

The Black Media Journal Experience

By Sara Wajid, Editor of the Black Media Journal

My role at the Black Media Institute was to launch and edit the Black Media Journal. I worked there from September 1999 till it closed in June 2000.

The institute was set up by Claudine Booth, a Caribbean filmmaker and media activist. It's aim was to redress the lack of ethnic minority media professionals in the UK cultural industries, particularly journalism by providing subsidised training to the citizens of Hackney and campaigning for Black Media workers rights and issues of representation through the Black Media Journal. When I arrived there had already been some in-fighting and a high turn over of staff, but there was a one year journalism course in progress and a crop of graduates from the previous year.

Although wary I joined the staff because I had been working in the multi cultural arts scene as a journalist and critic for a few years and had never come across an independent Black organisation dedicated to supporting African Caribbean and Asian professionals. It was a dream job for me.

However while there was general enthusiasm for the idea the previous attempts to start the journal by my predecessors had been beset by financial problems and the organisation had already earned a reputation as a bad payer. This compounded the well-founded perception of the ethnic minority press as financially shakey and short-lived. Often when I contacted potential writers I would face a tired resignation mixed with a little hope, "So, any chance I'll get my fee then?" People were so keen for a publication to address the specific issues of race and media that they seemed to be willing to accept their work might be a donation and maybe not ever appear in print but they were willing to give it a go.

I was working with a full time deputy editor, a graphic designer and a consultant who we referred to as 'managing editor' and I had a budget of £8,000 to pay writers and photographers for the first issue of the full colour, glossy 84-page periodical. All the writers and sub-editors worked on a freelance basis. We paid a modest but almost respectable rate of 12p a word and we aimed for an editorial ethos that was industry focused but critically engaged and in our minds, high-brow.

Somehow in October it was ready and it was very well-received. No one had ever really seen a publication like it in the UK. People often asked how it was funded because the production values were generous for a specialist multicultural independent publication. The audience was expecting a community publishing effort, closer to a newsletter photocopied and stapled than the glossy periodical we had produced. Wise old journalist wondered at the launch whether the readership was really big enough to sustain this

ambitious publication which cost £3.50 and didn't have an advertising sales team. But the younger journalist were excited to see their radical perspectives dignified in this way and so we celebrated and promoted the launch on BBC radio and in the national press.

It was funded by various sources including the European Social Fund and the Arts Council of England. The publisher reassured me that there was plenty of money for the first 3 issues and the business plan wasn't expecting to see any profits for the first year. This was a politically motivated publication that was being subsidised by the funders and was not a profit-making organ.

By the time the second issue came out BMJ was already developing a reputation as high-profile well respected writers such as Ferdinand Dennis, Margaret Busby and Professor Charles Johnson were appearing next to postmodern experimental thinkers like Sukhdev Sandhu and Kodwo Eshun. Furthermore the mainstream media had found an incredibly useful resource. By March I was spending more time answering enquiries from Newsnight and radio 4 arts researchers than I was talking to BMJ journalists. Often the nature of the enquiries was "Do you know someone who could give an expert opinion on Asian dance culture?" but increasingly it was "We're looking for someone to do this piece of research for us, can you suggest someone." Our proudest moment was when one of our writers got a job as a web producer for an American Asian life-style channel. This was why Black Media Journal had been created, in order to increase the opportunities of ethnic minority media talent through strengthening our internal networks and our relationship with the mainstream media. It was starting to work.

Because the office was based in Dalston on the high street it was very accessible and local people who were interested in media or arts were always dropping in to let everyone know of their latest project or just meet up with like-minded people and talk shop. Jacob Ross, the editor of Artrage, a previous multicultural arts publication that paved the way for Black Media Journal was working nearby and he gave his stamp of approval. At this point problems on the management board came to a head and the Chief Executive was fired by the chair of the board, Professor Gus John.

Shortly after that we moved to more modest offices and awaited the appointment of a new chief executive by the Chair. But as often happens in small organisations in-fighting and mis-management eventually led to the collapse of the Black Media Institute and the short-lived Black Media Journal.