

Worldwide, society says media not always responsible - WEF's Cherilyn Ireton



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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With South African journalists [Guy Berger](#) and [Cherilyn Ireton](#) now in prominent roles at [Unesco](#) and the [World Editors Forum](#), our country's industry issues and interests are at the forefront of thinking at international media organisations.



Ireton, a highly respected journalist and manager from titles such the *Sunday Times* and *Business Day*, took over as the [executive director](#) of the [World Editors Forum](#) that falls under the [World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers \(WAN-IFRA\)](#), in January 2012. She tells Bizcommunity.com of the challenges of the Parisian-based job, the biggest problems and opportunities facing editors across the globe and how she wants to connect editors to try find solutions.

■ ***So how many people have you got working for you? What kind of scale is the World Editors Forum (WEF)?***

Cherilyn Ireton: There are 12 people in the Paris office, which basically deals with advocacy issues and the editorial side of things - and that includes the press-freedom division, the editors forum, young readers' development and media development. So a lot of the Africa work is done from Paris - and that's both for publishers and editors.

■ ***This development work must dovetail with what UNESCO (also in Paris) is doing, where [former Rhodes University professor] [Guy Berger is the director of freedom of expression and media development](#).***

Ireton: Yes, we work very closely with Guy. The African development work is quite exciting. I wasn't aware it was so big [before I joined WEF] and they work on a number of levels; for example, there's a women-in-media programme running throughout Africa where they take female publishers and give them a bit of mentoring and training and increase their networks. And they're doing fantastically - especially in Botswana, Malawi and Zambia... We also do consulting and are busy with a newsroom project in Kenya.

■ ***What goes on in your German office [in Darmstadt] then?***

Ireton: Well, there used to be two organisations: WAN, which was in Paris, and IFRA, which is in Germany, and they [merged](#). Germany is more on the printing side of newspapers. They also do a lot of the events organising and the marketing. And we also have - which we don't have in Africa but we do have elsewhere in the world - WAN subsidiaries so, for example, there's an Asia subsidiary, where they run all the Asian events.

■ ***So what are you overseeing from Paris then?***

Ireton: I'm in charge of the World Editors Forum and our main issue is to look after the editor members of WAN through a few things: there is [Editors Weblog](#), which at the moment has about 80 000 hits a month, and there's the annual conference, for which we do the agenda and basically make sure that the conversation reflects what's going on in the industry. There's also a bit of restructuring going on here and we're now doing an annual newsroom summit for newsroom managers.

■ ***Is the newsroom summit a new thing?***

Ireton: In the past it was done by Germany. Now I've taken over all the content aspects of the merged organisation so that's quite exciting. It's aimed at managing editors, editors and general managers and covers all the things that managing editors do such as managing people and trying to find money.

It's more of a management than a journalism conference. It's annual and the [next conference](#) is in Hamburg in May. The theme is 'Smart Strategies for Tough Times'. Managers are having to do more, take on digital staff and find more innovative ways of working but, at the same time, having to do it with limited resources...

Then there are the [research reports](#) that we do. 'Trends in Newsrooms' comes out in September and so too the Newsroom Barometer, which quizzes editors on what they are doing on their editorial floors...

Also interesting are the study tours for editors. We are taking a group of editors on a tour of the key newsrooms in London, Paris and Berlin in May and it is a wonderful opportunity to visit the most-admired papers, talk to their editors and see how they are coping with common challenges. I have a personal interest in taking newspaper executives to India in November because I think there is so much to learn, particularly for papers in emerging markets, from the Indian newspaper industry. I hope to interest some South Africans to join in and investigate how they got it right.

In the short time I have been in Paris I have been amazed by the things people are doing with papers in markets such as Indonesia, Brazil and India. As Christoph Riess, the WAN-IFRA CEO, said in Vienna [at the last World Newspaper Congress] last year: "Circulation is like the sun. It continues to rise in the East and decline in the West."

I think it is true of most emerging markets and there is no reason why South Africa should not be included as one of the countries with growth prospects. Perhaps though [*Daily Sun* founder and publisher] [Deon du Plessis's](#) approach in seeking and going after new markets is going to be more successful than trying to exploit the top and elite end of the market.

■ ***And the next big [World Newspaper Congress](#)? Where is that?***

Ireton: It's in [Kiev \[in the Ukraine\] in September](#). Everyone's excited in the Ukraine because Euro 2012 is taking place, so there's a lot of development taking place.

■ ***And are you guys feeling the recession in terms of having fewer members?***

Ireton: We haven't felt it in terms of membership but what we can see is that the members are struggling. All over the world, the issues are the same: it's declining circulation and this need to take on digital integration - and once you're on that road, you can't stop.

It's not like you can say: "OK, now we're up to speed." Things keep advancing so the newsrooms today are quite different from when you and I started. They've got digital editors and video editors... The newsroom side is tricky. We call it "integration 4.0": We've got mobile and the internet, we've got tablets and the 'what now'. And I think the real 'what now' is making it all pay for itself.

■ ***In South Africa, editors are worried about threats to [press freedom](#) with the government looking into regulating***

the media. Does this come up elsewhere?

Ireton: Also, the UK [after *The News of the World* phone-hacking scandal]. And the UK [where Ireton lived for many years, working as a media consultant before moving to Paris] and SA are obviously the ones I'm passionate about.

But all across the world, society in general is finding a voice that says: 'The media is not always responsible.' And that is quite a scary thought because it opens the door to regulation and interference.

■ ***It's interesting what you say about society finding a voice. Do you think that has to do with people are now used to commenting on and questioning information they get online so, compared with 30 years ago, the media no longer has a one-way conversation with media consumers?***

Ireton: Yes, and also the fact that there is so much information out there and it's very difficult to sift the credible content from the not-so-credible content... and that's the opportunity for newspapers: to stamp their authority on copy.

■ ***Are there plans for [Editors Weblog](#)?***

Ireton: Well, in an ideal world we'd have a huge staff and produce much more original copy. But at the moment our plans are to expand our coverage and try to do more.

For example, ahead of this year's conference: a lot more on the various regional newspaper industries, what the newspapers are like that go [to the conference], a picture of media freedom in the Ukraine, what the newspaper challenges are. One report I'm pushing like crazy is: "Why are the Indian and Indonesian media doing so well?"

■ ***Why are India and Indonesia doing well?***

Ireton: India is a complex study: partly it's population growth, obviously, and it's an educated population. But what [the newspapers have done] is acknowledge that their readers are very young, at [The Times of India](#) in particular. It's full colour, very focused on news issues for people under the age of 26, and the paper is happy to retire older readers who don't like this. At the same time, they've cut their cover price quite drastically.

■ ***Golly, that's a bold move.***

Ireton: Ja, and they've also said: "We've got to be available in homes" and they have developed a phenomenal home-delivery network. They've also put a lot of social cachet on being a newspaper reader - saying that you're more sophisticated if you're reading a newspaper.

■ ***That's interesting.***

Ireton: Yes, and I think from a South African perspective there are lessons from India. In Indonesia, the one editor I've met said that, at 26, he was too old to be an editor. The editors and journalists are from the target market.

■ ***Indonesia and India have big populations though.***

Ireton: Yes, and Indonesia is the social-media capital of the world.

■ ***Does Editors' Weblog make money?***

Ireton: No, it's not a commercial site. There are a couple of ads on it but one of the things we will look at is whether we can up that. We could do some smart advertising on the site.

■ ***And is WEF funded completely by its membership?***

Ireton: Part membership but not only from the newspaper editors - from the publishing side of things as well. And then the events cover some of the costs.

■ ***You took over on 1 January so what's been the biggest challenge of the job?***

Ireton: Well, I got thrown into the newsroom summit as my first challenge and the planning should have taken place a long time ago, so my first few weeks were all about getting the speakers and the agenda for that organised.

Also, I had a board meeting three weeks after joining and I had to catch up on two years of history of the organisation and

present a plan to the board. So that was quite challenging. Then it was the planning for Kiev. What this has meant is that I've been event-focused, which when I'm settled in, will be part of the job - it won't be the whole of the job.

At the end of the day, my job has got to be about communicating with editors and trying to get them to communicate with others. The Editors Weblog is the main networking tool and then there are the conferences.

But what I want to do is try collect editors together in smaller groups. So, if I know that an editor from an investigations unit in South Africa has common interests with an investigation network in the US, then try get a conversation going between them... really identify common interests and challenges and then do a bit of match-making.

For more:

- Journalism.co.za: [Guy Berger moves to a bigger stage](#), October 2011
- Bizcommunity Search: [WAN-IFRA](#)

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