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Women making headlines: influences of women editors on newsroom socialisation and the news agenda

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Appendix C

How does a woman editor influence a publication on gender issues such as women's representation and news selection, if she does at all?

We believe that women and men are interested in similar content and stray away from covering things like verve in The Star.
So we prefer not to … to specifically gear our coverage aimed at women however we do cover gender issues, things like sexual abuse, harassment, gender inequality in the workplace, issues that are affecting women from a legal point of view, or in their day to day lives rather than looking at lifestyle, fashion, and those kinds of things. We tend to take a more serious approach to gender issues and gender representation within the paper. We believe in building the profile of all women across private, public and civil society and are bringing out a book in the next two weeks which is profiling top women in those categories. And to build that profile of women, much as it has been done with black economic empowerment in the past. The time is now for women to be taken into businesses and the media and achieve levels of economic empowerment similar to how black economic empowerment was done.

Newsrooms have a culture that influences how you work as a journalist, what specific examples can you tell me of times where the expectations of the newsroom were in conflict with your identity as a woman and how did that affect your work?

It's a difficult one, because I think that the M& G has always been a very liberal organisation. And I have always felt that as a woman within this organisation, especially within the editorial department that its been very easy to rise and to show one's skills within the department. I have always been promoted and as a woman has always been accepted, I have always been given advantages, and chances to progress in my career. … I think having a woman editor in the last two years really helped that even further but never felt that in the past I have had male editors who have tried to restrict one or keep one in a specific niche or not promote you because there has been a man in the newsroom with equal skills I think there has always been equal opportunity. I think that possibly on the executive committee and at board level, I think that we still need to promote the cause of women within the organisation. I think that its quite male dominated. And the only woman sitting on the board is the editor at this point. And I think that that is a problem. I think there should be, not necessarily within the organisation, but non-executive directors who are women or even bringing up women within the company to sit on the board and to have women at that level. Because it is all very well to identify and to promote women's role in the workplace within the specific departments, and we do.. in our department,… most of the sections are headed by women but at the very top level there needs to be a greater development. I think the only … that every now and than you might come across that colleague within the newsroom who may be a bit more old school and is used to a bit more male dominated… but I can't think of any instances where I can't speak my mind or challenge a person of the other gender within the newsroom and be able to speak my mind. It is very open and very honest and that if someone is being very misogynistic, hey will be told in no uncertain terms. I think that in the past there have been maybe one or two issues where a younger female reporters may have possibly felt a bit threatened or excluded by a male news editor, or that they are not treated with the same respect, and one has to deal with that as they go along. I think in the past few years that has

resolved itself. In fact I am working with my male news editor at the moment and that works quite harmoniously.

How do you think that your management style is influenced by your gender?

I think that one can be somewhat more empathetic in certain ways and I think that one can … one tends to listen a little bit more. One tends to get more women in the offices who need a shoulder to cry on and I tend to keep a box of tissues handy, and one needs to be…men mostly are a little bit more reserved because there is a woman in management. I don't think that it is a factor,… I think as a woman in management one needs to be fair in what your doing and not to favour any one gender. And if I'm dealing with an issue between a man and a woman to be careful not to take sides… when issues arise between male and female colleagues who are at odds with one another, and to really listen to both sides objectively and not to draw a conclusion, but to look at the issues at stake. And that is how I strive to do it, and be fair and not to make it a gender issue. Unless it is something like sexual harassment where one has to start looking at issues like why did it take place and identify the cause. **I think as a woman you just tend to have more women coming into your office than men.** Men tend to be a little more distant and it takes a concentrated effort to win their confidence and trust. I think as a woman in management, everything you do needs to be done with fairness and within the boundaries set out by conditions of employment.

There are very few women who hold leadership positions in the newsroom, why have you been one of the few who have succeeded?

I think its because I have always had really good support from some of my male editors … I have had support from managing directors who have feel that I possessed the skills to move the newsroom forward and I think I work really hard. I think your commitment and dedication to an organisation plays a major role, I think I have learned, and that I have worked my way up through the organisation, and I have learned how this company works from one end to the other. I think that when there is an issue or a problem I have learned how to solve it and I know how to make the organisation work as an entity rather than just focus on one small part and I think that a lot of people do that in management, they tend to only focus on one small part rather than identify with the rest of the company. And as a manager you have to go beyond your own department, you have to realise how the entire company is functioning and build respect amongst your colleagues, and so they respect you and how you work and how you resolve situations. And so you can build your profile as a woman in the organisation. It think that at the M&G it is a very open and liberal organisation, and has always allowed opportunity for woman to grow. It hasn't been an organisation where we have had to face extreme chauvinism, or dominance, they have been open to the chief photographer being female to managers being female, its always been a very open organisation. It always managed it well even with a male editor. I think it was time we had female editor. It was the end of the time when we had a white male editor, we had a black editor and now with [this editor] in that role, it was time for a female editor. And I think that she has really put a stamp on the newspaper, and there has been some people out there that talk saying, would a woman editor succeed. And the answer is, yes she would and she'd do a damn good job of it. But she started as a trainee, at the M& G and ten or twelve years later, she is the editor of the paper, So that is really the scope that this company offers one. I think it is … that some papers will prevent your writing, or progression into management. I think

you need you have women is all aspect of management because they ad scope and an interesting aspect to whatever company they work for.

How has your concept of news developed, How does it influence the process of news production? New selection?

I am not directly involved in the news production and selection, that would be more the news editor as such. I am more involved in the production side, that it meets deadlines,

But on things like supplements, on specifically on things like women's issues, we will look at things that are affecting women, specifically ones that are of relevance and things we think are important to women, things like 16 days of activism against woman's abuse, things like woman's day, and issues affecting women. We do a lot of HIV/AIDS and the role of women and how they are affecting women, I don't think that we are,… that's a difficult question to answer because I am not doing the new selection myself, and you'll be speaking with [another editor] later, she the new editor and will be able to give you a better idea of how she selects, I'm not quite sure of how to give you an answer on that one.

How has your concept of news been shaped?

You are taught what is news worthy and how it is decided…
And I would like to know what your idea of new is or what it should be?

I think working at the M&G, because it is a weekly newspaper, one's idea of news is somewhat different than looking at for example, *The Star*. I can read *The Star* and that was a short brief story. It doesn't have much research, or much value, although I suppose when I first started out, you know, that was the news. That is what is important and that is what journalist's did. I think that with the time I spent at the M&G , to me news is important when it is 1. Investigated, it challenges the facts, it looks at more than one side of the story, it doesn't quote unknown sources the whole time, it take takes an ethical stance and one must keep in mind those things all the time. It's a difficult one because our paper has changed and evolved over the last ten years quite dramatically, from being an anti-apartheid to being quite a watchdog on government, so we have to constantly watch ourselves while writing the news, are we being fed, with the Zuma case for example, its very easy to say that oh my God, this man can't be President. But as a journalist you can't do that. You need to be objective and to cover his trial objectively and carefully and not take sides and condemn him before even though when as an average public citizen you are saying oh my God, this man, how can the youth league just support him without looking at why they are… I think that because we have the time, and that we have a whole week to put the news together we are a lot more careful and try to be a lot more objective, and we try to dig deeper, And I think that is important. Something that [a columnist] raised in his column this week was the coverage of the Zuma rape case and that the newspapers had failed, is that they didn't place the rape case in the broader context and look at what is happening politically in South Africa. I think how we would look at it. There was a rape. Now how do we deal with it, how do we broaden it, how do we put it into the whole big picture. We don't always get it right. If it breaks late on a Thursday and gives us a half an hour until print, make an effort to make it contextualised as opposed to the Star which says that a woman got raped today blah, blah, blah,…

Give some examples of when gender was an issue for you in your career? Positive or negative

I have been fairly fortunate in that I haven't come across any major gender issues that have affected me negatively in the workplace. I have always been promoted and … in the workplace… at an executive level, I think that is the one level where I feel that because I am an exco member … sometimes they choose to confide and sometime they don't confide and I think that as an exco member…I am part of exco but not fully part of it and I am part of the newsroom, but not fully part of it, because I am management. But I don't know how much of that is really a gender thing or just a problem in the newsroom and in the paper. I think the one area where I feel ….. where we had a news editor that was negative towards young women journalists. And that was a very difficult one because it wasn't overt, it was very insidious, and where they felt that he would stop their stories or prevent their stories from reaching completion or reaching publication, and it was very difficult because you don't want to interfere because a news editor is a very senior position, and they should know and be guiding and building a reporter, and we eventually identified, one had come forward, and we eventually could identify three young women at training or junior reporting level **who all felt the same and there we could build a case. And say to him, whether you are doing it consciously or unconsciously, this is what is coming across and to take notice of those kind of things and to listen when young reporters come to you. One has to listen to what they have to say and deal with it. Because often the most experienced news editor**, could be… their not at the level and I don't have the time to guide them and deal with it. News editors and sub editors need to be taught that everybody, whether a junior reporter or senior reporter, need to be dealt with respect, and be guided through and built, especially the younger ones, you can't just expect them to be at the same level. But you actually have to take the time to develop their stories and work with them. Which is why we have a coach within the newsroom as well to help with that. To act as the bridge between the news desk now and those very young reporters.

What restrictions are there on you, as an editor, when you implement changes in the newsroom that you think are necessary in regards to things like gender bias?

The men maybe might have a joke, but I don't think we run into too must resistance.
I think in the news story side, we open things up even in the paper for things like reply, comment and analysis

Where if someone in the newsroom doesn't like it, they can write next week and comment back, I don't think that we have much.

What has been common expectations in newsroom environments during your progression as a journalist?

I think perfection. Getting one's work done in the best manner possible and ensuring that the paper is produced timeously, meeting deadlines, that I meet my goals, nothing that… and going beyond the call of duty and making sure that you are committed, and going the extra mile and I think that that works in one's favour. It has always been something that calls respect.

What is your understanding of objectivity?

I think that as journalists we strive to be as objective as possible. But I don't think that is always possible because the nature of ones life, one's socio-economic background, always frames the context with which you write or write with, however, I think there are checks and balances in place, especially in a newsroom that is open to debate and I think that really ads to our objectivity is that we meet everyday basically to discuss diaries and to discuss stories, to discuss editorial stance to the newspaper, from the editor down to the trainees, they all have a chance to voice their opinions and make changes to a story. So that it is not read by one person's perspective. It's very difficult to remain objective, if say for example you are on an undercover investigation, and then you are led by sources and whistleblowers and you need to try and maintain, which side is right. I think it is incredibly difficult and we have experienced that. And there have been times in the newsroom where reporters have slipped slightly because they are just so caught in this trap of being torn apart by sources or who is right or who is wrong. And every whistle blower has an agenda. And every source who writes has an agenda, they are not contacting you of their own good will. They contact you because generally they have an axe to grind or somehow the story has affected them. You have to constantly keep a number of checks and balances in place so that you can monitor what you write. And so you open it up to a number of people from your news editor to your sub editors and get a group of people who are willing to comment on it. My sub editors have been told that if they think a story doesn't work, they are the first reader. They haven't necessarily been involved in the process of developing that story. When it comes on to the page, they are reading it for the first time, they are the first readers after the writer and if they are bored by it or they think that there is something wrong they can raise it immediately. And we try to create that environment, where they are not afraid to say that this is either a load of nonsense, or that this might, or is not really what you want to be saying. And to promote that level of debate and I think that this assists in creating objectivity. I think that is the best… and we appeal to things like ethics and we … also pass a lot of our stuff through our lawyers, we have lawyers on standby every Thursday and if we feel that an article may face defamation or feel there is a legal issue, it goes through them. It is yet another check and balance. As I said, you're only as objective as what has framed your upbringing and what has informed your nature and your nurture. I know that ever since I had a child I battle to read articles on child abuse, and that has really made my reading and my objectivity around issues relating to children, quite different. Before I had a child I was much more objective when looking at articles regarding child abuse. Once I became a mother, you realise that my ability to remain objective is affected, and once you become a mother … and it is really quite difficult.

What other factors can you identify as influencing the production of news, that are outside of the newsroom?

……

These sources and whistle blowers can really affect the news that you are doing. People that want to interdict you or gag you… if we cover anything on oilgate we are somewhat restricted by a court action against us. And I think that that is a difficult process for any journalist to be working under. We have to let them know if we are going to publish anything on them by Wednesday, midday. And they send a fax to our lawyer every Wednesday to find out what is going on.. So I also think that there is a possibility that we will need to contest this in constitutional court and the … the whole oilgate issue and I think that has a burden on our journalists.. and on media in SA, … And we always wish that we could have the extra half an hour or that extra hour, to get the last bit of news in, … but

sometimes you just can't and you can't change it when its in print already,…that's in the production, and the news and the way it is angled, sometimes news happens two hours after you put it to bed and then you ignore it,… and sometimes you're forced to ignore the news, … its not within your time frame and you just can't do it … and so you have to define each week what you think is important,… and we must define in a sense,… what are the other newspapers doing… If the Star potentially has a story, is it worth our while, leading on that? And if we think they might have that, you know, …can we beat the Sunday Times these week or if we hold it for another week will…will the source give it to somebody else,…Do you write a news story as a lead because you think it is going to break in another newspaper, and if you had another week, you could really do a good job of it,… you know, … Those thing play out… and you face those constraints with advertising and editorial space you've gotta … and you have to balance the finances with for example how many pages you can bring out. You could have fifty really good news stories but you can only get ten in. … and that defines the production of the paper.

How are some of those issues managed?

I think that … we have diary meetings everyday except Tuesdays, …each day we go through what's going into the newspaper and we do it as a team,…we look at.. we all bring our knowledge and what we know other people are doing to that news meeting and from there we define what is the best potential news, what is the best lead,… where should we place certain articles, and …….

…in the conference we start defining what falls away and what goes into the paper and so we have an idea of how much space we've got, and there are times when we feel we have an exceptional newspaper, and the finances doesn't necessarily match that week [the editor] and I will go to an exco meeting with the CEO and the financial director and look at the option of maybe printing eight extra pages that week… with specific content we feel needs to go in. So there's negotiation that goes on …and if the content is going to sell the paper this week and we have a really strong lead, and so within the newspaper itself there is negotiation regarding space…

There is a constant negotiation that goes on in the M&G that seems to work fairly well, and the news editors and editors are constantly defining, especially on a Thursday of what goes in and what goes out. And there is stuff that is pulled last minute … like my posters yesterday…because we went to print at one o'clock and by three o'clock the figures had changed from 200 million to 230 million. But you try to be aware by mid day in the afternoon what the leads are and what pages are being done so that you don't run into those pitfalls.

There is a theory that the process of news selection is strongly influenced by advertisers, and stakeholders. What has been your experience of balancing the expectations of stakeholders with being a business minded woman as a journalist?

Not at the M&G. Advertising and management do not have influence on the editorial. We'll loose advertising … if we … if we don't publish a story on ethics… if we run a story on someone who has R 100 000 in advertising and they threaten to pull it… We will continue to run the story. … That is our stand. Editorial comes first. We have never backed off in the face that we might loose advertising. Because we have lived our entire existence in the M&G and the *Weekly Mail* loosing advertising… I think that companies are a lot more sure of

themselves and are not afraid to pull advertising if someone writes something negative about them … I think it takes a good editor to stand firm and say well… maybe you must prove me wrong… But we have never not published a story because of advertising. We would rather loose the advert. There will be someone else who will come along and advertise. We have always kept our editorial independence downstairs, and it a rule that [the first editors] initiated and when the Guardian bought in they remained faithful to the editorial stance. And the policy of editorial independence. And the stayed the same when Trevor bought it. Trevor does not know what goes into the paper until he might pop around on a Thursday or look around at the pages on a Friday morning he reads. So he has no influence on what goes into the paper. Unless we feel it is relevant to let him know that something is about to happen, like we are going to be interdicted, or are going to court tonight we will inform him, … but otherwise editorial is independent and we feel that that is a line that cannot be crossed. It is critical.

Name some stories that have highlighted gender related issues in the newsroom? Either how they were dealt with or there was controversy on how they should be dealt with, … ?

Nicole will be able to answer that …
Can we come back to that because I cannot think of any off the top of my head…

There have been studies that have highlighted gender biases in media and expecially in the news, do you deal with gender issues differently than someone else would in your position?

Than other newspapers… I think that we are quite cautious especially when dealing with sensitive issues,… I think we have been a fore runner and have published a lot on gender issues, … there was an article released by one of our journalists, Charlene Smith, the morning after she was raped and I think that was a ground breaking story, … I think we have always tried to be a fore runner on gender issues, … without … like … that judge down in Cape Town that got accused of rape.

Judge Desai… we have been very cautious in issues of rape cases, and very reluctant to print names, trying to respect gender issues at stake rather than just publishing,… We tend to be a little more serious about gender issues, the Wendy Orr case, … we dealt with in a very serious manner, … and I think we give a lot of ability to women to write their own stories… which I think is important so that the voices of women are heard within the pages of the newspaper, that is something that we have always done from Charlene to Wendy Orr,…

How has the environment of the newsroom changed under the leadership of a woman?

I think every editor is different and its not necessarily because its that they are a woman or a man, I've worked under five editors here, Anton, Erwin … and each one is different and each brings a very different slant to the way one covers news, to the management of the newsroom. I think that what [this editor] has brought, is … less because of the fact she's a woman, but because of who she is… I think that she is a very exacting person, … she expects… she has high principles, she has high values and she expects a good quality product. … What she bring to the newsroom, you can see… everyone tries to do their best… I think that her standards are really high and I think that people really aspire to keep those standards within the newspaper… She is aware, I think far more than some of the previous

editors of some of the financial issues at stake within the organisation, … and the necessity to make it a financially viable company. Beyond just producing the newspaper she's taken a very important role in building the business side of the editorial department. And looking at opportunities where editorial can assist in the growth of the company. And so she has quite the corporate side that has come in,… not a negative corporate side, but positive, that we can do projects, that are in line with our editorial stance and that are financially viable for the company. Instead of advertising coming through, and saying oh you should be doing a supplement on …. property… we would look at things that are far more in line with what our readers want and has an understanding of the news and also of what our readers are looking at. And so really working much more closely … I that that she's built the profile of woman in media across South Africa, by her poignant and by her dignity. I think she has really proven that a woman can do this job. Took up one of the most controversial newspapers in South Africa and do it really well and hold her head high. I think the women in the newsroom feel more empowered to a degree and at the same time that just because she is a woman, they don't think or feel that they can just get away with anything. She is equally demanding on every staff member. Whether male or female, I think she's … she likes to build people. And build their profile and we've really done a lot more performance management and … building the profile of each person individually in the newsroom since she joined, and I think that … she brings a professional stance to managing the newsroom.

I think also that one thing or that another thing that coming from a woman's side she has far greater understanding of the role of woman in the newsroom from the point of flexible working hours. And family matters and those kinds of issues which I think a lot of men just don't take notice of. You know the thinking that I go home and my wife is cooking dinner. She has really introduced the concept that one can work flexible working hours and that having children should not be a negative thing. If you have to go home at lunch time to see your child, there's a very much openness to family, to flexibility, it makes for a progressive environment, I she looks at things,… what's happening internationally that she can bring, and things like job sharing, and looking at those kinds of options, to really bringing in a very progressive stance into the organisation.

I'm going to go back to my question on what stories raised gender issues in the workplace?
You actually mentioned a couple, the Wendy Or case and the Case of Judge Desai,…
And how did they affect gender issues within the newsroom?

I don't think it did. I can't think of a time where we've sat and had major … there has been religious fights, political fights,… but I am trying to think of a time where gender … where men have stood one side and women have stood on the other,.. we've had other thing when was editor, like when he put Cameron Diaz on the front page cause he thought she was you know … and women were like come on, put some soccer player on the front, but they were light hearted things. There has always been those kinds of jokes, but I'm trying to think of specific gender stories that has divided the newsroom.

There was a debate about the Desai case, that I can remember. … Ask [another interviewee], she had an argument with someone in the leader conference… but I can't remember the details. She would be able to highlight it for you. And I would be wrong to try and go into detail. But speak to her… cause there was an argument. It was more of a debate within the leader conference. But chat to her.

Are there any other things you think are relevant that should be included?

I think that as far as media goes across South Africa, there's been … I think that as I've worked at the M&G I've been very fortunate and many of the women are, my concern is that change, and the role of women across the media is not great, and if I look at the other media houses, I mean the only other woman editor is [other editor], in the newspaper industry. I think that there are a lot of strong women out there and I think that they need to be brought to the fore and that they need to be given opportunities to show themselves. I don't think that the media industry in South Africa is necessarily changing fast enough to accommodate that.