

## WHERE IS THE INTROSPECTION?

BY CHRIS VICK

Four months ago, I started writing a weekly column for *Business Day* on media and politics in an attempt to shed some light on the dark side of how our media functions, how this affects our democracy, and why South Africans should be worried.

Among other things, I have highlighted an increasing number of ethical lapses. These have resulted in, among other things, more journalists resorting to “churnalism”, more journalists doing PR work on the side, and more people saying they know of journalists who take bribes. All of which has a seriously negative impact on the quality of South African journalism and perceptions of the profession and its products.

I’ve also looked at some of the problems this causes, how it is manifested in structures like the “press clubs”, and tried to get the SA National Editors’ Forum to start taking a more responsible position in speaking out about ethical lapses.

I’m not the only person highlighting these problems. A few more writers, including *Business Day* editor Peter Bruce and a fellow spin doctor, Rams Mabote, have started asking similar questions in recent weeks.

There has also been more published proof of journalists taking bribes – for example, the *Argus* “brown envelope” case and the journalist in Mpumalanga who wrote favourably about politicians after an ANC leader bought him a few beers. More recently, *City Press* published extracts from an SAPS report which, among other things, claimed that journalists had been paid between R50 000 and R100 000 to either write positively about the police, or to “kill” negative stories about the police.

The responses to my columns calling for a clean-up of media ethics can be clustered in two categories:

Congratulations from a range of people in newsrooms (generally mid-

career journalists who witness these problems every day and are frustrated that they aren’t being addressed) and from South Africans who feel the media needs some serious scrutiny due to its power and influence.

Vitriol from editors such as *City Press*’ Ferial Haffajee (who called me a “coward” because I did not name journalists who were said to have taken bribes) and the *Mail&Guardian*’s Nic Dawes (who compared me to the devil because of the reputation management work I do, which he described as “delivering bullshit disguised as bonbons”).

Primedia’s head of news and public affairs, Yusuf Abramjee – who is probably the most conflicted man in the South African media because of all the hats he wears – also didn’t take kindly to exposure of the growing presence of PR people in what he calls the National Press Club.

The key question which came, again and again, from critics was: “What is Vick’s motive?” Haffajee refers to the work I do as “the dark side”. Dawes tags me as some form of stalking horse for a media appeals tribunal, while Abramjee seems incapable of more than indignant letters asking what my “agenda” is.

The key question I keep putting back at them is: “Why do you have such thin skins? Why is it so easy to parade the supposed shortcoming of other members of society, but not hold a mirror up to yourself? Where is the introspection?”

At the same time, I have made my motive clear: As I wrote in *Business Day* in early May, “I seek an end to obvious conflicts of interest, and yearn for more ethical journalism. And a clear distinction between the people who make the news and the people who report it.”

That may sound strange, coming from someone whose profession actually benefits from the ethical lapses. After all, once you’ve got over the fact that it’s completely unprofessional for a journalist to put their byline on your press release,

there’s quite a kick for you and your client in seeing your message conveyed, word for word, as you issued it.

But that’s because I approach this matter on more than one level. Yes, I’m a spin doctor and I’m paid to get things into print or on air in a form that suits the interests of my client. I’m hired precisely because of my ability to promote and protect the interests of my client.

But as a South African, as someone who cares about our democracy and the crucial role our media play in protecting and promoting that democracy, I worry about what these ethical lapses are doing to the quality of our media, and to their ability to accurately reflect what is really going on in South Africa.

After all, I may be one of the few people in the so-called PR profession who calls themselves a “spin doctor”. But I’m certainly not the only one who’s trying to get their clients’ message across, unfiltered and unmediated, across as many media platforms as possible, and who will take advantage of weaknesses in the newsrooms we interact with.

So if I’m able to take advantage of poorly-trained and poorly-resourced journalists, so are people in political parties, in the intelligence community, in business and in the underworld.

That, ultimately, is why I would like to hear a richer conversation about how to get things fixed. I’d like to see more introspection in newsrooms about what editors already know about ethical lapses. I’d like to see a more proactive posture from editors and their collectives (such as Sanef) in acknowledging that there are problems, and in dealing with them.

The irony, of course, is that this process has already begun – quietly. I am aware of discussions taking place in the *Mail&Guardian*, *City Press* and *Avusa* in recent weeks about the contents of some of my columns, and in other newsrooms. These discussions have centred around some of the ethical lapses I’ve identified and have, in some cases, resulted in a

tightening of processes around conflicts of interest, disclosures and codes of conduct.

I don’t want any credit for this, nor do I expect it. That’s not the nature of the people in editorial decision-making positions.

I just hope that the next time someone comes along with criticism of the way our newsrooms work, the editorial decision-makers will treat whistleblowers from their own profession the same way they treat whistleblowers from other sectors of society – in other words, give them a hearing, investigate the allegations, and take an informed and relatively objective assessment. Rather than reaching for the vitriol bucket.

