Battling the bully

Andrew Don relives his own agony in a quest for the truth about bullying

My head was full of romantic ideals when I began in journalism. I pictured myself burning the midnight oil, fag hanging out of mouth, Glenfiddich on the desk.

But I must have had "victim" emblazoned across my forehead like the bylines I craved. I was living in a dingy bedsit in the early-Eighties, when I was offered my first job in a profession I've come to love.

The news editor took an immediate dislike to me. I don't know why. I like to think he was jealous or threatened by my talent — the most common reason for bullying — but that was hardly likely. I was a mere trainee.

It may have been when he asked me about my ambitions and I said I wanted Kelvin MacKenzie's job that my fate was sealed.

To be fair, I was not the only person at whom he screamed: "Stick your head up a dead bear's bum" umpteen times a shift. But when it was directed at me, I got the feeling he'd rather the bear had already started to decompose.

I could handle verbal abuse — that was just his way. After all, hadn't I read somewhere that one of the qualifications of a good journalist was a thick skin? This was all part of the training, I told myself. But the longer I was there, the more I rubbed my news editor up the wrong way and my encounters with him deteriorated.

It seemed to me that every bit of confidence I tried to muster, he tried to deliberately erode. I've trained staff since and even though I have made plenty of mistakes, the one thing I've learned is that confidence boosting is more effective than demoralisation.

I found him rude, overbearing and a bully. His criticism of the small amount of copy I got to write was never constructive, always belittling.

Several months into the job he took me aside in the newsroom, in earshot of everyone else to tell me I'd never make it as a journalist. Was I sure this was what I wanted? It was better he tell me now, than I find out later, he said.

It was nasty, it was cruel, it was unjustified and it was designed to crush.

> "He screamed: 'Stick your head up a dead bear's bum' umpteen times a shift. But when it was directed at me, I got the feeling he'd rather the bear had already started to decompose"

Have you suffered at the hands of an office bully? Tell us your views. Send your e-mails to Julie Tomlin at juliet@pressgazette.co.uk

In many cases of bullying in the workplace, the victim feels forced out, which can amount to a claim for constructive dismissal. In my case, my persecutor left first and, I'm glad to say, I've not encountered him since.

The NUJ, which is currently collating the results of a survey on the issue, says bullying in the media is a huge problem and a destructive force in print and broadcasting. It is.

HELEN REED, a campaigner on behalf of the union, criticised the BBC for not doing enough to counter bullying and intimidation when she went to an industrial tribunal last year.

Now a presenter for HTV, Reed was sacked after a running dispute over programme changes. She claimed she had suffered "mental torture" and at one stage was off work for three months after she was diagnosed suffering from stress.

But while she won £5,000 for unfair dismissal last April, the employment tribunal did not conclude that her managing editor, Jenny Lacey, had deliberately undermined her and devalued her work.

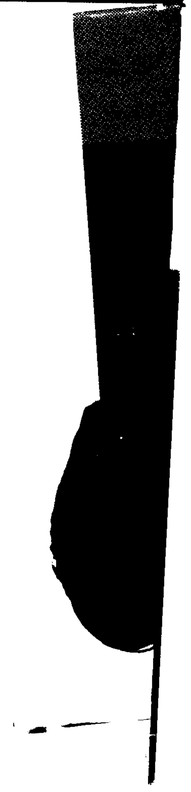
Reed points out that there are economic costs — research shows 40 million working days are lost each year in the UK as a result of bullying — costing industry £3.4bn.

"Much of our identity, self-esteem, self-expression, social life and friendship, is expressed through the career and workplace. So being ostracised, isolated, humiliated, undermined, constantly criticised, gossiped and lied about... even a remarkable person begins to crumble," she says.

With no support from others, Reed says she experienced panic attacks, emotional turmoil, insecurity, hypersensitivity, exhaustion, aching joints, sleeplessness and depression.

"Eventually I felt totally devastated and could hardly function after being well known for having a happy buoyant personality. My personal and family relationships were tried to the limit, I felt desperate and completely isolated."

One journalist, who did not want to be named, claimed a news editor he worked with at a large news



hear him on the telephone bawling out the regional offices and were always wary of his temper because you didn't want to be on the receiving end of it," he explains. "He tended to wind up over a number of hours and then explode."

The journalist's view was that it came with the territory, but Reed says: "With the stress and high pressure of the news desk, tempers may fly and unintentional bad behaviour may happen from time to time.

"Bullying is something different. It is the purposeful, intentional attempt to negatively effect and possibly destroy another human being's healthy state of mind, self-esteem and career. It is a cruel and focused attack, which is fuelled by the bully's own inadequacy, and shockingly, often witnessed and tolerated by some staff and organisations."

NUJ spokesman Tim Gopsill says this kind of experience is common in the media. "To some extent it is going away because I think the fad has passed for the really brutal, crude form of media management where the fashion was to throw chairs about," he says, although he adds that the union still hears every day about managers who think the way to get people to work is to brutalise.

And it goes on frequently at the BBC, despite the fact that it is well unionised, Gopsill claims.

This is disputed by the BBC. "It's easy for people to issue a general smear that bullying is rife in the BBC," says a spokesman, who adds that the corporation has "well-established formal complaints procedures for dealing with bullying" and that cases are always thoroughly investigated.

"People often say that a lot of bullying goes on and then there is no evidence to back it up, although it is a matter of regret that there are any cases," he says.

The Andrea Adams Trust, a specialist charity established by the eponymous broadcaster and journalist, says bullying can be in the form of:

- unwanted humiliating offensive behaviour;
- persistently negative malicious attacks on personal or professional performance that are typically unpredictable, unfair, irrational and often unseen;
- an abuse of power or position that can cause such anxiety that people gradually lose all belief in themselves, suffering physical ill health and mental distress;
- the use of power to coerce others by fear, persecution or to oppress them by force or threat.

The Andrea Adams Trust, Amicus, IRS Employment Review and The Work Foundation launched a "Ban Bullying at Work" campaign last year to publicise the problem and help employers find solutions.

Although the issue of bullying has an increasingly high profile, there is no specific legislation to deal with the problem. It tends to be covered under the broad brush of existing employment legislation that deals with different types of discrimination. Lobbyists have failed to date to successfully argue for a dignity at work bill.

Tim Field, author of *Bully in Sight* and founder of the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line, says the Government has not recognised the issue.

But failing to tackle bullying in the workplace is no longer an option with huge economic as well as human stakes.

A teacher, who claimed he was bullied for years by a headmistress who then sacked him for gross misconduct, was awarded £230,000 in an out-of-court settlement in October — one of the largest made in a bullying case.

As a freelance journalist today, the romantic ideals I had when I started out have never waned, despite experiencing bullying in my first job.

I'm burning the midnight oil as I finish writing, minus the fag hanging out of my mouth, but I have a glass of Glenfiddich on the table.

It is a great life. It's a great job and I am nobody's victim. □

Andrew Don is a freelance journalist