

The right to KNOW

Do the media have the capacity – and will – to tell South Africans what is going on in their country during these critical times? Journalist RAYMOND LOUW is not optimistic. This is an edited version of his speech at a recent Idasa seminar on the subject in Johannesburg.

All sorts of information has a bearing on our country's situation – the learned views of constitutional experts, the views of lawyers framing bills of rights and of others who have been involved in changing societies and changing economies; the mechanics of political and constitutional processes, of revolution and negotiation; the histories of past failures and successes in the art of reconstructing societies and nations.

There is an enormous amount of material and an enormous amount of talking about the relevance of all this to our particular circumstances.

But how is this information being conveyed to the people who have to come to terms with the new state we are in the process of building – and with the process of transition? And how does it affect the "haves" who don't see any reason why they should give anything away, or why they should show an over-inclination to share – and the "have nots" who feel very deeply that having been deprived all their lives there is some natural law that should compensate them?

The questions are: what is the media telling us of this complex process of transition? Is it really telling us what is going on? Is it presenting in a meaningful and understandable way the various options open to us? Is it doing an adequate job or is it failing because it lacks the will and skills to do so or because it is being prescribed to?

And of course there are the ancillary questions: is the public really interested in exploring the possibilities or has it fragmented into groups behind leaders who have taken up stereotype positions? And that leads to the further question whether the public has the desire and capacity to think for itself, to discuss the options and arrive at conclusions

independent of the dogma of the political parties.

Listening to Radio 702 and reading the letters columns I find myself increasingly being confirmed in the view that there is little independent thinking; that South Africans have locked themselves in behind the banners and the sloganeering of the various political parties and pressure groups. Perhaps, this is the way people do their thinking, by adhering to political positions, but it does not give much scope for fluidity and movement and changes in attitudes which I would think is necessary in our country.

'Critical faculties are not being exercised in assessing what the politicians are saying'

An example of this is the solidarity of the National Party establishment in its acceptance of an amazing 180 degree change in policies after 43 years without one of its public figures breaking ranks. I am not talking about supporters, who have quietly slid to the right – or should I say, have remained at the right wing end of the spectrum where they have always been while the NP has slunk towards the centre. These have stayed solidly racist, but the MPs, the cabinet ministers, the members of the President's Council, to a man and a woman, have maintained ranks behind the party banner.

Why should this be in the most traumatic time in South Africa's history? Why should the Nats behave in such a disciplined fashion while the white opposition to the left of the Nationalists, the Democrats in the centrist area of white politics, are floundering, not certain whether to join the Nats or the ANC,

that Lagos was his next port of call. Plainly there have been links between the Nigerian and the South African governments: the point is what happens next.

While it is not impossible that South Africa's president will soon find himself gazing upon one of Lagos's seven lakes, the harsh anti-South African resolution passed at Abuja may well impede his journey. President Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's president who is now chairman of the OAU, will certainly be advised by his own diplomats to slow down the impulse to embrace South Africa. They will see it as more important to heal the rifts which surfaced at the OAU than to compound these by rewarding South Africa long before the race is over.

This raises the now familiar question of irreversibility. However evaluated, it seems unlikely that Africa will accord South Africa the recognition which many think it deserves until the entire process of negotiations – however long and bumpy these will be – are well and truly over.

'As all Africans know it is only a few quick hours between the chill of a false dawn and the searing heat of noon'

But the effect of this stance, of course, cuts both ways. While foiling De Klerk's effort to pull, as it were, the African rabbit from its international hat, the ANC will be strongly pressurised by African states towards a settlement. This may itself seem a trivial point: what immediate purchase could African states have on the ANC?

The answer seems to be very little until one remembers that a country like Tanzania has made support for the liberation of South Africa a pillar of their foreign policy. In many cases, the influence which flows from moral stances of this kind, as the South African government may come to discover, completely outweigh the immediate appeal of commerce.

So how is one to judge the current stage of South Africa's Africa policy?

At the formal government to government level, it seems a false dawn. But as all Africans know, it is only a few quick hours between the chill of a false dawn and the searing heat of noon. □

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Journalists Jon Mattison and Raymond Louw at the Idasa seminar.

and the coloureds and Asians are flocking to join the NP, the party which was once anathema to them and which did them such great harm.

Of course there are many reasons, but I want to focus on the one that is the theme of this seminar – the availability of information, how it is used and the uses to which it is put.

It appears that the lack of defection by public office Nationalists is due to the glue of Afrikaner nationalism, loyalty to their cause and the dire warning drilled into the party that if they divide they fall. This has been brought about by skilful and sustained propaganda within the party and its fruits are to be seen in the solidarity with which the party forges ahead to a non-racial South Africa. Every Nationalist MP should resign because none of them were elected on a non-racial ticket.

'The government is not in the business of informing people so that they can make up their minds about their future'

Nationalist public information systems and their media vehicles spread a message of solidarity with the leadership and do not encourage doubts and questions, certainly not in public. Nationalists are told what is going on in the way they have always been told – to suit leadership views and party ide-

ology. There are few if any dissenting voices. There are not Solzhenitzyns in the National Party.

That is why strenuous attempts are made to crush papers like Max du Preez's *Vrye Weekblad*. Though by no means a Nationalist, Du Preez has to be silenced simply because he is an Afrikaner questioning Nationalist values. That is simply not to be tolerated, and of course, lack of tolerance of a relatively small dissenter such as *Vrye Weekblad* is a measure of the NP's inability to appreciate what democracy is all about and certainly its fundamentals of dissent and argument.

So, as far as Nationalists are concerned, the answer to the question of what is going on is easily answered. What the boss – F W de Klerk, Adriaan Vlok, Pik Botha et al – say is going on. And this unchallenging view is prevalent throughout the NP. So the answer as far as the Nationalist media is concerned is that no attempt is being made to widen the parameters of public knowledge, to encourage independent thinking and debate. It has to fit the mould laid down by the leaders.

But when we come to the rest of the country, the circumstances are different. People are assailed from all sides with conflicting information, propaganda, disinformation about what is going on, and virtually no information about the possible courses of action ahead of the country.

One of the reasons for this is quite simply that the media information gathering and information assessment and dispersal channels in South Africa have been seriously damaged, if not nearly destroyed.

That, you will say, is the natural consequence of the restrictions the government has placed on the press and of its tight control over what goes out from the state-controlled electronic broadcasting media. It has had a long run; it had been doing that since it came to power in 1948. But I say, the government tried...but it did not totally succeed. It passed law after law – there are now more than 100 on the Statute Book and they range over the spectrum of information that the public should have access to. But strangely enough, despite that clutter of legislation that certainly did inhibit information gathering and dispersal, it was not destructive of the information channels. Journalists were still able to gather and publish a great deal of information that the government would have preferred to see buried.

'There are few reporters probing the possibilities raised by transition'

The real destruction was performed by the Anglo American Corporation, the conglomerate that professes to support the principles of a free press, that has on more than one occasion been sturdily supportive of the papers it controls and has never to my knowledge interfered in the editorial departments.

So, why, with this record – largely achieved, it should be said, by scrupulously keeping their hands off the newspapers

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. □

Raymond Louw is a former editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* and currently publisher and editor of *Southern Africa Report*.

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. □