

**THE WEDGE THAT CRACKED THE ROCK - A PIONEERING WOMAN
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ABSTRACT

This article explores some aspects of the pioneering nature of the career of journalist Rykie van Reenen, professed to be “undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the [twentieth] century” (Giliomee 2003:564). After her death she was described as the “wedge” that cracked open the “brute rock of male domination” from which a new generation of women could enter the profession (“Rykie van Reenen” 2003). The focus is on her contribution to South African journalism in terms of her pioneering work and on the unique personality that played no small part in her becoming a legend in South African Afrikaans media history. The premise of this article is that Van Reenen was a pioneer for women journalists in a language community and a country in which women were ignored for a long time as professional contributors to the profession of journalism. Van Reenen left a repertoire of an impressive journalistic legacy that not even her male peers could equal, as described in a previous article (Rabe 2006). This article, which is part of an ongoing exploration of her work, serves as an initial study of her contribution to establish women in South African newsrooms, especially Afrikaans newsrooms, as equals. To some extent, it also contributes to a more comprehensive South African media history, which, in general, lacks significant scholarly attention, especially in terms of the media historiographical legacy of women journalists and their contribution.

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INTRODUCTION

Rykie van Reenen (1923-2003) is widely regarded in the Afrikaans journalistic community as representing a standard in journalism that can merely be aspired to, but probably never attained. This article attempts to establish the extent of Van Reenen's contribution as pioneer to establish South African women journalists as professionals.

Van Reenen was not only a pioneering Afrikaans woman journalist in the previous century, but was also widely regarded as the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the twentieth century. Her oeuvre ranged from an outstanding essayist and columnist to a specialist beat reporter and political and social commentator - a journalist *extraordinaire*, according to her peers (see Rabe 2006). Her "flaws" could be described as of a personal nature - for example, that she might have been too modest - to the detriment of herself and that of women journalists desperately trying to establish themselves in a male-dominated environment (Van Biljon 2006).

She nevertheless established herself as an extraordinary professional during a career that began when women were not regarded as serious newsroom workers to the time when she could have become editor of one of South Africa's biggest newspapers.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Various sources available in the public domain, as well as private sources were accessed (e-mail, personal interviews, telephonic interviews). From these sources certain attributes of the Van Reenen character could be established. These characteristics are listed and discussed according to the information gained from a variety of both primary and secondary sources, as is the nature of historiographical research.

In terms of any attempt to record the past, it should also be remembered that history "is understood to be an interpretation of the past made by historians" (Berger 1998: 111). Berkhofer, as cited in Berger (*ibid.*) points out that history is not a record of the past, but a selection of data and other information made by historians.

Muller (1990: vii) quotes the Belgian historian Vermeersch who compared "press history" to an iceberg.

It is the visible tip, the 'out'-ing of a mighty mass of history. No branch of the historiography has so little of its own substance and is at the same time a function of the social, political, economical and cultural events.

Muller also acknowledges the "amorphous" state of press history (1990: vii).

This study attempts to lessen this "amorphousness" by describing the contribution to the South African media landscape of one individual, Rykie van Reenen. Biographical works on two of her peers, Piet Cillié (Steyn 2002) and Schalk Pienaar (Mouton 2002), published within the same year, have indirectly emphasised the fact that contributions by male South African journalists are recorded, yet not the contribution of a woman journalist who was (in fact) described as "undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the [twentieth] century" (Giliomee 2003: 564).

It is a fact that the media, as a male-dominated profession, has recorded its history as *his-story*. A typical illustration of this *his-story*, coincidentally, can be found in Muller (1990: ix) where, in an attempt to explain neglected areas of South African history in general, he refers to the neglected histories of the black and coloured populations as that of “the black *man* and the coloured *man*” (author’s italics). This reference to history as being the story of “men” is yet another manifestation of the hegemonic male mindset according to which history has been researched and recorded – also that of the media.

It is a fact that “history” is a reflection of personal background and social factors, therefore “history” in general can be regarded as the “fragile expressions of white, male historians’ limited perspectives” (Van der Vyver 1987: 35).

This neglected part of our media history can be ascribed to the fact that it is not only a male-dominated society, but that the media industry is also still a male-dominated environment. The neglect to record the contribution women have made to the development of journalism should be seen against this background.

It is important to state that, although the author of this article regards Van Reenen as her role model of journalistic excellence, her neutrality in this analysis should not be questioned. Value statements about the subject will be substantiated by and attributed to sources. They are not those of the author.

Many of the quotations were originally in Afrikaans. They have been translated for the purposes of this article.

Firstly, very briefly as background, the development of journalism, and specifically, the development of women journalists, in South Africa will be recorded. An outline of Van Reenen’s pioneering contribution in terms of establishing women journalists as rightful professionals within the still male-dominated media world will be given. Secondly, her contribution to related fields such as the documentation of certain aspects of our history, also media history, will be discussed. Thirdly, the recognition that flowed from this work, and honours that were awarded to this journalist, will be recorded.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Journalism has popularly been described as the first rough draft of history. Another popular description is “history in a hurry”.

The recording of this “history”, however, has been male-dominated throughout the ages. A call for *Herstory* instead of *History*, as some feminist scholars contend - especially in the historiographical recording of the development of media - is therefore to be expected.

Where, indeed, are women to be found in the existing history of the media?

An American historian wrote about the struggle of women journalists (as cited in Van der Vyver 1987: 54):

Among all the professions, that of journalism offers perhaps the most impressive example of women’s intrepid persistence in the face of professional hostility.

The contribution of women to the media, specifically journalism, is a field of study that has been explored over the last two decades (Mills 1990; Lafky 1993; Steiner 1993; Van Zoonen 1994; Goga 2000; Spears, Seudegart & Gallagher 2002; Lowe Morna 2001; Lowe Morna 2003; Chambers, Steiner & Fleming 2004; Lowe Morna 2004; Ross & Byerly 2004; Rama & Lowe Morna 2005), with Lowe Morna as the pre-eminent researcher in terms of media and gender in the Southern African context.

It is a fact that women in media, since the earliest recording of their involvement, have also been activists for their recognition as equals in society (Van der Vyver 1987).

How far behind South African society was, not only in terms of giving women journalists opportunities, but also in terms of their suppression by societal/cultural prescriptions, became evident in the early 1950s when a national debate that had raged in 1842 in the USA, on whether women should be allowed to wear trousers (Van der Vyver 1987:28), was debated only a century later in an Afrikaans women's magazine (Rabe 1985: 158).

Another comparison to illustrate how far South Africa lags behind in media development, is the fact that the first woman war correspondent operated in 1848 in the USA (Van der Vyver 1987: 30). In South Africa, this researcher established that the first woman war reporter probably was the aunt of British statesman Churchill, who himself was a war correspondent. She was Lady Sarah Wilson (Crwys-Williams 1989: 179) who worked for the British newspaper the *Daily Mail*, sending "dispatches from Ladysmith during its long siege, and [who] was briefly captured by the Boers" during the South African War (Morgan 2002: 2).

This researcher has a hypothesis that Van Reenen was, if not the first South African woman to work officially as a war correspondent, then the first Afrikaans woman journalist to work as one (Rabe 2006). This however needs further verification.

Another brief comparison to indicate the difference in development for women in journalism elsewhere as opposed to the South African situation, is borne out by America's first lady Eleanor Roosevelt who promoted women journalists through her strategy of allowing only women at her press conferences, in order to create more positions for women in news rooms. By means of this strategy she "brought women into government and brought their ideas to bear on government" (Mills 1990: 36). In comparison, South African journalists would crack the glass ceiling of the male dominated political journalism only decades later.

Because of the stigma attached to working women, women entered journalism on a "part-time" basis. After the Second World War, however, working women, who had previously been regarded as socially inferior, were now accepted as part of the work environment (Van der Vyver 1987: 125).

Owing to the so-called "Women's Lib" movement in the 1960s¹ more women graduated, married later and could control their fertility due to the contraceptive pill.

So-called “new families” got used to two incomes, which meant women did not stop working outside their homes once they had started with a family (Mills 1990: 84).

Focusing on the South African situation, it can be said that women were a rarity in the world of the “newspapermen” in the early years of Dutch/Afrikaans and English journalism. Either the majority of media historians up to the 1980s ignored them, or they did not exist, except for one or two. At least one book - published in 1983 - on South African media history ignored women journalists completely. Biographies of important Dutch-Afrikaans journalists, published in 1930, also have no references to women in the press (Van der Vyver 1987: 16).

The Netherlands and Britain, both pioneer nations in terms of establishing newspapers, and both South Africa’s colonial rulers, deprived their colony of a free press. The media accordingly developed slowly, which probably also led to South African women entering the profession at a late stage (Van der Vyver 1987: 6).

Other factors that inhibited the growth of the media and the development of women in this sector can be related to the history of the country. The absence of women in media correlates with the absence of women in the history of the country.

The women who did contribute to early South African journalism can be regarded, up to now, as a forgotten group in our media history. They deserve recognition, as they helped, together with their male counterparts, to mould the media.

As was the case in Britain, a woman from the upper class - those who had some opportunities, although still limited - is one of the first woman names in our media history. She was Anna, Countess of Bremond, who, with the establishment of *The Star* in 1889 in Johannesburg, sang a number, after which it was announced that she would also be a member of the editorial staff (Van der Vyver 1987: 38). However, while in Johannesburg she described the “charming dresses” and “enchanted hats” of socialites, in Mexico an American woman journalist spent six months in Mexico investigating corruption.

In South Africa many years would pass before women journalists graduated to more than reporting the social scene (Van der Vyver *ibid.*).

An important explanation for the slow development of the Afrikaans media is the fact that the language had to develop with the media. In contrast with other countries where the press evolved out of a language that had matured over centuries, the Afrikaans language developed with the press (Rabe 2004).

As was the case in the USA, a male family member involved in the press was a prerequisite for early South African media women to gain access to journalism. The use of pseudonyms, to escape the stigma of a working woman, was also characteristic of the time (Van der Vyver 1987: 19).

Language and media having to develop under difficult circumstances were factors. Another was the effect of the South African War on the development and psyche of the Afrikaner.

It can be said that Afrikaans women in the past were manipulated in a way that suited the patriarchs of their time (Rabe 2002; Rabe 2004). Repercussions of this attitude reverberated through our society even today. Feminism is frowned upon by Afrikaans women - in fact, the very first sentence in an investigative article in 1994 reads: “[Afrikaans] [w]omen find feminism suspicious” (Du Toit & Krog 1994: 22).

As one of the consequences of the South African War the term “Volksmoeder” was created:

Women should not tire themselves with dirty issues such as politics, but should keep themselves busy with the noble task of being a mother for the nation, was said (Du Toit & Krog 1994: 24).

At a literary-cultural level patriarchal power was an accepted fact (Van Niekerk 1994: 10). One can then assume that it also applied at a media-cultural level.

Yet, the first “professional” Afrikaans woman journalist with a full-time position at a newspaper, Miemie Rothmann, better-known as MER, never shied away from the “f-word”. She in fact expressed herself in a way that was ahead of her time (Van Niekerk 1994: 13; Rabe 2002; Rabe 2004).

As a subsequent and important research question regarding this topic, one should also ask: what about the role of the black woman in our media history? If that of the white woman has drawn so little attention, given our history, that of the black woman has certainly not even received any significant attention at all.

The commemoration of the march to the Union Buildings 50 years ago emphasises the fact that not enough research on certain aspects of our history, specifically media history, has been done. In fact, there are gaping holes in our media historiography.

VAN REENEN AS PIONEER

Against a background of a culture caught up in a Western patriarchal, chauvinist, colonialist context, both in society and the profession she entered into, Van Reenen was unwittingly a pioneer for women journalists.

In the mid-forties of the previous century there were only a handful of women journalists in the South African media. Furthermore, they were confined to the “women’s pages”.

However, Van Reenen would not be confined. She challenged the whole gamut of professional journalism. She was the second “professional” Afrikaans woman journalist, making her a pioneer and role model for several generations of women journalists (Rabe 2004: 42).

The first, MER, did not remain in journalism, although she still wrote right into her ripe old age of 100 years (Rabe 2004). Van Reenen remained a journalist, and as such made an incomparable impact on the profession.

Appointed in 1922 at the age of 47 to the editorial staff of *Die Burger*, MER was the first “official” Afrikaans woman journalist. But she was to be responsible for the women’s pages only (Rabe 2004). MER left *Die Burger* in 1928 to become a full-time organiser for the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging (ACVV – Afrikaans Christian Women’s Association).

A number of other Afrikaans women journalists who became pioneers in their own right, regarded MER as their role-model. Van Reenen was one of them. Together with Alba Bouwer and Audrey Blignault, they were regarded as MER’s “Kaapse kinders” (Cape children) (Steyn 2002: 419).

After obtaining a BA and a master’s degree from Stellenbosch University, Van Reenen started her career in journalism in 1945 shortly after the Second World War, when women in South African journalism in general were a “fairly rare phenomenon” (“Rykie van Reenen” 2003). When Van Reenen was appointed as journalist to work solely on the women’s pages at *Die Burger*, women were not regarded as serious contributors to the daily news. The late Markus Viljoen in whose honour a medal for journalism is named, wrote in his memoirs in 1953 about the role of women in journalism as follows:

Her position is wholly inferior ... in the ordinary journalism she is charged with specific female matters like tea parties, weddings and such (Viljoen 1953: 25).

Even after 1945 women were solely appointed to the “women’s editorial team”. Should they marry, they had to resign. It was a formal policy that married women do not belong at the newspaper, not even on the women’s pages, even though some wanted to continue their careers (Van der Vyver 1987: 95). Van Reenen, not interested in marriage, was the first woman after 1945 also to work on the general news pages. However, to be taken serious as a journalist, you had to have editing skills - and for that you needed to work in the night office. Women were not allowed to work in the night office, although, like Van Reenen, she was willing to do so.

It is not surprisingly that, being thwarted like that, Van Reenen did not also almost follow in her predecessor’s footsteps. The ACVV-“line” apparently ran through *Die Burger*’s office: other women journalists also worked for the ACVV after stints at this newspaper (Van der Vyver 1987: 59). Regarding the possibility of Van Reenen following MER’s career, one source says it was “touch and go” or she would have worked for the ACVV (Louw 2005). It was to the benefit of journalism that she remained in the profession, contributing to transform it from the inside.

The current chairperson of Naspers remembers in a tribute that, although it was a male dominated workplace, Van Reenen could stand her ground:

Blow by blow she could retort in that male dominated world (Vosloo 2004: 46).

Van Reenen herself wrote (1979: n.p.):

When I, in the year dot, landed in the male domain of the Afrikaans newspaper world, it was for you, woman, a privilege to be allowed to write under the heading

‘In a sociable mood’² about “social matters”. With that, please note, was meant weddings, engagements and parties, in that order, but the grandest of these were weddings.

The day she was “plucked” from this position to the general newsroom – a “bold step” by the news editor – was something of a remarkable happening. Even if only for the groundbreaking story of reporting the seasonal occurrences of fish moths and their damage to the country’s economy (Van Reenen *ibid.*).

This action, however, led to Van Reenen being used not only in the general newsroom, but transcending this to become a legendary beat and specialist reporter as well as a columnist (Rabe 2006). This pioneering work undoubtedly made it easier for women following her to be accepted as equals in every respect.

Van Reenen (1979) reflects on the progress of women in the profession in 1979:

Today my little glass partition looks out on *Beeld*’s general newsroom filled with young women, and they type away that it drones, on anything that a male reporter would think of applying his hand to: politics, the economy, crime, sport, art... yes, if they feel like it, recipes, fashion and parties too, alternated with women’s rights, rape and abortion laws.

She writes that the day when women would be “allowed” to report on rugby,

women’s Lib in the Afrikaans newspaper world would probably reach its peak. [...] A woman can become head sub, she can become news editor. Success may be few and far between, but there is no, as the Reformed [Church] would say, fundamental objection to that.

The day an Afrikaans woman is appointed as editor, there might be a couple of cameras flashing, but as soon as a newspaperwoman with the necessary format comes, even this bastion will fall (*ibid.*).

The fact that she was regarded as exactly that woman with those characteristics, seemed to have passed her by. From various sources it can be extrapolated that she could have been that first woman editor of a mainstream newspaper in South Africa.

Yet, it is not clear from sources at this stage whether she was ever officially offered this position and declined, or whether this was merely speculation, and that she was recommended but never appointed – “perhaps it was just the male chauvinism of the time” (Vosloo 2004: 48). A contemporary concluded (Le May 2004: 11):

Rykie Van der Byl van Reenen should have been the first woman editor of a major South African newspaper but she was let down by her peers.

Van Biljon, as quoted in an SABC tribute to Van Reenen, also commented on the fact that she should have been the first editor of a mainstream newspaper:

She would have been the first woman editor of a big national newspaper if men did not have such a patriarchal approach to women journalists (Acclaimed Afrikaans writer 2003).

From what another peer, Piet Cillié, said, it seems as if an editorship was offered her, but that she declined:

It is an open secret that Rykie could have been the first woman to have become editor of an Afrikaans newspaper – if she just wanted to. But she is a born virtuoso, a genial individual, not an orchestra leader (Malan 2003: 2).

Boshoff, in the introduction to the anthology of Van Reenen's columns, which he edited, writes that it became known at her retirement as columnist (to concentrate on church politics) that she had been nominated twice as editor, but that she was unacceptable, because Rykie believes politics is all about people, while it is supposed to be about politicians and parties! (1980: n.p.).

In a tribute to another pioneering woman journalist of Naspers in 2003, Vosloo admits that women were disregarded too long as editors of publications (qualifying it: "directed at women"). This situation has been rectified, but Naspers, with the wisdom of hindsight, lost much because of its male chauvinism, which now belongs to the past (2003: 4).

Van Reenen would regard her contribution to women's rights, like all her other work, as insignificant. In an editorial after her death ("Rykie van Reenen" 2003) writes:

... [she] would become one of the most important wedges, which in the Afrikaans newspaper world would crack the brute rock of male domination through which a generation of new and young dynamic women could enter the profession.

In the article on the development of women in Afrikaans journalism, Van Reenen herself concludes (1979: n.p.):

The challenge for women in journalism is not to do every kind of newspaper work just as well as men. She should now, with that extra chromosome, also add an extra dimension to our journalism with which our profession can be broadened.

She ends this article with the clarion call to her "sisters" – which, for the sake of Van Reenen's typical Afrikaans style, needs to be recorded in this article in its original Afrikaans version (ibid.):

Komaan, my sustertjies, julle beurt.³

In the arena of breaking new ground in terms of what were "acceptable" journalistic standards, she also shattered existing rules (Meiring 2003: 2) and can be regarded as a pioneer in this respect too. Had she been appointed as editor of a mainstream newspaper, one wonders how she would have challenged restrictive media measurements. As acting editor, she once published, despite the restrictions on freedom of the press, a photograph of bodies lying in a street to show what is really happening in South Africa.

As acting editor [for *Rapport*] she did pioneering work when she allowed the word ‘Sies’ in a main story. Also the photographs of bodies in a street after a shooting incident caused controversy and criticism from faultfinding readers, moral custodians and language purists, but in the industry itself this intrepidity was lauded (Meiring *ibid.*).

As the first woman career journalist, Van Reenen fulfilled a pioneering role in Afrikaans journalism. Eventually she would become the first woman journalist, in both the Afrikaans and English press, who was appointed at the most senior level then - as acting editor of a mainstream newspaper. This was a milestone for her time.

AS PIONEER ON RELATED TERRAIN, AND RECOGNITION

Apart from her numerous journalistic reports, articles, essays and columns, Van Reenen also contributed to South African historiography at significant levels, and this aspect of her oeuvre can also be regarded as pioneering work.

Not many studies were done on the role of women in South African historiography. Van Reenen contributed greatly in rectifying this imbalance with a seminal work on Emily Hobhouse, an English woman who did pioneering humanitarian work on the Boer side during the South African War of 1899-1902.

Her first book on Hobhouse, published in 1971, was aimed at the youth market. The biography, *Heldin uit die Vreemde – die verhaal van Emily Hobhouse* (Tafelberg), was awarded the Scheepers Prize for youth literature.

In 1984 *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters* (Human & Rousseau), was published. This has been described as Van Reenen’s “biggest work”, “masterfully annotated”, “much more than a compilation [...] of gripping historical matter” (Grosskopf 1986: 2). Furthermore:

The thoroughness of the research, the inspiration and imagery in the compilation of this publication make it comparable with the best of its kind. The way historical, biographical and sociological dimensions were integrated is at the level of international standards. With this work Ms Van Reenen has enriched the South African historiography, literature and our experience of our own society.

This work was honoured with the Recht Malan Prize for Non-Fiction.

In 1960 she was, together with Alba Bouwer, the co-editor of *Die Dammetjie*, an anthology of essays by Afrikaans women essayists. Van Reenen also contributed to anthologies on two pioneering Afrikaans women journalists. She was co-editor of an anthology on the letters of MER to her daughter (*Familiegesprek*, 1975, Tafelberg), as well as an anthology on letters of MER to various personalities (*'n Kosbare erfenis*, 1977, Tafelberg) and editor of an anthology on Alba Bouwer (*Die lang reis van hart tot hart*, 1995, Tafelberg).

She also wrote a long biographical essay as the introduction to a book on a photographer who had an iconic status in the Afrikaans community, Jansje Wissema (*Die wêreld van Jansje Wissema*, 1976, Tafelberg).

Her own anthology of columns from *Rapport, Op die randakker* (Tafelberg), compiled by colleague Tobie Boshoff, was published in 1980.

Except for the two literary prizes for the two books on Hobhouse, Van Reenen was also awarded the Markus Viljoen Medal for Journalism in 1982 by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy for Science and Art).

This medal was named after the first South African journalist who received an academic training in journalism. Viljoen was - as a pioneering South African journalist - the first to qualify in the 1920s from the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of Columbia in New York (Viljoen 1953: 48). However, he is also the journalist who did not think much of women's role in journalism.

In 1986 Van Reenen was awarded an honorary doctorate from her alma mater. Grosskopf, who at the time was head of the post-graduate Department of Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch, was responsible for the commendation.

This had to be signed by ten members of the university's senate. Amongst them were the first head of the Stellenbosch journalism school (where students are educated and trained according to the same philosophy as that of the journalism school of Columbia University), Piet Cillié, as well as Willie Esterhuysen, renowned Afrikaner philosopher, and Sampie Terreblanche, another well-known academic (SU Archives 1986).

It was Cillié who said that, had she submitted her research on Hobhouse to the university for degree-purposes, she would in any case have been presented with a doctorate (Boshoff 2004: 11).

How she received the news of this honour, is one of numerous manifestations of her modesty. Grosskopf remembers writing the commendation, and what followed, as follows (2004: 49):

It was easy, there were many eager helpers. It also went smoothly through the senate. On a day I received an enquiry: the [University's] board will be sitting this weekend, can you find out where Rykie will be on Saturday tea-time so that the rector can phone her after the decision was approved?

Also easy: phone her and ask if we can come by for tea.

Good conversation, but later I became somewhat cautious: when will the rector phone? Just then the phone rings. Rykie's friend Jude goes to answer it, comes back and says it is for Rykie. Rykie returns, and quite unfriendly, looks at me and accuses me: "It's your work! You did this!" [...] Rykie was not to be appeased easily, but at least we parted good friends.

Grosskopf concluded this memory, which was published shortly before Van Reenen's death:

If I may address Rykie directly: one rarely gets the opportunity to bring unfeigned praise, without any tacit reservation, to a good person and a magnificent craftsman – grant us this pleasure!

After the graduation ceremony, Van Reenen wrote to the registrar (SU Archives 1986):

Just to say once again thank you to Stellenbosch.

What I envisaged would be pure horror, became one of the most wonderful days in my life.

It cannot be often that one person experiences so much heartiness and thoughtfulness and generosity and friendship in one day. I felt cared for. [...]

This letter should really be on parchment, but the wordmill is actually the only thing which allows crooked hands still to write on. 'Scuse the inelegant communication.

From the heart

Rykie

She concludes her letter of thanks with a post script:

Must say: those ten minutes alone on the stage of the full DF Malan Memorial Centre in a red gown immunised me against whatever horror life might bring me in future.

CONCLUSION

Declared “undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist” of the twentieth century (Giliomee 2003: 564), as well as the “pre-eminent Afrikaans newspaper-writer of the twentieth century” (Grosskopf 2004: 49), Van Reenen should be recognised for her contribution (see Rabe 2006) to the transformation of South Africa from an oppressed country to a democracy.

But her contribution should not be measured only in what she achieved as an outstanding personality during the almost five decades she worked as a journalist. Her influence as an agent of change goes far beyond those years.

Together with a gradual change in the social and political environment of the last half of the previous century, this one person's contribution also changed the South African media landscape. Her talent, combined with discipline, helped to ensure that women were taken seriously in the Afrikaans media.

In the eighties, according to one survey, a third of all editorial teams, Afrikaans and English, were women. No newspaper had a woman in its senior editorial team (Van der Vyver 1987: 212).

The newspaper where she began her career in the mid-nineteen-forties, *Die Burger*, in 2001 had 40 % women journalists, with about a third of the senior editorial team female (Rabe 2001: 9). In 2006 one out of three deputy editors at *Die Burger* was a woman (Jongbloed 2006).

Thanks to South African labour law, discriminatory practices that were applied by media companies right up to the eighties of the previous century, are now unlawful.

Of course, Van Reenen was not directly responsible for these changes, but one can argue that through her contribution as a career professional, by showing that women can be as good – if not better – as any male journalist – and by writing as a socially aware journalist about social change (Rabe 2006), she paved the way for women journalists who followed her.

Van Reenen and other women pioneers deserve to be honoured through thorough research on various aspects of their work as true – and equal – citizens of the “Fourth Estate” in South Africa under apartheid.

Van Reenen is today remembered for her singular spirit, professionalism and personality. An Afrikaans woman, who, in a time when women journalists were not recognised as professionals, not only contributed to the establishment of a profession, but also to the forging of a new land for all the people of South Africa.

It is essential that research on pioneers such as Van Reenen and on their contribution to journalism is recorded. It is also hoped that this article will inspire more media historiographical research, which eventually should lead to a media history reflecting a diversity of contributors to the development of journalism in South Africa, especially that of the neglected voices in our journalism – those who were marginalised, not only because of gender, but also of colour.

Endnotes:

¹ Which since has proved to be yet another manifestation of women’s secondary position in society and through which women themselves have added to their imprisonment of certain societal and cultural constructs.

² A column titled “In Gesellige Luim” translated directly, “In a sociable mood.”

³ Translated directly: “Come on, my little sisters, your turn.”

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