



Da Witsie Code



By Keyan G Tomaselli

My job is to get readers to plough through to the last page of this July mag. Not an easy task in our contemporary media-led world with its fractured sound-bite multitasking digitally carved-up consciousness. When last did you see anyone actually reading or leafing through a magazine in a doctor's waiting room or on a bus? People either stare at the walls or burrow self-importantly into their beeping, flashing, interconnected smartphones. No-one talks to anyone else any more in public spaces. Heads down at an angle, they sidle along like sidewinder snakes over a never-ending social desert, texting away in a desperate attempt to connect with a virtual community that confers upon them their perceived identity. A sixth sense warns them of impending lamp posts. The non-texting among us dodge these stupid twittering texters who could care less about the "last page".

The editor of *WITSReview* was literally at his wits' end in addressing this problem of last page inattentivity. Yes, this is an actual clinical condition afflicting all of us in the postmodern world. I can claim to have discovered and patented this condition, because this one-time Wits geographer turned Wits film production lecturer turned journalist is now housed in a school of applied human sciences. These are just big words for "psychology" and some other disciplines. I'm now a certified pop psychologist, probably certifiable also. Tell that to my postmatric career counsellor, whose jaw dropped to his knees when I told him that I wanted to be a psychologist – a bit like the John Cleese character, an accountant, in Monty Python's *Flying Circus*, who really wanted to be a lion tamer. Patience and idiocy obviously pay off.

I'm also something of a turnaround artist for university mags with captive readerships like staff and/or alumni. One learns by doing: my early career was penning articles for austere theatre journals and industry trade mags when I was a freewheeling free-lancing feel-em-up and foolhardy lecturer/unionist/film maker. When lecturing at Wits in the late 1970s I also wrote pithy, mildly Marxist film reviews for counter-culture magazines, some of which contained oh-so-tame girlie pin-ups. Even less tame girlie mags like the infamous Scope that pioneered pin-up nudity battled to keep their readers interested until the last page. One of my UKZN students going through late adolescence used a ruler, slide rule and tracing paper to predict the very date that Scope would reveal all. Just shows: social science is not useless.

Last page inattentivity does not affect newspapers because sport is the main attraction. That's why the tabloids bury nudity inside. Page 3 seems to be the magic number that entices the semi-literate cretins who read the tabloids to get beyond the first page, closer to the classifieds. Having fought censorship from the front, in the end Scope died because it tamed out in the no-holds-barred raunchy sexualised media environment that followed political liberation.

Well, at least we got to be sexually liberated even if freedom of political expression is now being rolled back by a government that prefers that we get our jollies from the very tame *WITSReview*. I am not going to untame it. Its engaging design solves the inattentivity condition. It's small and handy, and it's got nice colour pictures and good short stories on Wits academics we know or should know. It's won lots of awards from obscure organisations. Some boring stuff about university rankings is balanced by titillating articles on the sexual life of plants, migrating quiver trees and on song and dance. Every doctor's waiting room should be supplied with a copy. Even the kids can read it.

So, who is the mag's readership? The Alumni, maybe the Alumnati, maybe the Alumnatae, an association of intrigued graduates. We might as well Latinise it, as many of us still remember reciting our conjugations at school. Hey, we're all alumni and in this together – that's why the back page is important. Or, maybe the Alumnati or Illuminati are a residual shadowy group in a Dan Brown novel, bent on global domination? Certainly Wits wants to be the top-ranked university. *WITSReview* is the diabolical means to this laudable end.

Under the surface of *WITSReview* are hidden codes, calls to arms, known only to Wits Alumnati, to change the world (and promote the University). They will congregate when called by one of the sub-textual messages that is wrapped up in an otherwise boring article sourcing Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco on sub-particle anti-gravity read through an obscure medieval theological text, clouded with poststructuralist discourse masquerading as a shindig in pop psychology. The Friends of Wits will congregate at the gates (because they don't have swipe cards to get onto campus). They will be herded to The Nunnery, once a theatre, now a secret underground convention centre where my production company once shot an episode of a slapstick TV series starring Al Debbo and Wits drama students in a chain gang. There they will be addressed by my editor, Peter Maher, Director: Alumnati Relations, and told the real meaning of being an Alumnus. He will bare all and illuminate the darkness.

The secret message: please read the whole mag beyond page three, including the back pages. After all, I gotta keep my job in these challenging times.

Keyan G Tomaselli was once a student and lecturer at Wits. Now at UKZN, he gets his jollies by writing articles like this.

