



# Tackling the SABC's newsroom defects

After three months in the job as the new editor of SABC TV news, Allister Sparks talked to ANTHEA GARMAN about what he's trying to do with the much criticised news division of the public broadcaster.

**A**LLISTER SPARKS might be a highly acclaimed and world renowned writer but the role he sees himself playing in the SABC newsroom is that of trainer.

Five years at the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (which he reminds me, he started single-handedly) have convinced him that something in the newsrooms of South Africa is seriously defective.

"The single most striking lesson," he says of his time at the IAJ, "is that it is all very well giving good courses to journalists. But when you send them back into defective newsrooms all the benefit drains into the sand and is gone."

What is so wrong with the way South African journalism is practised?

Sparks says: "Our newspapers are descended from the British tradition and have serious structural defects."

The first defect he outlines is the "chasm" between reporters and sub-editors. And this divide is worst on the morning newspapers where reporters work by day and sub-editors by night, thus ensuring that they barely see each other. "This has led to a practice of fix-it," he says, "the reporter gathers the news, the subs hack and chop the story. This is demotivating for the reporter and it leads to the writer handing in raw copy which is more like a draft than a polished piece of writing because the reporter has no control over the finished work."

Sparks says when he walked into the SABC he discovered that the divide in the public broadcaster was very severe. "There was massive dislocation between input and output," he says.

"Input" worked on one floor, "output" on another and his office was separated from both. He immediately moved his office into output and started to encourage reporters (input) to spend time there.

The other "grave defect" he sees in SA journalism is the "addiction to the inverted pyra-

mid", adding "it is the worst form of human communication".

"If you write in descending order of importance you tell the reader there is a descending order of interest. This is a powerful disincentive to reading to the end of the story. That's why nobody finishes a newspaper story."

"And reporters never save their best quote for last as a kicker because they know the sub will chop it off."

Again he found the SABC newsroom to be the worst exponent of this form: "Here the stories start with a great big punchline and just get duller and duller."

His IAJ experience of training was that writers would go back into newsroom fired up, find themselves facing these two entrenched practices and "just quit". "People who returned to do second or third courses would tell us this," he says.

While at the IAJ Sparks tried to intervene in newsroom management and worked with several papers "trying indirectly to persuade them to change". But it's just not an effective method.

So, he sees the job he is doing for the SABC as a powerful opportunity to take the worst forms of journalism in South Africa and correct them. He has a short contract and says his unique position ("I'm not career building, next year I'll be 65") means that he can't be threatened with dismissal and this gives him power and immunity.

So what are the tasks facing him? There are three, he says.

One: Sharpen the news and give it a sense of immediacy. "When I arrived this was the flattest, most demotivated newsroom."

Two: Break away from episodic news — "the bang-bang of the day, courts, crime, minister's speech, etc. the predictable events" and into "more enterprise stories, those that are not time-related, items which are our own".

Three: Extend into Africa. Recently Sparks

has been sending reporters to Kenya, Angola, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe — one is in Maputo as we speak — to cover the news. This means South Africans get a sense of being part of the continent, but also that other Africans start hearing about themselves from the SABC. Sparks says that Chris Bishop, the correspondent in Zimbabwe, reports that 500 satellite dishes are being sold a week in that country, proof that people are trying to pick up SABC, he claims. Next year the SABC will be using Pas-7 which will give the broadcaster a footprint that will cover Africa up to Ethiopia. At the moment Pas-4 covers the SADC. He foresees that this will eventually cause conflict with conservative African governments who tightly control their own media. "We are a disputatious democracy and the sight of South Africans arguing about their issues will see the virus of democracy spreading deep into Africa," he says with visible satisfaction.

Sparks says that in the time he has been at the SABC he has had two experiences which constitute the extreme low point and extreme high point of TV.

Just shortly after his arrival, there was a train crash at Swartruggens in which 38 tankers were set ablaze. The Mmabatho reporter was dispatched. He drove two hours to Swartruggens, drove back to Mmabatho, tried to file a report, found the telephone connection to be unusable and decided to go to bed. The next day he drove to Johannesburg and filed a report — 27 hours after the train crash. Sparks says: "It was symptomatic of the way the place operated. There was no real sense of immediacy." The report had spectacular footage when it appeared on the next day's 7pm news, but radio had carried the report at 4pm on the previous day — just not good enough for an electronic medium, Sparks says.

That was the low point. Sparks demanded a full report and sent out the strong message that



this kind of tardiness just wasn't on.

On to Sunday August 31. At 7am he was phoned by a staff member and told Princess Di had been killed in a car crash. He was up and in the office at 7.30am. Nobody else was in - Sundays are usually slow news days. Sparks started negotiating with the channel heads to run CNN all day, he also started the complicated business of rescheduling the advertising so that a continuous flow of news could be broadcast through the day.

Then he took the controversial decision to put out an unscheduled news broadcast at 1pm. The few staff who had trickled in started to contact the Cape Town office to stake out the airport to catch Charles Spencer, contact correspondent Conrad Burke in London, stake out Mandela's doorstep to get official SA government comment, and they tried to get their colleagues on their cellphones.

Fifteen minutes before the broadcast newsreader Alyce Chavunduka walked into the newsroom.

It all came together suddenly. All day they ran CNN alternating with the BBC.

That night on the 8pm news broadcast Diana was the lead story, as Chavunduka began to read Sparks, watching the BBC monitor, saw

the RAF plane land with the body. Chavunduka was instructed that they were switching to BBC live. It was perfect timing.

The whole experience had a very positive effect on the staff. "There's nothing like a great story to give a big adrenalin shot. It was a huge lift for the newsroom staff."

Another controversial opinion Sparks holds is that "people are fed up with bad news". He says: "It's a distortion. South Africa is the story of a miracle, we avoided Armageddon. This is not a good time to be pessimistic."

He quotes a survey by UK researcher Martyn Lewis which shows that generally people have had an overdose of bad, violent and sensational news. The feeling that nothing good or constructive ever happens has the effect of "deadening sensibilities", Sparks says.

"We have reached the obsessive state of thinking that every public figure has to be demolished, every politician is dishonest, that every interview must be a high noon confrontation."

This is not just a South African phenomenon, but a "creeping global approach" to journalism.

"Within three days of Tony Blair being elected, the journalists were trashing his wife.

"This is a habit and it grows out of the notion that we are the watchdogs of society. It grows out of confronting an evil system." Journalists think that now we are free, "we are free to go and smash everything", he says.

But, in case this has journalists howling, Sparks returns to Lewis' survey and says the ratio of good news to bad (which Lewis estimates at 95% to 5%) should be shifted to 70:30.

He continues: "There are a lot of interesting and good things happening in South Africa today going unreported. This is not accurate. If accuracy is our leitmotif then we have to report those too." But, he hastens to add, "I'm not advocating that journalists avoid the bad." And that's why he gave the go-ahead to broadcast the documentary about Katiza Cebekhulu and Winnie Mandela.

Sparks is determined not to be lured into staying at the SABC. When his short, sharp reign is over he intends handing over to a black editor. At the moment he has two new men in place as TV head and executive producer, but they will compete for his job which will be advertised.

"I have things to do," he says, "this is the first time I have worked for a company for 17 years and it makes me nervous."

## Sanef's resolution on spies in the media

This council, noting:

- Recent testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the security apparatus of the previous government planted agents in the media and recruited journalists to secretly work for them;
- Claims by self-confessed former police spies in the media that many agents are still in place;
- The incompatibility of such arrangements with the credibility and independence of journalism, and the safety and legitimacy of journalists, both of which are essential to the public interest;
- The contrast of such phenomena to the spirit of the open democracy that we now have;

Sanef therefore resolves:

- To condemn in the strongest possible terms the presence of any agents in the media;
- To call on any journalists in the employ of the security apparatuses, past or present, to resign from the media with immediate effect;
- To call on the present security and intelligence apparatuses to publicly forswear the use of journalists as covert agents in the interests of media independence and a maximum free flow of information;
- To further urge journalists who may be approached to serve state agencies to reject and make public such approaches.

*Sanef is the SA National Editors' Forum.*

## I'm not a 'Rhodes scholar'

The advertisement from Independent Newspapers Cape which appeared in the last edition of the Rhodes Journalism Review names me as a "Rhodes scholar" (with a lower case 's'). The fact is that I scraped through a BA at Rhodes by the skin of my teeth, so the very most I could ever claim was that I was a Rhodes student for three wonderful years.

Shaun Johnson was correctly identified in the ad as a Rhodes scholar (this should have been a capital 'S').

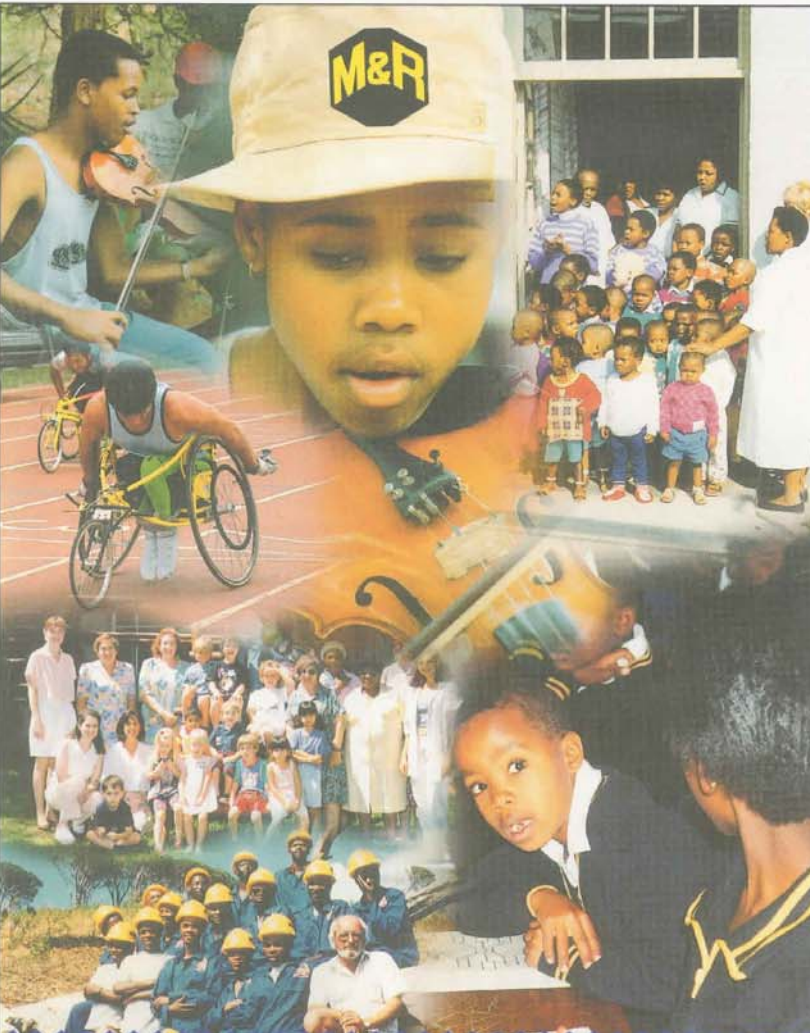
I'm afraid our advertising copywriter had delusions of grandeur on my behalf.

I'd be grateful if you'd set the dismal record straight.

Yours sincerely

Rory Wilson

Managing Director, Independent Newspapers Cape.



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