

Ownership, control and affirmative action in **black,**

Thami Mazwai

THE OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL of the media is a topic which does not get the attention it deserves; and this is simply because the whole of the South African media would be on trial. We cannot expect it to indict itself.

Yet, the "ownership and management of the media, and what is necessary to ensure diversity", is a crucial issue. After all, the media must underpin our democracy and play a crucial role in protecting, consolidating and entrenching the freedoms we fought for and now enjoy. However, do all South Africans have easy access to the media? Does it reflect all shades of opinion? Does it encourage debate on sensitive issues? Does the African way of life, for instance customs, get the respect given to the western way of life? Is it gender sensitive in line with our new national outlook? Does its composition and management structure reflect the demographics of the country and gender? Obviously, the answer is NO to these questions. The media is top heavy white male in all respects. As this impacts negatively on our democracy, it must be corrected.

However, just as the de-concentration of the media is crucial if our democracy is to blossom, how the Government deals with this is ultra sensitive. It will show how committed it is to democracy. Furthermore, it is also going to determine how the world will see and relate to us. By extension, and this is what investors are interested in, is our political miracle going to continue?

In short, if the government intervenes directly in the control and management of the media, it will destroy whatever confidence the outside world has in us. In addition, ripples of fear will grip our communities as it will mean the first step towards authoritarian rule will have been taken.

On the other hand, the Government cannot leave the situation as it is, and hope it will right itself. The mainstream media, like many other institutions in the country, is still, consciously and unconsciously, clinging to the past where white was white. Appropriate steps have to be taken to make it more South African.

Yesterday's major players, the top heavy white male structures, are still today's principle actors. The point we must note is that because the media was white, it could not go all the way in fighting a white government enjoying the support of the white community. Hence, its commitment to freedom and justice in general, and press freedom in particular, was suspect.

For instance, journalists employed by major groups could not belong to the ANC, PAC or AZAPO, but were allowed to be members of the NP, PFP or CP. Journalists found guilty of so-called terrorism charges were not given their jobs back on release from jail, yet white journalists who served time in the SADF had

their jobs guaranteed. In fairness, I must mention that journalists detained without trial or who were banned, were kept on staffs and paid their salaries. The point I am making is that these newspapers were part of the attitudes of white South Africa, after all the staff and management was white. They could not see things differently from the rest of the population.

To get a clearer picture of what is happening, or not happening, let us look at the media under three headings: ownership by blacks; blacks in senior positions; programmes to fast track blacks into senior positions.

+ OWNERSHIP Blacks do not have any mentionable stake, if any, in the four major publishing houses; Nasionale, Perskor, Times Media Limited and Independent Newspapers. The then Argus company unbundled the *Sowetan* and sold it to Dr Nthato Motlana's Corporate Africa. However, it still owns a percentage of *Sowetan* and controls the printing and distribution of the publication. In short, the *Sowetan* is not a completely black-owned and controlled paper in the sense in which we want it. Let us stay on the Argus a little longer. Soon after unbundling the *Sowetan*, Anglo American, the ultimate owners of Argus, then unbundled further and sold *The Star* and other titles to Tony O'Reilly. Amazingly, Motlana, and any other black group for that matter, were not offered *The Star* and these other titles, or offered stakes in them. These titles and the printing and distribution operations were sold to O'Reilly for a song. I have no doubt that Anglo did not want a block of major and influential newspapers to fall into black hands for the usual stereotyped reasons we are always fed. Hence, when it sold the Argus stake in TML to O'Reilly, it still did not give blacks a slice of the action. A black group that wanted to buy the *Cape Times* was even frustrated. Times Media Limited, also owned by Anglo, and part of Omni Media, is now on the sellers block. Anglo says it wants the buyers to be blacks. On the other hand the same Anglo has been denying persisting reports that the *Financial Mail* and *Business Day* will be hived off and sold off independently to an overseas organisation or one headed by the editor of the *FM*. I desperately want to believe these denials and hope that all of Omni will fall into black hands. But, information I have is that the leaks in the press upset certain semi-completed deals, and these deals did not have black players. Let us wait and see.

Naspers and Perskor do not have any black share-holding worth talking about and talk is that they will be selling some titles to blacks. But it is still talk.

+ STAFF When we look at the complement of blacks in management levels of newspapers in the four groups, the position is as follows: there

are only two editors in the Western Cape to about 15 whites; there are three black editors in the Eastern Cape to about 15 whites; there are five black editors in Natal to about 18 whites; and in Gauteng the situation is hardly any better. At *The Star* we have four blacks to about 20 whites. At Times Media Limited three blacks to 20 whites in several titles.

Perskor and Naspers do not have black editors save in their blacks-only publications. Just as most black editors are also at the *Sowetan*. Furthermore, eighty percent of black editors in mainstream newspapers are on junior to middle management positions.

+ FAST TRACKS When we come to programmes for the development of blacks, there is nothing definite in all groups save a hunt-and-miss situation. The last time the Argus had a major initiative was when Doug Band got Joe Thloloe and a number of us countrywide overseas secondments and training. This has fizzled out.

Why did I give the above scenario? The answer is simple. For as long as the decision-makers in newspapers are predominantly white, those newspapers will reflect white aspirations, biases, values or attitudes.

For instance, when newspapers first reported on the RDP white journalists questioned what it would cost; while blacks saw it as a major development that would benefit our country. The announcement of retrenchments in the civil service, the change of the guard at the SABC, the changes in the police force, the appointment of diplomats, the furore over Dr Fanus Schoeman, the changes at SAfm etc, all evoked reactions that left the reader with no doubt as to which community the journalist came from. Mainstream newspapers tend to be protective of the interests of the white community. After all, the management and reporting staff are predominantly white. And, for many, this is done in the unconscious. There are two types of racists, one that has set ideas and is deliberately negative about blacks, and the one that is not aware he is being racist but innocently sees life as it was presented to him at white schools, the NGK churches, white universities and the old TV1. Such innocents predominate in the media.

Black journalists also see things through the eyes of their community. Our perspectives are also shaped by our background and environment. We are as guilty of being unconsciously biased as our white colleagues. Unfortunately for us, because of the power structure in the media, our perspectives, and therefore those of the black community, are in the periphery. This is the reality of South Africa.

There is therefore no doubt the concentration of the media in a few white hands, distorts the message. Hence, as far as we

white and

grey

blacks are concerned, there is only a relative difference between a media owned by a minority and one that is government owned. People who are against government control of the media should, in view of the principle involved, that of distorting the message, also be against control of the media by the minority. Where do we go from here?

Providing news is not an exact science, it is a process driven by subjective judgment. Attitudes, education, background, likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, knowledge of the subject, knowledge of the reader and many other factors come into play.

Our media must be de-concentrated and made more South African. How do we do this? We have already identified our major problem areas and they are: no black shareholders in the major groups, lack of senior editors in mainstream newspapers, and lack of development programmes to fast track blacks in the media. In short, there is little affirmative action in the media. How do we get it going?

The dangers of direct government involvement have been explained and I suggest the following strategies:

+ ADVERTISING To ensure that mainstream major groups of newspapers offer stakes to blacks, they should appoint blacks to senior editorial positions or prepare them for these positions; programmes should be set in place to develop and fast track blacks in the media industry; the government must not place its advertising, and that of organisations it has an interest in, such as parastatals, in newspapers or groups of newspapers that do not commit themselves to implementing the above three conditions.

The government spends R150-million and the provincial governments and parastatals bring this close to a billion.

The millions government, provincial governments and parastatals spend in advertising must be used to develop diversity in South Africa's media. Black publications and those media groups that are implementing affirmative action and black economic empowerment policies must benefit. It goes without saying that black groups must also reflect the country's demographics at ownership and management levels. This strategy has been tried, and with success, right here in South Africa. When TV was introduced and it started eating into the advertising cake, the four major newspaper groups were given a TV licence, now known as M-Net, now an international and continental player of note. This was affirmative action and empowerment in action, let it also be applied to blacks.

+ LEGISLATION Legislation that prohibits or regulates vertical integration must be introduced to enable free and fair competition.

Newspaper groups must not own distribution and printing companies, or use these to benefit the group newspapers to the detriment of competing titles. It must be ensured the industry does not create monopolies. Media monopolies are anathema to press freedom.

+ FOREIGNERS There must be a limit on the stake foreigners can have in our media. Under no circumstances must they have a controlling interest. This already applies in broadcasting, it must now be extended to the print media.

+ RESTRICTIONS Legislation should be introduced to restrict cross shareholding, interlocking directorships, trade agreements and cartels between major media groups. These militate against smaller organisations, make entry expensive and create monopolies or semi-monopolies. In addition, horizontal expansion must be monitored to ensure that groups do not straddle sub-sectors in the industry.

+ FINANCE The government should fund or help finance struggling media organisations owned by Africans, Coloureds or Indians. These are crucial to diversity in the media, and need a kick start. Many new black radio stations face closure if they are not helped, just as community newspapers are struggling. However, the government must not dictate policy, but must set up an industry committee independent of government that will protect its interests and ensure that money is not used for other purposes, and will also see to it that these organisations run their businesses in such a way that in five years time they will be weaned of government support. The programme would obviously have a sunset clause.

+ COMPETITION The Government, or the IBA, must not allow the major groups into radio as the many small radio stations being set up will be at risk against competition from the big boys. Regarding TV, the many consortiums vying for the one licence on offer must be scrutinised to ensure that a licence is granted to an operator with true black participation. Black organisations are watching Government attitudes and strategies on affirmative action and black economic empowerment with concern. Helping blacks into the media industry is crucial in the development of our country as it will allow South Africans to talk to each other as equals. "A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself," as a New York editor once said.

Let us have an industry with players that facilitate dialogue across racial, cultural, tribal, political, religious, social and other divides. This will be democracy in action.

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John Patten

JUST AS THE WHOLE of South Africa, in almost any walk of life, is undergoing rapid transition following the demise of apartheid, so the press and electronic media are facing up to the need to make changes reflecting the reality and the spirit of the new democracy. In recent months, the Black Editors' Forum (BEF) has been engaged in a campaign to speed up this transition and to give it focus and direction. And this has thrown it into apparent confrontation with the Conference of Editors (CoE), which broadly represents the editors of the mainstream daily and weekly publications of the country.

The perceived confrontation is more apparent than real, because there is a healthy realisation

among member editors of the Conference that transformation is the imperative of the day. There may, however, be differences over time-scale and end solutions. The difference between the BEF and the CoE comes down to the fact that the BEF is lobbying for change in the CoE territory, while the CoE is concerned with the practicalities of managing change within its own territory.

Vitaly important in considering this change is the fact that transformation towards racial representivity is only one aspect of the press dilemma (although that aspect is the only one the BEF chooses to focus on at present).

Other matters that should not be ignored are the long and proud tradition of the South African press to date (especially the strong stand on independence and press freedom taken by the English press over many decades), and the problem of reflecting differing values of society better after transformation than before.

The drive of the BEF has three prongs — media diversity, media ownership and affirmative action.

A kingpin in this argument is to cite the fact that about 85 per cent of the SA population is not white, while about 85 per cent of the press is in white hands under white editors. From these statistics it is argued that, with this racial skew, the SA

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press is unable to reflect accurately the mood of the people.

While there is merit in this argument, the statistics that matter far more in the world of the commercial press are the readership figures, which tell a different story.

Recent statistics for 38 leading SA publications, issued by the Amps national readership survey, show only eight newspapers with a majority of black readers, and two others with a higher percentage of black readers than from any of the other race groups.

Those 10 publications make up little over a quarter of the total — a very different position compared with the overall population make-up.

At the other end of the scale, there are 16 publications with a majority of white readers, with a further five publications having a higher percentage of white readers than from any other race group. This means more than half the leading publications of the country rely for their bread and butter more

on white readers than on any other group, reinforcing the need for them to serve a market with such a profile.

To complete the racial breakdown of newspaper readerships, the Amps figures show only one publication with a majority coloured readership, and three others depending more heavily on coloured readers than any other group. There are also only two publications in the survey with a majority Indian readership, with one

other paper relying more heavily on Indian readers than on any other group. To stay statistical a moment longer, it is worth noting that there are only a handful of newspapers whose editors do not reflect the main racial profile of the papers' readerships.

These are *The Argus* (white editor, majority coloured readership), *Daily Dispatch* (white editor, majority black readership), *Evening Post* (white editor, large minority black readership), *The Sunday Paper* (white editor, 50 per cent Indian readership), and *The Daily News* (white editor, large minority Indian readership).

The other papers have editors fitting their readership profiles. Another real consideration for mainstream papers is that their advertising base is heavily dependent on white-led companies, who in many cases rely for advertising response more heavily on white readers than on other groups.

The nub of the problem, thus, is that the ownership and editorships of newspapers reflect the market position of newspapers fairly accurately, even though they may be out of line with overall population statistics. In terms of newspaper viability, the market speaks more strongly than a population that does not buy, advertise in, or read newspapers.

It does not alter the BEF case for change. All it does is make it more difficult to achieve the changes the BEF would like to see take place. Suggestions for assisting the transformation process include government pressure (through threatened legislation) to diversify ownership to other race groups, government placing advertisements with black-owned publications to the exclusion of publications not meeting transformation criteria, and government funding for struggling black-owned publications.

All these are possible routes, but of questionable use. The government would not necessarily

achieve maximum response from placing advertisements according to political instead of commercial needs, and could not be sure of achieving viability for government-funded papers. The drag on the taxpayers might thus be considerable.

Mainstream newspapers have, to differing degrees, been making efforts to transform themselves from within, through the recruiting and training of black staff, and placing them in the fast lane for promotion.

To quite a large extent, unfortunately, this effort has been neutralised by the poaching game taking place between companies all trying to get into the affirmative action act.

Many of the best black journalists recruited and trained on mainstream newspapers have been poached by the SABC radio or television services, or by companies offering lucrative public relations positions, forcing newspapers back to Square One in their affirmative action programmes. This is one of the main reasons why there are not more black journalists in senior positions in mainstream positions already.

It would be wrong to believe, however, that mainstream newspapers are content simply to offer this as an excuse for inaction. Promotions to senior positions now tend to have an affirmative action conditional clause. That is, if a black journalist cannot be found immediately for a top position, then a black journalist must be seen to benefit from any staff reshuffle arising out of new appointments.

One of the real problems of fast-tracking black journalists into top positions is the effect it has on the morale of white journalists who have worked their way up the ladder to middle-ranking positions and who would expect to be rewarded with promotion for hard work and good service.

These journalists also have to be accommodated to an extent, even while trying to speed up promotional opportunities for journalists of other races.

The effect is that transformation, for very practical reasons, is taking place at a slower pace than can meet the impatience of the BEF campaign.

The BEF campaign is nevertheless very constructive, because it helps to keep the minds of employers and senior editorial executives focused on the political pressures that exist to conform to general perceptions of acceptable levels of transformation.

If there is a plea that should be made from the side of mainstream publications, then it is that blacks at all levels of society should be encouraged by the BEF, politicians and other influential black public players to assist in the transformation by becoming newspaper readers and advertisers.

The moment more black readers and advertisers are found, newspapers would have a commercial reason to adjust their content and staffs to black needs.

Where the BEF appears to be somewhat off-beam in its campaign is in its hostility to newspapers' ownership by international groups. International groups can probably do far more than domestic business groups to assist in transformation, because they have more economic muscle and because they have to meet public pressures from their widespread constituencies to conform to political correctness.

In the case of the take-over of the Argus Group by Tony O'Reilly's Independent Newspapers of Ireland, pressure for affirmative action has been greatly stepped up, in spite of the losses suffered as a result of poaching.

It is also somewhat vain for black groups to imagine they have a right to take over unbundled

newspaper groups if they haven't got the capital to do it. International owners can assist in this respect too — by providing bridging finance that in time can lead to black ownership.

There remains one major problem in the whole transformation process, which is worrying executives in both the print and electronic media. That is the fact that listeners and readers are responding badly to the efforts to adjust programme or newspaper content to the non-racial new SA.

The change to TV programmes caused an outcry. So did the change to radio programmes. There have been similar protests from long-established newspaper readers to the changes in content and emphasis that have taken place.

The result has been a serious fall-off in viewers, listeners and readers throughout the media, meaning all these media are serving their immediate customers less well than before.

Customer care is a buzzword of the market, and the media have stopped serving customers' needs in their agitation to conform to political correctness. The BEF campaign only tends to put more strain on that already strained relationship.

For transformation to succeed, therefore, the re-education of the media's existing customers must be aggressively augmented by efforts to expand the base of black customers. Without it, transformation can only land the media in a financial pickle of growing proportions.

BEF chairman Thami Mazwai, speaking at a recent press freedom forum, mentioned an example of how the white-led media did not represent the people. He referred to the case of a group of teenage black youths who had been abducted from their homes so that they could undergo tribal initiation and circumcision ceremonies they had refused voluntarily to submit to.

Mr Mazwai was offended by the fact that the white-led newspapers represented the abduction of these youths to their readers as a barbaric act. He argued that the initiation ceremonies and circumcision the boys were subjected to was part of an honourable tribal custom, and that the boys had been done a favour by the tribe through being abducted to undergo the ceremonies.

While Mr Mazwai may be right that the abductions may have been seen in tribal society as justified and right, this does not in any way alter the fact that measured against the cultural values of whites, the abductions were barbaric.

While tribal custom may have been upheld, honouring tribal rites, the abductions were also capable of being seen as a gross abuse of human rights — in that youths were forced against their wills to undergo ceremonies affecting them so intimately that they had the right to decide for themselves whether they wished to take part or not.

The cultural clashes thrown up by this example, and there must be many more, only serve to accentuate how important it is that the emphasis a publication places on an event is aligned to that publication's readership.

It would doom a publication to failure if a newspaper with a majority of white readers was run by a black editor who insisted on giving a tribal cultural aspect to his newspaper's coverage.

These are not easy problems to resolve. That is why they are taking time to work out. But the BEF is acting as the agent in attempting to speed up the process, while the Conference is wrestling with the practical problems.

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