THE ERODING STATUS OF EDITORS

by Raymond Louw

When I became an editor, that legendary editor of the Rand Daily Mail Laurence Gandar, who had been in the hot seat for some 11 years, told me that life as an editor was very different from that of our predecessors. He said that G Raymer Ellis, who was editor from the early 40s to the mid-50s, wielded considerably more power than he did or I was likely to be able to command. He mentioned that Ellis could – and did – request the advertising department to remove an advertisement from a page so that he could use the whole page for an editorial display: “Not a hope of an editor being able to do that today,” observed Gandar wryly.

We were in the mid-60s so it showed how the power of the editor on that newspaper had been eroded in something like two decades and, of course, the reason was quite simple. In Ellis’ day the fight for financial survival, though a factor in the life of the newspaper then, was not as intense as it had become during Gandar’s tenure and certainly during mine (1966-1977). Also, the editor then, especially on the big name titles, had an almost godlike status. They tended to isolate themselves in their ivory towers communicating with the rest of the paper through their secretaries or senior assistant editors.

I started my career on the Mail during Ellis’ editorship after he had overcome his aversion to my Afrikaans name. He was highly regarded by his peers and senior staff. He would frequently change the content of the front page on deadline, or even rewrite his leading article on deadline and pay no attention to the anguished cries of the production staff watching the clock, deadlines and the production and distribution schedules. An editor of the grand old order who, however, as many of his successors were to, and some of his predecessors did, suffer the ultimate diminution of his status in the conclave where ultimate power and status were wielded, the boardroom.

But, since then, even while acknowledging that there has been no change in the ultimate power of the boardroom, the status of editors has declined. The editor is now part of the staff and the once single-minded devotion to news of the day and the other editorial features has been expanded to take note of the demands of the new aristocracy, the advertising department and the other closely following in its tracks, the circulation department. Editors now have to ensure that not only financial viability is maintained but profitability is boosted.

The editorial requirements have been increased to encompass a lower form of “advertorial” – the place where the despised adage that the news is used merely to keep the ads apart is actually practised and where lofty ideals of editorial independence and objectiveness are seriously bent. That Chinese wall between the commercial interests of the paper and the editorial has been slammed down and though the editor may try stoutly to maintain it between his staff and the advertising sellers, s/he has had to mould himself or herself into a kind of multi-faceted person staring at editorial integrity with one eye and the cash register with the other.

And what is the status of this multi-headed person? No revered godlike figure here. The management looks upon him or her as a workhorse in a profit centre while the advertising and circulation departments see the driver of the vehicle which enables them to increase their successes and break sales records which have little to do with editorial excellence.

And in the overcrowded part of the building, still overcrowded despite the staffing cuts that have taken place while news coverage demands have grown and the gaps continue to grow between what can be covered and what reporters would like to cover, are the journalists. They anxiously watch the editor, the senior assistants and departmental heads and see their standing in the editorial sphere diminishing – and with it their own.

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