

Editorial



WHY, we are asked, did *Review* run a cover article in the last edition on intimidation of journalists, and particularly material harping back to the darkest days of the mid-80s? Surely with political transition underway, *Review* should avoid highlighting past divisions and rather look ahead to the prospect of a brighter future? These questions bear answering.

Were we being divisive in "trying to find hair in a bowl of dough," as the Afghan proverb has it?

We think not. But in case of misunderstandings regarding motive, we focused on intimidation of journalists precisely because there *are* no guarantees in the process of building democracy in South Africa. There is no sure outcome; and now, more than ever, media need to highlight obstacles on the road to an open society.

Intimidation of journalists is one such obstacle and it is being reported by so many different sources that we believe it has become the major problem facing the media in this country. It is a dangerous development because not only does it limit reporters from doing their job, it also threatens to hold any future democracy to ransom.

Over the recent past a picture has emerged of journalists being subjected to intense pressure from various political interests to abrogate their calling as recorders of objective fact and instead to become silent witnesses or purveyors of partisan fiction.

Equally 'Advocacy Journalism' weened an entire generation of reporters and commentators who defined media as a 'site of struggle' so that in South Africa truth was often the first casualty.

The result of this self-censorship on the one hand and propaganda on the other is that the citizenry remain uninformed and thus can fall prey easily to totalitarian solutions.

And how often in the past has an uninformed public been misled into catastrophe? Remember National Socialism? Remember the Gulag! History is replete with examples, not the least of them the cynical manipulation of white public opinion in Rhodesia and the disinformation and censorship which supported Apartheid in South Africa. In all these cases, media were held hostage to malignant political interests through censorship, manipulation, hostile legislation or intimidation.

Intense pressure to conform to the dominant will has always been a feature of society and journalists live under constant psychological pressure to promote one set of players to the exclusion of others. But in South Africa journalists have been caught in the crossfire of competing wills in a climate of general intolerance.

Our political culture clearly has some way to go before it accepts the journalist's independent role of watchdog in the democratic process.

Democracy, after all, is not to be found in fine sentiments, social structures or even in the law itself. Rather it lives in peoples' minds and it is clear that some political players in South Africa have not yet grasped this essential point. Those who intimidate journalists in the name of the State or 'struggle' are enemies of democracy because by manipulating information they display what St. Augustine called *libido dominandi* – the lust to dominate. And if information is power, restricting it must certainly limit people's power.

Only an informed public can make sensible decisions about their future governance. For liberty knows this sure thing: that given the essential facts, the man-in-the-street has boundless common sense, and armed with full and accurate information, he is unlikely ever to vote for anything which might usher in his own bondage.

It is in pursuit of a full and accurate picture, and in the hope of a true democracy that we focused attention on the intimidation of journalists. ●

WE are gratified that the *Rhodes Journalism Review* is making inroads into southern Africa as a whole – which was its intended objective from inception – and we hope the day will come when occasional editions can be edited and even produced in other regional centres such as Harare, Lusaka, Luanda or Maputo because we believe we must advance journalistic skills and pool resources as a region.

Besides reaching senior media executives and academics in the Frontline States, copies of *Review* are now circulated as far afield as Liberia, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Cameroon, and we intend to pursue this important dialogue with our African colleagues whenever and wherever possible.

We also have pleasure in announcing our first Editorial Board member from the Frontline States in Fred M'membe, managing director of Post Newspapers Limited of Lusaka, Zambia.

Mr M'membe is one a small but growing and outspoken group of young journalists in the region who hold that commercial viability is the greatest safeguard of editorial independence, and that journalists must be entirely independent of the State if they are to do their jobs effectively.

His contribution to journalism in the region lies in his brave independent editorial line in a country which, effectively has had no free press since gaining independence on October 24, 1964. ●