

## **2018 Ruth First Memorial Lecture delivered by Niren Tolsi**

### **Starting the Fire**

Three children died in a fire at Fannin Road informal settlement outside Durban on 10 June 2017. The reports of their deaths were minimal and vague. They were girls who may have been aged two, three and six-years-old, according to East Coast Radio. Or, they may have been a pair of five-year-old twins, with a younger sister who could have been three, according to News24.

There were a few certainties, however: They were poor; the girls lived in a shack. Their lives ended excruciatingly; the neighbours who woke up to the girls' screams in the early morning testified to this. The dead were black. Aside from one story in *The Mercury* newspaper, none of the reports named the twins: Snegugu and Snenhlanhla Mtolo (six-years-old) and their three-year-old sister, Esihle.

Three days earlier Madré Johnston and her husband Tony burnt to death outside their home in Elandskraal near Knysna. According to the *Sunday Times*, Tony was found next to the family's cars on top of the bodies of Madré and their son, Michael. Madré was eight-months pregnant when she died. The couple would have celebrated Michael's third birthday that afternoon.

We know the contents of the final WhatsApp message Madré sent. It was to her neighbour, Anton du Plessis, in which she described the "red glow" of the fire nearing their home early that morning.

We know Du Plessis and his wife Anita survived by fleeing in their Land Rover, and that they packed their three dogs in with them. We know the names of their dogs: Mojo, Cola and Nika.

What we know, or don't know, about these fires — how they started, who they consumed and how those who died had lived their lives — we garner from news reports.

That information is managed by journalists, their subjectivities, their biases, their stresses and pressures, their curiosities; their willingness to witness and make enquiries of the world around them.

Journalists move between worlds: we can be in a shack settlement in the morning and in Mahlamba Ndlopfu in the afternoon. We have unparalleled access to the present — in all its shades of class and race, squalor and opulence, power and agency, unnerving beauty, repugnant violence...as we -- ideally -- document all this for those not as lucky as we are to have such freedom of movement and enquiry.

Is this what journalists do in South Africa in 2018? Are we, as the cliché goes, writing history's first draft? If so, are we writing for future generations and what will their interest in the news be — if any? And in the present, for whose interest do we write the news?

Are we mindful of the agendas of our sources? Do we report without fear or favour? Do we speak truth to power regardless of whether it is white capital or “black government”? Do we place a microphone to the mouths of those who are voiceless and extend the public sphere to the marginalised?

This paper seeks to use fire, and reporting on fire in South African newspapers and online websites, to understand where journalism in this moment is — and where it may be heading. Journalism, like fire, should illuminate. Can we use fire to irradiate journalism?

Fire can be both destructive and regenerative. It can destroy a community as easily as it allows for pyrophytic plants like fynbos to re-emerge.

Fire can speak directly to the human condition, to advancements in civilisation and notions of fate. Fire's disruptors included the Titan Prometheus and the Praying Mantis who stole fire from the Ostrich and gifted it to the Khoisan.

Before this moment's seminal technological breakthrough, the internet, there was humanity's very first technological breakthrough: fire. Both have set in motion possibilities which have transformed our worlds in ways unimaginable before we explored their individual discovery.

### **Fire as metaphor**

Fire is matter changing form. Fire occurs when oxygen experiences a chemical reaction with a fuel after its ignition temperature is reached. It is at once, a potent metaphor, a material force and media of conflict.

The characteristics of fire can be used as metaphor, and a metaphorical formula, to understand how news, or fake news, is created and spreads through the internet — going viral -- like wildfire. Or how news may smoulder and die with little acknowledgment. Fire can be used to explore the effects on society of news spreading, or not spreading, on how we establish facts, gain knowledge, form opinions and understand this world we are living in, just a little better.

In science: Fire = Fuel X Ignition Temperature + Oxygen

News content — the fire — is fuelled by the internet and social media with the ignition temperature of our outrage and cognitive biases plus the oxygen of our attention.

Here's another formula:

News Virality = Social Media X Outrage + Attention

Journalism, undeniably, requires the internet for stories to spread and to gain traction in people's minds and imaginations. For the formulation of ideas and opinions — to keep us connected to our political realities.

In a digital age, social media appears the most effective tool for this dissemination and interaction — for the spread of wildfire. It is the fuel that allows journalism, like fire, to self-perpetuate.

Yet, social media is premised on the “attention economy”. It aims to hold our attention while we freely give away our information and autonomy to be sold off for billions of dollars in advertising revenues by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google.

These tech behemoths are the mining companies of the digital age. Like Lonmin or Anglo-American, they are in the business of extraction and profit — not radical progress or the pursuit of egalitarian societies. Their methodology is as rapacious as that of the Randlords.

These are platforms which, especially on our smartphones, cynically use unethical “persuasive” design to hook into our brain's dopamine pathways and manipulate our time, ideas, vulnerabilities, the political, the personal. Like junkies we return to their “addictive feedback loops” where our sense of outrage is heightened. Our individual and collective will undermined and political and social bonds fractured.

Against this backdrop why should journalism, never mind good journalism, even matter? Will the future care about history's first draft? What hope, then, for journalism's survival?

In using the internet and social media, journalism's survivalist response in South Africa, as in most other places, has been to favour the sensational over the nuanced; to appeal to emotion, anger and outrage; to bait and draw up listicles rather than to investigate. To subscribe to the parameters that Silicon Valley has imposed on us.

South African newsrooms are under pressure to move away from thoughtful and in-depth reporting towards responding to social media

The dot.coms who drive “digital first” planning in newsrooms are unconcerned about the ethical problems of rehashing another publication's story without verifying documents and other source material. Traditional journalistic processes like developing contacts, corroborating their information with independent sources,

following paper trails and spending time in the field, for iconoclastic journalism, is being replaced by the click-bait pile-ons.

I felt this during my time working at the M&G from 2005-2013. Online we lost our identity and started to look like any other 24-hour news cycle website. In one instance, I recall an online editor ordering a promising intern not to bother going out to a shack settlement to interview residents who had experienced the double pain of an attempted eviction and a fire. The official version from police and the landowners would suffice, apparently.

Against the backdrop of ruinous ownership spending and retrenchments, this dumbing down exacerbated a traumatic time for the newspaper.

The consequences were best reflected in a “music review” of a Kanye album. It consisted of a succession of selfies with the reviewer’s facial expression for each song reflecting their thoughts on the music and lyrics. It had neither substance nor insight — the M&G’s trademarks.

We now treat social media as a core source of our news reporting. Over the last three years Times Live reported on what the celebrities Bonang and AKA tweeted about Marikana or state capture, rather than sending journalists out to interview and investigate.

## **Reporting Fire and Social Media**

Stefan Goosen, a Knysna-Plett Herald journalist, told me about the various WhatsApp groups that emerged during the Knysna fires last year. Their intention was to alert people to the fires’ directions and dangers, update emergency services on areas at risk and disseminate news of relief operations.

“Voice-notes were being posted of people screaming for help and claiming they were burning to death. I initially started trying to verify these claims on the groups and by calling people. They were hoaxes,” Goosen said.

One of two journalists at the Knysna-Plett Herald, Stefan is sincere and passionate. He worked tirelessly to cover the breaking fire, but also had to deal with nagging questions of whether his home and belongings were safe and where he would sleep that night.

Chasing these fake news leads wasted time, especially with the fire breaking out on the newspaper’s deadline day. It inhibited his ability to work, but illuminated how social media was used during a moment of human crisis: “A very particular side of the human psyche emerged through social media responses to the fire. People like being the centre of attention, hence these hoaxes, which appeared to come with a degree of macabre pleasure — like the pleasure that internet trolls get.”

It's the dopamine hit.

Once a fire is lit, it is self-perpetuating. For news to spread it needs the flames of our indignation and our vulnerabilities which maintain ignition temperature and ensure virality.

It does so by consuming our attention and crowding out other materials (other news) that may have a different ignition temperature — news that is not sensational or sexy enough to light up as easily as the ongoing fire.

An example: Cecil the Lion was killed by an American dentist in Zimbabwe on 1 July 2015. It led to over 3-million stories worldwide. The South African media piled on, too. There was protest and outrage.

A day earlier former president Jacob Zuma released the inquiry report into the 2012 Marikana massacre when South African police killed 34 striking miners. Very few media outlets approached the grey-washed report with rigour, there was no media-pile-on and no outrage cascade about democratic South Africa's bloodiest event.

At Marikana itself, the fires were lit — literally, because there was still no electricity in the shack lands surrounding Lonmin. Metaphorically, because Zuma had refused the families' request to be forewarned of the report's release and they were angry. The flames of this anger licked ever higher as report summary was read out on radio.

### **Fire Will Tear Us Apart**

Fire provides the energy for atoms in one gaseous compound to break their bonds with each other and combine with available oxygen atoms. Fire uses oxygen to continuously break down the bonds between atoms.

This atomisation is the converse of the brave new connected world promised by technology companies. Rather than extending commonalities, technology has reinforced our divisions of class, race, gender, language, geography and sexuality. Society has fractured into information silos and echo chambers. Rather than exposure to a multiplicity of voices and ideas, we only hear what we want to and remain unchallenged in our prejudices.

Social media is designed to ramp up our prejudices. It has been instrumental in radicalising the disaffected towards the right wing, and towards fascism — in Germany, America and South Africa.

The spread of sensational and fake news, the kind feeding our paranoias and prejudices, is the fire that breaks humanity's connective bonds.

This atomisation uses up the oxygen required for curiosity, exploration, gaining knowledge, developing empathy and solidarity, and articulating a humane praxis. We cannot breathe. We are suffocating our personal and political imaginations and, consequently, we have stopped feeling.

Goosen pointed out a perverse characteristic of the social media responses to the Knysna fire: the wide-spread celebration that the majority of victims were white people from the upper-classes.

“I actually smiled when I saw that Knysna is going thru it all, ‘cause we all know what the majority of the population is there [emoji],” read one tweet.

These responses argued the privileged would “finally know what poor black people go through in this country,” as one Facebooker posted. A sentiment, absurdly shared for different reasons, by white people who spoke of “now knowing” what it felt like to “have nothing”.

A spurious argument. Most Knysna residents who lost their homes and belongings were insured and easily replaced them. Accommodation was provided through their racialised class networks in the town. The home affairs department set up a special process to replace identity documents quickly.

The Knysna fire also saw an unprecedented societal response. Companies like Discovery Health, Standard Bank and Absa donated millions of rands towards the relief effort, as did ordinary citizens. Most of this money is still unspent because, well, the rich didn’t really need it.

Government, business, the media and the class and race networks which sympathised with those affected by the Knysna fire reacted instantaneously to the crisis.

This is not how poor black people experience the aftermath of a fire which has destroyed their homes, belongings, and killed their loved ones.

At Fannin Road, outside Durban, the ruins of the two-room shack where the Mtolo girls lived with their mother remain untouched. A physical reminder of a trauma that lingers much deeper in every member of the Mtolo family, who were too poor to afford counselling, or to be recognised as in need of it by the state’s dysfunctional welfare system.

A few weeks after Knysna went up in flames in July 2017, there was a fire in Alexandra, Johannesburg. Approximately 120 shacks were destroyed, leaving over 1 000 people homeless. Days afterwards some residents were still living on the street and community leaders said they had yet to receive any “clear communication directly from government” as to what relief accommodation, food and clothes would

be provided for people who had lost everything: birth certificates, identity documents, school textbooks, carefully guarded family heirlooms. A week later the community and emergency services were still “pleading” with charities and individuals to donate clothes and food.

Whether in outrage or in solidarity, social media remained distinctly un-animated by the Alex fire. The atomisation we experience and articulate on the internet was palpable in our failures to respond. The residents of Alex were invisible to us while even the pampered pets of Knysna had names and a warm place to sleep.

Antonio Gramsci noted the “common sense” of ordinary people contributed to the establishment of social morals and values. In this corrosive technological moment we are more individualistic and insular despite our deeply traumatic and violent history demanding we act otherwise.

### **“Where there is fire, there is politics”**

“Where there is fire, there is politics,” Mnikelo Ndabankulu, then a housing activist with the social movement Abahlali baseMjondolo told Kerry Chance in 2008. Ndabankulu and Chance, then a University of Chicago academic, were surveying the burnt remains of Foreman Road informal settlement in Durban. Over 2000 people were left homeless by the fire. This comment appears in Chance’s 2015 paper “Where there is fire, there is politics”: Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa.

For South Africans, Ndabankulu’s observation runs through our history into the present. There are the scorched earth tactics of the British and Boers, which affected Black South Africans most. During the 1980s state of emergency Winnie Mandela declared, “together, hand in hand, with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country”. Fire lit up campuses across South Africa as #FeesMustFall protests heightened in 2015 and 2016.

Chance notes: “Once set, flame spreads rapidly and consumes what it touches, making its illuminant effects highly visible, but leaving the agents who have lit the match often invisible, mysterious, or unknown.”

Political agents at grassroots level, rendered largely voiceless because of the media’s elitism and the inaccessibility of municipal officials and local councillors, use fire to demonstrate agency and draw attention to their situation.

Often, media coverage, focusing mainly on the protest and ignoring the structural problems behind these, will render those who lit the match “invisible” through their reporting.

Media is mesmerised and blinded by the fire, and what it is burning: libraries, schools, tyres, vehicles, immigrants. There is rarely reporting on community issues before the protest or whether grievances were addressed afterwards.

Journalists no longer embed themselves in communities because, following over two decades of retrenchments and cost-cutting, there is neither the human nor financial resources for such immersion. Often, there is no will, either.

Shack fires are inherently political. In Durban, where I spent five years reporting for the M&G on various beats, including shack dweller issues, fires pointed to the inadequate and corrupted public housing roll-out. Public housing is political. Knowing your rights and challenging your councillor or refusing to pay a bribe ensures one stays in a shack.

Fires started because of the state's intransigence towards in situ upgrades or to electrify settlements — especially if social movements were active there. Housing activists were kidnapped, detained and tortured by police. Some were assassinated. Burning tyres at street protests in Durban were often met with bullets — both rubber and live.

Durban's ruling ANC requires shack fire victims to be members of the party to receive emergency assistance from the state. If not, victims' recourse is to buy that material from ANC members in the community. This is linked to an attempted hegemony, the urge to create voting banks and patronage systems, the conflation of ruling party and state, and the gangster-isation of politics. Fires also allows for forced evictions under the guise of emergency response and "development".

Early on a Sunday morning in November 2017 a fire ravaged Foreman Road in Durban - again. Three people died, approximately 485 households were destroyed, directly affecting 685 adults and 248 children. The dead were Eric Mpanza, Mfikiseni Ntuli and their two-year-old daughter Sisipho. The fire's size ensured it led the following morning's Mercury newspaper.

By midday residents were rebuilding their homes on blackened ruins and smouldering ashes. Housing activist Lindela Figlan was helping his neighbour hammer together pieces of scrap metal unto upright poles: "A fire is an opportunity for home improvements in the mjondolos," he joked.

Figlan, whose home had escaped destruction, intended to take leave from work for two days to help his neighbours, some of whom had lost everything. His solidarity meant losing the R180 he earned daily as a security guard. He could barely afford this but it was important that normalcy was restored to families with whom he "shared everything, except my wife".

Members of Abahlali were negotiating with residents and municipal officials about electrifying the settlement.

The city advised that some shacks not be rebuilt, allowing the area to be “reblocked”, creating more spaces between structures for the installation of electricity poles and wiring along the settlement’s steep incline.

In May this year Abahlali general secretary Thapelo Mohapi said almost no progress had been made in electrifying Foreman Road. The provincial housing minister told Abahlali his department had yet to be approached by the municipality about purchasing the land to relocate the 300 people affected by the re-blocking. The 300 were still homeless, “sleeping with neighbours and families”.

According to Mohapi the electrification process had started earlier this year, but ground quickly to a halt when the community started asking questions about the tender process and the appointment of the community liaison officer, who is an ANC branch executive committee member.

Where there is fire, there is politics.

The Knysna fire — like the 2012 St Francis Bay fire — was one of the few instances where the mainstream media moved from reporting on fire in protest situations to reporting on the material aspects of fire — something they do whenever a fire affects the rich.

Journalists were able to relate to the fire’s middle-class victims - the coverage was wide-ranging, nuanced and empathetic.

There were first-hand accounts from survivors, reporting on the range of collectable and antique cars destroyed, stories about missing pets and rebuilding efforts, others celebrating local heroes like volunteer firemen and pieces about what happens next in insurance claims.

**“It was hidden in plain sight, but we had stopped looking”.**

South Africa and its media is not unique in the stresses and fractures it is experiencing. In Brazil, both the media and public ignored government austerity measures which had led to the deteriorating state of their National Museum. Until it caught fire in early September this year, the flames destroying over 90% of its 20-million item archive.

On 14 June 2017 the Grenfell Tower in London, a public housing project, was engulfed by fire. The residents were not rich and the number of dead remain unconfirmed. Conservative estimates suggested around 80, survivors claimed many more perished.

Grenfell residents had waged a long battle with the building's Tenant Management Organisation, and the landlord, over the lack of sprinklers in the 24-storey tower, the combustible cladding in their walls and other fire hazards. Nothing was done.

The media also did nothing until it was too late.

The broadcast journalist Jon Snow, in delivering the MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh TV Festival last year, noted this while agonising over the “widening disconnect” between journalists, who are part of the elite, and the ever-increasing numbers of those who are excluded from it.

In an age of supposed technological connectivity journalists are more *disconnected* from the worlds which our profession demands we report on.

We ignored Vuwani in Limpopo until residents set fire to around 30 schools in 2016 to protest against the Municipal Demarcation Board's decision to create a new municipality. We ignored residents as they fruitlessly attempted to exercise their agency and constitutional right to be consulted on decisions affecting them before they resorted to protest's fire. In not listening we missed a deeper story: the profound fracture between citizens adamant that democracy is a participatory process and local governments wishing to cast them as voting cattle to be ignored between elections.

We ignored people living in the Cape York building in inner-city Johannesburg until it caught alight within a week of the Knysna fires last year. We did not care about the immigrant penury Africans experience in “hijacked” buildings or how these buildings could solve the urban housing crisis if there was expropriation of land without compensation. We ignored information that many government buildings in Johannesburg's CBD did not comply with fire regulations until the Bank of Lisbon building burnt down — taking the lives of three firefighters whose deaths, colleagues blamed on the building's safety non-compliance.

As Jon Snow observed: “[T]he Grenfell residents' story was out there, published online and shocking in its accuracy. It was hidden in plain sight, but we had stopped looking. The disconnect complete.”

Journalists have stopped looking. We have stopped looking up from our smartphones and social media platforms when we report on something. In doing this we miss the detail which elevates our story-telling. We do this because we are told our readers demand constant information. We also do it to for the endorphin rush of virality, for the narcissistic kicks of affirmation from our digital networks. With our heads down,

we have physically stopped looking at the world around us, its stories and its nuances.

Like the society around them, journalists have developed an inward-looking narcissism which is contrary to our essential role: to tell other people's stories. The journalistic eye has been replaced by the self-aggrandising "I" as opinion replaces more expensive social and forensic investigation in an age of relentless newsroom corporatisation and austerity.

Digitisation and atomisation has exacerbated elitism and individualisation in the world, and in the media. In this moment of late Capitalism, there is a recalibration of the global order as the gap between rich and poor widens, there is an accelerated flow of capital and precious metals through borders which obstruct people while ethno-nationalism around the world rises and fascist ideas become normalised. This has infected journalists too: many of those who consider themselves progressive or liberal are guardians of racialised privilege in the media.

There was, once, an optimism that technology was wholly good for journalism. But we have learnt, through pro-Gupta online trolls, paid-Twitter, fake news sites, the emergence of social media influencers and Russian social bots that we cannot trust social media. The numbers — of followers and interactions — used to grade our online relevance and success were untruths. Journalism had not checked its facts when unquestioningly embracing technology.

We live in a time when, as Frederic Jameson noted, we constantly expose ourselves to "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence".

Journalism reflects this atomisation.

Editorial identity is chopped and julienned into small chunks before being aggregated on social media. Algorithms dictate our news morsels. We are losing the whole, the bigger picture. The "mix" that we found in an actual newspaper which caused us to read outside of our information silos and prejudices. No more. We are now one-dimensional in our knowledge and information gathering.

I was reminded of this while paging through the edition of the Knysna-Plett Herald published a week after the fire. All 48-pages, from the front to the sports section examined different aspects of the fire. Reading through a particular social media feed online I would have misunderstood the Herald to care only about the pampered cats surviving the fire.

The "mix" of an actual newspaper, that tactile, material thing consigned to history's dustbin ensured we knew more than we chose, or would like to know. That discomfiting provocation is what journalism is about.

The truth is, however, that with the honourable exception of some vernacular newspapers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Drum generation and the leftwing and alternative press during apartheid, journalism in South Africa has largely colluded with power.

The Afrikaans press unashamedly propped up apartheid. The English press, owned by mining companies protected capitalist interests. Newsrooms abounded with spies.

It is an undistinguished history for which South African journalism has never properly atoned. By atonement, I do not mean NasPers, on its centenary in 2015, apologising for its “complicity” in apartheid. For those words, a single action, did not address the structural anti-black, anti-poor, anti-female, anti-queer prejudices that exist at News24.

If it did, we wouldn't have young white male editors at Netwerk24 not being held accountable for the racist and misogynist vitriol that “slips through” their systems to be published online. Or young white male editors defending the publishing of Steve Hofmeyer’s hate speech political analysis as fair comment.

The lack of an apology rooted in profound transformation, allows many of us to ignore the need for introspection, to carry on with arrogance and hubris — often with a sense of untouchability, to detrimental effect. We have seen this when the Sunday Times published their various accounts of the “SARS rogue unit”, the Cato Manor Death Squad story and others. Or when the M&G led the newspaper with a fake story about DA leader Mmusi Maimane taking “presidential” lessons from FW de Klerk.

This lack of transformation means that the concentrated and toxic nature of ownership in South African media — at News24, Tiso Deathstar and Independent Newspapers and previously at the M&G and the New Age — can flourish without concern for journalism ethics or the consequence of managements’ intrusion into the newsroom.

It means even without the stresses of technology, we continue to suffer a crisis of quality and credibility.

## **Conclusion**

Much of journalism is moribund. Irradiated by technology, journalism is turning toxic. We need to start new fires to illuminate this complex and confusing country: to shine light on all our stories and ensure journalism, with its progressive intentions and values, survives.

We must innovate, not mimic failing models from the North, to pay for journalism and take back the internet from aggregators and fake news. We must develop journalism-centric social media platforms.

The recalibration of the global world order demands of journalists — now, more than ever — that we heed Nadine Gordimer’s call for writers to defy being products of the present, and rather, remain witnesses to it. And, I would humbly submit, explorers and investigators of the present too.

We need to start caring about the people around us. As journalists, we need to love again. For “Love”, as James Baldwin observes in *The Fire Next Time*, “takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within”.

I use the word "love" here, as Baldwin does, “not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

If we did love like this, we would have enquired about Snehlanhla, Snegugu and Esihle Mtolo who died in the Fannin Road shack fire.

If we had, we would have found in Durban, a pair of twins infatuated with make-up and “acting glamorous” who taught the younger children in their neighbourhood “games they learnt in school,” according to their aunt Phumlile.

We would have learnt that each twin had a different personality. Snehlanhla was “smart”, “quiet” and “liked doing her homework”. Snegugu was the extrovert, who loved playing practical jokes on people and was not afraid to “confront the bullies” to protect her younger sibling and friends.

They loved watching TV, and Takalani Sesame especially. Esihle, who insisted on tagging along with her elder sisters whenever she could, would join them in “jumping on the bed and singing along to the Takalani Sesame songs.”

We would have known that Phumlile’s three-year-old son Lubanzi “always speaks about his cousins and asks when they will be coming back from school? He stands in the burnt ruins of the house and asks where are they? Whenever he sees a fire, he says: ‘My cousins are burning’ and cries.”

This is a cry of many South Africans, which journalists must heed.

—ENDS—