

**NO WONDER
PEOPLE HAVE
STOPPED
READING
NEWSPAPERS**



**AND OTHER
TALES FROM
THE
NEWSROOM**

ROGER KENYON

“WE MAKE GOOD THINGS BETTER”



CLIENTS IN CANADA, USA, SCOTLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND,
CZECH REPUBLIC AND SOUTH AFRICA



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Remembering Roger Kenyon

I first met Roger Kenyon a few months after becoming executive editor of *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg early in 1976. It was a hectic, frightening time as a Soweto students' uprising was met with fierce repression by a government that lashed out at every sign of opposition, banning newspapers, and jailing editors and journalists. *Drum*, a monthly for black South Africans, had been at the heart of the fight against apartheid for 14 years and wasn't spared from that backlash: Several staff members were detained without trial, and the issue of the magazine published immediately after the riots was banned – in fact, it was an offence to possess that particular issue for another 20 years.

Roger – then deputy editor of *Reader's Digest*, based in Cape Town – had also been a senior editor at the magazine, and, as I learned over the first of many long, liquid lunches that helped keep us sane during that tense period, we had other things in common ... our background was in the English provincial press, and we'd both worked for the *Daily Express* – Roger in Manchester, while I'd toiled for a year in the national paper's Glasgow offices.

It also helped that I was one of the few people in our new country who understood – most of the time anyway – his crazy humour, honed years earlier while working as a part-time scriptwriter for a couple of British TV comedians.

Roger quit his full-time job and became a freelance writer for *Reader's Digest* and other publications, and I left *Drum* a few years later to become a partner in a publication consultancy, *Freelance Editors*. One of the first things my partner, Kerry Swift, previously an associate editor at *Drum*, and I did at our new business was to launch a quarterly magazine, unimaginatively named *Review*. Aimed at

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corporate PROs and consultants who produced magazines and newspapers for large corporations, the publication also picking up many readers in the mainstream media.

Roger was, of course, one of our first writers, contributing a wonderful series of critical vignettes that he described as “a gentle evisceration of those little fluffy rabbits hopping amiably, but pointlessly, around the newsrooms of South Africa.” Most of his venom was reserved for his local papers, the *Cape Times* and *Argus* in Cape Town, along with a previous employer, the “grey lady of Sauer Street,” Johannesburg’s evening paper, *The Star*. But the insanities of corporate journalism didn’t escape his withering gaze.

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His main energies at this time, apart from earning enough cash from his freelance writing, however, were devoted to playwriting and scriptwriting for radio and television. And the last time I met Roger – in a pub close to my studio in 1989, he was displaying more than his usual frenetic exuberance. Finally, he’d completed a script for a BBC radio series that he was convinced would propel him onto the next stage of his career. That dream was never to be fulfilled. Towards the end of our lunch, he complained of the lingering pain from an aching shoulder, then dashed off to fly back to Cape Town. Soon after arriving home, he was dead – at 48 – felled by a massive heart attack ...

This booklet – produced as a small tribute to mark Roger’s 60th birthday – features the articles he wrote for *Review* magazine.

Tony Sutton



No wonder people have stopped reading newspapers!

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In a recent column, *The Star* newspaper's ombudsman, James McClurg, cited the case of a reporter donning a white coat and stethoscope to interview the driver of the bus that crashed into Westdene dam, drowning dozens of schoolkids. Naughty, says Jim, with a verbal slap on the wrist. But I disagree wholeheartedly with the ombudsman. In my book, the unnamed scribe should have got a gold medal for enterprise.

My experience with South African journalists is that if that reporter had followed standard SA practices, she would have waited around the newsroom for the press release or reported back from the Federal Hotel six weeks later that her request on

the standard form 22/b (Press, provincial hospitals, dealing with) had been turned down by the medical superintendent.

That is the problem with South African newspapers in general and its journalists in particular. Reporters have become so cosseted by the official statement, the “unrest” news from SAPSPEAK, the PRO or the company spokesman that they have forgotten what journalistic enterprise is. The agreements have either been tacit: You print my hand-out and I’ll buy you a Coke, or official – the Conference of Editors agreement on dealing with the police.

They have knuckled under and now accept not only that official doors are closed unless it suits some official or other, but also that private businesses can operate as though protected by the Official Secrets Act.

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Some of my erstwhile colleagues will say, “Hang on Roger. That’s laying it on a bit thick,” and forget to include me in the next round. But is this criticism unfair? When last did you read/write a good old-fashioned news story (disasters notwithstanding), the sort that wears out shoe leather and not the seat of your pants from sitting too long in front of the Atex screen?

Is there a memorial in some scrapyard to the last motoring correspondent who tore into the South African motor industry? No! The last piece of criticism I read of any car road-tested by a newspaperman was a gripe over the fully-reclining ashtray. No, sorry chaps, you have to admit that after all those trips to Tokyo and Wolfsburg you can’t really do much more than polish up the company PR’s ego.

If that’s cruel, take comfort in the truth that few articles extend to more than a handful of pretty pictures and a glowing eulogy on how Acme Airways got you there, Northern Fog put you up in six-star glitz and Suffermarine cruised you home. Crisp, analytical copy? Forget it.

So where does the blame lie? Certainly with newsmen who prefer freebies to hard news stories. Most definitely with editors who are coerced by advertising managers to run supplements where the editorial merely holds the ads apart. But more so with those who profess to train South Africa’s journalists.

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I have seen the products of Rhodes and Potchefstroom universities, and I wouldn't give most of them jobs as copy boys. Correct that! I would start them off as copy boys. At least they'd learn something.

The efforts of the newspaper groups have been lamentable in training young journalists. No wonder people have stopped reading newspapers!

Can anything be done about the deplorable state of the craft? It would be easy to give up and switch on the telly. But the solution is in the hands of journalists. Demand higher standards and be prepared to help your young colleagues along. And, for God's sake, please don't pass on your bad habits of rewriting hand-outs. Instead, show them how to get a story and how to put it together.

And editors, let's cut the travel supplement, the Carfinder, the Jobfinder, the Homefinder, the Funfinder. What we need is a Newsfinder !



Is there an alternative to the alternative press?

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In 20 years of journalism in this country, I have found the South African Press inherently fair. Too fair, to my liking, to be all good. On arrival in Johannesburg, I soon discovered the enormous lengths newspapers went to to get both sides of the story. As a young reporter in England I was motivated by the axiom “Never let the facts get in the way of a good story,” so why temper a juicy scandal by leavening it with a rebuttal? That would make an even better yarn in the next edition.

So, as a sub-editor on *The Star* I had to learn – quickly – that even-handedness was the hallmark of South African journalism, even if it led to boring, sometimes incomprehensible, stories. Inevitably, the ubiquitous “spokesman” popped up to deny rumors, refute allegations and put “the facts into perspective.” As I say, very boring. But when you have acres of newsprint, it can all be accommodated, even if

the reader switches off after getting through the real meat. What I'm saying might sound like heresy to those who try to instill that quality of fairness in our young journalists. But I disagree. You can balance the scales so much, but there comes a time when the other side just does not make good journalism.

Years ago when the South African Police were attempting to gild their lily and created the Directorate of Public Relations, headed by ex-crime reporter and sometime photo-book hero Leon Mellett who invented a sort of barometer of reporting on SAP affairs. On a wall of his office in Pretoria he had a graph showing that day's state of affairs with the media. On one side were the "positive" reports, with "neutrals" holding them apart from the "negative" stories.

I assumed when I was shown this elaborate fantasy that Mellett could somehow convince his masters that the directorate was doing a good job if the "positives" balanced – even outweighed – the "negatives."

It must have worked because Mellett rapidly swept through the SAP ranks, became a one-star general and alter ego to the Minister of Law and Order. However, in creating this balancing act, he was only codifying what the Press was doing anyway. Though in Mellett's mind and what he eventually sold to his political bosses was the dangerous idea that for every bad story there must be a good one. Unfortunately, unlike the photo-stories Mellett starred in, every newspaper report cannot have a fairy-tale ending. Thus, when newspapers started reporting on the excesses of the police it was not sufficient just to refute them, but to ban even reporting them – except through the "Unrest" PR.

This psychosis – for that is what it is – has been glibly, and enthusiastically, taken up by the rest of officialdom. Recently, I was hauled before the Media Council over an article I had written for *Reader's Digest* about the conditions in rural schools. The details do not matter, but slowly during the inquisition, I realized the basic facts of the article were not being challenged – the article simply did not contain enough good things about the government department responsible for black education.

Somehow there was this feeling that because I had written three paragraphs on the particularly hideous and scandalous conditions I found at one school, the department had a RIGHT to an equal length of eulogy on what “good” they were doing for other blacks.

There was this threatening demand that the article should have been about all the plans they had for black education and not the nasty reality that exists today. (The fact that after two years of deliberations their report was not available at the time of researching the article didn’t matter.)

So, it is surely understandable that the alternative media is getting it in the neck for daring to report the unpleasant facts of life to their readers. For no amount of cologne sprayed by officialdom is going to make them smell sweeter. For instance, I saw a cartoon on TB in the newspaper *Grassroots*. It started off with the usual line punted by the health authorities about coughs and sneezes spreading diseases and then launched into the REAL causes: squalor, poor housing, lack of sanitation.

It must have offended all those nice people doing so much to combat TB, not to mention those in officialdom who can quote reams of figures on new housing. But the fact is South Africa still has an inordinate number of TB cases, and *Grassroots* was, to my mind, nearer the truth.

But there the State would differ. It would shout “foul” and insist in a follow-up to present ITS side of the story. Such juggling with the Press would placate official minds, but I doubt if *Grassroots* readers would be taken in.

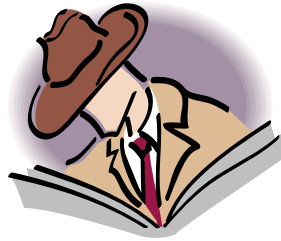
I agree the alternative papers often go overboard with their looney thinking – even the sports reports become slanted (but, then, I’ve yet to read an unbiased report on Western Province written in the Vaal) – but I would have thought banning them polishes their haloes a little too much. Rather let that most powerful of forces – the reader – do the Minister of Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil’s work for him.

The alternative press has an important role to play in the dissemination of facts, particularly where the legit press seems to have abdicated its responsibility. But

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they will soon alienate not so much the official mind as their most important target – the readers.

The material in the alts, whether the *Weekly Mail* or the *Village Voice*, might look impressive to a handful of politicians and trade unionists, but after a while the bleats, clarion calls and tub-thumping becomes too stodgy a diet. Readers want variety, and when they get fed up with reading the same old hash they will turn to the boobs and bum of the other alternatives.



Beware of those editorial camels

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In publishing, particularly corporate or technical journals, we are only too aware of the editorial committee. This is fine when individual members of the committee lend their technical expertise or corporate wisdom to fine-tuning an article. Few general editors are adept at knowing all the scientific details or office politics, and, if only because they want to keep their jobs, they accept the wisdom of the committee or board and thus manage to keep out of the journalistic stew.

However, it is when members of the editorial committee take on – often quite erroneously if they took the trouble to review their terms of reference – the mantle of editor that the camels of the publishing world start appearing.

Usually it takes the form of believing that the style of writing can be improved. Not just because the editorial committee member wrote a prize-winning essay in

Sub-A, but because he or she actually believes that a reworking here and there will enhance the corporate image. Out go the crisp phrases, the finely-honed idiomatic sentences, the workmanship that brings understanding among readers from the chairman to the tea lady.

Take this gem from a leading corporate journal: The writer originally essayed this piece to show that members of the company's staff were not only efficient, workmanlike and pleasant and also, above all, human ... (the woman's car wouldn't start).

Peering under the bonnet, "I see your problem, missus. Just let me get my hammerometer." Pete returns with a three-pound hammer, gently taps the starter motor. "OK, try it again, lady." The engine bursts into life. Pete slams down the bonnet lid. "On your way, ma'am," and gives a cheery wave.

From the editor, who liked the article, the copy went up to corporate line, everyone adding his twopenny-worth. The section arrived back APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION and bearing half a dozen signatures. Here it is, as devoured by, I am sure, half a million totally-bored readers.

Sub-Superintendent Pete Farnsbarns (I swear not his real name), checked out the ignition system and fuel-line flow of the customer's car. (This was in line with corporate policy as laid down in the regulations). After locating the fault, Sub-Super etc. etc. diagnosed the fault (again) as being pertinent to the starter motor. He carefully located the coaxial lead from the starter motor to the solenoid (this is for lay readers) and affixed the cable more firmly. (What happened to Pete's hammerometer, which was so effective?)."

It goes like that for a few more turgid sentences, before: *Superintendent Pete Farnsbarns relocates the engine cover and firmly secures it. After completing the relevant forms, he gives a friendly (can't be cheery in the organization) wave and says, "Thank you madam. I hope I have been of some small service to you"* (Uriah Heap move over).

Editorial committees do have a function, as I have pointed out. If you are the

editor of a house journal it would be a miracle if you knew everything about the widgets and geegaws your company produces. When you want to report a new breakthrough in corporate technology or the expensive gizmo in the computer division, you get it right or you get out. There are areas in company policy that are best not broadcast to the world, even if your source on the squash court was impeccable.

So cultivate those on the committee who can help. Explain to them the job you are doing. If the purpose of the house journal is to communicate to all its workers, tell the committee that is your aim. The working of the computer might be the greatest thing since the interfaced abacus, but show the committee that as far as your readers are concerned, they are only interested in the fact that it cost R1,000 million but will save the company R500 million in a year, not lead to retrenchments, make the customer happy and, most important, guarantee the 13th cheque at Christmas.

If you foster the committee correctly, it will amaze you what you can get away with. Unfortunately, South African business has become more hideabout and secretive than the Bureau for State Security, let alone your regular government department. If you're involved in the public relations or, nowadays, the public affairs and media department, you know that most of the statements on tetchy corporate policy are so much hogwash. So with that degree of tact and diplomacy for which you were originally appointed, deftly take the committee through the journalistic craft and show them how it can benefit the corporation by communicating with the workers.

But in doing this, get it clear what you are after. From the technical boyo, it might be worth asking him/her to have a particularly articulate boffin explain new developments. Invite him to have a cup of tea, buy him/her a beer after the story's in, and explain how he's so bright and is really the best person to unravel the fanagalo for our readers. If the technical director is the guy whom the editorial committee decreed to approve your copy, he will be only too pleased to get this task

out of his in tray. Likewise, tie up the human relations (erstwhile personnel) department – always sources of juicy stories – and make sure that instead of dull lists of people having babies, getting gold watches and commendations from the chairman, you get those nuggets that Percy from the Buster Room restores Mark II Jaguars in his spare time and Philemon is manager of the Islamic League’s soccer team.

If it sounds like more work for you, it is. But usually it pays dividends not only by carving a smooth path through the editorial committee, but also by enlivening your journal.

One word of warning. In your dealings with the Corporate Mind, turn on your professionalism so that it understands not only that you are the editor, but also that you are capable of making the right editorial decisions, and that if you are ever in doubt you will quickly come to seek its wisdom.

Consider this little literary gem I read recently in the house newspaper of a very large corporation. It read like this: *Pictured from left to right: Mr. Moses Mcube, senior administration officer, public health division, Ms. Elizabeth Nkosi, superintendent, catering and accommodation services, Dick Laughingstone, popular head of the workshops, Mr. Andrew Fairenough, director, technical and administration, with Sir A.B.F. “Harry” Arbonot, at the annual long-service awards presentation.*

This illustrates the dilemma of corporate thinking on our newly-democratized society. All the readers know this is a shot of Moses the clerk who sees there’s soap and towels in the showers and Lizzie the tea lady, so why these labels when Dick doesn’t even get his full title, which puts him several notches up the corporate ladder. And Sir Harry (it is incorrect to use initials) possibly prefers the handle that everyone in the company calls him to the given one of Algenon. But while Sir Harry doesn’t stand on his dignity, obviously Mr. Fairenough does and can hardly be called “Randy Andy” (as everyone calls him behind his back).

No, if it’s all right to call everyone Tom, Dick or Harry, fair enough. If the editorial committee wants to stand on high horses, make sure the result isn’t a camel.



Did honesty, integrity and credibility disappear with the last Linotype?

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Recently, a doctor was bemoaning the fact that at medical school today students spend something slightly less than five minutes on medical ethics during their studies. I would like to think that our journalism schools spend slightly longer. But I've got serious doubts. In a country where the newspapers make hay – and circulation – out of the fast-buck merchant, the scams of fly-by-night shysters, and the editors themselves are not averse to taking the odd freebie to Mauritius, why should the hacks worry about ethics?

But surely when those same newspaper people discover high principles and daily

knock the derring-doings of P.W. and Pik, there ought to be some reckoning. Right, be holier-than thou – as long as your own fingers aren't in the collection plate. Thunder at the iniquities of impoverished people trying to eke out a sort of living at the Crossroads squatter camp under cardboard and plastic, as long as your own magnificent pile isn't in hock, thanks to a generous, no-interest loan from the proprietors.

Can our newspaper people honestly say their hands are clean?

On the other hand do they need to answer that question? Aren't they like all the other grubbers in the business, out to make a buck or two? (Preferably honest, but who's watching?) Don't they have kids, mortgages and a battered Mercedes to support?

Of course. But in setting themselves up as commentators on events, or as arbiters of taste, they must hold true to a couple of tenets, the most important of which is honesty.

Honesty to themselves comes first. If you really feel you have done an honest job, haven't been swayed by half a glass of Coke or a promise of better things, then you are on the right track. But the job becomes trickier when journalists find themselves in the nexus of "promoting" a "special" hobby horse of the editor or, more likely, a client of the advertising manager.

It might be honest-to-goodness "advertorial", for which you are, hopefully, paid. No lack of honesty there; the customer pays his money, and you pipe the tune. But what happens when the editor has a vested interest in a particular slant on a story? An old pals act, you might call it.

So you go out there and honestly report that as far as you are concerned Honest Fred couldn't be trusted to manage a hard-boiled egg. Naturally, that story will not be published. But could you honestly say there haven't been times when for the sake of peace in the office – and your job – it has been easier to write about Honest Fred being on the verge of canonisation than expose him to the world?

Don't laugh or shrug your shoulders, you know it happens, frequently. It has

become such a vice in South African journalism that reporters, subs and editors have long forgotten what's right and wrong.

Now if that sounds strong meat, try this: One well-known weekend newspaper makes a fair income out of travel advertising, although the advertorial accompanying it distracts most readers to boredom. It so happens that some bright, intelligent young woman out there discovered that some of these bumper, econo-packed holidays weren't all they were made out to be. Any mention in the newspaper? Any attempt to revise the advertorial to make sure the customers knew what they were really getting? No.

Take another case. For years, the Advertising Standards Authority has been battling, with little success, to get shysters peddling dubious slimming techniques out of print. The code prescribing this gadgetry is loosely-worded and newspapers and magazines happily collect the ad-spend for these advertisements.

Now, where are those highbrow ethics? Does the editor squeal to the advertising manager? Do journalists even attempt an article exposing the rip-off of their readers' cash? Isn't there any conscience among the lot of them that as self-appointed guardians of the public interest they ought not only to be doing something about slimming gadgets, but should be seen to be doing something about them? Then, in this beloved country there is the dodgy question of political ethics. Look, we know you consider the PFP passé, and the extra-parliamentary scene is the biggest rave, but before your struggle becomes a fight in the dole queue, consider, honestly, what you should be reporting.

Your newspaper has a line – for most it will be a simple choice of supporting either Nats or Progs. (The rights and lefts have their own problems, like having NO newspapers to support them at all.) So you neo-fascist, pinko liberal, what do you report? The facts, simple sweet child of the liberation: no more, no less. If it so happens that you find a bleeding heart in the policeman who rescues a brother from a Goodyear Greeting, for Christ's sake report it – although it will do the SAP's image no end of harm.

But, above all, remain true to yourself. Whatever your political views, you can write and sub straight. Here's where you can learn a lesson from some of the hard-nosed pros in Fleet St. (or wherever they're producing newspapers in England these days). Some of the best subs on the *Daily Express* are card-carrying members of, if not the Communist Party, at least the Labour Party, and some of my best friends on *The Guardian* are died-in-the-wool Tories. That doesn't take away the fact they are bloody good subs, and there is no distortion in their subbing.

The other thing is to remember that a good journalist cannot be bought. In these days that might sound laughable, particularly in South Africa where much of the printed space is bought.

But why should this be? Surely, the fun spots of this beautiful country have enough magnetism in themselves, not to need the backing of a full-page advert that repeats what has already been written in the "editorial."

This may send the advertising managers scatty. But should it? Just consider: If your newspaper or magazine was known for its honest reflection of news, for its integrity and, most of all, its credibility, wouldn't this rub off on the advertising?

OK, you creative guys need this spelled out: Which do you believe in the most, a write-up in an unbiased mag-newspaper on Fred's Steak House, where the bill is paid by the journal, or a lavish double-page spread declaring on one side that the greatest steaks outside of Dallas are served at Fred's with, on the facing page, a beaming picture of Fred advertising, you've guessed it, "Fred's Steak House – the greatest steaks outside of Dallas?"

Look, that may be overdone, but I've seen it, and so have you.

So, deep down, where do your ethics lie? Hopefully inside you. Don't be easily led – let alone cheaply. If something inside you says it's wrong, it probably is. And if nothing is saying anything to you inside, then you're not a journalist anyway and would be better off selling used newspaper buildings.



A critic takes a critical look at newspaper critics

20

Have you noticed that South African newspapers have suddenly become cluttered with cut-price critics and reviewers, from the motoring reporter who has a fetish for ballet to the payola gourmets who gorge themselves for free and then tear the hardworking chef's culinary delights to pieces. The sheer welter of arty-farty pages has led to a growth industry in critics. Some – a few – are good. They are informative, literate, humorous even. Their columns stand out like a beacon in a mass of grey type. To them I hand a bouquet. For the rest, well . . .

From personal experience I can recount a couple of incidents. One critic sat through the whole of a brilliant performance I was giving at the local am-dram production, singled me out for adulation from a cast of 20, but completely misread the part I was acting.

Look, I did have a couple of stiff ones before going on the stage, but even my fellow thespians thought he must have been thinking of the play he had seen the night before. (I do sympathise with am-dram critics. They have to get through an awful – that being the right word – lot of church groups during the season.) Anyway, because of the glowing words he wrote, I forgave him.

The second manhandling was a play staged at a local drama festival, which attracted the big guns. And this critic brought her prejudices with her.

The play (no names, no packdrill) was about a revered figure in the dance world. It was a play of conflict and went deeply – and accurately – into the life of the dancer, bringing out not only how she won the adulation of her audiences, but the devious means by which she won such fame.

We must have upset this critic (although, fortunately the paying customers didn't think the same way.) She dipped her pen into vitriol and slammed the actress's performances, her voice and dancing (of which there was none). Her scathing criticism was personal and hurtful. It touched little on the content of production because she found this out of kilter with her own adoration of the character portrayed.

The criticism would have been gracelessly accepted if the newspaper had sent a drama critic to review it. Unfortunately, this was a balletomane, whose perception of theatre was minimal.

Now this all brings me back to what I expect from critics. I believe they should be well informed about their subject, be it a soccer match or Shakespeare. That doesn't mean they need go as far as my father insists. He used to berate boxing critics because none of them would last one round in a ring.

Certainly, I can't think of many soccer players – or rugger-buggers – who'd be able to string together more words than, "How much?" But surely it is not beyond anyone's comprehension that newspaper critics should have a broad understanding of dancing, acting and music.

They are as much a part of the performance as are the principal players. As that,

they owe a great debt to the readers who pay their salaries as much as performers owe it to their public. There is no room for personal pique or hobbyhorses.

Who hasn't read the garbage of a hack who has got it in for a particular performer and belays his readers with it ad nauseum. (That is one of the prices we pay for such journos being given licence to fill the pages with their poisoned prose.)

No, let's have an end to it. If a newspaper has not got good enough critics, get new ones and let them know from the start that their purple prattle will be carefully vetted for a certain amount of objectivity.

Editors have a duty, as well, to see that their reviewers can not only write (oh! for a Bernard Levin), but have a modicum of knowledge of their subject as well.

That doesn't mean having arty-farty friends or a surfeit of ego-polishing patronage to dispense. The name of the game is criticism. If you can't feel the heat, go jump in the furnace.



It's time journalists ended their obsession with winning awards

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What's happening to South African journalists? They're becoming self-obsessed! I remember the day when the only ego-polishing they indulged in was a guarded word of praise for a well-written story or a nicely-designed page. And the most important "award" was a soaring circulation figure. Now all they care about is writing turgid prose that might earn them a trophy, a cheque and a free lunch – and to hell with the circulation.

Even their editors have clambered onto the bandwagon, recently forming their own mutual admiration society, one of the main items on its agenda being an

Annual Awards Ceremony.

In a journalistic career spanning three decades, I have been fortunate in ducking any prizes handed out for excellence or endeavour. Not for me those heady delights of free dinners and lunches doled out to starving hacks by supermarkets, oil companies and wineries.

The daily boost of adrenalin has been sufficient to wax my ego.

In a land blessed by the munificence of sponsors applauding the merits of our journalistic community, it must seem that I have either had bad luck or am not up to scratch. Perhaps I haven't tackled the subjects that seem to attract the judges. Burning issues like life insurance (good for the Checkers award, though the ungrateful swine threw it back in the sponsors' faces and took his sailboard off to New Zealand), or examination fiddles in the Transvaal (as if anyone didn't expect fiddles if so many kids are passing exams when they haven't been to school). But that sounds like – and, in fact, is – sour grapes, because what journalist doesn't mind the extra cash even if the sponsors can keep the silver trophy?

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No, my analysis of the current round of awards for newspapermen is that I'm working for the wrong company. A roll call of recent awardees will reveal that prizes for enterprise, excellence and endeavour only go to journalists on newspapers that are either in chronic financial troubles or ones that have actually folded. (The 1987 nominees may now line up at the dole queue!)

And when you get down to the nitty gritty of these prizes, it sometimes baffles the mind as to what they are being judged on. How can you have "The Most Brilliant Journalist of the Year" when the selection comes from such diverse individuals as a lame hack who just happens to be at Jan Smuts when a Boeing thuds down with a gang of itinerant Libyan hijackers aboard, or a quiet cove who has spent all his Sundays digging up the financial fiddlings of the village council.

Or take the Sportswriter of the Year. What is there on the judges' scoring sheet? Fine, turgid prose guaranteed to fill half a metre of the Sunday Bore? Brilliant predictions that Danie Craven will deny any rugby tour from the Fijis! Rambling

essays on why the wrong team won against all the odds? No, the score sheets generally only add up to how much piffle the writer has managed to con his readers with for the last 12 months.

My award, most certainly, would go to the tipster who guaranteed me a share of the jackpot every week. But that would spoil the game.

No. Let's have a new look at prizes. Forget sponsorship. All it does is make sure the products get enough free advertising, which, if lashed out in another way, would keep SAAN's debt at a manageable level.

Newspapers and journalists shouldn't get too serious about these awards. No great Page 2 blow-ups of enterprising journalists who just happened to be in the right queue this year. No lauding it about our staff's endeavour in combatting abuse of plastic bags in townships. And, certainly, no prizes for enterprising newspaper designs that went out with Caxton (William, that is!).

Let's choose our heroes for the year, for sure. But please, no dignitaries throwing "bones" to grovelling hacks. Certainly no speeches: just a jolly good time to be had by all.

And perhaps the biggest award should go to the people whose work contributes most to the survival of the few remaining newspapers in South Africa.



There's no reason to knock free newspapers

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I happen to live in that neck of Cape Town where at least twice a week and sometimes thrice, I find stuck in my gate post a community newspaper. Call it a knock-and-drop if you like or a freesheet if you feel that “newspaper” edifies these hand-outs too much. Whoever drew the boundaries for the distribution of *Plumstead News*, *Southern Suburbs Tatler* and *Constantiaberg Bulletin* must have been indecisive when it came to placing my piece of the backwoods into a specific circulation area. Anyway, whoever’s reading this at Unicorn Press – which has a string of freesheets covering the Cape Peninsula – don’t change it. I like my knock-and-drops.

What, you may be saying, a wizened hack like me who always seems to have something to spout about on the standards of journalism in this country, actually giving praise to what is seen as a useful way to con honest businesses into taking advertising in a rag whose literary merits barely touch sides with Janet and John?

Well, I do like them. Though somewhat thin on real news, they inform me about what's happening in my bailiwick and what I should be doing in the garden this month. And that is what freesheets should be about – and more.

If you think these freebies are something new, that they have only been around since some bright fellow thought of talking on the Argus/Times media axis, think again. Gutenberg had high ideals when he cranked up his first printing press, with laudatory thoughts of putting a Bible in everyone's home. (Trouble was, not many people had got around to reading.) But tradesmen quickly realised here was the medium to extol the virtues of their wares. Likewise, people who didn't like to keep their opinions to themselves dived into the printer's ink to give their radical and sometimes dangerous ideas an airing.

In every democratic age, people who disagreed with their notions – not unexpectedly, in government – had these disseminators pilloried or burned at the stake. (Now why hasn't Stoffel van der Merwe thought of that?) This regulator on the press, such as it was, was slightly slackened when real newspapers first appeared. The king put a swingeing tax on them, which made sure the proletariat could not read (even if they could!) these diatribes. That is when the forerunners of our knock and-drops flourished. You couldn't put a tax on what their proprietors didn't call a newspaper, and they were freebies.

When the King's men dropped the newspaper tax, newspapers flourished. That uneasy partnership of editors and advertising men provided a balance that readers generally accepted. They informed people and stood their ground on issues, usually fomented from a pen dipped in vitriol. Such politics offended readers of a different persuasion and newspaper rivalry led to a proliferation of newspapers.

But none thought of going free – circulation revenue was seen as every bit as important as the ad bucks.

Both in Britain and the United States – and to a smaller extent, South Africa – this led to a vigorous Press, not just in the great cities, but in local communities, too. America, which has never really courted a national newspaper, city and town papers survive even if some do not thrive. Britain, sadly, has seen a decline in its provincial newspapers. Less than 30 years ago, most towns of a sizeable population in Britain had two newspapers – fierce rivals, but mergers have taken their toll.

And, if this doesn't sound seditious, so have the free sheets.

I hand a bouquet to the person who thought of giving a newspaper away free in the modern style. It must have taken guts. I can only re-tell how one of these newspapers had its birth and of its success story.

28

Leicester, the area of England where I gleaned my newspaper training, had a very lively evening newspaper. Its circulation of 175,000 in an area of 100,000 families, made nonsense of readership surveys and, more important, kept a smile on the advertising manager's face. There was a rival evening newspaper, but of little consequence, though its reporters gave us a healthy run for our money. The health and wealth of the evening paper allowed it the luxury of maintaining a string of weeklies, some only marginally profitable. What's more, in some of the market towns of the county, they were pitched against independent newspapers.

Onto this scene came a former colleague, his head slightly bowed after hitting the big time in Fleet Street, only to find that one of Beaverbrook's mad ideas of running a farming weekly didn't work. As always, my friend left the Beaver with a handsome pay-off. Now I'm sure, like most of us, he could have sought the security of another newspaper (his talents as a journalist were excellent). Instead, he took the road that divides the many who cling to pension rights and a month's holiday a year and the few who take risks (with their own money).

He started a freesheet.

Now this was a time and in a part of England where people were suspicious of

anything free. My friend had chosen his area well – a dormitory suburb of the city with a cohesive community identity. Though he knew he would be up against the might of the evening newspaper’s county weekly, he also had a more than advantageous insight into its workings. It lived off the fat of the evening’s earnings and paid scant attention to the area in which he had chosen to set up shop.

Also, he wasn’t greedy. He had set his target market and stuck to it. The local combine could harvest the rest. The success of this early freesheet can be gauged by three things: In the 25 years or so since its founding it has become an established newspaper; it has become part of the community, indeed made the community aware of itself; the large newspaper group had to launch a rival paper – an unsuccessful one. Yes, there is a fourth – he was offered a handsome buy-out but refused it.

But the main reason why his paper was such a success – and this is a lesson to the publisher of every freesheets in the world – is that, while he appreciated the value of the “puff” for the local hardware store, it was never an overriding factor in his budgetary make-up. Prominence was given, instead, to local activities – the women’s institute, the churches, the local soccer teams and the schools (tomorrow’s readers) – everything, in fact, that the heavyweight big city newspaper largely ignored. There were pictures galore of netball teams, prizegivings and local worthies. Each Friday was an event for the community. No great world-shattering scoops. But stories that brought up – and answered – questions. The vicar was never found in ladies’ underwear, but he could be counted on to give some rollicking comments on teenage morality. (Always a good one, because the local headmaster will defend his pupils to the last condom.) In fact, a newspaper. A bloody good one. It became a “believable” newspaper. And, that’s a great asset to have, especially if you’re trying to con the local businessfolk that “everyone in Plushville reads your freebie”. We know they don’t. The day you write editorial that proclaims “Fred’s Steaks Are the Best in Town” next to an ad that says “Fred’s Steaks Are the Best in Town” your credibility goes out with the stop press.

And, that's my biggest gripe. I am sure local trades-types do not need the inducement of a plug to get them to advertise. If you want Harry's Hardware to display his wares, why not entice him into a well researched and written article on do-it-yourself? If Fred's Steaks are so good, let him put them up against Billy's Fish and Sarah's Chops in an entertainment section. As for the fertilizer and seedsman, they'll come in if you have a good gardening article (my locals do).

But freesheets need to establish more of a community identity. I get the feeling that the nitty-gritty news is a rehash of what's already been in the *Cape Times* or *The Argus* (and much of it written badly and often inaccurately at the start). Freesheets have a great opportunity to bring their readers real local news. They, like my friend's early newspaper, can become a local event – and not a throwaway. (By the way, jack up your distribution. How can we keep the Cape in Shape when a good south-easter sends a dozen or more into my garden?)

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Perhaps, most of all, we have in knock-and-drops an ideal opportunity to get journalism training back on the rails. They can become far better vehicles for young people to learn the craft from grassroots.

And, as they improve – and I am sure they will – we will see the development of a real alternative press, one that doesn't bore us to tears with regular tirades about the struggle or one that bores with its complete predictability.

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- ☞ 99 Ways To Improve Your Newspaper
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Roger Kenyon was a journalist at the *Leicester Mercury*, *Sheffield Star* and *Daily Express* in England before becoming an editor with *Drum* magazine and *Reader's Digest* in South Africa. He was also the author of a series of critical articles in *Review*, the magazine for in-house publishing, that he described as "a gentle evisceration of those little fluffy rabbits hopping amiably, but pointlessly, around the newsrooms of South Africa." He died in 1989 aged 48. This booklet is a 60th birthday collection of his writings in *Review*.



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