

IN my opinion the most immediate, indeed the most important, challenge facing the media today is one of credibility — and here I don't mean only the SABC.

The so-called mainstream newspapers (i.e. the major English-language national and regional newspapers owned by the Argus and Times Media Limited groups), suffer a two-fold credibility gap from the perspective of the black community.

The first problem of credibility which the mainstream newspapers have is that, to all intents and purposes, they are widely viewed as being the agents of big capital. This perception, right or wrong, has been given credence by the concentration of ownership in too few but economically powerful hands, and cemented by the undeniable fact that there is pretty little to choose from by way of diversity between newspapers owned by Argus and TML. When you consider that both groups are firmly in the clutches of the all-embracing Anglo-American empire, then you perhaps begin to see why this near-monopoly of the English-language press is largely perceived to serve white economic power interests.

Next, the mainstream English-language press is seen as serving white political power interests. The argument has been that the English-language press in the past opposed government policy not so much because editors and their newspapers believed in fundamental change for its sake, but rather that they would oppose the political injustices and imbalances to the extent that such opposition did not threaten white privilege.

Segregating news on a racial basis

Liberals will be only too familiar with this line of thought, because for years it was used to scoff at their efforts in opposing apartheid and, at any rate, the majority of English-language newspapers have always fought the liberal cause.

Perhaps it was inevitable that, granted the highly polarised and ruthlessly segregationist nature of the South Africa of past decades, someone in the English-language newspaper groups would dream up the idea of segregating news strictly on a racial basis. And so, 'apartheid' editions of the same newspapers were born, going variously by the titles of "Africa" or "Township" or "Extra" editions.

I am not at all certain if any worthwhile purpose was served by the practice of segregating editions of the same paper, a practice which still persists and which has now been adopted by the Afrikaans press. I know all the arguments both managements and editors have always advanced to justify the creation and existence of the separate editions, but, when all is said and done, separate can never be equal — at least not in the eyes of those for whom such editions are intended. I suppose you could turn this argument around and say: "Oh, but at least those papers with special editions are

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Media in South Africa suffer credibility problems from the black perspective, but there are a number of ways in which they can put their houses in order

only being half segregationist; what about newspapers which are totally black such as *City Press* and *Sowetan*? They are 100 percent segregationist." That may well be so in theory, but that would be missing the point. In any event, those selfsame newspapers are owned by the same people and publishing companies which are guilty of the sin of separate editions.

Two other branches of the media suffer a lack of credibility for an entirely different reason. The so-called alternative media and the SABC are in the same camp as organs of political partisanship.

A gross disservice to democracy

Anyone who has followed SABC television and radio reports since the early part of 1990 will readily agree that there has been some noticeable, almost tangible, change in comparison to the preceding era of "Total Onslaught" thinking. Yet that change is not nearly enough: the corporation is still heavily biased towards the National Party and President De Klerk's government. News is still slanted to favour the government and, in these days of endless and mindless violence in the black community, it is also slanted heavily in favour of the government's security forces.

The alternative newspapers, on the other hand, have faithfully served the cause of extra-parliamentary forces, in this case the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party and their allies.

This is not to deny that alternative newspapers have performed some sterling work in their own right, especially during the dark days of the emergency when censorship was every pressman's shadow, and when the mainstream "establishment" press suffered a paralysis of inaction. Indeed it is newspapers such as *Vrye Weekblad* which blew the lid on the horror of police murder squads.

But the open flirtation between the alternative press and the extra-parliamentary outfits does about as much good as the close relationship between the SABC and the government; such collaboration rapidly diminishes the true functions of the press, and lessens to a very great degree the fundamental right of society to be informed in the strict sense of the term.

There is another form of credibility gap which we suffer as media people, and which is self-inflicted.

There is a disturbing, yet very fashionable, trend among journalists nowadays to place themselves firmly inside the camps of political organisations and parties. Chances are that if you gave me some names of practising journalists I could easily and correctly place at least 60 percent of those names in one political camp or other.

This is a gross disservice to the ideal of democracy to which we all aspire, and the reasons are not very difficult to find. Journalists who have become travelling ambassadors for political parties and organisations have lost their right to be seen and labelled as

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journalists; they are no more than propagandists for their organisations and parties. While the main culprits in this regard are black journalists, an increasing number of whites are jumping on the bandwagon.

All too often we moan about harassment and intimidation in the execution of our tasks, and much of the time it is true that faceless censors and unruly mobs want us to toyi-toyi to their tune. But there is hardly ever smoke without fire: we are being harassed and intimidated in our communities and by elements loyal to political organisations because in many cases we ourselves first planted the idea in their minds that we could be pliable political tools sincerely serving a determined purpose.

Clearly that is about as sensible as hitching a lift on the back of a tiger: you are safe for as long as you remain perched on its back. As soon as you disembark you are pretty certain to end in the tiger's belly.

Colleagues who bend over backwards to ingratiate themselves with politicians and organisations do our society, black and white, a gross disservice in another way: they are less likely to question their political masters if they overstep the mark, and are more likely to gloss over their shortcomings than expose them. And the politicians, comfortable in the knowledge that they have the journalists "in the bag", are more likely to do as they please. The continent of Africa is replete with examples of this sort of thing.

I for one am very wary of seminars which focus on harassment and intimidation of journalists, especially when the key participants are confirmed and articulate masters of bias, and conveniently omit to spell out their true role in this unsavoury state of affairs.

To sum up, let me first acknowledge unreservedly that despite the ills I have outlined — and they are by no means spelt out in full — both the mainstream and alternative media have performed some admirable tasks in the past: the Info Scandal, the Biko affair, the horror of the death of Stompie Moeketsi, the police murder squads and the CCB, the Matthew Goniwe disclosures, and many other exposés.

Yet we need, as the press, to do a lot more. I have a few suggestions to offer in order to address some of the issues I have touched on, as an attempt to meet the challenges facing the press in a changing society:

1. Let us have a press which probes endlessly. All too often we set out to sensationalise an issue, and leave it halfway through with no solutions. A ready example was the glaring lack of follow-through in the months after Winnie Mandela's witnesses retracted their evidence and publicly confessed to perjury. None of the media, to my knowledge, vigorously pursued Justice authorities to find out about the latest state of play. Another example was the Matthew Goniwe case. After sensationalising disclosures of State Security

involvement, there was a deafening silence in that quarter. The Codesa deadlock was yet another example, with newspapers screaming "Crisis" and "Deadlock" and "Showdown" and nothing more. To play our proper role we must inform, and to get information we must probe.

2. My second suggestion, in addition to having a probing press, is to address more adequately the needs of our changing society. First is the fact that residential areas and therefore entire communities are undergoing irreversible changes which mirror the New South Africa. Here I am talking specifically of the formerly "whites-only" suburbs which are beginning to lose their previous racial identity forever. Rather than continue endlessly with separate editions, pretty soon we shall have to face the fact that it is going to be very difficult determining readership — particularly economically active readers — in racial terms only.

3. Already there have been rumblings about nationalising the SABC and having all sorts of people appointed — God knows by whom — to its board. In my opinion that may be desirable on paper; in practice it is not. I spent quite some time in Namibia reporting on that country before its independence, and

for some time afterwards. The South West African Broadcasting Corporation was worse than anything you ever saw, yet since independence it is almost unspeakable. Rather the SABC must move swiftly and run itself along the lines of the BBC, with total independence of the corporation being the operative principle.

4. The alternative press must grow up and become newspapers. They may well have served a valuable role in the past, giving a platform and voice to liberation movements when those were banned and the mainstream media largely shied away from challenging the laws forbidding the press to quote banned individuals and organisations. In a more relaxed political atmosphere, the alternative media, indeed all media, must now apply the same vigour of the past to exposing corruption and injustices wherever these occur — inside and outside government.

5. Monopoly, especially in the English-language Press, must be meaningfully reduced, and ideally boardrooms should reflect the components of our entire society. But this is not an argument for affirmative action because I simply do not believe in that concept if merit is not the sole criterion for evaluation. What I am saying is that there are quite a few people of colour in the professions today whose contributions to boardroom discussions and decisions could spell the difference between a healthy and vibrant press and one which is prescriptive and fumbling. ●

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