CARTOON: CHIP SNADDON

the 'communication thing'

How foreign correspondents shift between praise-singer and mudslinger

Covering South Africa fairly, argues **Werner Vogt**, means striking a balance between recognising both the country's "successes and failures". It also means addressing officials' perceptions of bad press, and waiting for them to answer the phone...

The task is big, so is the exposure. As a foreign correspondent in South Africa you are expected to assess the politics, the economy and the social development of a country as big as Britain, France and Germany together – and consequently present a fair and balanced picture. Most of us deal, moreover, with the neighbouring countries as well; many of us even write about the whole of sub-saharan Africa. What is done by dozens of colleagues in a local newspaper group has to be condensed into a one-man show in the office of a foreign correspondent.

Millions consume the foreign coverage produced by a limited number of people. Although not the main audience, the diplomatic corps and department of foreign affairs here are the parties most interested in – and sometimes most concerned about – the foreign correspondents' work. After all, they stand a lot to lose or gain from the way press coverage swings. Yet while reporting about a certain country or region of the world certainly has some influence on the decisions of overseas business leaders, it's a false assumption that major investment decisions depend on the goodwill of the foreign press. Apartheid South Africa was hammered daily in the foreign press, yet many countries like the United Kingdom decided not to propagate disinvestment, because according to the former ambassador to Pretoria, Sir Robin Renwick (today the Lord Renwick of Clifton), it is comparatively easy to drive a company out of Africa, and much more difficult to persuade it to return.

In South Africa there is an interesting difference in the government's interaction with the local press and its relations with the foreign press. Any harsh comment in a South African newspaper is immediately countered by a letter to the editor by the minister in question or one of his key officials. Moreover, in the more than 1,000 days I have lived in this country I have witnessed several vitriolic attacks on the local media by the most important representatives of the state and its ruling party, up to the former President, Nelson Mandela.

It is thus surprising that the foreign press is hardly ever criticised by the same government. Yet surely the government or the African National Congress as a party does not agree with certain aspects of our judgment. Every now and then we do, however, discern a degree of dissatisfaction. Former Minister of Education and new ambassador to Berlin, Prof. Sibusiso Bengu, is quoted in *The Star* (September 2, 1999) as blaming the media for the – in his view – exaggerated focus on crime in the German business community.

I do not know what German language newspapers Mr. Bengu reads regularly but I challenge him to come up with evidence of his alleged exaggeration of the crime problem by the German language media. I read the most prestigious daily of the Bundesrepublik, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, on a daily basis – as do thousands of executives in Germany. There has certainly not been any trace of disproportionate reporting on crime in South Africa in this publication. Mr. Bengu is obviously not aware of the fact that the South African subsidiaries of German companies cannot help touching on the crime question in their annual reporting. When, for instance, the entire stock of personal computers in a German company in Johannesburg is stolen not once but twice in a row, it will not go unnoticed in head office.

President Thabo Mbeki is more nimble in his language. During the Durban summit of the World Economic Forum and the Southern African Development Community, Mr. Mbeki mentioned problems with 'this communication thing', meaning the allegedly wrong overseas notions (allegedly gleaned from media reports) about the attractiveness of Southern Africa from an investment perspective. In November 1998 the then-Deputy President asked with an expression of bewilderment: "What in God's name have we done wrong to create these unfavourable perceptions about South Africa in Europe?"

I was not without empathy for Mr. Mbeki. He must have heard foreign complaints about the crime problem on scores of occasions. Yet the only realistic way forward for South Africa is to attack the real problems of this country rather than the unfavourable comments about it. The best a foreign correspondent can do is to strike a balance between reports of success and reports of failure.

Coming back to the relationship between the South African government and the media, the picture is a varied one. Mainstream events like the Parliamentary briefing weeks in Cape Town or important state visits are well organised by the Government Communication and Information Service (GCIS). The same cannot be said about media relations officers and spokespeople of various ministries, including the Office of the President. While it is obvious that the President of any country does not have time to talk to all the journalists who would wish to interview him, it is equally clear that in his unofficial function as his country's chief marketing officer he should try and accomodate as many media contingents as he can. In requesting such an 'audience', even collectively, Foreign Correspondent Association representatives are usually confronted with one-way communication for months on end, whereby faxes are lost not only once but several times and potential reservations for big enough venues expire one after the other.

Endless fights against red tape are not likely to create a more favourable picture of the country. If the South African government is serious about marketing, about tackling 'the communication thing', key officials whose only task is to communicate should perhaps start returning phone calls.

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