

by Lizette Rabe

The craven co-joined twins, Jen and Duh Bias share a body but this is no androgynous synergy. They alternate between hating women and berating men. Di Versity has to work hard to avoid their stereo-traps.



Once beginner-journalists enter newsrooms, time for reflection on the challenges of their profession is a **luxury** due to the pressures of deadlines and delivering to those deadlines.

Thus a beginner-journalist needs to enter the newsroom with basic skills – both practical and conceptual – in place. Some of those skills adhere to the way we construct gender in our daily lives – and which flows over in the way we construct the news reports that become part of our daily lives.

All individuals – and therefore all journalists – have certain preconceived, programmed ideas as to how they perceive and experience the world around them. Journalists especially should challenge themselves constantly about these perceptions.

Why? Because the media has such an important role in modern society. It reflects – and influences – every single aspect of modern life. Women are stereotyped according to certain constructions “glued” to them and their roles in society since the earliest civilisations. And instead of questioning these stereotypes, our modern media perpetuate them in every possible way, in every possible medium. As Margaret Gallagher (1995) wrote:

“In a world seen through the lens of the media, social and occupational roles are almost completely divided along gender lines. When women appear at all – and numerous studies around the world document their dramatic under-representation in almost all kind of media content – they tend to be depicted within the home and are rarely portrayed as rational, active or decisive.”

The gender researcher Colleen Lowe Morna puts it in a nutshell: the media are **“one of the most powerful forces on earth** for shaping the way we think”, yet “the media are all too often part of the problem, instead of part of the solution” (2002:10).

It needs to be stressed that in the discourses around gender, and the phrases used – such as mainstreaming gender, engendering the media, and gendersetting – we should remind ourselves that although the discussion is centred around the topic of gender, there are more categories that need to be treated with sensitivity – such as diversity, ethnicity, race, class and age.

Back to gender.

In SADC countries only one in five journalists is a woman, and less than 5% of SADC media managers are women. In Southern Africa women constitute less than 20% of news sources. While men are portrayed in diverse roles, **women are “either victims of violence or fashion models”, not human beings “with hopes,**

aspirations, ambitions and potential” (Lowe Morna, 2002:10).

What are our challenges?

In a time of media conglomerates, media integration and media convergence, and given the complexities of our age, it is already a challenge to be a **“super-journalist”**. Add to this our proven lack of basic skills – as shown by the Sanef Skills Audit of 2002 – it seems impossible to also expect journalists to understand and act upon various other challenges – such as engendered reporting or sensitivity to race or age.

Yet, if we as journalists truly want a free and fair society, and want to comply with the Constitution in the daily execution of our profession, we must think according to a new mindset and apply our newly-discovered knowledge accordingly.

Why should gender be mainstreamed – in other words, taken into account in every report and not only in certain women-orientated stories?

Many – also media role-players – think that gender equals women. Yet gender and gender stereotypes also concern men. One of the best examples of the stereotypical portrayal of gender was the coverage earlier this year of Michael Schumacher upon the death of his mother. The typical headline read how **the “hero” was “victorious over his grief”**. In other words: **real men do not cry**. This is gender stereotyping.

Newsroom management and journalists should constantly remind themselves of the way these subconscious stereotypes are constructed and de-constructed in the media.

In this discussion one should also ask the question: where did our consciousness of human rights begin? The histories of various societies are well known. But then, as in the French Revolution, human rights excluded women’s rights. They were meant for those who deserved freedom, equality and brotherhood.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) dates back to 1948. Subsequently many others have been proclaimed. The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) was adopted by the UN in 1979. In 1995 the Beijing Declaration highlighted the issue and called for governments and civil society to act. Two strategic objectives for the media were set:

- ★ To increase women’s participation and access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; and
- ★ To promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women and girls in the media, encourage gender-sensitive training for media

GENDER-SETTING

Turn over for more...

professionals, and to take effective measures against pornography (Gender, 2002: 7).

In our region and country we also have various acts and bodies ensuring and enshrining rights, among which are the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and the Gender Commission.

On paper it seems we have everything needed to enshrine human rights. But it will take more than our constitution and various acts and bodies to entrench rights. What is needed is a conscious mind-shift. In the media's case: application of these rights in boardrooms and newsrooms in order to mainstream gender.

This new thinking needs to be applied on various levels to restore/rectify gender blind imbalances/human rights violations. It does not mean training only – there should also be re-training – and then application to re-store imbalances and injustices.

From the management side it is necessary that codes of ethics need to be re-thought. Most media laws and codes of ethics are gender blind (Lowe Morna, 2002:61). In fact: "Patriarchal views permeate decisions about what makes news, where to place it, and when to present it" (Lowe Morna, 2002:61).

This is why a conscious decision by media and news management is needed about mainstreaming gender, and why the various role-players – on various levels – need training and refresher courses to continuously sensitise themselves to apply their newly-found news principles.

The (re)training of journalists to recognise their own gender blindness, and to recognise the gender blind spots in their reporting can and must be done on various levels. The two most obvious levels are for beginner journalists during tertiary training, and for practising journalists in special training courses. And of course: there must be training and re-training for both sexes.

Special attention must be given to media and news managers, because "engendered thinking" on a media management and news management level is a prerequisite for engendering the media through the newsrooms.

It is accepted that editorial independence is at the core of press freedom – from government, political and commercial interests (Gender, 2002:16). Press freedom is also dependent upon journalists' freedom from prejudices and biases against many issues – in this case gender. Through "gender training, journalists and editors become more aware of how their own internal biases and prejudices influence their coverage just as much as

external factors such as government censorship" (Gender, 2002:17).

In many cases the media has by now worked through simplistic and archaic thinking around "objectivity".

Instead of objectivity, journalists should strive for balanced, fair and accurate reporting. Yet, it is clear that gender biases "creep into the way they gather information, interview sources and report on

news and issues" (Gender, 2002: 19).

To mainstream gender, journalists need to understand what gender is, and that there is a difference between **sex** (the biological differences between men and women) and **gender** (the socially-constructed roles assigned to women and men). This understanding is the critical starting point in gender training (Lowe Morna, 2002:39). It should also be understood that gender does not equal "women's issues".

Therefore re-training (Gender, 2002:19) should include making journalists aware of gender biases "inherent in their work and in the final media product", and that they should strive for the objective of being "balanced" in media coverage.

Training "engendered journalism" must be done on various levels, starting at classroom training for beginner-journalists through to mid-career courses for practising journalists. But ongoing, everyday sensitisation of gender awareness together with the application of "engendered" thinking and writing in the newsroom is the answer.

As a prerequisite we need a new definition of news. Women add substance, not just a touch of flavour, to the daily mix of news (Mills, 1990:xiv). Why then should news at the beginning of the 21st Century be determined by a predominantly Western, patriarchal society?

Why, for example, is there a distinction between hard and soft news? Hard news is foreign policy, government matters and economics: historically men's matters. **This is real news.** Soft news is the four Fs: "family, food, fashion and furnishings". Hard news/soft news distinctions still regulate how newspapers look at news – and what is important and who must cover it (Mills, 1990:110).

If we turn to doing gender in the journalism classroom: gender should be mainstreamed in journalism curricula. It should not only be a theoretical approach, but models and theories must be used to teach "engendered" journalism writing to beginner-journalists. It must be applied in everything they write, whatever the daily assignments are in terms of news or features, so that they are almost forced to find themselves in positions where they can question their own internal biases and prejudices.

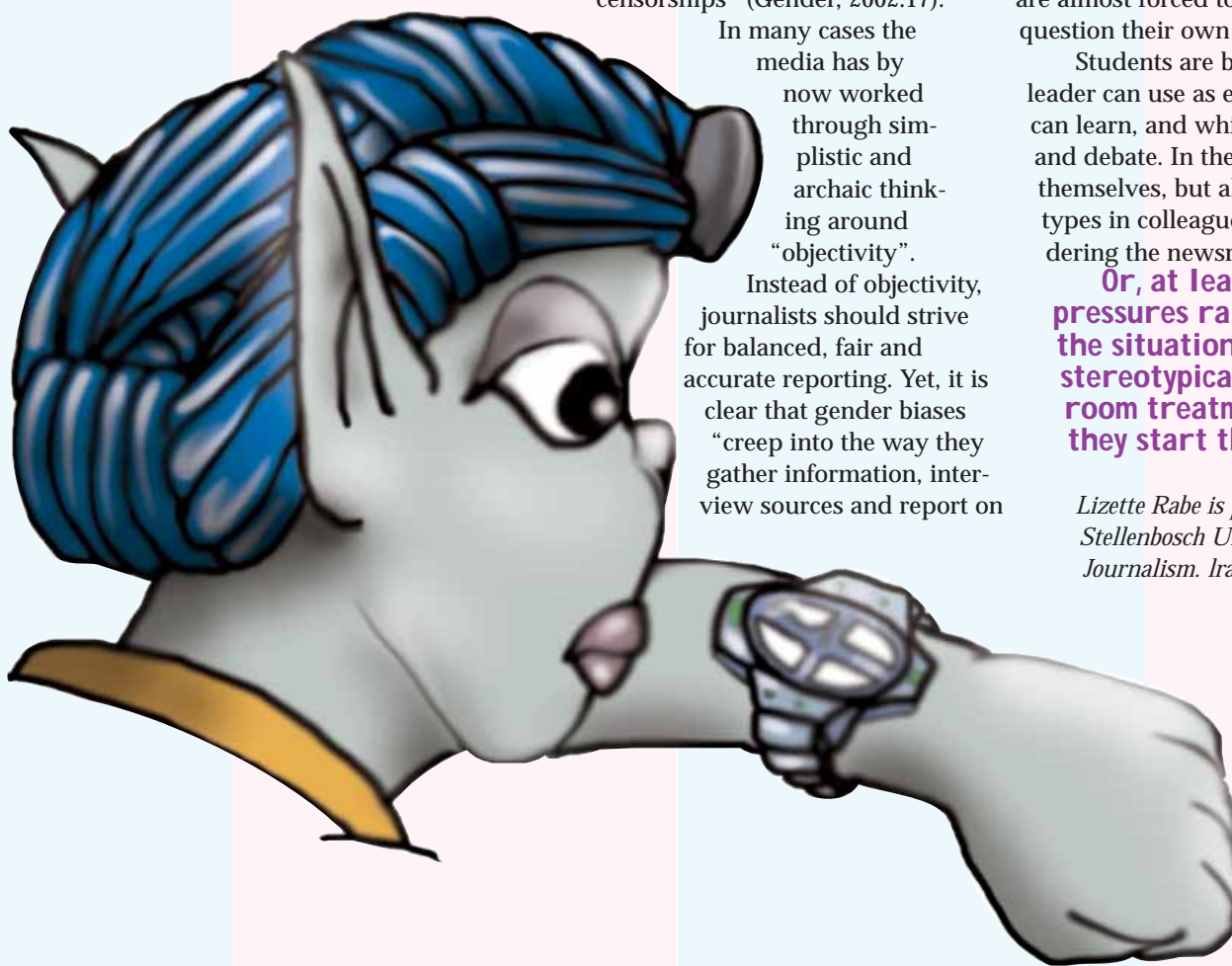
Students are bound to make mistakes, which the study leader can use as examples in class from which the whole class can learn, and which can form the basis of classroom discussion and debate. In the process they should not only question themselves, but also be critical of and recognise stereotypes in colleagues' work and thus contribute to engendering the newsroom.

Or, at least, get temperatures/blood pressures raised – depending on the situation – of challenging stereotypical writing and newsroom treatment of gender when they start their careers.

Lizette Rabe is professor and chair of the Stellenbosch University Department of Journalism. lrabe@sun.ac.za

References

- Gallagher, Margaret. 1995. *Women and the Media*. UN International Author Series. UN Department of Public Information.
- Gender, HIV/AIDS and rights. 2002. *Training Manual for the Media*. Rome: IPS Inter Press Service International Association. www.ipsnews.net. Accessed on 09.06.03.
- Lowe Morna, Colleen. 2002. *Gender in Media Training*. IAJ. GL.
- Mills, K. 1990. *A Place in the News. From the Women's Pages to the Front Page*. New York: Columbia University Press.



The Accuracy Gauge beeps loudly when a source is telling a lie; when statistics are being given a spin; or when Di is seriously in danger of committing defamation without a public interest defence.