

NIGEL FREDERICK PARSONS (R64-68)

He was born on 27 May 1951.

Prior to retiring, he was CEO of TVC News, a 24-hour pan-African news channel launched in Nigeria in early 2013. He was previously the pioneer Managing Director of Al Jazeera English, overseeing the channel from concept to launch. It was immediately recognised as one of the 'Big 3' global news channels, and within a year had won the accolade of 'Best News Programme of the Year' at the prestigious Monte Carlo Television Festival.

His previous experience spans 30 years in the media business gained from his roles at BBC Radios 1-4, BBC World Service Radio and WTN (Worldwide Television News). He has also successfully managed TV start-up news network teams, EBC in Switzerland and Telecampione in Italy.



He joined Al Jazeera International in August 2004 as Managing Director based in Doha, Qatar, in charge of overseeing the launch of the English speaking news and current affairs channel. Prior to that, his previous position was as a Director of Associated Press Television News, APTN, (created when AP bought WTN), with responsibility for contract revenue and broadcaster relations worldwide.

He was made Director of APTN following his role as Vice-President Europe for WTN, responsible for all revenue in the region and relations with broadcasters in both Eastern and Western Europe. Previously he was Regional Executive in charge of opening up Eastern European and former USSR markets, instigating the first international agency news feed to Central Asia and Eastern Russia through Intersputnik.

He first joined WTN as a news desk editor in 1985, before moving to Zurich in 1988 as Operations Director and one of the founding members of EBC (European Business Channel), a bi-lingual, English-German business channel for Europe. He then moved to Milan to re-launch local entertainment cable channel Telecampione as a news and business channel.

Nigel's TV career began when he joined UPITN, which later became WTN (Worldwide Television News) working initially as a cameraman based in Central and South America. During this time he also filed stories on a stringer basis for The Daily Telegraph, BBC World Service Radio, ABC Radio America, ABC Radio Australia and CBC Radio Canada.

Nigel's introduction to the media business was as a newspaper journalist: he worked as an apprentice reporter at the Cambridge Evening News and then at the New Zealand Herald, before moving into radio work at RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) and then at the BBC Radio 1-4 news desks and at BBC World Service Radio.

On the next page is an article and interview with Nigel that appeared in the 2007 Yearbook

Nigel Parsons and the launch of Al Jazeera International

On November 13th 2006 The Times announced the imminent launch of Al Jazeera's long-awaited English language channel. Based in Qatar and funded by the Emir of that country the channel's Managing Director is Nigel Parsons, a Briton, like many of the new channel's employees. The broadcaster employs 250



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journalists of 47 nationalities and is expected to be available in 40 million homes across Europe.

Its goal is to be a respected and impartial provider of news, providing an angle different to that offered by the American and European media.

In our 2005 Yearbook we anticipated the launch in January 2006, but, despite

delays, the launch had an enormous impact, not least because of recruitment of high profile figures such as Sir David Frost, Rageh Omar and Darren Jordan. Frost's first interview with Tony Blair proved to be eminently newsworthy in itself. We asked Nigel for his reactions to the launch of the channel:

"Many people said it couldn't be done - but we pulled it off, successfully launching the most ambitious broadcast project ever at precisely 1200 GMT on 15th November 2006. I will never forget watching the countdown clock on the screen as launch time approached: most of the time it seemed to be running much too fast! A couple of presenters told me that watching that clock was like watching the countdown to an execution; certainly I thought I could hear the distinct sound of critics' knives being sharpened in the background. As we finally went to air with a medley of coverage from the last 10 years to mark the anniversary of our Arabic sister channel, I sat with the chairman and Director General of the network trying to gauge the reaction.

In the event, I needn't have worried. The first of hundreds of congratulatory text messages and emails started to pour in from across the world. Competitors watched agog as our reports beamed in seamlessly from Gaza,

Somalia, Darfur, Congo, Iran, Zimbabwe, China, Brazil and elsewhere. Everyone loved our on-air look; one email said our graphics were 'just Divine.' And we had launched into an unprecedented 80-million households across the world.

Over the next days we read the reviews - surely no matter how good we were, someone, somewhere was going to trash us anyway? But no, from North America to Australia and everywhere in between (travelling in an Easterly direction) we received fulsome praise. We had stuck to the vision, and delivered a global channel in English with its roots in the developing world, giving a voice to the voiceless."

This is a fascinating piece written by Nigel in February 2014, on his experience of launching TVC News in Nigeria :-

TVC News – Through African Eyes

Admit it – most of what you know about Nigeria may have come from that email you got offering you big money if you'd just let a Nigerian politician park his millions in your bank for a while.

Nigeria's reputation precedes it: rampant violence, endemic corruption, internet fraud, extremes of wealth and poverty, and an HIV crisis out of control are among some of the images that seem to surface when Africa's most populous nation is talked about. The country definitely has an image problem.



So when, after spending five years in the Gulf setting up and running television news channel Al Jazeera English, AJE, (an experience I wrote about some years ago in the SOF section and received not a few hostile emails in response), I was approached to do the same for Africa from a base in Lagos, I was wary, to say the least. But it had to be worth a look.

Stepping off the airplane at Lagos' Murtala Mohammed International Airport (named after a military ruler assassinated in 1976), I was immediately hit by the vibrancy of this sprawling city – as much as by the heat and humidity.

Some of the recent history of the airport itself could almost serve as an analogy for the wider city. As recently as 2000, the US Federal Aviation Authority was warning that Lagos airport security did not meet minimum standards. Passengers were subject to harassment by criminal gangs both inside and outside the terminal buildings, and aircraft taxi-ing on the runways were being hijacked and their cargo offloaded.

Then a shoot-to-kill policy was introduced following democratic elections in 1999. The violence dropped, the airport buildings were improved, baggage beltways were repaired, and today it is no better, but no worse, than any number of international airports across the developing world. It feels safe, not threatening, and the people are relaxed and smiling – even if you still wouldn't be advised to get into a taxi with a driver you don't know.

Lagos itself is a vast, sprawling city of close to 20-million people, with more arriving every day, drawn like metal filings to the magnet of the Southwest's booming economy and bright lights.

Just like any city this size, there are some places you go, and some you don't, especially at night. But elsewhere I was astonished to see streets lined with fashionable boutiques, with the background thrum of 'naija' as Nigerians from the acknowledged capital of African hip hop indulged their favourite pastime. In the ex-pat havens of Ikoyi and Victoria islands, young, upwardly mobile professionals from Nigeria's burgeoning middle class relaxed in trendy cafes and restaurants. While in the more recently reclaimed island of Lekki, row upon row of neat, new family homes stood as proof of the prosperity to be had, as orderly children in immaculate uniforms made their way to school.

In the end, despite a lingering scepticism, but with the full support of my family, I decided the challenge of setting up Africa's first pan-continental news and current affairs channel was too tempting to turn down.

It soon became clear that this was a project unlike any other channel start-up I'd undertaken. To begin with, unlike at AJE, and the half-dozen other channels I have played an integral part in setting up, we couldn't simply go out and 'poach' our core staff from already established broadcasters, such as the BBC, CNN, ITN or Sky. This was to be a home grown project, an African channel for Africans and by Africans. We were granted only two ex-pat work permits – my own, and one for the director of news and programmes.

Recruitment was an exhausting exercise, given that Nigerian journalists, especially those working for the state outlets, had little or no experience in working for a balanced, unbiased news outfit. The politics of Nigeria

remains heavily based on tribal affiliation and patronage, and it's common practice for politicians to 'gift' journalists with envelopes of cash to carry positive news about them, a practice we had to break with.

To achieve this we generally steered clear of 'experienced' applicants from the state broadcasters, and concentrated on young, ambitious journalists who were ready to buy into the vision of an African channel that could compete with the big, established international broadcasters.

And then there was the building – dogged by poor building standards and the astounding corruption that permeates all aspects of Nigerian life, it was soon way behind schedule, and way over budget. But as we recruited and trained our young staff, the board stuck with us, and we finally moved in to what I am convinced is Africa's most modern broadcast facility at the end of 2013.

We also opened bureaux in Johannesburg, Nairobi, Cairo, London and Accra, while an Indian company, MediaGuru, oversaw all the technical installations and provided additional trainers.

All of us were deeply impressed by the willingness to learn and work long hours by our new staff. They in turn responded with enthusiasm and fulsome support as we introduced 'best practice' HR codes of conduct, and weeded out the few people we uncovered falling back into the 'bad old ways.'
Finally, after more than a year of preparation, we launched TVC News with the tagline 'Through African Eyes' at the end of February 2014. Our output focuses on sub-Saharan African news with just a nod at the international agenda, supplemented by programmes featuring women's and environmental issues, youth culture, music and dance, business, sports and travel.

We have sent crews to cover the civil wars in Mali and the Central African Republic, and our coverage of the Westgate shopping mall siege in Nairobi matched that of any of the major international broadcasters. But perhaps the most challenging, and dangerous, of all has been providing balanced coverage of the brutal Boko Haram uprising by Islamists in the north of the country.

Now available on satellite platforms across Africa, live online worldwide, and on BskyB (channel 572) in the UK and Europe, we receive a huge volume of feedback from both within Africa and from the international diaspora – and the comments are nearly all positive. For once, Africans have a chance to look at themselves from their own perspective, rather than seeing their continent reported only from the outside.

So for those who might still view Africa as a place offering little more than civil strife, famine and mismanagement – think again. Nigeria's economy is growing at 6%-7% per year, and it's not just the oil – the country also boasts well-developed financial, legal, communications and entertainment sectors. The 'Nollywood' movie industry astonishingly churns out more than two thousand films a year in a USD\$500-million-a-year business.

More statistics: in the past ten years GDP per capita is estimated to have grown from USD\$1,500 per year to something closer to USD\$3,500 today, while the number of mobile phone users has risen to 90-million, around 65% of the population.

A deeply religious people, not once in Nigeria have I even heard anyone swearing (apart from myself) – although they do enjoy a good heated argument – and working here it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. Nothing is easy in Africa, but the people have been an absolute joy to work with.

Having said that, and despite our success so far, much will depend on the next 12 months as the country heads towards its most hotly contested general elections since the end of military dictatorship in 1999. For the first time, an opposition party, the ACN, is seen to be in with a strong chance of unseating the ruling PDP, which has governed the country since the military were ousted. It promises to be a rocky road, marked by the threat of violence and that old Nigerian bugbear – widespread corruption

Pictured below is Nigel, his wife Zouflia, daughter Nikita (the last of his 4 children still living at home) and deputy CEO Lemi Olalemi outside the HQ of TVC News in Lagos.



Since 2014 he stayed in Nigeria running TVC News until deciding to retire in 2017 and return to London. He then spent the next 12-18 months struggling to cope with the lack of structure, read a lot, played some golf, got a bit depressed and in his own words "took too much interest in wine"! Then towards the end of 2018 he decided to re-visit the Manouche people of France, having come across some old photos, and write a book. He took myself off to a writer's retreat in Shropshire where it all came together. But I had to find an ending, and this year conducted a physical search for my old Gypsy group...and after hundreds and hundreds of miles finally found them again (Nigel had previously known them before the days of the mobile phone & internet).

In the end he finished the book 6 months from starting and you can read his press release for the book launch below in late August 2019. He has kindly agreed to donate a copy to the College library.

PRESS RELEASE- 27.08.19

A vivid account of one man's experiences living with the 'Manouche' Gypsies of France

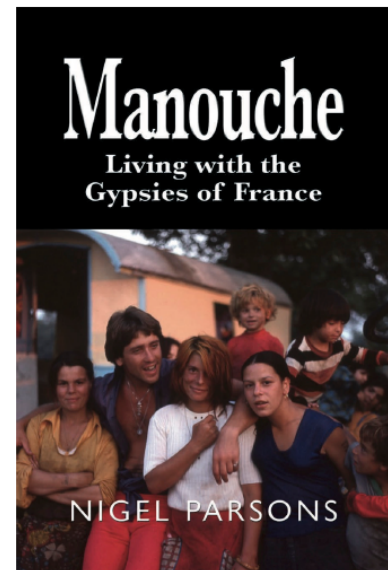
In the 1970s, Nigel Parsons found himself working on the French grape harvest alongside five Manouche families, known more commonly as Romanies in the UK. Initially, he was apprehensive as the French advised him to stay away from these groups. Despite their hard work, the Manouche were barred from the end-of-harvest feast and vanished overnight. All that remained were the blackened, burnt-out remnants of the fires around which they sang. Keen to find out more, Nigel embarked on a journey of discovery which involved him living and working alongside this misunderstood group.

After working with the Manouche for a season, Nigel returned to England, but found himself unable to forget their campfires, their music and their dancing. In some ways, this was not surprising to him because he had spent the majority of his life travelling; his father was in the the Army and Nigel initially chose to give up a career in journalism to see the world, travelling to Afghanistan, Malaysia and Australia. His own nomadic lifestyle led Nigel to have an affinity with the Manouche, so he returned to France to join the group several times, funding his annual trips by working 12 hour shifts at the BBC. Within *Manouche - Living with the Gypsies of France* Nigel recounts his journey of reconnecting with the Manouche, his first-hand experiences of this unique way of life, the steady erosion of their lifestyle by others and the hostility they faced.

Whilst in their company, Nigel lived exactly as they did, travelling from place to place, under constant pressure to settle or move on from an unsympathetic government, and even experienced some hostility from the police himself. Throughout his time he gained intimate access to this unique way of life, learning their language and culture, including their belief, fear & respect of Beng (the Devil) and his shape shifting associates, long, companionable evenings around the campfire, playtime with the children and dedication to a life of hard work.

Despite finally returning to England and losing touch with the Manouche, Nigel never forgot his experiences as these had been some of the happiest of his life. After almost thirty years he decided to set out once more in search of his old friends and managed to reconnect this year. The book not only recounts his journeys with the Manouche, but also his experiences in journalism within a variety of publications and organisations, including experiences in Colombia and as launch MD of Al Jazeera English.

Manouche - Living with the Gypsies of France transports the reader to the Manouche community and paints a vivid picture of their working lives, relationships and the downtime of a community often overlooked by many. Not only does the reader get to learn about Nigel's personal journey, but also how the Manouche community has evolved over time and their own path towards societal acceptance. *Manouche - Living with the Gypsies of France* offers a truly unique perspective, shining an important light on a forgotten community.



Publisher: Choir Press
Price: £11.99
ISBN: 9781789630657
Available: 20th September



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