



Editor's experience of creating a voice for the voiceless, tabloid-style.

By Beata Kasale, Publisher

Botswana's *The Voice* newspaper, which celebrated its 14th birthday in February 2007, prints over 32 000 copies weekly and boasts by far the highest circulation in Botswana. The paper has become almost as controversial as the news it carries. Yet, it also carries stories that people want to hear about, and effectively engages its readers.

The Voice's founding aim was to offer an alternative newspaper focusing on local-interest stories and entertainment, crime stories, gossip columns, lives of celebrities and people of prominence, as well as sports stars.

However, in the absence of celebrities in a country with a population of 1.7 million people and a low-key response to sports stars in Botswana, *The Voice* realigned its content to reflect Botswana society today, as well as to give the "voiceless a voice." However, most of all, to bring issues otherwise regarded as mundane to the public interest.

The Voice gives extensive coverage to a wide range of social, cultural and political issues which are deemed to impact the "man on the street" and it is predominantly identified by its lively, brief news content, with an abundance of pictures and big headlines while reporting wonderful, amazing, and even shocking stories.

Despite comments that the beautiful 'Voice-babes' published on page 3 and the gossip column sells the paper, we have established that it is the headline, which sells the newspapers.

People are interested to read about national issues and the hypocrisy displayed by prominent members of our society. They are tired of politicians who stand there and wag their fingers and preach but do not practice. We believe that a good and responsible reporter's job is to get the story. If the story happens to be about sex, we cannot get away from it.

Our country, as with other African states, struggles with the HIV and AIDS issue, but this does not stop infidelity. The sex scandals articles name and shame those in the public eye, who indulge in extra-marital affairs. How can we effectively curb HIV/AIDS when our courts are full of cases of infidelity and some of these cases involve the 'cream' and the 'role models' of our society?

Perhaps one of the most controversial stories, still talked about today, was the 1997 headline, Have you had Sex with this Lady?, which featured the tragic story of brave Sally Modise who had died from an HIV/AIDS related illness.

Modise gave an exclusive interview to the paper a year before her death. She was deeply concerned and disturbed that the HIV/AIDS issue did not seem to have any impact on the society who continued to be in denial and treated HIV/AIDS with stigma and discrimination. She asked that her death be dramatised to reach out to the public.

The story sparked much heated debate. Some felt *The Voice* violated Sally's human rights. Ten years later, we still stand by that headline as we have heard testimony of how that headline has changed many a life. At a Gender Links organised workshop in Gaborone, Botswana journalists discussed the "Have you had Sex with this Lady?" headline and one journalist said that the story encouraged him to practice safe sex.

The newspaper has become a "voice of voiceless" by becoming actively involved in running various campaigns for the marginalised and the



Juleka's story inspired action and public apology.



poverty stricken. *The Voice* has worked with people living with HIV/AIDS and given them a platform to talk about the issue through columns in the paper.

Stories have also encouraged readers to come forward to lend a helping hand. The story of a woman, badly scarred when her former boyfriend torched her face and body, touched a kind reader who raised money for her to reconstruct her face through plastic surgery. The story also resulted in a response for the former boyfriend, public acknowledgement that he was sorry for what he did.

A child who was born without an anus got assistance from *The Voice* reader, Robert Masitara who, through his charity organisation, raised money for an operation in South Africa, which relieved the baby from this disability.

The paper has also inspired community action. The Free Baeta campaign, launched in 1997 for a woman jailed for 10 years for stealing P50.00 from her friend, ultimately resulted in her release from prison following the massive campaign started by *The Voice*. In February 2007, a Tati Siding man had a tragic accident when his donkey drawn cart collided with the train. He lost a grand-daughter and all his donkeys were killed. Through an appeal from the newspaper, readers raised money to buy the family a cart and donkeys.



WHAT THE EDITORS SAY

The Voice shows that though editorial content may include tabloid style brief stories, big visuals (including beautiful girls), controversy, and the most ordinary, amazing, and even shocking stories, it can also be a sensitive and compelling source of news

and current affairs that affect the average person. The Voice moved from tabloid to a popular but more sensitive publication, ensuring that there is above all 'a voice for the voiceless.'



Writers Bio

Beata Kasale is publisher and co-owner of *The Voice* newspaper in Botswana.