

rather than delving into their policies and activities – should I accuse Anglo American of having seriously damaged the information channels?

The answer again is relatively simple. Anglo – not the government – killed the *Rand Daily Mail*, the morning daily in Johannesburg which operated within the country's political and economic heartland. It closed the one paper that was the catalyst for the country's press information systems.

It is not generally known that the *Rand Daily Mail* fed more information to its sister morning papers around the country – *Cape Times*, *Natal Mercury*, *Eastern Province Herald*, *Daily Dispatch* – and to the national news agency, the SA Press Association, than any other newspaper in the country. It was pored over by countless local journalists and foreign correspondents as an ideas and information base for their day's work. And, among the most avid of those professional readers were the reporters and news desks of *Beeld* and the other Afrikaans newspapers and, of course, the news desks of the SABC.

The effect on South Africa was similar to what would happen in America if the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* were closed.

### **'No matter who was to blame, the catalyst had gone out of SA journalism'**

People now talk of the poor quality of their newspapers. But outwardly nothing has changed; indeed, since 2 February 1990, information is more freely available. The *Mail* was closed ostensibly because it was losing money. A few months after its closure a senior director of Anglo American admitted that it had been a mistake and that the paper should have survived. Its ills, he stated, had been perceived as due to editorial incompetence, but it was found that the problem lay with management.

No matter who was to blame, the catalyst had gone out of South African journalism. The *Mail* may have been hated by many, but it could not be ignored and its readership showed it was read by English and Afrikaner, by blacks, coloureds and Asians.

What remains of the press today is unsatisfactory. It is too specialist to do the job: *Business Day*, as its name suggests, emphasises business and pays limited attention to political and sociological issues. The NP supporting *Citizen* is unlikely to be critical of the party and in any case survives on a diet of the Sapa and handouts. The morning edition of *The Star* is a morning version of an evening paper with little reflective handling of the news. *The Sowetan* is an early deadline black paper with limited news of significance.

Evening papers cannot do this job; they have to ride with the news as it breaks and try to assess it later when its impact has been overlaid by the next day's events. I think *The Star* tries, but its format and time slot in publishing are against it.

There are few reporters probing the possibilities raised by transition. Though censorship does not directly impinge on this area, the culture created by long years of repression and harassment of journalists have blunted these ideas.

This culture includes respecting authority so that when political bosses say something it is given prominence and, worse, I suspect that it is believed all too readily.

Critical faculties are not being exercised in assessing what the politicians are saying. Too much is accepted at face value. And when it comes from the security establishment the information is frequently regarded as sacrosanct.

Certainly, that is the attitude of the state-controlled SATV and radio services which are back to their old tricks of looking after the interests of the party. There was a short period when the SABC floundered around not sure of the direction it should take, but that period has gone. The opposition-bash-

ing programmes are back again. If ever there was a case for the SABC to be dismembered so that greater variety could be introduced, now is the time.

In a sense, all this was predictable. We have a government that started out on a constitutional negotiation process but rapidly turned it into an election campaign where it devotes its energies to scoring points off opponents.

It is not in the business of informing people so that they can make up their minds about their future. It is issuing information selectively and with an emphasis intended to get people to side and vote for it.

Public thinking has been conditioned by the country's long enslavement to thought constriction through censorship and the many other constraints brought about by compulsion to adhere to doctrine and this, of course, includes a requirement to conform to the dogmas of the liberation movements.

We have a long way to go. In terms of press freedom this country has not yet returned to the basic standards that applied in 1948 when the present government came to power. And it is worth recollecting that in those days, the media in this country had much the same degree of freedom as that which existed in Britain then.

Here is the prescription. I see little flexibility on the part of government. It has before it the list of media and other laws that the law commissioners have proposed should be scrapped or amended to conform to the bill of rights which they have drafted. The Media Council's list of recommendations, which duplicate some of the law commissioners' proposals, have also been handed to the Home Affairs Minister, Eugene Louw, but so far nothing has happened except a few vague promises.

This is hardly the background for a country embarking on the most important decisions of its life. But the government sees nothing odd in this situation. And – perhaps the most frightening aspect – neither do the people in the street. □

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## **Looking for broadcasting alternatives**

The Centre for Cultural and Media Studies (CCMS) at the University of Natal has established a broad-based working group to examine questions relating to broadcasting, deregulation, privatisation and future telecommunications policy in South Africa.

The group invites co-operation between academics in making information available swiftly to the public on the choices facing South Africa with regard to broadcasting and electronic media.

According to CCMS director Keyan Tomaselli the urgency of the exercise is motivated by the imminent report of the government-appointed task group on the

future of broadcasting in the country. The task group reports to the cabinet at the end of July.

The CCMS group is interdisciplinary, with student and staff representation drawn from the ranks of media specialists in cultural studies, education, sociology, business administration, electronic engineering, development studies, telecommunications research and drama studies. The group will co-operate with other organisations like the Film and Allied Workers Organisation and Campaign for an Open Media which are calling for the development of open, accessible and democratic media structures. □