

South African newspapers either operate in a vacuum or, at best, deliver a mediocre product

Romancing about Sophiatown and what might have been

On Wednesday August 31 last year, a question was asked in Parliament by Felix Fankomo, a member of parliament who comes from a remote part of the Northern Transvaal.

He wanted to know whether the government was planning to build a reservoir or a dam at Lehokwe in the District of Mandela in the Northern Transvaal.

The short answer, from the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Mr Kadar Asmal, was: "Yes."

The long answer was: "The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry intends to start construction of the Njaka Dam on the Maritsane River, immediately downstream of the confluence of the Maritsane and Nqwaritsane rivers in the vicinity of Lehokwe in October 1994. The dam is scheduled for completion in 1999."

I took the story back to my office and during a planning meeting attended by the managing editor, news editor and political editor, among others, I proposed what I called a "multi-track" approach to reporting current issues in South Africa. I used the Fankomo question and Asmal answer as a case in point. The idea was, I said, that we take the question and answer and carry it as a straight news report from Parliament.

I suggested, also, that at the same time, and on another level, we send a team of journalists (consisting of a writer and a photographer) to the area in question to produce pictures and text of the perennial drought in the region and its effects on the local people.

I suggested, further, that we asked people in the region if (a) they knew about plans to build a dam and (b) how they thought a dam would change their lives.

Contiguously I offered to look, on yet another level, at State plans, including funding, for the project and suggested that I would bring in, for example, the developmental aspects of building a dam in a rural area.

For the greater part of my proposal I was stared at (by my colleagues) as if I had plunged my bare hand into their chests and wrenched out their hearts without anaesthetic. They retained this condition throughout what I followed it up with.

By this approach, I said, we would, in a heuristic way, explain to readers (in this case also the people in the Northern Transvaal) what it was that their elected representatives were doing in Parliament and what some of the purposes of the legislature were.

Nothing has to date been said or done about this multi-track approach I recommended.

This apparent lack of innovative approaches to journalism in the pre-

sent state of constant change in the environment is not restricted to one or two newspapers.

On another occasion a (senior) editor on a newspaper turned down an article (before ever having seen it) which, I explained, was critical of the role of certain multi-national corporations in the host-country economy.

The response was curt: "We need investment."

On another occasion he refused even to consider a piece (also written by this journalist) which argued that South Africa may become an entirely peripheral country in the international political economy if, to begin with, local business (not necessarily foreigners) failed to invest (first) and afterwards to compete internationally.

In both instances my arguments were based on reliable theories and on assumptions that had been tested in academia and in international institutions. On the multinational corporations' global reach, Anthony Sampson's *The Sovereign State: The Secret History of IIT and The Seven Sisters*, to name only two established texts off the top of my head, were to form the bedrock of my argument.

In the case of the argument that South Africa could become a peripheral country my argument was based on theories from selected readings which included work done by, for example, Patrick McGowan in the South African Journal of International Affairs and further afield, the works of Lenin, Hobson and lately Johan Galtung, James O'Connor, Immanuel Wallerstein among many.

Judging by the responses I have received, these established arguments apparently do not form part of the conceptual framework for analysis among especially senior journalists - those in decision making positions - on most local newspapers.

Most senior journalists, including some editors who spend most of their time romancing about Sophiatown and what might have been, or wallowing in self-dramatising apostasy, seem intimidated by the idea of pushing at the edge of the envelope.

The result, in many instances, is that South African newspapers tend either

to operate in a vacuum or, at best, deliver a mediocre product that fails to challenge the intellectual faculties of the reader.

Having said that, one must add that at the best of times, only the *Weekly Mail & Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* stand out (for different reasons) in any challenging way.

The best thing about the *Weekly Mail* is that it may well be the only paper in the country that has forsaken (if that's the right word) the commercial interest in the interest of promoting the literary, aesthetic and intellectual aspects of journalism.

Ken Owen one might disagree with, but his column is, perhaps, the best reading on any Sunday. The rest of the weekend reading, perhaps more the columnists, is about as exciting as a stick; at least one of these falls into the category of the self-dramatists.

How else can one explain this columnist on a very big and influential newspaper, writing about his Filofax and about all the important people he had had lunch with whom and how they had sought his advice...

It is difficult, as a working journalist, to deliver trenchant commentary or analysis of the print media without raising the spectre of being victimised or ostracised.

I have sought to explain some of the trends and tendencies in journalism I have discerned by inferences and by alluding to the possible routes through which I believe the print media can become less of a drudgery and more exciting, informative and reliable.

As a pointer, I want to refer to a remark made by Lenin an act which may have serious connotations and implications. Who can forget what happened to Sefako Nyaka when it was found a few years ago, that he was a member of the ANC? This, I hope, should not mean that I am a member of any political party.

Newspapers, Lenin said, "may be likened to the scaffolding around a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communications between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common result achieved..."

I would like to turn, also, to the

words of a former editor-in-chief of *Time* magazine, Henry Grunwald.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* Grunwald said "...journalists are in the same madly rocking boat as diplomats and statesmen. Like them, when the Cold War ended, they looked for a new world order and found a new world disorder. If making and conducting foreign policy in today's turbulent world is difficult, so is practising journalism."

A respected former American deputy secretary of state, Lawrence Eagleburger, said that the Cold War, for all its risks "was characterised by a remarkably stable and predictable set of relationships among the great powers".

Much of what Eagleburger and Grunwald said of the Cold War can be extrapolated to the Apartheid era. Since last year's election political commentary in South Africa has missed its organising principle, and that "remarkably stable set of relationships among the great powers".

During a television panel discussion two years ago Professor Robert Schrire of the University of Cape Town said former president FW de Klerk had on February 2, 1995 shattered the mould of politics.

My response at the time, on the same programme, was that politics and democracy were oozing from this shattered mould, in all directions. It was difficult, I suggested, to codify the changes in the environment, worst still to analyse them. Since

The rest of the weekend reading, perhaps more the columnists, is about as exciting as a stick

then, what has passed for analysis is often descriptive narrative, or simply just commentary.

It would seem, for all intents and purposes, that working journalists have not come to terms with the abundance of reality around them to use a Sartrean idea. No new mould has been created.

But then again, perhaps we have lacked a conceptual framework to begin with. I remember the comment included by the political editor of one of South Africa's bigger newspapers on the address to Parliament last July of President Francois Mitterrand.

Mitterrand, he wrote, had secured a place for himself in history, when he addressed the South African Parliament. I would like to believe that for many reasons, not just for the fact that he was the longest serving French president since the Second World War, Mitterrand had had a place in history long before he arrived in South Africa.

The lesson one can learn from this is perhaps, in terms of the writer's comment, his concept of history begins and ends in South Africa.

Ismail Lagardien is political correspondent for the Sowetan.