



Guest Editorial

Moegsien Williams, on the need for a new vision in the media.

SOUTH AFRICA'S MASS MEDIA has helped change our world, but internally, it has done too little about changing itself. Now we sit with the problems.

We have a profession wracked by differences, and a media skewed in terms of representivity. Political parties are using these problems for public point scoring.

THE SINS of the fathers are borne by today's journalists. But it would be wrong to say that we should therefore bury the past and simply move ahead. Likewise, however, it would be wrong to dwell on the past.

We must acknowledge the past, agree that the way things look now is precisely because of the mistakes of the past. And we need to ensure that our profession conducts its own transformation.

That means a lot more than making Moegsien Williams editor of *The Cape Times*. It means more than effective affirmative action and training in our media.

Transformation must cover the creation of career paths for messengers and receptionists; it must enable black economic empowerment in ownership. And transformation must include our journalism.

OUR WORK NEEDS TO CHANGE.

Reporters today are being required to do five or six stories a day. Quality suffers in the process. Simply, we don't have the staff to chase every ambulance going down the road.

So, we need quality, not quantity.

We need journalists to spend time cultivating stories and getting close to sources.

Transformation also means our white colleagues must finally realise that the social pages should cover more than Sea Point weddings.

What about those with majority white audiences that don't want to have black people in "their" media? The issue is whether journalists are going to try and shift these audiences or not.

You may successfully go for building audiences in the white community in the short-term, but what of tomorrow? History is in danger of overtaking some of us.

TRANSFORMATION will mean there may be those who are asked to give way to journalists better placed to serve the new audiences. That does not make you redundant: without your skills, who will mentor the new generations of journalists?

Transformation must redefine the news. That means developing mechanisms whereby editors and reporters begin to get better feedback from readers, listeners and viewers.

White journalists historically have been distanced from the lives of most black readers. Today, many black journalists have moved into formerly white suburbs and are losing their daily contact with the townships.

On the *Sowetan*, we tried to deal with this by ensuring that reporters went to every local meeting in a given community — taxi associations, stokvels, school committees, etc. People in the community began to co-determine content, and it worked.

At the same time as ensuring news close to communities, we need to be forthright with our audiences. We should tell them that we are trying our best with limited staff, tell them that we need their help.

Transformation means we must engage our audiences, point out that it is incumbent upon them to support a free press and diversity for developing this democracy.

Journalists have no need to be defensive; they are needed to act as leaders — serving communities, linking

communities, creating new communities, and serving democracy.

Transformation also goes for our editorial organisations, which can no longer continue as before.

We need a new vision for South African journalism — one that cuts across the Conference of Editors and Black Editors Forum, one that spans different companies, and one that covers both print and broadcast media.

It must be a vision that covers ownership, training, affirmative action — and press freedom. I believe there is not that much that divides us, and that even where there are areas of continued difference, there will be common principles to stand by.

JUST THIS ONCE, we should take a leaf out of the politicians' book — and talk, talk, talk until the stereotypes fade and polarisation gives way to finding common positions.

Now is not the time for bloody-mindedness, grandstanding or the dissolution of organisations. We need the existing bodies to work through and to meet through. We need them to talk to the owners of our media, and we need them to help engage our audiences and staffers in the process.

The challenge is to stop seeing one another as part of the problem — and, rather, to try to make people part of the solution.

There will not be a shotgun marriage, but a resolution is necessary. The alternative is a nightmare scenario which goes something like this: it is 1998 and the government legislates against the press. One group supports the move, another opposes. The law goes through.

We need one voice to speak on behalf of the profession, and with credibility and authority.

Too little was done in the past; let history judge us differently.

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