



COURTESY: MAYIBUYE

BURNING THE MESSENGER

*ANC supporters converged on the offices of three newspapers in Port Elizabeth and burnt copies of the papers in the street. Editor-in-chief, **DEREK SMITH** explores this extraordinary attack on his editorial policy*

BEING pulled off the tennis court on a Saturday afternoon to be told that the three newspapers you oversee are to be summarily boycotted tends to focus the mind. Negatively.

The league game is desperately close and you're into the deciding set. Like Drake with the armada fair in sight, you stoop to finish the game. I am not sure if history tells us who won the bowls, but let me confess for the record that the tennis was lost. Game, set, match.

But the agonising goes on. Why? Why would the ANC and its alliance partners, without warning, talks or consultation, announce such drastic action against a stable of newspapers which for so long have identified themselves with the anti-apartheid struggle? Was it something we said?

Yes it was, as the *Evening Post* report of the announcement subsequently makes clear. Before a mass-action crowd of thousands in the Port Elizabeth market square, ANC regional chairperson Linda Mti spelt it out:

"We, the oppressed people, will withdraw our buying power from the *Evening Post* and the *Eastern Province Herald*. We will not allow them to be sold in

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our areas, especially the *EP Herald* which has been distorting our events, not publishing our statements and printing editorials which have been against the ANC and other peoples' organisations.

"Our reporters have no say in the management we are calling for the restructuring of these two institutions. Our people must be in the management of the two newspapers."

Yes, well, we sometimes complain about the management, too. But "our reporters" seems a bit much. We thought they were *our* reporters.

Then comes the soul-searching amid attempts to try to get together to talk the matter over. How have we distorted events? What statements didn't we publish? But complaints against our editorials are accepted.

Guilty as charged. We have written many editorials critical of ANC actions. Of course, we have also written many others supporting the ANC view. And, with equal vigour, we have panned everyone else in the public eye from the Nats to the Boerestaaters.

There is some solace in a statement from ANC headquarters referring to recent guidelines issued by Nelson Mandela. Effectively he says the liberation movement must learn to accept criticism. If democracy is the goal, tolerance comes with the territory.

Nevertheless, there is more trouble ahead. On a dismal Wednesday following the boycott announcement, several hundred demonstrators arrive in the street outside Newspaper House. A loud-speaker blares, rousing speeches are delivered and a nervous editor-in-chief, flanked by staffers from all departments, is handed two copies of a memorandum listing the sins of his newspapers.

The show climaxes with a pyrotechnical display of newspaper burning and as the remnants smoulder on, the crowd moves off on its next assignment.

News editor André Erasmus dubs it the 'Baakens Street Braai', but it is difficult at that moment to see the funny side. Not only is there a clear commercial threat to the welfare of the newspapers and the staff who man (sorry, people) them, but it takes a sterner constitution than mine to conceal the nervousness we are all feeling. Posters demand that 'Derick Smith must resign' and go back to Rhodesia (which he left 33 years ago). All very personal.

The points in the memo turn out to be somewhat different to those made at the mass meeting.

The demands include an end to biased reporting and continuous bashing of the ANC-led alliance; balanced and proper coverage of news; a restructuring of the *EP Herald* and *Evening Post*; an apology; affirmative action to address imbalances of race and gender in the employment and promotion of staff; the *Evening Post* to work towards promoting

harmonious relations in the community; democratisation and more consumer participation in determining policy; and a clear social responsibility programme to plough back profits for the upliftment of our people.

We wrack our brains. What bias? What imbalances? What "balanced and proper" reportage of news? We already pride ourselves on our equal opportunity employment policies and our balanced coverage. But perhaps it's true — if you stand in the middle you get run over.

A meeting is held some time later but we remain in the dark. Little progress is made and no examples are given on which we can act. But knowing that the *Post's* 'Extra' edition, which concentrates on township news, has been a long-standing sore point, we announce that it is to be discontinued. Soon (in the event, on October 5) a new edition, combining Extra and Stop Press, hits the streets.

For the rest, we make it clear that we welcome input from the community. If we are not serving our market, let us know. We take criticism from readers seriously and will act if lapses are pointed out. But on one matter we remain adamant: we will not abrogate our democratic right to freedom of expression.

However, the meeting fails and we are left none the wiser on specifics. It is agreed that I will submit a further document stating our attitude towards the sentiments expressed in the preamble to the memorandum.

Our answering memo is duly deliv-

ered to the ANC offices but in the heat of mass action, it remains low on the priority list and the *Herald* hears nothing for several weeks.

In the interim, *Evening/Week-end Post* editor Neville Woudberg manages to organise an informal discussion with certain leaders of the alliance to explain the workings of a newspaper.

The get-together is friendly and, given the undertaking to get rid of the Extra edition, the boycott of the *Post* is lifted about a month after it began.

However, the action against the *Herald* continues and we have to sweat it out for a further month before a four-man delegation arrives to inform us that the Broad Forum has suspended the boycott of the *Herald* as well.

Our plea at this meeting is the same as it was at the first — please speak to us if there are problems and give us a chance to put matters right before taking drastic action.

Our plan now is to hold regular meetings to ensure that we understand each other and, hopefully, this arrangement will create a happier environment in which to operate.

But the memories of burning newspapers and placards declaring "Derick Smith must resign" will not be easy to forget. Nor will I forget the GM surveying the scene and pronouncing it "terrible".

I couldn't have agreed more. After all, everybody should know that Derek is spelt with two E's and no C. ●

Media must reflect the changing society says ANC Eastern Cape

IN opting for a boycott, we (the ANC Eastern Cape Region) wished to express our observations on the unbecoming attitude adopted by the *Eastern Province Herald* and *Evening Post* newspapers.

This attitude had become intolerable. We believe that newspapers should, without bias, grant an automatic right of reply regarding information or opinion published about any person or institution.

Apartheid and the structure of ownership of the papers in this country, have meant that the majority of the people have no media of their own.

If the owners of the media do not allow the free flow of information or inculcate a culture of open debate, but instead drive the communities apart through false reporting and misinformation, those who are targets of this misinformation and disinformation have to seek other ways of righting these wrongs.

The media has the right to criticise the ANC and its allies,

but we cannot take vilification and the 'no-nonsense' stance adopted by the *Herald* and *Post* against our campaigns which did not suit them. Whereas the boycott has been resolved through meetings, it remained, however, our right to choose the form of struggle against the attitude of Times Media Limited in the region. We chose the boycott.

As we see it, the media in general and the print media in particular, should reflect the changing society by promoting the norms, values and morals that are embodied in the vision of a new South Africa.

Otherwise, the media can become the backbone of the old South Africa, particularly if it continues with the misinformation about the struggle, as was the case throughout the years. Their readers, especially the white readers, have a fundamental right to know what is really taking place.

— *Unsigned opinion piece by the ANC Eastern Cape Region, published in Mayibuye, September 1992.*