

Press must tell the whole story

By **SUE VALENTINE**



SPARKS: avoid "simplistic" journalism.

The urgent need for journalism to establish a standard of careful, explanatory reporting – both now and after the elections – was emphasised by former *Rand Daily Mail* editor and director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, Allister Sparks.

Unless there was careful, contextualised coverage of events in South Africa, simplistic and even dangerous interpretations were likely to persist or emerge well into the future.

Sparks said the demand for "ventriloquist journalism" would continue, but that reporters should be encouraged to break away from "episodic, stenographic" reporting.

He warned that in its present state, South African journalism was not well placed to provide sensitive, in-depth reporting. He said it seemed that the stock headlines used to describe the complex process of the negotiations process at the World Trade

Centre were: "breakdown" or "breakthrough". Such "shorthand" headlines served no purpose. Reporting and headline writing needed to be creative and journalists should be tough on all the issues. This, however, did not mean that stories should be overdramatised.

Sparks also criticised the structures of ownership of newspapers in South Africa, saying the marketplace was overtraded. "There are too many newspapers – six dailies and 10 weeklies in the PWV area ...

They are not sufficiently diversified ... there are too many voices coming out of the same two stables (the Argus company and Times Media Limited)."

Too many newspapers were trying to survive off the same small advertising revenue base which led to limited space being available for news. He said, for example, that in the *Cape Times* there were only 30 columns of actual news space – half of what there should be for effective reporting of the day's news.

The same competition for advertising revenue led to newspapers sensationalising and "hying" the news – the exact opposite of what was needed in order to promote thorough, in-depth understanding of the news of the day.

The pre-occupation among newspapers with "the bottom line" meant that newspaper staffs were too small and journalists worked under severe constraints: they were underpaid causing a juniorisation of the profession and the staffing of newspapers by inexperienced reporters.

No new role

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The logic is simple: if you didn't cause it, you need not do anything about it. Said South African Union of Journalists organiser, Karen Stander: "When you impose responsibility for political tolerance on the media, you are also blaming it for intolerance."

Two foreign observers – Angela King of the UN observer mission and Michel Amar of a Canadian educational trust – expressed frustration with the apparent reluctance of journalists to commit themselves to playing a role in promoting tolerance.

Amar said there was no contradiction between press freedom and adopting guidelines on democratic values. Journalists could internalise these and decide how they would give editorial expression to such values.

King said some comments indicated that many of those present completely underestimated the power of the media. "Rather than saying can we do this or that, we should just

go ahead and do it," said King, adding "it is our collective responsibility to instil responsibility."

De Klerk later conceded that a code to further tolerance was not a necessity. What was important was that newspapers must be

Zabantsundu in King Williams Town that newspapers should exercise some restraint on "unhealthy competition" during the run-up to elections seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"Every newspaper is there to make money, but if we have a common obligation to serve the people of our country, it's time we worked hand in hand. You think I might just be saying this because I come from a small paper, but I have a big daddy (*Imvo* is owned by Perskor). If we can just hold hands for nine months then people might say that the media helped to teach them about political tolerance."

While not agreeing to a definite role for the press in promoting tolerance, there was consensus that voter education was needed and that most newspapers would probably make a contribution.

Generally, it was felt that newspapers could do much to improve the way in which they reflect the news. Karen Stander urged editors to take the debate around this issue into their newsrooms in a democratic fashion.

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FROM THE FLOOR: Jody Kollopen (*Lawyers for Human Rights*) and Eric Apelgren (*MPD*).

willing to follow an educational programme on the values that are relevant to the communities they serve. "We must plant the seed," he said.

An appeal by Eric Qabaza, editor of the oldest black newspaper in the country, *Imvo*