

By MOIRA LEVY

Can the messenger deliver?

Media in crisis of credibility, seminar of journalists told

As South Africa struggles through the process of transition, is the media going to be part of the problem or part of the solution? Or, put less crudely, in the words of Idasa director of policy and planning Dr Van Zyl Slabbert, is the media going to increase the current confusion in the country - or help alleviate it?

That was the nub of the debate at a morning seminar, organised by Idasa's media department, which brought together leading Cape Town journalists. The title of the seminar, and the question they set out to answer - "can the messenger deliver?". The answer, after three hours of discussion and debate - "yes, but..."

For the first time journalists - representing all the city's daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, radio and TV - faced each other across the table. This time, instead of being subjected to the usual daily criticism from the public or the government, the journalists themselves subjected their colleagues and their profession to a rigorous and frank assessment of their role and their responsibility.

Blaming the messenger instead of the message is an oft-cited complaint raised by the media; at the seminar the journalists set out to examine whether they should indeed shoulder some of the blame.

In his opening address Slabbert accused the media of "ideological cherry picking". Referring specifically to media coverage of the findings of the Goldstone Commission, he suggested the public's right to know was being compromised by selective, sometimes subjective and often inaccurate reporting.

He warned that the role the media plays now, in the period of transition, may govern the role it is allocated in the future. "If the press continues to be part of the confusion, it could be posing a threat to its own (future) freedom.

"Freedom of the press is a consequence of democracy, not a precondition for it...It is not simply a right that we are entitled to and that will be conferred upon us, but it will have to be struggled for. What we do now, in that struggle, could be critical for future press freedom."

Slabbert's warning set the tone for the rest of the proceedings. Speaker Jon Qwelane, deputy editor of the Johannesburg *Sunday Star*, continued in a similar vein. In a powerful appeal for a return to the professional journalistic ethics of integrity, impartiality, accuracy and relentless investigation, he said the media today, across the board, is suffering a crisis of credibility.

Speaking from the perspective of the black community, he said the mainstream newspapers are perceived as agents of big capital and as serving white political power interests.

"This perception, right or wrong, has been given credence by the concentration of ownership in too few, but economically powerful, hands, and cemented by the undeniable fact that there is pretty little to choose from by way of diversity between newspapers

owned by Argus and Times Media Limited. When you consider that both groups are firmly in the clutches of the all-embracing Anglo American empire, then you begin to see why this near-monopoly of the English-language press is largely perceived to serve white economic power interests."

He said two other branches of the media also suffer a lack of credibility, but for entirely different reasons. "The so-called alternative media and the SABC are in the same camp as being organs of political partisanship.

'The SABC is NP-objective, The Star is DP-objective, City Press is ANC-objective'

"The open flirtation between the alternative press and the extra-parliamentary outfits does about as much good as the close relationship between the SABC and the government; such collaboration rapidly diminishes the true functions of the press and lessens to a very great degree the fundamental right of society to be informed."

Qwelane went on to say that journalists who serve as ambassadors for political parties and organisations do a serious disservice to their profession and "have lost their right to be seen and labelled as journalists". He warned that journalists are in some way to blame for the harassment they often experience when carrying out their duty by "faceless censors and unruly mobs (who) want us to toyi-toyi to their tune.

"But there is hardly ever smoke without fire; we are being harassed and intimidated in our communities and by elements loyal to political organisations because in many cases we ourselves first planted the idea in their minds that we could be pliable political tools



Deirdre Moyle, Gerald Shaw (both Cape Times) and Chris Freimond (Financial Mail).

are readers and viewers customers, consumers or clients? And are journalists public servants or political actors, do they faithfully reproduce reality or play a role in shaping it?

'Whites in particular are not informed, and whose responsibility is it to keep them informed if not the media's?'

Speaker Deon du Plessis, editor-in-chief of the Pretoria News, in a dig at journalistic convention, argued that in the final analysis news value must be determined by market-driven realities. "Not only is this not understood by many journalists, it is actively rejected by some on the grounds that this kind of approach threatens their freedom... But there is no freedom in poverty. Nobody is as unfree as he who must seek special favours, considerations, hand-outs or stays of execution.

"In this sense profitability is good for the business of press freedom. And profitability will come the way of he or she who best understands the environment or the resulting demands of consumers or clients... you are not going to sell T-shirts on a winter's morning, but you might sell some scarves."

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Jon Qwelane and Gavin Stewart.

sincerely serving a determined purpose.

"Clearly that is about as sensible as hitching a lift on the back of a tiger; you are safe for as long as you remain perched on its back. As soon as you disembark you are pretty certain to end up in the tiger's belly."

He expressed his doubts about the media's commitment to objectivity. "The SABC claims to be objective, but it is National Party-objective. The Star is Democratic Party-objective. City Press is ANC-objective.

Qwelane issued a call for a return to effective investigative journalism. "We must probe, probe and probe some more." He gave examples of stories that have been seized by the media, wildly sensationalised, "beaten semi-conscious and left for dead" with no follow-up investigations. Three months after the sensational disclosures on State Security Council involvement in the Goniwe killings there is a "deafening silence" in the media.

"The current Codesa deadlock is yet another example, with newspaper headlines screaming 'Crisis', 'Deadlock' and 'Showdown' and nothing more. To play our proper role we must inform, and to get information we must probe."

Qwelane raised a dilemma he has faced on the news desk of one of South Africa's largest circulation newspapers; competing for the front page, on the one hand, dramatic pictures and a harrowing story about a train massacre in the townships, on the other a colour piece on cricketer Jonty Rhodes working his wonders on the pitch. Should he select the former for the township edition of the paper and the latter for the white suburbs. "Who the hell am I to deny white readers this truth."

Who decides what makes news - usually a small clique of highly educated, upper mid-

dle class white men. Who reads the news - on most newspapers the majority of readers are black and working class. What gets into the news, what makes the front page lead, how much space a story gets or, in the case of radio or TV, how much time is given - these daily decisions are determined by a newsroom selection process that is often rigidly hierarchal, strictly governed by precedent and custom, and based on assumptions that are often minority opinions masquerading as universal truths.

Is the media's audience an undifferentiated public or a collection of different communities with differing needs and interests;

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Du Plessis said the client – or the reader – deserves paramount attention, and “client-driven journalism” that keeps a close watch on the market is essential for the survival of the press and the only guarantee for future press freedom.

A reporter on Business Day and a reporter on the Sowetan may cover the same press conference and return with entirely different stories, he said. “As long as they were both accurate, balanced and honest, I have no problem with that. Indeed, it is to be applauded. It would be evidence of reporters working their respective markets and giving up forever the notion that any newspaper is the mass communicator to all people anymore.”

A successful media in these terms would be one that is market-driven, that is closely attuned to the needs and demands of its clients and that selects news accordingly.

Chairperson Prof Gavin Stewart of the Rhodes University journalism department referred to another model of the media in citing a popular dictum – the mark of a successful press is its ability to survive changes in government. Such a media, it is implied, would preserve and present the truth, however unpalatable, “unmarketable” or untenable it might be to the reader or client.

A similar distinction was also made by Slabbert when he posed a question to the journalists present – do they seek a press that has a democratic preference or one that is driven by patronage?

Dr Alex Boraine, Idasa’s executive director, summed up the dilemma with an example of the media coverage of Codesa. “Many newspapers imagined Codesa would solve all our problems and in seeking to comfort and bring good news avoided the warning signs. When the collapse came, it was a shock; the public was not prepared for it. It is almost as if to sell news the media must sensationalise the truth and keep the bad news away. Yet this is a white perception, a comfort perception.”

He concluded with a strong call on the South African media to fulfill its obligation to inform the public and to demonstrate its commitment to the principle of the public’s right to know: “By all means give people some good news, and keep their hope alive, but above all tell them what they need to know. The majority of South Africans, whites in particular, are not informed, and whose responsibility is it to keep them informed if not the media’s?”

Maira Levy is media facilitator with Idasa’s media department.

Dakarites look back on event which nudged SA to negotiations

From July 9 to 12, 1987 a group of mainly white, mainly Afrikaans speaking South Africans met members of the ANC in exile in Dakar, Senegal at a conference which provoked widespread angry reaction from the National Party establishment.

According to some, the Dakar meeting was the start of the current negotiations process, even the turning point which led up to De Klerk’s memorable February 2, 1990 address. Others, while not necessarily according it such significance, still regard it as a memorable event, both personally and politically. Here are the views of some of those who attended that meeting five years ago.

By SUE
VALENTINE

Van Zyl Slabbert:

“It is always tempting to seize on an event that your organisation has been responsible for and present it as a major cause of subsequent events. Some people, not even involved with Idasa, have tended to do so when referring to the Dakar meeting.

“I have just been to Dakar, five years later, to help found the Gorée Institute for Democracy, Development and Culture – a direct consequence of the 1987 meeting. This coincided with the preliminary meetings of the OAU and listening to politicians, journalists and academics from different African countries discuss developments over the last five years, Dakar 1987 frequently cropped up.

“ANC executive members have ascribed seminal importance to this event, as well as one or two cabinet ministers of the current government. I am satisfied that Dakar 1987 was an event that, within the combination of historical situations at the time, helped nudge the balance of forces towards negotiation in South Africa.

“It certainly put Idasa on the map and helped us to, so much better, do the kind of work we had hoped to do from the outset.”

Five yea



Together in Dakar in 1987: Lindiwe Mkhomo

Alex Boraine:

“In 1987, the politics of coercion and co-optation held full sway. Negotiation politics was not an option. The ANC and others were banned and exiled organisations were demonised and marginalised.

“Despite the current impasse, however, in 1992 South Africa has moved into the negotiations mode. It is certain that the meetings between the ANC and the group of whites in Dakar at least made a modest contribution in the direction of negotiation politics. The crunch question, with *whom* do you negotiate, was also more urgently asked as a consequence of the Dakar initiative.

“In Dakar we faced three major areas: the use of violence, a new democratic constitution and the need for an economic policy which addressed both growth and equity.

“Ironically all of these questions remain on the top of the agenda. Idasa’s role in 1987 was to facilitate – a start was made. Clearly there remains much more to do.”

For **TRUDIE DE RIDDER** the meeting at Dakar resulted in the loss of a job (a state employer revoked her appointment as head of department because she was a “political terrorist”) but at the same time it propelled her into further study and work within the black community of Lentegour in Cape