



BY CHARLENE SMITH

Guest editorial

Charlene Smith on the latest batch of foreign correspondents and their lack of respect.

IN SOME WAYS you can judge the level of international news interest in a country by the quality of the foreign correspondents sent to cover it.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, South Africa had the world's best. Joe Lelyveld, who became the New York Times foreign editor, wrote with astonishing clarity and insight about South Africa, in brilliantly researched pieces. Michael Parks, who is now the Los Angeles Times editor, was meticulous and humble, he hired South African researchers, he consulted with the widest range of South Africans to try and figure out a story we ourselves did not agree on or fully comprehend.

The Lelyvelds and Parks were brilliant because they respected the people of their host countries and their quirks, even if they did not agree with them.

But democracy brings unexpected difficulties, ours is that the story has been downgraded as a major foreign correspondent posting, we now have the foreign correspondents' kindergarten corps. The brat pack in all their big mouth, brainless glory.

That does not mean we do not have some fine foreign journalists in our midst. We do. Buchizya Mtseka of Reuters is one, Victor Mallet of the Financial Times another, but their careful prose is drowned out by the self-opinionated drivel of the brat pack.

Of which, the prune-like John Pilger, who so many left-leaning journalists had for so long admired – myself included – until he came here and produced a documentary of the most puerile banality, and where the most important opinion was his own.

September's conflict in Lesotho again showed what a bunch of incompetents most were. Never have so many journalists been injured in such a short space of time, despite years of far more violent incidents in South Africa's turbulent past. It was often because of arrogance, and an absolute lack of respect for Africa and Africans.

One idiot managed to be in two such incidents. In the first he passed a two finger insult at an approaching mob, and then when the vehicle he was rapidly reversing stalled, and the mob caught up with him, he tried to punch one of the leaders. This is a man who should rather stay at home and write about the consumer price index. Fortunately, he was with a woman foreign correspondent, also a

novice to Southern Africa, who instinctively did the right thing. She got out of the car, focused on one person who seemed to be a leader and calmly talked their way out of it. But not before the mob had destroyed the vehicle.

In the second incident, Rambo was travelling with another Boys Own hero – the class of foreign correspondents who sit in hotel bars and trade war stories, as their runners bring back information about what is really happening at the front for a few measly dollars. The two had gone through some roadblocks when they had a bad feeling about another looming before them. Did they turn the car and flee? Nope, they stopped some 50m or so away from the roadblock, an incredibly suspicious act in a war situation. The soldiers at the roadblock opened fire, Rambo's pal was hit and only then did they turn and race for the border.

After that, SA readers were astonished to read the opinions of Sam Kiley of The Times of London, reproduced in the Sunday Independent here, containing the most vitriolic racism I have ever read in this country. Africans, he expostulated, were not only chronically war-prone, but amazingly inept, their housebuilding capacity, he wrote, extended only to the construction of "biodegradable houses". Actually, I would have thought environmentalists would have applauded.

Then the Mail&Guardian carried an article by Suzanne Daley, the New York Times bureau chief here about what an awful bunch of sexist South African men are. This is a correspondent from a country that has bemused the whole world with its obsession with the sexual exploits of its president, a society where women keep semen stained dresses and actively pursue the president. By contrast SA has shown minimal interest, other than approval, in the love life of our 80-year-old president who lived with his wife before marriage, and of two past presidents, who have shown, well over the age of 60 that we probably don't need Viagra in this country.

The evidence she presented of sexism was indeed shocking. Our 80-

year-old president jested of her skinny frame, that he preferred women with more meat on their bones. Daley wrote that she was humiliated. In my view, humourless seems a more appropriate term. The 70-year-old leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party made a gentle joke about her carrying her husband's business cards that would infuriate only the most insecure of feminists. A bank and a removal company worker wanted her husband to co-sign documents. Gee whizz, what signs of awful repression, what is a woman to do?

What really infuriates women are people like Daley, who claim they are feminist and give such trivia as examples of our oppression.

This is a country where a woman is raped every 26 seconds, where many battle to support their children because maintenance laws are inadequate, or endure spousal abuse because policing and laws to prevent domestic violence are not as good as they need to be.

It is also a country that has some of the most far-reaching anti-gender discrimination laws in the world, and where these are put into place in the workplace and political forums. There are more women in senior government posts in SA than in the US. Women can safely and cheaply have abortions here, without fear of being shot at or jeered by anti-abortion protesters outside clinics. Lesbians can proudly announce the fact and ensure their partner shares company medical and pension benefits with them.

Mandela and Buthelezi have more women in their political parties at senior level, and have more strategies to empower not only those women but all women than all US parties combined – and we don't do it for sound bite value here. We do it because it must be done. There is a recognition that there can be no human liberty if sectors of humankind – women, the disabled, the aged – are discriminated against.

A liberation struggle slogan of the 1980s notes: an injury to one, is an injury to all. But then again Daly, who wrote that she anticipated "snakes, elephants, malaria ... racism, bug-filled hotel rooms and the heartbreak of watching children die", clearly didn't research the country at all, but applied the generic racism Americans apply to Africa: it is not a continent of many peoples, countries and norms, it's just a single mess.

And sexism is not confined to SA men and our society. I was married to an American for 10 years, he and the US news organisations he represented thought it was fine that I should give up my career to follow him around the world. I didn't. I've had US journalists, academics and politicians make passes at me in less than discreet ways here and in the US. More than one approach would have made good tabloid copy.

There was the very famous Washington correspondent who arrived at my door at 1am after receiving a brush off at a cocktail party hours earlier. He extracted my address from others, scouted an after hours town for a magnificent bouquet of flowers and a bottle of France's finest champagne, then believed that not only would I be thrilled to see him at 1am, but so overawed by the buying power of the US dollar in after hours Johannesburg that I would sleep with him. Not a chance.

While pornography flourishes in the US, SA showed an initial flurry of interest in pornography when censor laws were eased in the early '90s, then all of SA society yawned and the pornographers went bankrupt.

Real women aren't hung up about their sexuality. It's part of us. We can be feminist without having to wear hiking boots and military khakis.

In the 1990s when wars were being launched from hostels in SA townships and no man would dare enter, I as a woman journalist reported extensively on them, because I bothered to think about the psychology of the people who inhabited them. Of course they were sexist. So I wore conservative calf-length frocks and was able safely to enter and speak to people no man could. If I'd worn jeans I would not have had a chance. But getting the story by understanding the culture of those I dealt with was more important to me than the lowbrow whinging of post-feminist suburban whiners.

And that's the bottom line Suzanne, if you want to deal with people who behave like Americans (according to your version) stay in the US. If you want to be a serious foreign correspondent, show respect to the people, the culture and the countries you work in, even if you don't agree with them.

And yes, there is sexism here, but sexism too doesn't deserve bland brushstrokes. Finding the reasons why is far more fascinating. Let's read a great story from you delving further into that.

Charlene Smith is a freelance journalist who has lived and worked as a writer, radio journalist and television documentary maker, specialising in politics and economics in South Africa – her home, and in Japan, the USA and Argentina.

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