

Foreword

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The story of South Africa has changed dramatically in the past decade and a half – as has journalism and the challenges we face as we tell the story.

Fifteen years ago, the South African story was as simple and straight as a ruler: there were the oppressed masses and the oppressors. And the story always revolved around how the oppressed were fighting racial discrimination and how the oppressors in turn were trying to justify the unjustifiable.

Today, the South African story is very different.

From the unbanning of the ANC and other political formations, the release of Nelson Mandela, the elections, our first parliament to our constitution; the story has undergone myriad twists and turns – some at break-neck speed.

To be able to properly tell the complete story, editors and journalist have required special skills and commitment.

As this book goes to print, South Africa is preparing for its fourth general election. It's no normal election because the ruling party faces unprecedented challenges for the first time in its 98 years. The change of leadership at the party's Polokwane conference, where Thabo Mbeki was unseated as ANC president by Jacob Zuma, has unleashed a chain of events that no one fore-saw.

For good measure, you can add the unedifying prospect of the country having a sitting president – Zuma – standing trial on corruption charges.

These stories – and that's not counting the challenges posed by poverty, the HIV/Aids pandemic and education – have meant that editors and journalists must not only keep up with the game but keep in front. They need to do this to better inform their audiences in an increasingly rich and diverse media environment.

These are the obvious challenges; the others are more subtle and insidious.

For one, our audiences, be they listeners, viewers or readers, are far more discerning, far more independent.

All hugely mobile, most can be identified by a cell phone in the one hand, an ipod in the other and a laptop in front of them at any given time.

To successfully cater for their needs, we must adapt



... and do so quickly. There is no middle ground; either we do so or we die.

Part of this adaption involves investing in multimedia platforms, a phenomenon that has forever changed the face of South African media as we knew it.

We are currently investigating ways and means in which the new and exciting platforms can be used to deepen the role of media in society.

It is heartening to note how a number of media houses have taken concrete steps to help journalists polish their craft and become increasingly professional in their conduct.

The major challenge, though, remains the reality that the growth of our industry has not been met with commensurate growth in our skills.

Not only must we fend off inter-publication poaching, but government departments and parastatals also have a hunger for our valuable skills, further emptying the barrel.

Sanef has published a number of manuals, from helping reporters deal with anonymous sources to reporting the courts. This latest initiative sets the bar even higher, providing editors and senior journalists with the skills to run their own news organisations by learning about the mistakes and successes of others in the university of life.

The editors and journalists chasing deadlines in our newsrooms are very special. They have every right to feel that way for they are living in a special time, a historic period in our country.

Their greatest role is not just telling this story, but rather keeping alive the tradition they inherited from their forebears in such a way that they can hand over the institution of journalism in this country to the next generation in an even better condition than when they received it.

We hope this handbook will go a long way to helping them do just that.