

**A MICROHISTORICAL RECORD OF “MICROMEDIA”:
A COMMUNITY MEDIA JOURNALIST AND HER MEDIUM**

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ABSTRACT

This article applies the notion of microhistory in recording the development of a community media journalist (Heather Brenner) and her publication (Tabletalk). Community media, in essence, is the ideal subject to be analysed within the tenets of microhistory, as community media is in essence “micromedia”, recording a distinctive persona, time and place – the microhistory – of an era. This article briefly reflects on the origin of community media, and then records the history of a “micromedia” journalist. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the subject and her former colleagues, this study attempts to explore the essence of a good community media journalist. Although the bulk of this study considers the reasons for her success, it also questions whether her career as a journalist was restricted because she was a woman in a male-dominated world. She never sought recognition for herself, and thus she remains an unheard voice of journalism outside her paper's distribution area – almost a textbook example of a subject for microhistory.

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INTRODUCTION

The study field of microhistory is not well-known in South Africa, although some projects carry all the elements of this branch of historiography. A simplistic definition of microhistory is that it is a branch of the study of history. First developed in the 1970s, microhistory is the study of the past on a very small scale. The most common type of microhistory is the study of a small town or village. Other common studies include looking at individuals of minor importance. [...] Microhistory is an important component of the “new history” that has emerged since the 1960s. It is usually done in close collaboration with the social sciences, such as anthropology or sociology¹ (Wikipedia 2007).

Some well-known exponents of microhistory are Ginzburg, Hunt and Magnusson, the latter being the chair of the chair of the Centre for Microhistorical Research at the Reykjavik Academy in Iceland. Microhistory is described as one of the “most interesting and innovative” (Magnusson, s.a.) approaches to history, especially cultural and social history. Magnusson writes that microhistory came about, according to the German-US historian Georg G. Iggers in his summary of the development of modern historical practice, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*,

not because the microhistorians considered that the traditional methodology of the social sciences “is not possible or desirable but that social scientists have made generalisations that do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life they claim to explain”.

Microhistory can thus be used as a means of typically recording the life and times of someone such as the topic of this article: the person behind a hugely successful community newspaper, within the contexts of the development of media in our country.

Historians are unavoidably influenced by personal background and social experiences, and mainstream history was until recently “the fragile expressions of the limited perspectives of white, male historians” (Sochen, in Van der Vyver 1985:35). There is thus a need to rewrite history, also, as it has been phrased: to rewrite history and write “herstory”. Microhistory therefore is useful in recording the contribution in various fields by those who are “other” than male or white. Microhistory, in other words, can unlock the plethora of “herstories” that still need to be recorded.

South African media started out as community or local media when the first attempt at a sustainable – and free – press was made in colonial times. It seems our media’s history is mainly the legacy of British colonialism (Wigston 2001: 34-37). The Cape saw the first publication of what can be called a newspaper in 1800 (Diederichs & De Beer 1998: 87), after 150 years of no press freedom. This was followed by an expansion of local media, thanks to the 1820 settlers, who brought with them both technology and expertise (Diederichs & De Beer 1998: 90), as by the end of the nineteenth century “there was hardly a town of any size without its own newspaper, the proprietor and editor often being one and the same person”.

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Today, one can distinguish between commercial community newspapers that have a cover price and that belong to major media companies, knock 'n drops or freebies, also called VFD (verified free distribution) papers, the majority also belonging to major media companies, and grassroots community newspapers, also known as start-ups, some financed through the newly established MDDA². According to one source, there are 340 newspapers in South Africa targeting local communities. Those in urban areas tend to be VFD, with bigger circulations, while those in rural areas have a cover price and smaller circulations (SA Media Facts 2006).

The subject of this study, Heather Brenner, founded one of Cape Town's largest urban community papers 21 years ago. It became so successful that it is today the property of the international Independent Newspaper Group, published by its Cape Community Newspapers division, from Newspaper House in Cape Town.

*Table Talk*³ was founded in February 1987, and its success led to Unicorn Publishing buying it barely one year later in June 1988, and amalgamating *Table Talk* with *Milnerton Mail*. The combined title was called *Table Talk & Mail*. In 1991, Unicorn was bought by the Argus Group⁴. In the mid-1990s, the newspaper reverted to its original name of *Tabletalk* (now written as one word). The Unicorn community newspapers, serving "white" suburbs, moved into the Argus Building (now Newspaper House) in St George's Mall in 1996, having amalgamated with the Argus community newspapers, serving "coloured" suburbs, to become Cape Community Newspapers (CCN) (Brenner 2006).

Shortly thereafter, Independent Newspapers bought out the Argus Group. David Hill took over as editor of CCN in February 1997, retiring at the end of 2007. Brenner remained the newspaper's sole journalist from the first edition in May 1987 until the end of December 2005, when she retired at the age of 66 to become a politician.

Tabletalk, a VFD newspaper, was originally published monthly and later fortnightly. *Tabletalk*'s current circulation is 50 920 (Vale 2006). The free distribution newspaper is delivered every Wednesday to homes in Cape Town's ever-burgeoning and diverse West Coast suburbs. *Tabletalk* is one of CCN's biggest titles in terms of distribution figures (Vale 2006), surpassed only by *Athlone News* (55 120), *Vukani* in Khayelitsha (75 000) and *Plainsman* in Mitchells Plain (80 000).

It was not possible to establish the paper's current advertising revenue (Young 2006)⁵, but it is a telling fact that the newspaper's advertising rates are of the highest of the 14 titles in the group (Vale 2006). In addition, *Tabletalk* is one of the biggest community newspapers due to its advertising pull – it often reaches 40 pages at the end of the month (Holmes 2006). *Tabletalk* has long been a major contributor to CCN's revenue, thus playing an important role in sustaining Independent Newspapers Cape – a far cry from Brenner's little eight-page monthly publication in 1987.

This study examines the reasons for the growth and success of Brenner's newspaper. It also considers the question of what makes a successful community journalist.

HEATHER BRENNER, THE PERSONA

By rights, Brenner should not have become a reporter. All the odds were stacked against this unemployed 46-year-old widow who did not even know how to type. But Brenner believed that she could do anything she wanted to do. Coupled with this attitude was the fact that she had never been trained in journalism – and thus never exposed to the hierarchy of the South African journalism world. And so, not realising (or caring) that only men were “investigative reporters” at that stage, she went out and became one herself – after single-handedly starting a newspaper (Brenner 2006).

Although Brenner is a legend in *Tabletalk*'s distribution area ⁶, hardly anyone outside this region has heard of her. Beyond the greater Blaauwberg area of the Cape West Coast, she is an unheard voice. Sadly, this lack of recognition is often the case with community journalists. Yet for all 20 years of *Tabletalk*'s existence, Brenner was *Tabletalk*. This is the story of her life, and, simultaneously, that of *Tabletalk*.

When the first author of this article joined CCN in 2000, she was told of Brenner's reputation for being fearless. Soon afterwards, Brenner became annoyed with her medical aid scheme, so she decided to occupy the medical aid's offices. Brenner sat down on the floor in the middle of their office space and refused to move. Eventually the medical aid gave in and paid her the claim. This tenacity is Brenner personified.

Today, Brenner is nearly 69 years old. She left *Tabletalk* in December 2005 and joined a political party, which she represents as councillor for her area. She notes that she is doing exactly the same thing she was doing when she was a journalist, only now she's not writing about it (Brenner 2006).

TABLETALK: THE EARLY YEARS

The story of *Tabletalk* is the story of Brenner's life. She was born in Birmingham, England, in 1939 and spent her formative years there. In 1952, the family settled in South Africa, in what was then known as the Transvaal, and in 1961 she moved to Cape Town to help open a dance studio. There she met and married her late husband, and the couple settled in Milnerton. She admits that it was not a happy marriage (Brenner 2006), but she kept herself busy looking after their two small children, giving ballroom dancing classes, coaching drum majorettes, organising fêtes and directing plays and church pantomimes. She had never had what her father would have called a “proper job”: “I never ‘trained’ in anything except dancing. If I enjoy the prospect of something, I just go ahead and do it” (Brenner 2006).

In the early 1980s, Table View was a “Cinderella suburb” without many municipal services – the roads were not surfaced and sewage disposal was dependent on septic tanks. Brenner's best friend was Isobel Hutchinson, chairperson of the Table View Ratepayers' Association, which was fighting for services for the area. Hutchinson believed a “real” newspaper would be a catalyst for improvements, as opposed to the little quarterly bulletin (put out by the association) that came and went in fits and starts (Brenner 2006). Brenner remembers Hutchinson asking: “Why don't you start a

newspaper? You don't have anything better to do!" But Brenner retorted that she knew nothing of newspapers and couldn't even type.

In 1984, Brenner's husband died. Three years went by, and out of the blue, one morning in February 1987, Brenner woke up and thought: "Oh, what the hell, I'm going to start that newspaper for Isobel!" (Brenner 2006)

Brenner knew that she would need advertising, so she walked around Table View, creating a map that listed the names of all the businesses in the area. Most pledged their "undying support" and everyone was wildly enthusiastic (Brenner 2006). She then approached a printer who explained what she would need to do. The printer (operating from his garage) gave her a mock-up of the paper – a four-page black and white tabloid with a spot of colour – "a little bit of blue" – on the front and back pages. Armed with this, she set out to sell advertising and once again went footslogging through Table View. Brenner (2006) recalls her immediate success:

By lunchtime that day, I had R1 500 worth of advertising. The owner of Seeff Properties in Table View wanted to be on the front page permanently. So I took a lunch break and said to myself: "I'm going to be a tycoon!"

She never became a tycoon, but three months from the date when she decided to start the newspaper, she published the first edition of *Tabletalk* on 25 May 1987. The initial outlay had cost her absolutely nothing as she raised enough advertising revenue to cover the costs of the printer, photo lithographer and typesetter for the first edition, and they only billed her after 30 days. A number of dignitaries attended the launch of the newspaper. Brenner (2006) was amazed at her success:

I couldn't believe it was all happening. It was fun and I didn't take it seriously. Not many people enter journalism at the age of 46. I was the oldest cub reporter ever!

Brenner started an editorial column with a "friendly photograph" of herself. The tone of her column was relaxed, as if writing for friends and family. And she did indeed know many of the people for whom she was writing. As time went by, her column became funnier and funnier as she made herself the object of laughter. Her former colleague, Cathy Stagg (now assistant editor at CCN), remembers with delight a column Brenner wrote about looking for a suitable bathing costume (Stagg 2006).

Table View was small and insular and thus the paper was initially largely "parish pump" (Stagg 2006). An example of a lead story in 1988 was the anticipated return of a young Table View man who had been doing national service in the army (*Table Talk* 1988-06-14:1). Brenner believed that if her readers saw her as an "aunty", they would send her their news. She wanted people to relate to her (Brenner 2006).

In the beginning, Brenner did almost everything – and everything was hands-on. She would write all her articles by hand and have them typed by a company which also designed her advertisements. They would provide her with the stories typed into columns and ready for plates to be made. Brenner would cut and paste the copies of the adverts and the stories onto a page grid. This would go to a backyard photo lithographer, who would cut and paste the originals professionally according to Brenner’s proofs. He would also add her photographs (which he had processed). From these he made the plates, which Brenner would take to the printer.

Besides writing the editorial, booking the advertising and taking the material to the printer, Brenner also went door to door, delivering many copies of *Table Talk* personally. Around 5 000 copies of the newspaper were published monthly, with 4 000 copies being delivered to homes by a distribution company. Brenner (2006) remembers how she distributed many of the remaining 1000 copies by hand to approximately 200 businesses, as well as municipalities and libraries:

I walked around Table View, with the newspapers under my arm. When I delivered them, the businesses would pay for their adverts in cash and immediately book their adverts for the next edition. [...] In retrospect, my advertising costs were far too low. But I commandeered all the available advertising spend in Table View. I knew every business owner, their granny and their children.

Avril Dumont, a long distance runner from Table View, hand delivered the papers to the nearby industrial area of Montague Gardens (Brenner 2006).

In the early days, *Table Talk* had about 60 regular advertisers, with a ratio of 65% advertising and 35% editorial. Within half a year, Geila Wills, the advertising representative for the adjacent suburb’s *Milnerton Mail*, began to struggle to get advertising because everyone was advertising in *Table Talk* instead (Brenner 2006). Meanwhile, Brenner was unaware that she was making inroads into their advertising. After a year, she received a phone call from the owner of Unicorn Publishing (and *Milnerton Mail*). He invited her to lunch, admitting that she had them with their backs against the wall – they couldn’t even get “a sniff of advertising” (Brenner 2006). He offered to buy *Table Talk*, but Brenner hesitated. She knew nothing about business and did not want to give up her “child”. However, Brenner’s then life partner, Andy MacPherson, encouraged her to do a deal in which Unicorn would buy her as part of the package (Brenner 2006).

When Brenner went to sign the deal, the editorial director of Unicorn put a computer in her hands and she “nearly fainted with shock” (Brenner 2006). MacPherson assured her that “any fool could type”, saying that she could dictate her stories and he would type them. Because of his bad spelling, Brenner had to work on the articles afterwards, correcting the spelling and thereby learning to type (Brenner 2006).

Brenner negotiated her contract to work from home and take her work in once a fortnight for typesetting and pasting up (Brenner 2006):

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The Unicorn office was typical of a newspaper workplace: crowded, desks piled high with newspaper junk and heaps of newspapers lying over the floor. There was no place for me to work from. After a few weeks, Geila Wills (my former competitor on the advertising beat) generously offered to share her rather large desk with me. [...] Just sitting across from [her] I learned a lot about keeping things and keeping them accurately filed. I did a bit of leaning over the shoulder of Unicorn's editor of Southern Suburbs Tatler, Trish Bam, who was generous with her advice and friendly [...]. Everyone at Unicorn seemed so experienced and educated in journalism. I always felt a bit of an outcast, but I wasn't going to let it get me down.

Everything had been hands-on when Brenner was running a one-woman show, but now she was part of the Unicorn structures in Protea House, Adderley Street, Cape Town, which included typesetters and experts who oversaw the page make-up. Around 18 000 copies of *Table Talk & Mail* were distributed twice a month.

It was just after the merger that Unicorn employed Lynn Holmes, a Table View resident who had been selling advertising for *Cape Times*. Brenner and Holmes soon became a winning team, working very closely together. Holmes still sells advertising for *Tabletalk* 20 years later.

In the final edition of her eight-page *Table Talk* before it was bought out, Brenner wrote in her editor's letter (1988-06-14:2):

A great thing has happened to *Table Talk*, and likewise to me. We have amalgamated with *Milnerton Mail*, which is part of Unicorn Publications, to give you a bigger, better, more frequent updating of news and views [...]. The new paper will be called *Table Talk & Mail* and I will remain as editor. [...] I'm sure in time we will both settle down to the original basic concept of *Table Talk* – that of service to the community.

A detailed reading of this edition reveals a paper that was still largely “light” in both subject matter and approach, but there are indications that Brenner was beginning to explore more serious issues. On one hand, there was a column by Brenner's friend, Isobel Hutchinson of the Table View Ratepayers' Association, and an article on drug abuse, but, on the other hand, much of the paper was filled with news of schools, clubs, theatre and sport.

An examination of the first edition of the 16-page *Table Talk & Mail* (1988-07-07) reveals smooth continuity, with Brenner's style and approach very much in evidence. The paper was a little bit more colourful – yet still restricted to a few red, yellow and blue adverts. (Colour photographs were only introduced in the mid-1990s.) With her customary informal, chatty tone, Brenner introduced herself to her new readers in her editor's letter (*Table Talk & Mail*, 1988-07-07:2). The lead story in this inaugural edition was about the Lions Club of Milnerton (“Pride of Lions”, *Table Talk & Mail*, 1988-07-07:1). Other articles included the history of Table View, legal advice, schools news and a wedding photo. Sports news, including tennis, canoeing and surfing, was

scattered throughout the paper and there were no separate sports pages. There were also columns by the ratepayers' associations from the various areas.

Despite the soft family flavour and the lack of substantial "hard news" in this one-year-old newspaper, the presence of ratepayers' issues in the newspaper was an early sign that Brenner was soon to start tackling meatier topics. In addition, Brenner's statement in "Table View ratepayers first to announce candidates" (*Table Talk & Mail*, 1988-07-07:5) that councillors "are answerable to no-one but you the people" is also indicative of this.

Perhaps it was Brenner's growing confidence in her own writing, perhaps it was the backing of Unicorn Publishing which meant that she no longer had to spend time selling advertising and hand delivering the newspaper, or perhaps it was the fact that the merged paper brought her a new and more complex readership with more varying and challenging issues. Whatever the reasons, Brenner entered a new phase of local investigative journalism. The newspaper grew in size and she increasingly filled it with issues of greater and wider significance, particularly relating to service delivery and the community's plight in what was then frontier territory in Cape Town.

Yet Brenner never forgot the importance of local news. She found space for all sorts of news – from the toughest matters involving local government down to little girls performing in their first ballet concerts. She understood her readership and was not afraid to take on the big issues, but she was equally unafraid to include stories that might seem insignificant to those outside the area. It was a winning combination and the newspaper continued to grow. As time went by, Brenner grew in stature and so did the paper (Stagg 2006).

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR BRENNER'S SUCCESS

At the outset, it is crucial to define community journalists. They are generally multi-talented and multi-skilled individuals who are required to report on all aspects of community life – and take photographs. This is in contrast to reporters at daily papers, who are given well-defined beats to cover.⁷ Thus community journalists quickly develop in-depth knowledge about everything that happens in their area. Because they tend to live in the community they write about, they have to be fearless in reporting. Indeed, they know they will often encounter the subjects of their articles when they visit the local shops. Community journalism gives a voice to people whose concerns and situations are largely ignored by daily newspapers and various authorities. From experience, many community journalists see their work as the purest form of journalism.

Brenner's success as a journalist is hardly known or recognised outside her own community. Even in the journalism world, she is generally unknown outside Independent Newspapers' Cape Town office. This could well be because she consistently refused to enter community press awards, despite the pleadings of her editor and colleagues, who were convinced that she would have won many categories.

Yet Brenner (2006) neither needed nor desired awards, praise or recognition.

From interviews with Brenner and her colleagues, six reasons for Brenner's success as a community journalist were identified:

- a positive attitude;
- a passion for the community;
- fearless investigation;
- the ability to be adaptable;
- knowledge in many spheres; and
- teamwork with advertising representatives.

These reasons will be expounded in the section that follows.

Positive attitude

Brenner has experienced a great deal of tragedy in her life. After a “terribly insecure and unhappy marriage” (Brenner 2006), she was widowed with two children at the age of 43. She experienced more heartache when her son passed away in 2002. Despite this, Brenner (2006) remains positive:

People are often thrown off balance by dramatic change. Every time my situation changed, my positive attitude was most important. I look forward to each change in my life as another chance to start over.

Her marriage taught her how important it is for women to take control. Her approach of being optimistic and in control naturally extends to her professional life. Brenner believes it is important for women to have careers and interests because this enables them to be independent (Brenner 2006).

When she was bought out by Unicorn, she saw that many of the other community newspapers' reporters were experienced, young, “with-it” women. They laughed when Brenner told them that she would make *Tabletalk* the flagship of Unicorn (Brenner 2006):

It took me 10 years, but I did it. By its 10th birthday, *Tabletalk* had the biggest distribution of all the Unicorn papers. [...] And it had the biggest pagination. It was a revelation to me that I could do this from nothing.

Brenner's non-judgmental attitude towards gender, race, age and disability made a huge impression on Stagg (2006), who notes that although one of Brenner's hands was deformed from birth, she speaks about it openly, doesn't try to hide it and doesn't let it affect her writing or photographic work. Stagg (2006) also notes how Brenner was able to do things differently and break the rules of reporting because she had never been trained in journalism. For example, Brenner wrote about her medical aid sit-in in *Tabletalk*, despite the journalistic rule that reporters should not place themselves in the news.

Passion for her community

Brenner was always “in tune” with the inhabitants of the *Tabletalk* area (Stagg 2006). Brenner laughed with her readers and she cried with them. She lived in the area, her children went to school there and she was on the Milnerton Players’ executive for 40 years, directing and acting in plays. She taught ballroom dancing, coached drum majorettes and organised fêtes.

When Brenner knew she would be retiring, she started searching for a person whom she felt would look after her “baby” and serve the community as she had done. Brenner (2006) notes that she handpicked and trained her successor, Pam Fourie, who took over in January 2006. It is significant that Brenner handed over her newspaper when it was 18 years old, much as an 18-year-old child comes of age and goes out into the world.

Fearless investigator

Brenner really came into her own as a fearless investigator when David Hill was appointed as editor of CCN in 1997. For the first time, she had the total support of her editor and this gave her the freedom and confidence to write without fear of repercussions. Hill notes how the growth of the paper coincided with tremendous growth in the area and he is full of praise for Brenner (2006).

Although Hill’s support was indeed crucial, Brenner’s penchant for investigative reporting had developed before she started working with him. She had long been a crusading journalist with a strong sense of right and wrong (Stagg 2006). Brian Josselowitz (2006), who was Brenner’s news editor at CCN, describes her as tenacious and someone who wouldn’t take no for an answer. Stagg (2006) recalls how secure Brenner was in herself and how this aided her in her investigative reporting.

What made Brenner stand out as a white community journalist, particularly in the 1980s, was the fact that she went into the townships and reported on the black community’s issues. For example, Brenner was the first person to investigate the lives of the black grooms from the Milnerton Race Course who were not allowed to have their wives and children living with them (Stagg 2006):

The grooms and their families were eventually allowed to settle in what have now become the large townships of Dunoon and Joe Slovo Park in Milnerton. Heather has known people there for 20 years and they have relationships of friendship and trust.

Tabletalk’s advertising representative, Holmes (2006), was also always struck by Brenner’s passion for the underprivileged and Fourie (2006), new to *Tabletalk*, is well aware of Brenner’s reputation for covering news across race and language barriers. Although many people encountered Brenner’s tough side, she cared deeply about people and it was this dual nature that made her a successful community journalist. Brenner “saw people and not just stories” (Stagg 2006).

Adaptability

Despite being the oldest journalist in the newsroom, Brenner always relished change and moved with the times, whether it was mastering e-mail, adapting to the style of a new publishing group or getting to know a community that had been added to *Tabletalk*'s distribution area. Whenever she encountered change, she realised she was very lucky to have another chance to do something different (Brenner 2006).

Stagg (2006) was always struck by the extent to which Brenner embraced change and was flexible. Few women enter journalism at the age of 46 – although MER, the first professional Afrikaans female reporter, was appointed as *Die Burger*'s “women's editor” at the age of 46 in 1922 (Rabe 2001). Even fewer women enter politics at the age of 66. (There are a number of interesting similarities between Brenner and MER, who, as a social worker, also changed careers and moved into serving her community after her stint in journalism. She was also an independent woman, who divorced her husband in 1905, when she was 30, and raised her son and daughter as a single mother at a time when divorce was frowned upon.)

Extensive knowledge

Stagg (2006) is not surprised that Brenner went into politics because she has such a vast amount of knowledge about her area and local government:

She didn't just write stories – she also fixed things. She liked networking and putting people in touch with each other. People would phone her to ask for advice. It was like a free citizens' advice bureau – she knew who to phone to get things done.

Fourie (2006) concurs that Brenner has enormous knowledge of how the city and its sub-councils work:

She had insights into local government, municipalities, developments and even the Koeberg Nuclear Power Station. She would investigate every angle of a story and her articles were never one-sided. They were always well-planned and well-structured.

Although she did not have any tertiary education, Brenner had been at the “university of life” for 46 years when she entered journalism (Brenner 2006):

For a long time, I felt subordinate to anyone with journalism training. I felt out of my depth when writing because I had no training. Then I did various courses and it was a revelation to me that I didn't need them! I enjoyed them, but I learnt nothing from them in the main. I had been doing the right things all along – operating from sheer gut feeling.

Brenner (2006) says she learnt that life skills and experience matter most in community journalism. She is saddened when, for example, young journalists who have never had a bond or paid rates are expected to write intelligent pieces on these topics.

Teamwork

Journalists and advertising representatives often completely ignore one another. This situation mostly stems from the journalists' idealistic belief that news should be free from the influence of business, advertising and money. Brenner, who had no journalism training and was four years away from 50 when she ventured into the journalism world, was not constrained by this attitude. She managed to maintain her editorial integrity and simultaneously work closely and harmoniously with her advertising representative, Holmes, who joined *Tabletalk* in 1988 and is still there today.

The success of *Tabletalk* came from the fact that both the journalist and the advertising representative lived in the area and cared deeply about their own community. In addition, they understood where the other was coming from and communicated very closely (Holmes 2006). Stagg (2006) tells how Brenner had very strong and definite views about the controversial advertising versus editorial debate:

The “what’s on” notices were for churches, charities, non-profit organisations and service clubs. Each was allowed only one notice per month. Businesses tried to get in, but she made them advertise. Heather’s partner, Andy, has a son who owns a garden centre. The local bonsai club meets at this centre – and Heather refused to name the centre when she advertised the bonsai club! She went to extreme lengths – but I admired that about her. She had a strong sense of ethics.

Stagg (2006) acknowledges that part of the reason *Tabletalk* grew to become the biggest and most profitable newspaper in CCN’s northern group was Brenner’s very workable relationship with Holmes.

A MATTER OF MARGINALISATION?

Brenner entered journalism at a time when men still dominated South African newsrooms and when many a young female journalist was intimidated by overbearing male editors, as is clear from numerous studies on media and gender (cf. Goga 2000; Lowe Morna 2001; GMBS 2003, Sanef Glass Ceiling Audit 2006). It certainly helped that Brenner was already 47 when her newspaper was bought out by Unicorn Publishing and she went from having a one-woman show to working with a team and male editors. But it was especially her confident approach that saw her withstand sexist attitudes.

It is, of course, unfair to look at male/female dynamics in the 1980s from a 21st century perspective and it must be borne in mind that even Brenner was, to a certain extent, inevitably part of the social gender constructs of the time. Indeed, in her article entitled “Drama Drama” (*Table Talk*, 1988-06-14:6), she refers to the mayor of Milnerton and his wife as “Mr and Mrs Geo Mellett” and the ex-mayor of Bellville and his wife as “Mr and Mrs Tinus Meyer”. At the time, this was fully acceptable language.

It is, however, clear that Brenner believed in equality. Stagg (2006) notes that at a time when it was not socially acceptable for a woman to cross-examine (for example) the male chairperson of the local council, Brenner did so fearlessly.

Yet despite Brenner's attitude that enabled her to become an influential woman in her community, it must be questioned whether she was marginalised in the male-dominated world of journalism. Despite her success over the course of 18 years in journalism, Brenner says she did not receive a single promotion or job offer from another newspaper over the years (2006). Could this have been because she was a woman, and an older woman at that?

One cannot assume that sexism was at the heart of the matter, because Brenner (2006) openly admits that she is territorial and loves her community. And it is certain that she rightly believed that her community newspaper was better than *Argus* and *Cape Times*. However, it is significant that, when asked to provide advice for young reporters, Brenner (2006) says that they should see CCN as an excellent stepping-stone and nursery, as well as a place for journalists who are at the end of their careers and not going anywhere. Perhaps this is an indication that Brenner would have liked to work at a large national newspaper if she had entered journalism 25 years earlier than she did, although that would have been at a time when female reporters faced far greater challenges.

Yet somehow it is impossible to imagine Brenner at a newspaper other than *Tabletalk*. Despite this, Brenner would have made an excellent editor, particularly because of her incisive judgment, her organisational skills and her ability to mentor her fellow journalists. Brenner, meanwhile, says she never experienced outright sexism because she never regarded herself as inferior, and she simply never allowed people to be sexist towards her (Brenner 2006).

DISCUSSION

Brenner went against the grain in many ways, both as a journalist and as a woman. For example, many of the pioneering female journalists would have been tempted to buy into the [male] journalistic culture of heavy drinking, but not Brenner (2006). She came up against much opposition (both overt and subtle) and perhaps even marginalisation over the years, although she never termed it sexism. There is no doubt that it was her strong character that enabled her to succeed as a pioneering female journalist in an ever-changing community (and country) and in male-dominated newsrooms.

She boldly broke the rules and redefined the boundaries for female community reporters. She never saw herself as a victim of anything – she just went out and did the job without any fuss or fanfare. She investigated, found the truth and wrote about it, not caring about the inevitable criticism.

Brenner's readers often saw her as a fearless journalist, yet this is not strictly true. She did indeed have fears, but she bravely faced and fought these fears, often on behalf of her readers. In so doing, she became a strong and successful role model, inspiring and encouraging CCN's female journalists.

Brenner recalls her favourite book as a child was about a Scottish girl who lived in the Gorbals, a poor part of Glasgow (2006). The little girl went on an outing to the countryside and wandered into a field, coming face to face with a huge cow. She was terrified, but remembered that someone had told her to always face up to things and look them in the eye. “There are a lot of fearful things in journalism, but you have to get on with it, have a bash and do your best” (Brenner 2006).

Outside the broader Blaauwberg area, Brenner is an unheard voice. For her *Tabletalk* readers, she remains a legend – and in terms of microhistory, a worthy subject for a more extensive study as part of ongoing microhistorical projects on community media.

Having researched the (micro)history and growth of Brenner’s *Tabletalk*, it has become clear that there are certain attributes and characteristics which excellent community journalists should have. The passion for one’s community should exclude any favouritism. In order to understand what is locally relevant, and to grasp the history and issues of an area, one should ideally live in the paper’s distribution area. This is not without its difficulties, as one is often required to withstand the pressure of particular groups and their agendas. Natural curiosity and the resultant in-depth knowledge about all aspects of community life, particularly local government, are essential, as this enables reporters to write about what really matters to their readers.

Good community reporters should remain true to the tenets of journalism, namely to be fearless seekers of the truth. They should work as a team with advertising representatives, while at the same time not compromising on editorial integrity and independence. They should also be hard-working, embracing technology, welcoming change and always aiming to improve their skills. Being well-organised, self-motivated and flexible is crucial, as is having a “can do” attitude and intentionally acquiring vital life skills. Community reporters should be multi-talented and multi-skilled – both in terms of their field of work (writing/photography/editing/layout) and in terms of their beats (anything and everything).

RECOMMENDATIONS

A study of this nature is not exhaustive enough to do justice to the subject matter. As an explorative study in terms of microhistory and its subject, this article serves as an example for other such studies. There are many other community newspapers that would benefit greatly from an in-depth analysis of their content, growth and reporters. Indeed, the writers of media history often sideline community journalism.

It would be particularly fitting if media conglomerates were to provide funding and support for research into community titles in order to promote critical self-examination and introspection.

History is soon forgotten if it is not written down. Microhistory is a vehicle through which the “historians in a hurry” – as journalists have been called – of our community media can be recorded as contributors and participants in the “first draft of history” – as journalism has been described. Since community journalists are often women, it

would be essential for female voices to number prominently among those who are tasked with writing these collective microhistories, adding “herstories” to history.

Endnotes

¹ A definition from Wikipedia. Although the authors realise that this online encyclopedia is generally regarded with suspicion, and not recommended for use in the social sciences, the authors deemed this definition as succinct and useful as it describes microhistory in a nutshell, and can stand the test if verified against other sources such as Iggers (1997), Ginzburg (1993) and Magnusson (s.a.), who will not be dealt with here because of space constraints.

² Media Development and Diversity Agency, established to support, amongst others, grassroots media.

³ The first author of this article read the *Tabletalk* (part of Cape Community Newspapers and owned by Independent Newspapers) every week while she was a sub-editor at Cape Community Newspapers from April 2000 to April 2004. In addition, she was closely involved as sports editor for *Tabletalk* and Cape Community Newspapers’ other titles from May 2004 to February 2005.

⁴ When referring to a specific time in *Tabletalk*’s history, it is referred to it by its name at that time, in other words, *Table Talk*, *Table Talk & Mail* or *Tabletalk*. When making generic references to the publication, it will be referred to by its current title, *Tabletalk*.

⁵ CCN’s retail area manager, Pat Young (2006), did not want to divulge *Tabletalk*’s advertising revenue.

⁶ Experience of the first author of this article, Gillian Turner, as a community journalist working for CCN.

⁷ Definition as per own experience of the authors of this article.

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