

Breaking out the box

'Where to from here?' is the question we need to address. The short answer is: 'back to basics'. **Lynette Steenveld** starts with the fundamental role of the media in democracy

Democracy means 'rule by the people'. The independence of the media to this process is crucial, because in this political arrangement (system) the media constitute an important institution for enabling the political process.

A significant feature of a democracy is an inclusive, participatory polity. Thus the important expectation citizens have of the media in a democracy: that journalism should be representative of all the people.

Most of the problems the media face, have to do with how they are to represent 'all' the people. Here the key word is 'diversity'. There are at least four areas in which diversity needs to be addressed: (1) structures of ownership and operation; (2) employment equity; (3) representation (views); (4) training.

1. Ownership

Arguably, the government's role is to provide an environment (through regulation) in which there are diverse media structures (privately owned newspapers, community newspapers, community radio, public service broadcasting etc.) to ensure the diversity necessary for freedom of expression for all points of view, and for local culture to flourish.

2. Employment Equity

Another area where government plays a part is with regard to employment equity. This is positive for newsrooms:

- A diverse editorial staff has the potential to attract a broader range of readers, listeners, and viewers. Target groups respond to familiarity, as a consequence, circulations and ratings could increase;

- Journalism strives for objectivity. Diverse representations are a more accurate representation of reality, and these are better achieved through the use of reporters from diverse backgrounds like class, colour and gender. (The problem here is not to assume that a woman reporter can represent the views of all women, nor a black reporter all black people — there is a diversity of views within these groups);

- A diverse workforce and an explicit recruitment policy will show the social commitment of the media and will contribute to a progressive and positive image of the media.

3. "Representations" — or, "the stories we tell"

While it is legitimate for the government to regulate the environment in which journalists operate, journalists, on the other hand, are responsible for media content. Only hate-speech (in which there is incitement to cause imminent harm) is proscribed by legislation. Other content is the responsibility of the media.

Areas of responsibility in this "representation" which need attention are:

- News values — or, simply, what makes news. The big question here is whether the traditional list of news values is adequate for reflecting our South African reality. Are various groups and issues adequately reflected by these values, or do they privilege some groups and issues, and marginalise others? In so doing, does this contribute to the media's role of enabling democratic practices?

- If news values decide the "what", the framing of news deals with the "how". For example, a newsworthy story about foreign residents can be framed in many ways — as "aliens" taking jobs away from jobless South Africans, as "immigrants" adding to the richness of South African cultural and economic life, etc. Do the

news frames used adequately reflect our diverse society — or does the media favour particular perspectives, and marginalise others? Again, how does actual media practice square with its rationale vis-à-vis a democracy?

- Who are the sources of news? What is their stake in the story? Does a list of sources for particular story genres/beats adequately reflect our societal diversity with respect to demographics as well as political perspective? Or has the list become routinised for efficiency, and in so doing abandoned the civic role that journalism is supposed to play?

- Story assignment. Are stories assigned in such a way that they enable a shared sense of citizenship for both journalists, and their read-

VUKILE TYESE

b. 1959

Settlement after the battle

Shows the meeting of black and white peoples in search for resolution. The aim is to listen and see each others' expressions of loss and hurt. Through this they can negotiate for a peace settlement and a greater understanding for each other.



ers/listeners/viewers? There is the tendency to assign black journalists to 'black' stories or 'township' issues. While this may be efficient because it is based on the presumption that the black journalist knows the issues better, because he/she has a better knowledge of this environment/culture, this could be an erroneous assumption because of the class background of the journalist. It is based on the racist assumption that all black/white people 'naturally' know everything/anything to do with black/white people better than anyone else. This may be the case, but it may not.

Furthermore, this leads to the scenario in which only 'white' reporters cover 'white' news, 'black' reporters cover black news, etc — which limits the professional skills of reporters to cover any area. We narrow our journalists' competence and we perpetuate laagers for white and black citizens amongst our audiences.

4. Training

Given the current demographics of newsrooms there is the need to train more black and women journalists — both in the area of general reporting, and in specialist areas such as business, finance, labour, tourism, legislation.

There also seems to be the need for a better demographic spread throughout the various levels in the newsroom — and especially as sub-editors. A key area that needs to be addressed is the ability of all journalists to be multi-lingual so that they can be assigned to a variety of communities, and work in any medium ('black', 'white English', 'white Afrikaans').

Training needs to be recognised as costly, and as time consuming. Good training cannot be expected through one-off crash courses. Both employers and trainee journalists, or journalists undergoing mid-career training, need to see this as a long-term investment process in which there is no 'quick fix'. Mentoring of junior reporters needs to be standard practice — with big enough staffs to cope with this.

Transformation is often treated as an end itself. It is, however, integral to South Africa's media making a successful contribution to our young democracy.

This is an edited version of a talk by Steenveld, senior lecturer at Rhodes University, at commemoration of International Media Freedom Day, May, 2000, The Freedom Forum African Center, Johannesburg.



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