

THE EVENTS that recently pumped adrenalin through all journalists in this country — the bombs and death, the elections, the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela and the transfer of the symbols of power to a democratic government — are behind us now. We feel as if we've just landed on the ground with a bump; we now have to cover boring provincial council meetings and unexciting visits by foreign heads of state. But as we sit at our favourite after-hours drinking places talking about what happened, we sometimes get the nagging feeling that there has been a sea change not only in the country but also in the media.

Newspaper managers are trying to understand why there has been a sharp decline in circulation since the elections. In fact, the circulation figures for the first six months of this year from the Audit Bureau of Circulation are going to surprise many. Journalists have the feeling of something missing as they try to satisfy their readers, listeners and viewers.

Truth is that the media are in exactly the same position as the rest of the country, going through a revolution we did not prepare for. On one side, the readers, listeners and viewers are changing; on the other, the fundamental structures and tenets of the media industry are being questioned.

The coverage of the elections showed that newspapers have to revise the way they cover news.

In the days of apartheid the electronic media, owned and controlled very tightly by Government, were not a credible source of news. When people saw a story on their television screens or heard it on radio, they still needed newspapers to confirm it. We cheerfully published yesterday's news (news?) knowing that the readers would continue to buy us. Then came the elections.

Television and radio's 24-hour coverage of the results and the running commentaries given by "authorities" as well as by ordinary folk high on uhuru changed the comfortable lives of newspaper editors. Any story or comment they published on the results was too late for their readers. Suddenly the tortoise was faster than the hare. People were watching results at midnight, and the best that the morning newspapers could give them were the results at seven the night before.

The range of the commentators, from across the political spectrum, transformed the image of the SABC from biased source to a more credible one. Suddenly the SABC is the major source of information for the country and newspapers will have to find other ways of being useful to their readers. Editors will have to start with the assumption that the readers already know the story and the newspaper therefore has to complement the electronic media.

Editors have not been fast in grabbing this lesson.

Yet the sports festival that followed the elections— Wimbledon, the World Cup, the cricket and rugby



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tours by South African teams, etc — confirmed the lesson even more strongly. Radio and television were miles ahead of any newspaper as viewers walked around all day bleary-eyed after watching World Cup games all night and the newspapers continued to publish stale news.

All this, however, does not mean that the electronic media can now rest comfortably and watch the death of print. They were lucky that the elections were followed by such important sports events. The festival merely gave the electronic media space to think about their future and about the way they cover news. Can they make ordinary stories, like a state visit by Francois Mitterand, interesting for their viewers and their listeners? Can they make them understand the rights they now have under the constitution, rights South Africans of all colours have never had before? Can they make the viewers and listeners aware that they now have recourse when their rights are threatened? Can they make the reader and the viewer vicarious participants in the drama of life? Can the news broadcasts become a true reflection of society or do the journalists still see the world through white, middle class, male eyes?

Chances are that for a while there will be restlessness in the media as the readers and viewers out there demand that we change our glasses while we hold tenaciously to our jaundiced ones.

Argus Newspapers anticipated the demands for unbundling by selling most of the *Sowetan* to a largely black company. Other newspaper companies are also talking about unbundling. The interesting thing about the unbundling, however, is that only publications that were all along perceived as black are being sold to black companies: the money spinners, like *The Star*, *Beeld* and *Sunday Times*, remain under white control. The unbundling is still tentative, as it has been in all industries, but chances are that down the line there will be greater demands that business must reflect the same ratios as society in general.

We can expect turmoil in newsrooms as blacks demand a bigger voice in the decisions there and the present rulers of those newsrooms feel insecure and question the competence of those who would take their places. There will be hard questions about an almost lily-white editorial management team at publications like *The Star*. There will be questions about training for leadership roles in the media. Some organisations, such as the SABC, are already confronted by the questions; the rest of the media will follow.

This restlessness, distressing as it may be to those directly involved, only shows we are part of the bigger world we try to reflect in our publications and on our airwaves.

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