

BY MICHAEL MORRIS

# That hoary

Objectivity in journalism is probably one of the most maligned and certainly most unfashionable ideals in current debates on the role of the media, yet it is possibly the most important source of credibility available to lately freed South African newspapers and broadcasters as they seek to reposition themselves the better to exercise, and protect, their freedom.

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... is a bit like a grace: it's never attainable — and criticising it on that basis is spurious — but aspiring to it is immeasurably valuable.

Objectivity is especially pertinent in view of the efforts of politicians, particularly, to prescribe a role for the media in sustaining South Africa's nascent democracy.

At the heart of these efforts, invariably, is the notion that a vigorously independent, harpingly critical or disinterested media is unhelpful, even disloyal.

The nurturing duty that's offered as an alternative is a cosier, collaborative thing: it calls for political realignment (ill-defined "transformation" may, euphemistically, be germane), it implies sympathy with the political majority (the vox populi, it is hinted, is not to be trifled with), and it appears to abhor the idea that news is the really quite unintellectual business of satisfying people's curiosity about the world they move in.

What it usually overlooks is that the media's importance to

democracy lies quite simply in its exercising minute by minute the democratic rights of citizens.

Even so, the implied role — essentially that journalists place themselves on the "right" side — is seductive, perhaps mainly because it appeals to their sense of what they are against (and what many of them spent most or all of their careers opposing): the whole nasty regiment of what used to be called the "anti-democratic forces". The grand project of opposition has probably been the most defining feature of the South African debate since World War 2, giving influential media institutions a strong sense of purpose even if they didn't always live up to it, and the justification for several decades of elegantly imperious stand-offishness.

Things have changed, and to be truly non-aligned now has about it a whiff of betrayal, as if it's inimical to democracy, or might threaten it.

In the brisk Cyberian climate of the late 20th century, there's possibly little patience for the elaborate cadences of John Milton, but what he has to say in his *Areopagitica* (a seminal defence of free speech) of 1644 about virtue and truth having to earn their value is salutary.

"I cannot," Milton wrote, "praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."

It is salutary because that is really what the media should be for. In this sense, journalism's crucial role in democracy is not that it serves the "agents" of the democratic process, but actually resists doing so.

It's difficult, not least because it makes the media seem churlishly indifferent to the celebrated rapprochement achieved in these past few years, callously unappreciative of the toll of repression and revolt in the decades that preceded it, and recklessly unmindful of the risks that would attend its failure in the years ahead.

Quite rightly, it's a difficulty that belongs in the media's province, not the government's.

But it's an important challenge, because if it is to succeed in its vital, independent role, and resist overtures to be cosier, the press must have credibility, and to be credible, it cannot simply be aloof without having a sense of why it should be: it must be confident in knowing not what it is against, but what it is for.

Is that possible without a reinvigoration of the concept of—the aspiration to — objectivity?

Ultimately, it is not what the government thinks that counts, but what listeners, viewers and readers think. It is their trust essentially in the sincerity of the news process that will determine the success of the media as a forum to test, expand, monitor and promote democracy — or even simply survive in the market.

Contextualising events, presenting the broader picture rather than bitty snap-shots, is essential too — but it's not a substitute for a commitment to the balance, fairness and independence of view that the aspiration to objectivity offers.

That's surely what underpins the media's confidence in what it is for, and its capacity to exercise the rights of those on whom it depends for its commercial viability.

It's this relationship that really matters.

Cushrow Irani, eminent Indian newspaper proprietor and one-time chairman of the International Press Institute, said of his own media's circumstances in a speech in 1979: "We have not yet learnt that temporary advantage is no substitute for principles. We no longer have even the excuse of the midnight knock on the door or the fear of detention for our conduct. So we must improve both our conduct and our performance and thus earn the confidence of our readers and the general public in greater measure than we do today. This is the best guarantee of our existing freedoms and it is only on this foundation that we can push back the frontiers of liberty for all our citizens. I suggest that there are no freedoms so dangerous as those which are not exercised."

The same might be said of South Africa today.

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