And yet when I examine our media, an institution I consider myself to be part of, I begrudgingly have to admit that it does not always reflect who I am or what I believe in. It leaves me with the same feeling I have when I go into a book shop and have to look for South African or African titles. In the front seat is the European and American experience. All else is other. I am other.





My relationship with the spiritual is other, as is the vast majority's relationship with their ancestors. The natural knowledge base passed on from my grandmother through which we were raised is other. All that is our own and all that we know naturally is being tossed away as we seek to mimic a global culture. Is this an inevitability? Or are there flashes of self-affirmation in our public life which we can easily strengthen?

The exquisite beadwork that so many of our people make is slowly becoming part of the mainstream but remains other. The knowledge of our fishermen is shafted in favour of commercial enterprises. The huge community weddings in Gugulethu and Athlone do not make our news pages. Who knows of our daily achievements in the communities where we live? Who acknowledges the painstaking effort the local Cape Town community has made to grow the minstrel activity into a cohesive community activity over nearly a century? Is it just something that must be reorganised from outside to take away the agency that



created it in the first place? The tailors, seamstresses and choir masters have tried by their own efforts to cast off the role of victim and reinterpret their bleakest experiences. And still this city is not theirs on their terms.

A foreign diplomat made the observation recently that South Africa defines itself in terms of its problems and not its strengths. No country can continue defining itself in this way and hope to succeed. The difficulty will continue to be getting the balance right. Striking that balance and alongside this, enhancing conditions of peace amongst us remains two of our gravest challenges.





## *Facing our challenges*

**W**e face a myriad of problems, one of the greatest the current joblessness of six million people. While we tussle with this difficulty, government and public demands for media change lurch back and forth setting the scene for a bitter stand-off. I remember last year after the World Cup it came as a bit of a let-down when we immediately got tangled up in threats of government instituting a media tribunal to regulate media coverage. At the same time, a controversy continues around the revised





version of the Protection of Information Bill seeking tighter classification of government information. The Wiki-Leaks saga has illustrated how flimsy the notion of a Top Secret document has become in today's world. We need to debate what we consider to be appropriately confidential from the government's point of view but hasty classifications of information as "secret" will only lead to a greater clamour for such information.

As a journalist, I believe I have to highlight both the light side and the dark side. I have to tell the stories that show the challenges and ugliness of the dark side and also tell the stories that show the beauty and brightness of the light side. Yet many journalists see their role exclusively as that of exposing the dark side of our country.

Part of the explanation comes from the fact that the media in its present form has become more and more about entertainment and selling our product. And





it appears that what sells often is what feeds into our dark side. Is that true? Is it that we will only sell our stories if they are filled with dark drama? There is truth in that. We are naturally attracted to the gory and the dramatic. A good story grips the mind. A story that has intrigue, passion, crisis that touches our emotions definitely holds our attention. It has been fascinating to observe how the Dewani story of murder and love has gripped not only us but people in other parts of the world. Did he do it or did he not? It is not the media that has created this hype. It is the media's understanding that the human psyche thrives on this kind of drama that moves editors to dig deeper and deeper to find the little titbits. Shakespeare wrote plays about these kinds of dramas and filled halls with these performances demonstrating the struggle between light and dark. He showed life as a constant tension between these different impulses.

The problem lies not in exposure of misconduct and abuse. We can never have too much good investigative





reporting. The problem is that a blanket pall of cynicism and negativity is thrown over our country where no light at all is allowed to come through. If we have a narrative that exclusively and relentlessly reinforces the dark side, how are we supposed to believe in our capacity to do good things and be successful? Every one of us has these tensions within ourselves and the question arises: Is it the role of the journalist to throw the spotlight only on the bad? Do we provide a meaning and a context to information that suits a limited interpretation of public life? Is this not the role of the politician?

Journalists cannot, of course, be apolitical. But we can resist the temptation to see the world purely through the lens of a particular formation. What worries me is not so much that our thinking is conditioned by the political slogans and catchwords of a particular moment, but that it is motivated by deep underlying narratives about the nature of the country we live in. It is these narratives more than objective





fact-finding and reasonable analysis that determine the stories we tell and how we tell them.

In my own case I am always aware that my history and my experience incline me towards an alignment with the former oppressed majority. This is not because I think that the majority, and those chosen to represent them, are always right. It is because my critical journalistic capacities will always locate themselves within the narrative of our ancient and continuing striving for emancipation.

It would be naive if a journalist does not understand that there are different stories that move us as a people. We have to acknowledge these different stories while at the same time seeking to find what binds the stories together. It is only the Constitution that provides us with a common basis to interpret our South African condition. We have made a pact. We have agreed to the rules. All the rest we need to work and fight out on a problem by problem basis.





## *Taking sides*

Here I find that when our government takes decisions in the interest of the working people, journalists often side with the wealthy. The trade unions are strange creatures and the government is naive to work with them and be swayed by their point of view. If the government is swayed by business interests, then the government is sensible. If it is swayed by community or worker interests, it is stupid and naive.

We cannot continue to wish away the fact that South Africans want an unbiased media. They want a media that reflects and defends their experiences. They also





want a media that fights corruption and anything that destroys the good that has been built. But they don't want the good to be thrown out with the bad. The journalist cannot be fighting to protect the rights of the farmer and ignore the rights of the farm-worker. He or she must defend the rights of both, and be especially attentive to the powerless without voice. And just as corrupt government officials must not be let off the hook, so too must the corrupt in the construction industry be brought to public attention.

It is not our job to trust blindly what we are told. It is our job to be sceptical, to question and to examine, to make sure that the public is not led by their noses. This tension between government and the media is a necessary tension. It provides some form of checks and balances. It is part of the political process that constitutes a democracy and it is what we have agreed to as a nation when we adopted the rules defined in our Constitution. We cannot now say why do the media play that role? The media must



play a role of being sceptical to keep government on its toes. Buoyant scepticism can only be good for our national health. However when vigorous, fact-based scepticism comes to be displaced by automotive and all pervasive cynicism, the breakdown begins. The function of journalism is then reduced to finding material to feed the cynicism rather than to report on people, institutions and events in all their nuanced complexity.

A political correspondent told me not so long ago that she only respects two cabinet ministers. The rest she said were all hopeless. I was shocked to the core. By any standards, we have a number of intelligent, hardworking, experienced and committed ministers. Was there any effort to know who the ministers were and what they were doing daily? In fact, I often say it is not a job I would do even if I earned ten times more than what I earn now. Be that as it may; if we are proceeding from the point that most cabinet members are hopeless, the public cannot





possibly be assured that it is getting the information it depends on or deserves. Is it this kind of thinking that makes it possible, for example, for most of our media to miss the story that South Africa was recognised as being the best country in the world with regard to the transparency of public finance management? We hear how poorly we are doing in health, education – and it’s good that we are kept on our toes – but our achievements are belittled and the balance is lost.

Why would we not want to acknowledge our own accomplishments? If we don’t, why should anyone else bother to do so? The choice is not between sunshine journalism and rain and fog journalism. It is to capture both the sun and the storms, to see the rays that penetrate through the clouds as well as the clouds that block out the light. It was with great interest that I read about Dene Smuts of the DA taking on Paul Hoffman of the Accountability Institute. Here the country is faced with an onslaught from sections of the British media and the publicist of the murder





suspect, Shrien Dewani, and one of our own rubbishes the justice system and the Cape High Court judge. He hands cannon fodder to those who have set out to rubbish our country's justice system in the context of extradition proceedings.

This cannot by any standards be supported. It is like those media who endlessly repeated the doom and gloom stories of our competitors for the World Cup. Surely it was up to us as journalists to promote the true capacities of our country against prejudiced and grossly inaccurate attacks? One gets a sense that this is almost a no-no amongst journalists.

Those in power know that they will not easily get away with corrupt practices, because we have a strong media. Our former police commissioner would not have been charged if media attention had not been relentless. However, what concerns me is that we seem to make an assumption that if there are rotters amongst us, we are all rotten. As Nelson Mandela said during his time





in office, there are good men and women across all political parties. Those good men and women need to be supported and encouraged, while never being immune from criticism in the free and open media process. But no-one should be considered to be rotters simply because they work within government as an institution.

How can there be trust and confidence in journalism if the journalist spends most of his or her time telling only a fraction of our story, without light or shade, in what ultimately becomes a relentless monochrome of darkness and cynicism?

Are we asking the right questions? Are we reading the mood in our local communities? How do we read the mood if we do not live within our communities and are not an integral part of the challenges facing them?

I have been fortunate to live in one neighbourhood for a long time. About 51 years ago, my parents bought a





home in Wynberg which became a coloured area under apartheid. There was also White Wynberg separated from us by a railway line. And when the library we had been using was located in White Wynberg in terms of the new demarcations, we were barred from attending. My mom took a stand and waited for the librarians to directly order her from the premises. This politics of exclusion and subjugation shaped most of my childhood and young adulthood. I took my life experiences with me into the Cape Times newsroom and gave expression to my reality on its pages. One story changed my life for ever. When I wrote in detail about the police shootings on the Cape Flats in June/ July 1980, everything changed for me. I was arrested as a result of writing the story, tortured and charged with possession of three banned books. I felt the doors closing around me. I felt the avenues of expression restricted. I was silenced.





## *Freedom burning*

I had to find another avenue. I stayed at the Cape Times after my release but could not settle down. There was something burning inside of me. It was a fire that had been fanned by the prison experience and threatened to engulf me. The only way to control that fire was to direct all my energies towards changing the authoritarian system. I found other ways to give expression to the feelings and thoughts of people around me. I helped with putting together the 5-weekly community newspaper called Grassroots started by the Writers Association of South Africa.





And so began a period of interaction between individuals from all over the Cape. We combined, drew strength from one another and told the stories coming from within the heart of the different areas. We wrote about the community struggles, the challenges and victories in order to inspire other communities to take charge of their lives. My journalism took a different form. Writing was tied to action and action to writing. No longer was I a dispassionate journalist trying to balance all sides. I took the side of those who were excluded and downtrodden and gave all my energies to be part of throwing off the shackles of oppression.

Most of the stories were about agency. They were about the problems facing people and what they were doing about them. It was to spur people on to take charge of their own lives and oppose the anti-democratic practices that had become part of their lives. The approach spread like wildfire and soon led to the formation of several small organisations across the Cape. Those organisations joined existing





organisations to eventually form the formidable United Democratic Front.

We were engaged in writing for a cause and a noble one at that. We discarded the paradigm of the dispassionate journalist observing from the side-lines and took on the advocacy traditions of early journalism both in the United States and Great Britain.

Spearheading this effort was Johnny Issel, the first organiser of Grassroots, launched in 1980. The sense that our destiny lay in our own hands inspired the setting up of a chain of community newspapers, large and small, across the country including Saamstaan in the South Cape, The Eye in Mamelodi and the Voice in Lenasia.

It was a time when journalism could not sit on the fence. (It seldom does, anyway). It was a time that called for decisive action to throw off the tide of subjugation seeping into every aspect of our lives. The





memory of subjugation was in our blood from earlier centuries but there was also a memory of dignity and freedom that we had known before, both as indigenous groups living in South Africa before the coming of the European settler community and as those of us coming as slaves from the dignified communities plundered by the Dutch East India Company in the East. In our blood we have the knowledge of being free, we have the knowledge of determining our own lives, we have the knowledge of having trusted and relied on our own instincts.

A place like Soweto that was once the heart of resistance and oppression, is now the heart of healing and development. We have to write about this. We have to acknowledge that local people have achieved this. All over the country there are growing pockets of development. And yet if we read our stories, we could easily come to the conclusion that South African governance is uniformly rotten to the core and leaders from all over the country are a bunch of





idiots screwing up everything. If this were factually the position, it should have been evidenced last year during the Soccer World Cup. In fact the opposite was there for the entire world to see. Despite all our nonsense, we were able to hold something as big as that together.

The difficulty will continue to be getting the balance right. It is my view that upholding the basic tenets of journalism will help towards solving this challenge - give all sides of the story, be fair and seek to provide as much information as possible so that the reader can make up his or her own mind.





## *The power of words*

In today's world, it is acceptable to say anything to one another, how ever careless. Our Constitution upholds this right to free speech. If we take this literally then we are allowed to say whatever we wish to say. This is an important principle to uphold lest we err on the side of caution and allow wrong to prevail.

At the same time we have to weigh up the effect of our words on the society or whoever the words are directed at. We cannot ignore that words have great





power. I always say to my daughter, pause before you speak. I believe that we as journalists must pause before we write, and if that which we choose to write flows from thoughtfulness, it cannot but be supported. Thoughtfulness assumes access to as many of the facts as possible. Often, however, the very nature of the news process does not allow for such thoughtfulness. We provide snippets of information which we add on to on a daily basis. This is within the nature of the process. In many stories, there are different interests at play. We need to be conscious of this, and seek to balance out the different interests. How in the process of what we write, do we preserve each other's dignity?

In the end I think that the biggest challenge is the fact that each of us has different narratives running through our minds. And there is nothing wrong with that. We cannot do anything about that. We each have our own truths. It is to acknowledge those truths and be conscious that one is moving from that





position. At the same time, we have as a guiding light our Constitution which represents an accord between all of us in the country.

Despite all the criticisms, we have in our country a formidable media institution that can be strengthened further. Democracy has freed the airwaves with a plethora of radio licences issued for the first time in our history. These licences give voice to many communities scattered across the country. We have also diversified television coverage. The emergence of Soweto television marks a considerable move forward in the efforts to broaden access to this medium. All this has happened as a result of our new democracy. If we cast our minds back to pre-1994, all our media were restricted. Now we continue to fight out the parameters of a free media, taking some steps forward and some steps backward.

Our journalism often captures and reflects the bi-polar existence of our country. The World Cup experience





illustrated how we moved from fear-based reporting to hope-based reporting, and then back to fear-based reporting. In the years and months preceding the World Cup, the World Cup Organising committee's efforts to assure us that we were on track were partly ignored. We reported on the progress but we also tended more to keep the focus on the fears. Is dread our life force?

Then came the glorious month when we suddenly caught a glimpse of our strengths as a nation. Journalists let their guard slip and allowed themselves to get caught up in the euphoria of the moment. We read the mood, captured the spirit of the experience and pumped joy into our minds for one long month. What irony it was that as soon as that month was over, the government itself chose to follow the path of negativity by focusing on what the conduct of the media had been before that month and off we went.





Our writing swung from being hope-filled to fear-filled.

What is it about our political process that makes us swing from one mood to another? Is it something about the way we conduct our politics? Politics is about managing difference and it is here that we collide. It is not as if there was a deliberate effort to find something fractious that could divide us. The issue of fair media coverage has been on the ruling party's agenda for a number of years and post-Polokwane; it was set to become a focus at some point.

It seemed that nobody in government considered that announcing plans for a media tribunal and tabling the detail of the new information bill would cause negative pressure.

Perhaps the thinking was that the timing was right because the government was on a real high as a result of the World Cup. It had amply demonstrated that it





had successfully pulled off one of the world's largest sporting events without any major hitch.

It also read correctly that the sense of South African unity recorded and displayed by the media was what the South African public was longing for.

We seem to be removed from the lived experience of the vast majority. How do we restore our craft to the illustriousness of the Drum generation?





## *From the heart*

Journalists spoke then from the heart of their communities, not as dispassionate outsiders. I recall about ten years back one of my colleagues said he just reports. It is not his job to consider the consequences of his reporting. It is his job to report. He does not have to clean up the mess that his report generates. I listened to him and thought long and hard about this. How my writing affects my community matters to me. How my country is progressing matters to me. I cannot be part of an effort to breakdown what others are painstakingly building up just for the heck of it. It matters to me that this is my home until I die. It



matters to me that it is the home of my daughter, my nephews and nieces and their children and is likely to be their home for decades to come. So it matters what I write.

We must be neither too afraid to expose wickedness or culpable incompetence, nor too cynical to report genuine achievement.

When a group of journalists created the community newspaper Grassroots, the main focus was on sharing stories across communities that showed the success of right action.

Communities cannot just be told of their bleakest experiences that cast them in a role of victim. They have to see themselves as agents of their own destinies. The city of Johannesburg has admirably facilitated community agency in Soweto. And there are fabulous stories of community agency all over the country. Let us showcase this as journalists alongside putting great





pressure on all those who are rotters. And let us tell the good stories with the same verve and drama of the bad stories. We live not by dread alone.

The Cape minstrels have emerged as an industry from the heart of local communities in the Cape. It is about the love of music, learning to play different instruments and the art of performance. It is also about the seamstresses and tailors who design and make the costumes and mothers who save the whole year long for their children to participate in the carnival. It is an event local communities have built themselves. And yet this is other. It is as it was before, quaint and other. It is not recognised as a proud rejection of all that constituted slavery and a strong impulse for freedom.

The narrative in my mind that is clamouring to get out is the quest for a dignified life for all South Africans. Fairness must become the standard of all our transactions. How do we bring the other to the centre? How do we do this without making some other group,





the other? Is “othering” inevitable? Will the others eventually be the African foreigners? And is that the price we will pay to combine all South African groups?

Our Constitution says that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. How do we as journalists uphold this value that we have all committed to? Do we write fairly about all who live in South Africa? It is good to focus attention on the Guptas, but why only on them and not on the O'Reillys? We must put under scrutiny the business practices that make corrupt dealings possible. We tend to focus public attention on those who are the corrupted but not the corruptors. The corruptors often continue to enjoy positions of respectability in the world of business. Let us shame not only those in governments who enter into corrupt deals but also those who make the offer of those temptations.

Do we sense the needs and desires common to all or do we just support small interest groups that reflect our own views? We do not hear the voices of our miners.





We do not hear the voices of our farm workers and we do not hear the voices of our unemployed. Perhaps we have to accept the limitations of our craft.

But is it the limitations of our craft, or is it in fact the limitations of the industry within which our craft is located? That industry is committed to maximisation of profits and not to advancing the craft of journalism. How do these two impulses coexist for the benefit of communities?

I do not want to refer specifically to statements made by various political leaders and dissect these. We all are aware of the statements that are made that do not resonate with us. The difficulty is that statements do not resonate with some but resonate with others. What we as journalists need to be conscious of is how we write about those statements when they either resonate or do not resonate with ourselves. What do we place in the public domain and how does this contribute to the health or ill health of our society?



There are no easy answers because we all are such different individuals populating the profession. We have to however, at all times be true to the demands of our craft and above all be true to ourselves. We have to examine and question our conduct and the effect of what we do in order to be mindful of what we write and send into the space beyond ourselves. Free speech and conditions of peace amongst us must be finely balanced in order to nourish a sense of dignity and respectfulness.

I believe that one has to weigh up one's words, think carefully about what one wants to say and be aware of the power one holds in one's hand. The politicians wield power. We too in our different institutions wield power. Journalists have the power to speak the truth and to challenge authority. Teachers have the power to mould the minds of children. Lawyers have the power to interpret and shape the law of the land. Our society is structured in such a way that these different powers interact to make up the whole. When any one



power is weak or out of sync, it must necessarily affect the overall health of the society.

Our institutions are unevenly successful. The work that we do as journalists is not all bad or all good. Some things we get right and other things we get wrong. The difficulty we face now is that we have to defend ourselves against those who wish to suggest that all we are doing is wrong. This cannot be further from the truth. Just as there are good men and women across all political parties, there are professional men and women across all media outlets. We will have to creatively consider how to win back public confidence so that our politicians do not arbitrarily make decisions that could throw the baby out with the bathwater. We owe this to the communities we come from, We owe this to Neville Ferreira on the West Coast and other concerned citizens like him. We owe it to Andries Tatane who lost his life. We need to bring the concerns and vibrancy of our communities to the centre of our public life giving





space to more than just dread alone, so that the rich tapestry of our lives can unfold and hold us within a warm embrace. Journalists rooted in our communities have the possibility of connecting us to our ancient yearning for self-determination. It is not just about telling the story. It is about finding the strength to tell our story on our own terms, to face both our dread and to revel in our ability to overcome. We cannot live by dread alone. We have the right to preserve our story as we understand it, including the triumphs and disappointments of freedom.





*“What spurred us on then — the need and urge for freedom — still burns within us and it will burn in us for a long time to come. I want you to be strong. Do not be distracted by anything. Let us continue moving on and finally I believe we shall see what we fought for.”*

**Johnny Issel**, a week before he died.

