

# Tough Talk

## from the President

Extract from a meeting of Sanef editors and Nelson Mandela

**Nelson Mandela made mincemeat out of editors in the SA National Editors' Forum when they met in his offices in June. This second meeting between the two parties took on a tone much tougher than the first get-together (reported in Review 13). This occasion was not all conflict. Much of the meeting saw the president cordially briefing the editors on the situation in Zaire. They also discussed limits on the release of crime statistics and the apartheid anti-press laws still on the statutes. But it was the tense talk, recorded here, that saw some brow-beaten editors staggering out of the meeting . . .**

**NELSON MANDELA:** Even without agreement, a meeting cuts down problems by at least 50%.

**THAMI MAZWAI:** Reports of what you, Mr President, said in Harare have concerned us. You were reported to have said that the media is controlled by conservative whites, and that black journalists are told what to do. We felt this was unfortunate because we had raised it before. Control of the media is changing, a number of companies have made strides in black ownership. Not far enough, but there are some strides – at TML for instance.

This does not mean a change in operations, but that will come as the new owners implement their programme of transformation and affirmative action. There is also the example of Perskor and Kagiso Trust. A lot of other blacks want in, but we feel there should be some recognition of progress that has been made.

**MANDELA:** There is no point in beating about the bush with problems. Whatever measures have been taken, the truth is that the media is still in the control of whites, and in many cases, conservative whites, who are unable to reflect the aspirations of the majority. This is not to reflect on their integrity, but on their background. I

accept that some steps have been taken to deal with this. But let us be accurate: black companies that are supposed to be in charge of enormous assets are a hollow claim at present – because they are heavily indebted to white companies. Black companies are virtually bankrupt because they don't own their assets. The process has started, but it will take a very long time before blacks – that is Africans, Coloureds, and Indians – can say "now blacks control their own press". I am not responsible for what is reported in the electronic or print media. I was asked in Harare why black journalists are so hostile, especially to Zimbabwe and President Mugabe. I wanted to put these black journalists in proper perspective. We do not have black journalists saying what they would like to say. They have to work on papers, they want to earn a living. While there are a few exceptional journalists, many like to please their white editors.

**BRIAN POTTINGER:** It is insulting to my black colleagues to suggest that they would kowtow to me. My paper reflects the views of all the paper.

**MANDELA:** Last time we met, I said how you had not behaved in the manner I expect of you. I invited you and gave you information. You thanked me. In the next editorial, you made a statement accusing the ANC of dishonesty. If a journalist, and a paper like the Sunday Times, can accuse an organisation like us of dishonesty, you destroy a relationship. You can disagree, but a relationship requires integrity. You are thick-skinned to repeat this again. It is not true to say that what is said on your paper reflects the views of all. You do not live on an island.

These black journalists discuss with us. So you are not accurate in saying that black journalists are totally independent. Some of you have told black journalists not to publish. So it is not correct what you say, and I don't know how you can expect me to take you seriously.

**POTTINGER:** We will need to agree to disagree. But let me assure you that I have never criticised your own integrity.

**MANDELA:** The ANC has no separate existence from Thabo Mbeki and Sydney Mufamadi. When you say the ANC is dishonest, you are saying they are. You are saying that every member of the ANC is responsible.

**JOHN BATTERSBY:** At the risk of receiving a tongue-lashing similar to the benevolent one given me at the foreign correspondents association function, let me say that I understand your position about our society and the balance of power. We are also concerned with this, but in the meantime, we have to do the best job with all these limitations and flaws. If you as president speak about senior black journalists being under the command of white editors, this has a demoralising effect on these journalists, and on the whole community. There might be instances as you have raised. However, if you say these things in general terms, it will make our job more difficult.

**MANDELA:** I mentioned at a previous meeting at Shell House the names of Khulu Sibiyi, Jon Qwelane and Kaiser Nyatumba. I had to correct them, and ever since that debate, I can't fault Khulu and Jon. Even if they criticise us, it could even be a view expressed from someone in the ANC for example. They have taken into account our criticism and that has enhanced our respect of them, even when they criticise us. In July 1996, I was criticised by a newspaper which said that there is nothing Mandela will be remembered for.

Someone replied [to that article], and they cut it by half. I had to do something very reluctantly, to speak to the owners. Only then, was the response properly published. What are the ethics of making serious allegations, but when we reply, you maul it and just publish a shadow? You are entitled to criticise us, but not to censor our answers. You have to publish and let

the readers decide.

**DENNIS CRUYWAGEN:** I'd be willing to be named [if you have criticism of me]. Don't tar all black journalists with the same brush.

**MANDELA:** Well, you are the same as them. At [an earlier meeting at] Shell House, you never said if you approved of my criticism. It was as if you supported your colleagues. What you say is meaningless to me. We are dealing with a trend. The real problem is not black journalists, but conservative white journalists who are able to instruct their colleagues under them.

You do not have freedom to speak, when this is the case among yourselves. Will you have the courage to say that no black journalist has complained about this?

**PETER SULLIVAN:** There are very few journalists who have not had things not published. These conservative white editors: am I included or not, and are you including all of the black journalists?

**MANDELA:** You are not portraying the picture of what happens on The Star. You sent a reporter to ANC members after I said that Thabo was not my anointed successor, because you said we had quarrelled. You said you would publish this at the appropriate time.

**SULLIVAN:** I said the appropriate time, which meant when we could confirm this. We never published because no confirmation was received from a second source.

**MANDELA:** Let us not cover up. I am an old man, and I don't want to be taken for a ride by young people. You don't publish our articles. You don't want us to reply to your campaign.

**SULLIVAN:** Sixty-two percent of my readers voted ANC, and 95% of my staff did. There is no campaign. It is physically not possible to publish everything. We should find space for replies, definitely. But if we err on one side in this regard, it is on the side of the ANC.

**MANDELA:** I don't like this type of discussion. I spent 27 years fighting wardens, and my style is gloves-off diplomacy. Do you remember the article in The Star where you said there was nothing worthwhile Mandela had done except to dismiss his wife?

**SULLIVAN:** I can't remember that.

**MANDELA:** Are you not Peter Sullivan? I don't want you to pretend you are an angel. You were convinced I was not going to reply to that. Don't handle problems in such a way that I attach no importance to what you say. You have suppressed a number of our replies.

**JIM JONES:** We often cut articles. Many people are not concise, but repetitive; there is also defamation. You can't run everything. I don't think there is a malevolent motive here. We think about what will interest readers. To suggest malevolence is not always a fair reflection.

**MANDELA:** I respect you. If you feel that I am wrong, you will say so, as you do in the press. But give us the latitude to say what we think too.



## Mike Tissong, night editor, Sowetan

Although President Nelson Mandela came across very aggressively in his exchanges with the editors, it served as an indication that all was not well between the media and the new South Africa.

I think it is good for Mandela and others in government, including Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, to put pressure on the media as a whole to transform, to reflect the values of the new democratic society. The values of the new South Africa cannot be reflected well by people who for decades either actively promoted apartheid in their newsrooms and/or in their views on news.



The South African Broadcasting Corporation, despite its flaws, has engaged the process of transformation and changed radically from what it was before. For decades it promoted apartheid on the airwaves and suppressed news about blacks, their politics and the liberation struggle. This has changed dramatically in that today the SABC reflects the new South Africa.

Radio 702 which was way ahead in reflecting the new society before the new society came into being, has taken a step back into the dark ages with its recent programming.

As far as the press is concerned, it is sad to see that there is generally a negative tone. It is a tone which reflects a society that cannot adjust or appreciate the positive changes taking place. I am sensitive to this when I read newspapers and I think this is what people like Mandela are sensitive to as well. So when Mandela gets impatient in dealing with editors of newspapers that reflect this negativity, I identify strongly with him. The press needs to change. Various other aspects of society have changed in line with our democratic and non-racial society, but the press is resisting with a vigour that is baffling.

## Thami Mazwai, head of Mafube publications and former Sanef head

The discussions directly and indirectly touched on several exposed and raw nerves. Do certain journalists have secret agendas? Is the media part of the society it purports to mirror and how does it go about this? Does it recognise the aspirations of the country's black community as legitimate? Have the Kagiso and Johnnic deals made any change in the way media sees and reports on issues? Does the media reflect SA as is or is it still patronising, more so when it comes to blacks?

I welcome the debate and we should have more of these gloves-off discussions with government and among ourselves. Sbu Mngadi's words when we launched Sanef are prophetic. They were: "When will black aspirations be part of this agenda?" We would be lying to say that in our publications blacks are the main item on the agenda. Right now, black journalists are being questioned about their commitment to press freedom simply because the word patriotism features in their vocabulary. Because whites do not feel the same degree of loyalty to the new order, our bona fides as journalists are being questioned. It is still the story of old: we are an appendage. Thus, President Mandela's comments directly and indirectly bordered on the issues above. I have no doubt in my mind we are a long way from becoming a media that South Africa is proud to have. The sooner we start being honest with ourselves the better.



## Dr Themba Zondo, Technikon Northern Gauteng

I personally appreciate the fact that the State President in his personal capacity takes time to meet members of the media as represented through Sanef. The last meeting was crucial in the relationship between the State President and the media.

Soon after the start of the talks it became clear that the media are not as clean as they would like their readers to believe. It also became clear that there exists no united voice from the media on matters of principle concerning its relationship to the state.

Answers such as "62% of my readers voted ANC and 95% of my staff did" are desperate

attempt to mend the obviously uncomfortable relations between government and the media. However, one should not ignore the fact that whereas there are very serious differences between the President and the media, there is enough goodwill on both sides and there is no doubt in my mind that the next meeting will be held with a clear understanding of what each party expects from the other. One observation I would like to make is that, whatever we do as media, we should



not forget that respect remains part of our agenda especially when we deal with very senior citizens.

## Mike Siluma, editor, Sowetan

It is a good idea for editors to meet with the president, even when some meetings may be off the record.

But the format of this meeting did not encourage a coherent addressing of the issues and their resolution. It tended to become personalised and directed at specific editors who then responded in defence. Rather, it should be the President speaking on behalf of the government and the editors representing the media, not themselves.

It is not an edifying spectacle when editors stand up one by one to justify their actions before colleagues. We need to have a more formal format and an agenda that will facilitate discussion without personalising it. As it was, the issues that came up in this particular meeting were not of interest to all the editors present – many related to specific editors and their specific papers.

Also, much of the disagreement reduced things to race in an almost simplistic way.

Race is an important element of the equation, but it is not the sole or even central issue if you are going to talk about the role of media in a democracy. It is not as if when you resolve the racial issue you resolve the problem of the press and its relation to government. You can genuinely change the colour of owners, and the publications will not automatically see eye-to-eye with government, because there will still be disagreements – as there ought to be – when the need arises. We lose the bigger picture when we get obsessed by the racial one.

This is not to say that race is not important, but the whole debate should not turn around it. We have had some white journalists who did more than some black journalists to bring about this transition. So we cannot oversimplify, as if black automatically means support for transformation and white automatically opposition.

We should be dealing with training, and how government can help – if at all. We should be talking about diversity in the media. And how the media might work with the government to ensure that the people who have never had access to information can begin to participate. And in a format where one meeting leads to another and we deal systematically with the range of issues.



## Comment on the extract

### By Joel Netshitenzhe, Chief Director Communications: Office of the President

The meetings between the President and the South African Editors' Forum (Sanef) leadership were conceptualised as an informal but at the same time serious interchange.

Three important elements add value to these meetings.

Firstly, they provide an important forum to seek joint approaches to widening the frontiers of media freedom.

Secondly, the practical steps needed to strengthen the understanding and co-operation between these two institutions are reviewed on an on-going basis.

Thirdly, the President is able to brief the editors on his and the government's activities.

The meetings would have been hollow without a robust exchange of views on mutual perception. As such, the President has been frank, honest and forthright, and so have the editors.

This is a reflection of the esteem in which both sides hold each other.

Consistently, the President has raised the fundamental question of the ownership structure and the composition of positions of authority in the media industry, both of which impact on reporting and analysis.

These notes published in this edition of Review reflect one such interchange.

The relationship between government and the media is complex, sensitive and sometimes tension-filled. Explicit coverage of these meetings, like the paparazzi photo, can be dazzling: it is accurate and it exposes the flesh in its teasing nakedness. But it does not capture essence.

Except where he so indicates, the President has no objections to the discussions being published. Rhodes Journalism Review published notes of the first meeting without checking – and to his credit, Guy Berger strained at the next meeting to get a clear indication of what was on or off the record.



So, technically he is very right. These extracts make for exciting reading. Yet one ends up with the feeling that, without context, they tantalise more than inform; they boost circulation more than enlighten.

Shouldn't we let other journalists sit in the meeting next time round – and we can shout "roll" and "cut" where appropriate? This may in fact save Guy Berger the trouble of taking copious notes or semi-clandestinely bringing an old-fashioned tape-recorder along!



Ryland Fisher, editor, Cape Times

While the President should have the right, like any other citizen, to criticise the media, I was amazed at the anger and venom with which he raised his criticism. And while the President has the right to criticise, he must also accept our right to criticise him and the political organisation he leads.

It is not correct to say that when one criticises the ANC, one is also criticising Mandela, Mbeki and others personally. The ANC's strength has always been that it is a broad church, so there will always be difference of opinion and differences of style. There's no need for the President to take everything so personally. By reacting in the way he did, he also opens himself up to the criticism that he is trying to manipulate the media through intimidation (and I challenge any editor who attended the meeting to tell me they did not feel intimidated).

At the same time, the president highlighted instances of sloppy and incomplete journalism. This weakens our position significantly. Our best defence against politicians and other media meddlers is to produce consistent, good quality journalism. If we are satisfied with mediocrity, we deserve all the criticism we have been getting.



Peter Sullivan, editor, The Star

Presidents are seldom happy with the press. When they are, we are probably not doing our job. President Mandela was indicating an unhappiness with the way we report, an unhappiness founded on good principles: we are too white; we do not really reflect what is happening in society; our ownership appears to be in too few hands; we are traditional whiners rather than praisers. Black reporters do not always get into print. We do not run enough letters from the ANC.

The President and I met the day after this exchange to clear the air. There are few countries in which this happens and I am enormously grateful he took the time, a whole hour, to discuss the issues frankly, but off-the-record. His world-renowned philosophy of reconciliation,

of respect for everybody, of uniting a divided nation are the fundamentals underpinning my vision of The Star's current role of tolerance of the travails of the transition, but intolerance of crime, corruption, racism and sexism.

Many colleagues shrieked "alarm bells" because President Mandela chose to chide us. Had he not done so – even if he was incorrect in some assumptions – would have set off a more strident air siren in my head. He was honest, which gave us the chance to be honest back. He helped us to clear up misunderstandings, and I hope we do so again when they occur.



Dennis Cruywagen, deputy editor, Pretoria News

I was surprised. Never did I expect President Mandela to react the way he did. I would have thought that we'd moved away from the old days when press-bashing was a must for National Party heads of state.

I thought the President's remarks about integrity were important. However, integrity should be respected by all sides. Still, it was a useful meeting. It may sound bizarre, but just think how far we've come if a democratically-elected President can meet us, go off the record, then insult us, and take us into his confidence again.



Professor Arrie de Beer, head of the Department of Communications, Potchefstroom University

In general the issue at stake is not new. It is common in modern democracies for heads of state and politicians to disagree with the press and for the press to push at the boundaries of free speech in their reporting of, and comment on, government.

However, in this particular incident some pertinent aspects came to the fore, whilst others were not that salient.

It seems that there is a lack of communication between government and the mainstream press about certain issues. Obviously Mr Mandela has a certain perception of the role of white journalists and owners (be they conservative or not), which is not shared by at least some senior editors who are members of Sanef. The regular Sanef meetings with the President could be a functional place to start a communication process to clear up misunderstandings of this kind.

It is also clear that Mr Mandela feels very strongly, and rightly so, that black journalists should be seen to be voicing independent opinions, and that news issues affecting especially black South Africans should get their rightful place in a reliable, fair and honest manner in the SA media. However, what was not so clear during the meeting, was what exactly the future holds for a free and independent press in a democratic South Africa in terms of its relationship with the government of the day.

While the President is on record (also during this meeting) emphasising the need for

and the role of a vibrant and critical free press, other ANC members are also on record stressing the need for the press to play a more "constructive role" in the nation-building process. The latter might imply that the press should rethink its adversary watchdog role.

Also, one wonders what the salient implications for an independent and diverse press system are if a senior editor stated during the meeting that 95% of his newspaper's staff voted for the ANC and that his newspaper should find (news) space for (ANC) replies. But more importantly, that if they "err on one



side in this regard, it is on the side of the ANC". One would have thought that they would err on the side of fairness and truth, which obviously might include the ANC on any specific occasion.

One would like to know whether the net result of the views discussed at

the meeting could mean that South Africa might embrace the developmental press model with its emphasis on utilising the press as an instrument for state driven actions such as nation building, RDP, GEAR etc., instead of the libertarian model where newspapers are free to choose whichever course they want to take – even of being outspoken and critical adversaries of the government of the day on state driven issues such as nation-building.

Dennis Pather, editor, the Daily News, Durban

The meeting was clearly the most robust so far between government and the media, with the President striking out like an aggressive boxer intent on unsettling his opponent from the opening bell. The tactic certainly had a stunning effect. As we left the Union Buildings in bewilderment, some editors were heard to ask: did we deserve that total onslaught?

What is more important, however, is what the exchange meant to relations between government and the media. Antagonism towards the media is certainly not restricted to the President. His views are shared by others in the cabinet, notably Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

It would be easy to dismiss the President's attack as yet another example of the traditional antagonism between media and government. In present day South Africa, it goes beyond that.

The ANC, it must be recalled, has come out of a history of long and turbulent guerilla war to liberate the country from apartheid. It succeeded in changing the course of the country towards democracy. The task it faced once it had taken over the reins of conventional governance was a gargantuan one – given the huge backlogs and anomalies it inherited



from the previous regime.

Many of the remedial and developmental measures it has put into place are out of necessity long-term, the results of which will not be seen for a long time. There are few spectacular results which the media can acclaim.

It is this failure on the part of the media to recognise what has been achieved so far that has led to frustration in government circles. Why do they dwell on the negative? Why do they not give us credit for what we have delivered so far? Is it because the media is still white controlled? Is it because most of the changes effected so far have been of more material benefit to the disadvantaged sections of the country (blacks)? These are the types of questions being asked in government circles.

Other questions that arise: can the media play a more positive and constructive role in the transformation process? Should we continue reporting news in the ways of the past? Is there a role to be played in educating readers about a whole range of issues, eg. how Parliament works, knowing your rights, health matters, education – while at all times maintaining a critical eye on government abuse and excesses?

What about the question of black journalists wanting to please their white bosses? I have certainly not encountered this at Independent Newspapers KZN. I believe the real problem lies in accelerating the process of developing, training and recruiting more black (Indian, Coloured and African) journalists in the media. While the black component of our readership increases, too many vital decisions are still being taken by people who have little knowledge or understanding of the black experience or black needs.



**Professor Guy Berger, head of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University**

Is an injury to one an injury to all? Should reading the riot act to some editors demand solidarity from others? In a normal society, yes.

But South Africa is clearly not one yet. Apart from Thami Mazwai kicking off the discussion and Dennis Cruywagen chipping in, the heated exchange with the President saw only white editors speaking.

Ironically, the issue that sparked and coloured (excuse the pun) the debate was the question of black journalists. Yet, Khulu Sibiyi, Len Kalane, Mike Siluma, Ryland Fisher, Dennis Pather, Mike Tissong and others held back. Some of these individuals have since responded to the invitation to use the forum of this journal to voice their views, a welcome step. Their remarks show that few black editors

feel a need to defend their white counterparts; many feel there are home truths in Mandela's remarks. On the other side, several of the white editors feel isolated and unfairly attacked.

This vast divide is the reality of race in the media today. In contrast, the President declared that an attack



on individuals in the ANC was an attack on the ANC as such.

We are still a long way from an undivided press. But we need to work towards it. This means explicitly and honestly tackling the racial issue amongst ourselves – and doing so until we have transformed it satisfactorily. It's no easy walk to freedom; it's also an uphill slog to normality.

**Brian Pottinger, editor, Sunday Times**

The meeting with President Mandela was typically frank. I prefer it that way – much better than grumbling in dark corners.

The President is, however, misguided in some of his observations. First, sweeping allegations that black journalists working on white-



edited newspapers who criticise the government are doing so purely at the behest of conservative editors is unfair to both parties.

That is not to say every black reporter agrees with every editorial position. It

would not be possible to have such a thing on any newspaper in the world. But those with whom I am acquainted would object most vociferously if they were compelled to write anything against their beliefs. I do not wish to push the issue further. They are quite capable of defending themselves.

The President's formulation of the accusation, however, gives ammunition to a broader campaign being waged in some

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**Ebbe Dommissie, editor, Die Burger**

The meeting with the President was disturbing in more than one sense.

Firstly, the ANC alliance, as the governing party, officially stands for a "non-racial, non-sexist" society. But when serious issues such as press freedom are discussed, the discussion is often couched in terms of race. Hence, black journalists are told even by Mandela that they are suppressed by "conservative" white editors.



It was doubly unfortunate that Mandela made these allegations in Zimbabwe, where the press is state-controlled, and where the Mugabe government is extremely intolerant

**Raymond Louw, editor, Southern Africa Report.**

Tough talking! And I think instructive for both sides. I think Mandela had the edge on the editors because he had done his homework. We journalists tend to talk or write loosely about the honesty of politicians and it was instructive for us for Mandela to spell out his interpretation of the use of such language.

However, his remarks about the role of black journalists which I sensed was the crux of his complaint, are extremely serious. I go along with the editors' response that black journalists will not kowtow to white editors, write falsely about situations to please them or take instructions to do so. I cannot recall a black journalist writing a story against his/her will to please the boss or to gain promotion.

But the issue is not what I or others believe. Mandela says he made the accusation because, according to him, "these black journalists discuss with us. So you are not accurate in saying that black journalists are totally independent. Some of you have told black journalists not to publish".

Here could be the makings of an untenable situation. Mandela is saying the complaints that white editors tell blacks what to write and what not to write, etc. come from the black journalists themselves, and that they go along with it in the interest of gaining promotion. The questions that arise are: are the allegations true? Have the black

of any criticism. Mandela made no mention of the simple fact that the press in South Africa has for many years been recognised as the freest in Africa. And that serious attempts have been made by many South African newspapers to reflect a diversity of opinion.

If issues of press freedom have to be discussed in terms of colour and race, Mandela would be better advised not to generalise. For instance, he could have referred to a newspaper like City Press, owned by Nasionale Pers. There, black editors are in charge of white staff.

The Mandela comments reinforced the perception that the ANC detests criticism. Also, their spokesmen too often revert to calling critics "racists".

These knee-jerk responses tend to deflate any constructive discussion of burning public issues. Unfortunately, Mandela came close to falling into this category. If this trend continues, it will mean the implosion of a successful multi-party democracy.

journalists confronted their own editors with this charge before going to Mandela? If they have, what action has been taken? Were they ignored? If they have not done so, is it because they fear for their jobs? How can there be integrity and loyalty in the newsroom if black journalists feel the need to take their grievances to the President? An investigation is needed – by Sanef?

I was saddened by Mandela's phraseology in his description of his meeting with the black journalists he named. There is an air of the schoolmaster bringing pupils to heel in the manner in which he uses the term "to correct" them. His complaint that there was not fair dealing in the matter of the response to the fatuous article that there was nothing for him to be remembered for requires investigation. If his version of how he had to approach the paper's owners to obtain publication of the reply is true, it is a sad commentary on the newspaper.

His various complaints suggest that there is great need for more of these meetings more frequently because there is clearly a lack of understanding by Mandela of the role and practices of papers, and there is also a lack of understanding by the media about his complaints.



**John Battersby, editor, The Sunday Independent**

Tension between government and the media in a democratic society is a healthy and necessary part of a relationship that should be founded on mutual respect.

In a transforming South Africa with a democratically-elected government faced with the awesome legacy of apartheid, the media has an additional responsibility: to help build a just and democratic society.

Because of this legacy, the normal tensions that would exist between government and media are exacerbated. Government wants to see transformation in the media which gives visible proof that the ownership, staffing and content of newspapers reflect the changing society. If the media want to survive as an independent commercially-owned institution they will have to be seen to be effecting this transformation.

In the past three years, there have been dramatic changes in the ownership of the print media. Against this background, the question must be asked as to how helpful



President Nelson Mandela's interventions in the media debate have been in assisting this process of self-transformation of the media.

Let us immediately state that the President is within his rights to criticise the media as harshly and often as he likes; that is an integral part of the transformation process. What is unfortunate is his continual harping on race issues: first black journalists were the target. Now conservative whites. Trying to establish a non-racial and inclusive culture on our newspapers is a task which takes up much of our energy on a daily basis.

While newspapers have to acknowledge that there is still considerable distrust and suspicion within the black community about the content and credibility of our products, it also needs to be acknowledged that transformation and reconciliation are not as simple as replacing white employees with black ones.

The point is that there is a huge learning curve for all of us in order to understand each other and to understand our readers across a complex set of interlocking divides: racial, cultural, gender, urban-rural and socio-economic.

Sanef has a key role to play in fostering a sensitivity in our media towards the highly diverse and complex nature of our society. I have every confidence that under the firm and insightful guidance of its new chairman, Moegsien Williams, it will do just that.



Denis Beckett was once asked by Rex Gibson, deputy editor of *The Star*, to compile a news story about a survey on support for political parties. Being nervous about having his copy hacked by the subs, Beckett asked how many centimetres it should be. Gibson said 45cm and assured him it wouldn't be cut. Beckett turned in exactly 45cm. To his horror, when it appeared the next day it was 38cm and completely garbled. In addition all the percentage marks – % – which he had used had been

converted to "percent". This he calculated had cost him another 7cm of the story. He enquired why the change.

"The page editor said 'style book'. I wondered why, and the page editor said why did it matter why? The style book had spoken and that was enough for him.

"I went to ask the guy who wrote the style book.

"He stared at the relevant entry for a very long time as if hoping that an explanatory apparition would appear on the page, and finally said: 'You know, that's a

good question.'

"I tried editors, I tried old hands. Finally I met a guy from the works, who said, simple, there'd been some trouble with a batch of low-grade flong in about 1965 and the intricate '%' had risked coming out as a blur, so the 'percent' had been a precaution.

"Flong was a cardboardy part of a production process that went obsolete more than 20 years ago."

\* From *Trekking, in Search of the Real South Africa*.

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quarters in the ANC, aided and abetted by a few media allies. This campaign seeks to characterise all critical black voices as coming from either stooges or sell-outs and all critical white voices as being either racist or unpatriotic. The long-term result, intended or otherwise, will be a most pernicious form of censorship by intellectual intimidation which would bode very badly for a free and inquiring media culture in this country.

The second point with which I join issue with the President is his view that the media is conspiratorially hostile to his government and his rather quaint notion that to question a government viewpoint is to attack the personal integrity of its members.

Personally, I think the new government and particularly the presidency gets off very lightly. Indeed, I detect disturbing signs towards sycophancy in some sections of the South African media, together with a willingness to be drawn into the kind of cosy and self-serving relationships with authority that is so rightly condemned in recent submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when it occurred under the previous regime.

The sub-text to this is the view often expressed in some ANC circles that articles are published with a "hidden agenda" – implicitly unpatriotic or racist.

I have at times listened dumbfounded to some senior ANC leader or other knowingly describe my secret "agenda" in publishing this or that article at such and such a time. In every instance the story was published because it was news, in the public interest and, above all, available in time for the deadline. In one case a collection of articles over a period of time which was identified as being part of an "agenda" to discredit a public figure, had in fact originated from different sources, had been written by different people, and had been selected by different editors and placed in different parts of the paper – without any consultation at all.

If the government insists that the media must be more professional and accurate – and they are right to so do – then surely the media can expect the government to move beyond these harmful stereotypes and rather help us build a truly worthy, indigenous free media culture.

A last word. The exchange with the President does not in my book constitute a crisis between media and government. The reverse: it keeps us all on our toes.

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