

# Feeding the infostarved

## The State's responsibility

It was part of the 1995 conference of communicators that gave birth to Comtask and subsequently the new Government Communication and Information Service. It was a very useful forum that saw an exchange of views on a wide variety of issues – media ownership and the need for diversity; the role of the media in a changing South Africa and relationships between government and the media.

What government was told repeatedly by various speakers, prominent among them Ken Owen, former Sunday Times editor, and Patrick Bulger of the Star who stood in for Kaizer Nyatumba, was essentially that government must leave the business of communication to the media. The argument was that people are likely to regard information from the media as more credible than that from government sources.

Whether the media want to play the role of a conduit, carrying the flow of information between government and the people, is a moot point. But even if the media were keen to play such a role, chances are that they would simply find it extremely difficult to do so.

There is merit in the argument that if government finances institutions such as the SABC, the danger of some control is real. What surprises me, though, is the inconsistency with which opponents of state ownership pursue this logic, as they contend that current media owners do not necessarily influence editorial content and the policies of the news media they own.

I have been impressed by senior journalists in the recent past, who are making contributions to the debate by admitting to the ideological divide prevalent in the Fourth Estate. We have pretended long enough that journalists in our country are neutral and impartial observers of our socio-political developments, that they operate in a political vacuum, and their outlook on life is not influenced by historical and social factors.

The role of the media in facilitating meaningful dialogue between the government and the people is complicated by other interests, and the ideological leanings of either the owners or journalists themselves. Sowetan editor Mike Siluma says: "You can't have journalists operating outside the economics of journalism. You can't expect someone to bankroll a publication and then walk away without worrying about what will be published. That is not the real world."

SABC programming manager Mandla Langa puts it more crudely: "The truth itself is packaged, sanitised and made palatable if only to sell newspapers and maintain the continued interest of advertisers."

The other contributing factor is simply that of capacity and infrastructure. The reality is that no single major commercial newspaper reaches more than 1,5 million

South African readers, while SABC television reaches only 14 million of the estimated 40 million South Africans. The collective reach of both newspapers and television is probably not even half the total population of our country and is concentrated in the urban and peri-urban areas.

Even when the information reaches its audience, one cannot guarantee that it will be quality, factual, balanced and reliable.

The other factor to be considered is that during apartheid the relationship between the media was either adversarial or collusive. To some journalists the battle continues – there is no paradigm shift. To be an award winning journalist you have to be hostile to government and should not be seen to be singing praises to it even in deserving circumstances.

Independent parliamentary editor Zubeida Jaffer says to her own peers: "We are failing in our duty to record one of the greatest experiments in recent world history. While foreigners travel here to marvel at our achievements, we South Africans take it all for granted."

The key question for me is: can the media meet the challenge of the 1990s and become what Gabu Tugwana calls "journalists to strengthen democracy ... constructive foot soldiers who will be good custodians of transformation"?

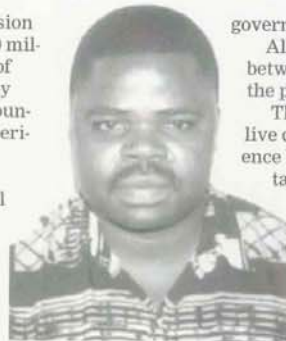
Given all the above, can journalists expect to be taken seriously when they say to governments "leave the job of communication to us experts"? Do we consider these practical questions? Or are we only motivated by a desire to retain a monopoly in deciding who gets information, where and when they get it, and what kind of information they get?

Most provinces have official external publications. Rural provinces, in particular, can tell of the stampede for these newsletters at distribution points. People starved for information risk limb

to lay hands on the newsletters.

It is very easy for John Citizen sitting in an office in Sandton, receiving all the newspapers at eight in the morning, having access to a Sapa modem and the Internet, DSTV, and many other sophisticated sources of information, to say news from government sources is not credible and must be regarded as cheap propaganda.

Besides the advertising imperatives driving the newspaper business, there is a fundamental difference between what newspapers want to publish, and what



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government needs to communicate.

Also closely linked to this is the difference between definitions of what information is in the public interest.

The recent row sparked by the SABC TV live coverage of the ANC Mafikeng conference brings this out. We ask: if the decisions taken at this conference were to determine

the policies and programme of government, is it not in the public interest to know what goes on in that conference? It seems we are far from reaching a national consensus on what constitutes a public mandate.

Reporters who dare to capture the transformation of society are labelled supporters of the new ANC establishment, as if you need to be a supporter

of the ANC to see, for instance, that water has been supplied to more than a million people who were previously denied it.

The basic constitutional requirement that all South Africans have a right to information that empowers them to make a meaningful contribution to the transformation of our society, puts specific obligations on the government to ensure as best as it can, that all people are able to communicate with the government they put in power.

The point I am making is that government must be allowed to set up machinery and enhance its capacity to disseminate information to all the people of South Africa. In some instances this will be done with and through the media and in some cases directly by the government to the people. Where the truth is not being told, the media will still have the right to point this out and take the government to task.

The new Government Communication and Information Service (GCIS) has a major task ahead – to foster dynamic interaction between the people and the government. In an ideal democratic social order, people's experiences, views, ideas and feelings must inform government policies and programmes. This cannot happen without information dissemination.

The truth is the South African media not only lack the will, but also the capacity to discharge this function. Where possible the government should do it on its own and the media should assist and not encourage South Africans to disbelieve everything the government says.

Fundamental media transformation will be required before we can see the emergence of an appreciation of the new South African story in our newsrooms.

As long as these disparities exist, the government must do everything possible – in the words of the new CEO of the GCIS, Joel Netshitenzhe – "to ensure that those who do not have the resources to access the media, will be afforded the opportunity to do so".

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