



EBBE DOMMISSIE
Die Burger



NIGEL BRUCE
Financial Mail



DEREK SMITH
EP Herald



RICHARD STEYN
The Star



IZAK DE VILLIERS
Rapport

JOURNALISTS SPEAK

There's no free lunch is the general feeling towards 'freebies'

This series intends to solicit the opinion of a variety of journalists. To kick off the series, we asked a group of editors for their views on the ubiquitous 'freebie'.
CHARLES RIDDLE reports

FROM the response to our survey (eight editors replied), it is clear that freebies in some form are generally condoned, if distrusted, by leading South African editors, and this despite the fact that everyone in (and out) of media is aware that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

At the economic level, the issue is simple: newspapers do not have the financial resources to provide as full and independent a service to their readers as they would like. Freebies, especially in the travel, entertainment and motoring areas, enable newspapers to extend editorial coverage by their own staff. As editor-in-chief of the *The Star* and *Sunday Star*, Richard Steyn, notes: "If freebies were banned outright, readers would ultimately be the losers."

The danger here is well understood by all – while freebies undeniably do have beneficial spin-offs for readers, they equally undeniably also have the power to corrupt journalists. Given that donors of freebies are not after criticism – whatever their up-front person may say – the question must be: What price the South African journalist's integrity?

In answering this, the theoretical sketch of the ethical journalist – that is, the independent-minded individual who holds a brief for no-one other than the reader, who remains free of obligations other than that of fidelity to the public interest, who is sincere, truthful, accurate and impartial – can be of limited use. It is, after all, one thing to glibly reel off such qualities to a wide-eyed cub reporter, but another entirely to match them to the underpaid reality of life in the newsroom. As the editor-in-chief of *Rapport*, Izak De Villiers, notes: "Freebies should be disallowed entirely – but then again, journalists should be paid a living wage."

Generally editors seem to see themselves as the moral guardians of their journalists. Richard

Steyn, Ebbe Dommissie (*Die Burger*), Aggrey Klaaste (*Sowetan*), Nigel Bruce (*Financial Mail*), Ken Owen (*Sunday Times*) and Jim Jones (*Business Day*) all emphasised their discretionary powers.

The rule seems to be that freebies "of value" are always referred to the editor and, outside of free travel, nearly always refused. Ken Owen states that the rules are flexible, but for him freebies are permissible subject to his approval and only when benefit ensues to the paper.

Motoring, in the words of Derek Smith (*Eastern Province Herald*) is an area of "particular controversy" with Aggrey Klaaste stating quite openly that his journalists are "overawed by the 'gifts' from car people". So controversial is the motoring scene that Ken Owen no longer has a motoring correspondent on the staff of the *Sunday Times* and prefers to buy in copy – thus giving his paper "a measure of protection in the editing".

This is not to say, of course, that there are no motoring journalists of integrity. There undoubtedly are, but editors nevertheless seem particularly keen to keep a close watch on motoring freebies.

Die Burger editor Ebbe Dommissie insists that motoring trips are individually approved, with the editor having final say as to which member of staff should accept.

The Star's Richard Steyn notes that mention should always be made of any free trips given by car manufacturers in any resulting story appearing in the newspaper.

For *Business Day* editor Jim Jones, the days of the "long-term trial" – which saw journalists given cars for lengthy periods – are definitely over.

Here follow some of the replies (edited in some cases for lack of space) to questions in the survey:

● What is your attitude towards gifts to journalists on your staff?

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“*The Financial Mail* discourages gifts ... unless they are small tokens at Christmas” (Nigel Bruce).

“No problem if the gift is small – I’d assume my staff would not or could not be bought by (say) a bottle of wine at Christmas. Anything larger should be discussed ...” (Jim Jones).

“No freebies allowed, whatsoever” (Izak de Villiers).

“Bigger ‘gifts’ are turned down immediately, especially if they appear to be bribery attempts” (Ebbe Dommissie).

● **What policy does your newspaper have on the issue of free movie or theatre tickets, free records or free lunches?**

“There are no free lunches” (Izak de Villiers).

“Cinema and theatre tickets are okay ... we do not encourage free lunches for restaurant reviewers” (Jim Jones).

“Critics in entertainment can accept free records, tapes, CDs etc; the gremlin of free lunches is debatable” (Aggrey Klaaste).

“Free lunches for restaurant critics are obviously out” (Derek Smith).

● **What is your newspaper’s policy towards promotional freebies for travel writers?**

“All invitations must be to the editor to be apportioned at his discretion” (Nigel Bruce).

“Keep a wary eye on it” (Ken Owen).

“Acceptable provided no strings are attached” (Derek Smith).

“Basically we would like to finance all trips of all our journalists, but budget constraints have to be considered ... Therefore, we accept promotional freebies” (Ebbe Dommissie).

● **What gifts are acceptable, if any?**

“A sample of a small product is okay. A car, boxes of wine, a word processor, TV set etc. definitely not!” (Ebbe Dommissie).

“Ball pens, neckties etc” (Jim Jones).

“A box of apples is in order. A diamond ring is not” (Izak de Villiers).

“I have once defaced and returned the title page of a special edition which I deemed an improper gift” (Ken Owen).

“No gifts are acceptable” (Aggrey Klaaste).

Journalists are not permitted to accept shares or special share options. Staff members have to disclose their share portfolios to the editor and are not allowed to write about companies in which they hold shares.

– Jim Jones
Business Day

● **What standpoint do you hold on the issue of financial journalists dealing in shares?**

“We don’t have such people on the *Sowetan*. Yet!” (Aggrey Klaaste).

“Not permitted in this company. All other journalists have to declare their holdings” (Derek Smith).

“The *FM* encourages its writers to invest in shares. They may not speculate or sell stocks forward in the hope of buying in at a lower price. All dealings and portfolios must be declared to the editor” (Nigel Bruce).

“Journalists are not permitted to accept shares or special share options. Staff members have to disclose their share portfolios to the editor and are not allowed to write about companies in which they hold shares” (Jim Jones).

“Our financial editors have to submit a complete list of their shareholdings. We regard it as highly unethical to promote shares they possess, and would take immediate action in such a case” (Ebbe Dommissie).

“All shares must be disclosed and transactions reported. My own shares, and my wife’s, were put into a blind trust some years ago and are administered on our behalf – transactions are reported to us quarterly, never in advance” (Ken Owen).

● **Any other comments?**

“I generally assume staff members cannot be ‘bought’. That’s backed up by a requirement that any ‘large’ freebie be disclosed to the editor” (Jim Jones).

“The answer is to raise the qualifications, salaries, status, and self-respect of journalists” (Ken Owen).

“We do think freebies may compromise some journalists, but in the current financial climate of newspapers they appear to be a necessary evil” (Ebbe Dommissie).

“Freebies are, however, inescapable ...” (Aggrey Klaaste).

“Provided they are modest, do not carry an obligation to provide compensatory editorial and are controlled by the editor, the *Financial Mail* has no objection in principle” (Nigel Bruce). ●