



Guest Editorial

Mike Siluma, editor of the *Sowetan*, says editorial independence depends on interdependence.

Journalists need an editorial charter, but more importantly, they need other groups to agree on it.

AN EDITORIAL CHARTER will become a piece of paper unless there is a broad consensus between media and civil society, press and politicians, proprietors and government, editors and journalists.

People sometimes talk about the role of the press as if journalists were independent of proprietors. It's a misconception because you can't have journalists operating outside the economics of journalism. You can't expect someone to bankroll a publication and then walk away without worrying what will be published. That's not the real world.

All media needs capital, and this has to come from someone. It's the taxpayer via the government for the SABC — or it's private money.

So, the role of the press can't be defined by journalists alone. And besides the part to be played by the owners, there are many other people who feel that media must play a role that is accountable.

The most immediate stakeholders are the owners and shareholders. There is a direct interest here, because they're putting in the money, and expecting to get a return. But government and civil society also want to be in on defining what the role of the media should be.

Until, and unless, we define what this role is, and define it jointly, all our different propositions are going to be problematic. And friction between government and the media in particular is going to increase — without even the new constitution being able to resolve this contradiction.

The result could be a drift into a situation where government and legislators are hostile to the media and a move to control the media will become irresistible.

Journalists, editors and proprietors need to get together first to resolve internal tensions amongst themselves about the role of the press. Advertisers don't have a direct stake in the information side of media, but in trading money for audiences. If their interest was in democracy, a paper like *New Nation* would not have had a problem in securing ads.

But once consensus is reached with journalists, editors and owners, then the media needs to go out to civil society and government.

What needs to be discussed?

If we accept that the press must have a role in a democracy, it should be to facilitate the acquisition of information by people so they can make informed decisions about their lives.

In a democracy like ours, with 40 million people, only a tiny proportion have access to print. Even television is not accessible to the majority. Whose job is it then to make sure that they get the information that will allow them to participate in this democracy?

Where the majority of the media leans towards the "have's", how can you have a fully participative democracy? You need more media, and more diversity of voices. In the same way the government supports the Human Rights Commission, it should consider the possibility, together with the media, to set up a fund to be run independently, to help support as many diverse media as possible.

Tension is not necessarily a bad thing — in fact it is inherent in a democracy — as between political parties, the judiciary and other branches of the state, administration and the media, and so on. The challenge is to manage these relationships.

In calling for government involvement in agreeing a charter, I am not talking about politicians dictating what the press should do. The present government is tolerant, but a number of incidents indicate that there is a lack of understanding about the role of the press. As times change, one could get people in government who are not sympathetic, and who will change the rules.

There is an element of self-preservation in engaging with stakeholders, but there is also a bigger issue at stake. It is in the interests of democracy to build a kind of social compact on the role of the press. Control by government is not a threat to the media as an institution per se, but to the people who need information about where the country is going.

The problem at present is that when a section 205 subpoena is issued, editors make a fuss and the Attorney-General retreats. Then no one thinks of it again, until it happens once more. Editors need to recognise the state has an interest in this issue, because law and order should be maintained: thus the state is a stakeholder in the issue of journalists as witnesses. At the same time, the state should not seek to use journalists as its informants. That's not their job.

We need a national charter that states clearly the rights and obligations of the media. There is an expectation that the press must have a role to play, but this is not elaborated upon. And it is not only a question of the politicians, but also of the proprietors.

If you take away the proprietor, you have no

press. We need to address this reality. There is a tension between the need to make money and to inform the public. Media organisations are not charities. But at the same time, we are not in business solely and exclusively to make money.

Whoever buys a paper, sees a particular role for it in society. Newspapers are not money-spinners, even though they may make money. There has to be some kind of obligation on people who own media to do certain things, especially when some people have access to ownership of communications and not others.

We know that editors and journalists are not free agents. They act within a structure and are appointed by the board, or in a few cases by a committee of civil society. A board should set broad parameters. Accordingly, a left-leaning board will not appoint a right-wing editor.

It is not coincidental that, historically, owners of the English press appointed liberal editors supporting the Democratic Party and its predecessors. Editors are appointed to run certain kinds of newspapers.

Yet owners are human. Even if there are general parameters, they may try to wield influence within them. Which is why we need an editorial charter setting out all our obligations.

This is an insurance for editors, because it means one disagreement does not have to result in dismissal. It also means there must be a transparent process.

The alternative is a prospect of editors and owners locked in endless disputes. A charter could at least regulate differences.

The critical question that needs to be resolved is profit versus a political/moral role in a democracy. If there is a choice, what would we choose? At present, we're walking a tightrope in the midst of much confusion.

Consensus is also needed between editors and our editorial staffs.

This should not be confused with total partnership. An editor doesn't have to be dictatorial: he or she can be consultative without being paralysed by consultation. There has to be leadership; the question is the style of leadership. Either way, reporters need to have their say in drawing up a charter.

Editors should take responsibility to lead this process. It is they who are in the eye of the storm — under pressure to meet social, political and commercial demands.