The Namibian media watchdog or lapdog?

It seems to me that the media can be divided into three categories: lapdogs, attack dogs and watchdogs. We have all three. And when one looks back over 100 years of media in Namibia, we have to admit that the record has not always been a proud one.

Many of the media collaborated with governments in the suppression of information thereby contributing to the suppression of the people themselves. Instead of merely putting ourselves on the back, I think we have to look critically at where we have been and where we are going.

Today we have an environment far more conducive to press freedom than in the past. Yet, often journalists themselves fail to exercise this freedom, lapsing into apathy and/or lapdog journalism. Editors, I believe, should shoulder a lot of the blame — on many occasions they have suppressed the work of journalists.

They should also take a long, hard and critical look at themselves about whether they are creating an environment in which it is possible for journalists to exercise freedom of expression, and they should give support and encouragement to their young colleagues and serve as fearless role models in the profession.

Namibia has experienced a number of incidents where editors spike stories, not because they are badly written or poorly researched, but because they go counter to the political agenda of the editor him/herself. This is an unacceptable state of affairs.

In most of the countries of Southern Africa, government is the main, although not necessarily the only, target of media when it comes to watchdog, lapdog or attack journalism.

In developing democracies in Southern Africa, government tends to be the focus of the media for a number of reasons. Many of our countries have become used to undemocratic regimes in one way or another. In many parts of Africa, lifelong dictators use and abuse power indiscriminately.

In our region an undemocratic racist regime did the same, and our people had none of the fundamental freedoms that we all take for granted today.

Therefore the new, and supposedly democratic regimes (although many of them are not democratic and we need to remind ourselves that historically the former SA regime called itself “democratic”) are being watched closely by citizens.

Is the new democracy here to stay or is it something that will erode with time? I would suggest that democracy in most of the countries of the region is fragile and vulnerable. Governments have not necessarily committed themselves to the Windhoek Declaration in practice and intimidation continues unabated. The Windhoek Declaration.

The task of the independent journalist in these countries is to ensure that the watchdog role is indispensable.

Namibia, while not a one party state, is a one party dominant state. The political opposition is fragmented and weak. Parliament's traditional watchdog role is therefore eroded where the largest party has a two-thirds majority. The ruling party still operates in an authoritarian, top-down way and similarly in government this is mirrored in a lack of transparency and accountability which in turn impedes the free flow of information. Civil society is small and still developing, and much of it is in any case tied to the ruling party through political, trade union and other affiliations.

One situation places more of the watchdog functions on the media than would generally be the case in a developed and long-standing democracy. There are other mechanisms and institutions in place to perform watchdog functions, and they include the Auditor General, the Ombudsman, among others, but these offices have their limitations.

It will come as no surprise therefore that government comes under the closest scrutiny. This is not to say that I advocate the watchdog role of media only with regard to government. Quite the contrary. Watchdog journalism should be a permanent state of affairs, and should include areas such as national security, economics, NGOs and others.

Under the circumstances I would venture, that the Namibian media fare pretty well as far as standards of watchdog or investigative journalism are concerned. But there should be more of it and what there is, should be even better. We do have many constraints that make themselves felt in the exercise of these duties.

Most of our journalists, and I include myself, have fairly general news functions. Due both to financial constraints as well as training inadequacies, our reporters tend to cover a spectrum...
of beats as well as having to take their own photographs. Journalism training will allow more journalists to specialise and concentrate on developing areas of expertise in which they are relatively lacking, such as investigative economic reporting.

But the question is also how journalists can do a better job of reporting on institutions of political and economic power, such as governments and big corporations, without contributing to the cynicism about those entities that threatens to erode public participation.

At what point does energetic news gathering become a feeding frenzy and at what point, at the other side of the spectrum, does an unwillingness to pursue the stories of possible corruption in high places aggressively become an abdication of journalistic responsibility?

Most governments would like to receive favourable press, and tolerance of criticism varies from government to government and country to country depending on the levels of democratic sophistication.

If I compare working as a journalist under the former repressive South African regime to working under an independent, elected and democratic government today, I would say that it's a lot safer but it's no easier than it was in the past. No longer are journalists arrested, death threats and other forms of official harassment, but secrecy in government still prevails, and one is equally labelled "unpartisan" or "reactionary" if one pursues stories which may bring governments or members of the ruling party into disrepute.

One of the most common complaints from members of the public who resent media probes into people accused of corruption, for example, is that we have an "anti-government agenda." Generally there is nothing sinister behind our so-called agendas. What the media choose to report on or choose to ignore, is often a result of the public's own agenda setting. Investigative journalism usually relies on tip-offs or informants and information we are able to unearth on the subject in question.

According to Rogers and Derrig many now see the mass media systems as the mechanism linking the public with policy makers. In countries such as the US it is said that the media have usurped the micromanagement of political parties, creating what can be thought of as a "media democracy." The media certainly do (and should do) some agenda setting themselves. If we take the example of Namibia's participation in the war in the DRC, we clearly apted to that question until the public began to ask questions as well. Agenda setting is therefore showing the public that an issue is important, and this is an important component of educating the public in a democracy so that they are equipped to make choices.

We made some progress. The government finally admitted to the fact, although it earlier denied that it was involved in the list on the side of Kaibila. This, however, was only the tip of the iceberg. Solid investigative or watchdog journalism would ensure we take this agenda further, to know about what is happening to the public what they should know about this adventure. Among others, how many troops we have committed to the DRC, what kind of activities they are engaged in there, what the cost is to the Namibian taxpayers, and the period of time we can expect of them to continue to serve there. Government cannot expect to hide behind national security issues as the excuse for not being prepared to release further information.

We have our media lapdogs, and they are generally well-known. Those so-called journalists who make it their business to defend the interests of the ruling party or government, and who play the role of unofficial PB officers. Many of these journalists are caught in the New World Information Order web, where it was seen as a duty of journalists to develop these tasks in line with national policies.

We have our watchdogs too, and as I said earlier, they do well under the circumstances, but could do even better.

And the attacks. Well, we would probably prefer if they could be kept to a minimum, but sometimes it's necessary to revert to this kind of journalism to get the answers. And as a fellow journalist said recently; "If we stop making people uncomfortable, I think we may stop practising good journalism."

I believe that there is, and indeed has to be, a natural adversarial relationship between government and media. I end with a quote from a conference I recently attended at Harvard University: "It is a commodity and it is power. And it is the government's intention to use it, to withholding or to abuse it. It is our job to ferret it out. In the process, we are often stubborn and unpre pertaining. So the government needs to educate us. And we need the government to inform us. Out of that comes a very tense, and never ending contest."

I am not meaning, in any one direction — If we get too close and are the mere handmaidens of government, we fail in our function. If we stay aloof and hostile, that we remain uninitiated and dumb. I don't think in the long run we can write intelligently about what is going on."

Quinn Lister is editor of the Namibian. This address was given to the Namibia Press Centenary Conference in October 1998.