

Journalism

or Commerce?



Prejudice and pursuit of profit are compromising media's credibility, argues **Muzi Kuzwayo**

It's as old as history itself. The people that are closest to you are the ones that lead to your downfall. Shaka Zulu was killed by his brothers, Dingane and Mpande. Julius Caesar by Brutus, Abel by Cain, and Jesus was betrayed by Judas.

The same thing is happening to press freedom. It is dying a slow death caused by its sister industry — advertising. Unfortunately, the guards are watching the wrong people — the politicians.

Think about it, even the worst dictators, PW Botha and Vorster, could not gag the black press. The *Sowetan* survived the total onslaught, albeit after changing names. The *Rand Daily Mail* was not banned, neither was *Die Vrye Weekblad* nor the *New Nation*. They were starved of advertising.

We advertising people and media owners are the biggest threat to press freedom, and editors are our willing accomplices.

In the past, advertising was in the furthest sty, together with the sales pitches of used-car salesmen. That all changed when media companies became listed on the stock exchange, and subjected to the whims of money-idolaters. In this temple of greed, editors are judged only by the profits they bring, instead of the impact they make on society. It's a shame that Ken Owen is remembered more for making the *Sunday Times* profitable than exposing the evils of apartheid.

Not only do editors have to deal with a diffuse mass of insatiable shareholders, they have to please advertisers, who bring the money that shareholders want. One advertiser told me that he won't advertise in the *Sowetan* because the latter reports too much gore and abuse. This is regardless of the fact that the *Sowetan* is the biggest national daily, and reaches his target market.

Some have told me that they

will never advertise in any of Mafube's titles because they do not like the views of its publisher, Thami Mazwai. They hope to see his publications die. Isn't that interfering with press freedom?

Many advertisements have lost credibility, as consumers no longer fall for their superlatives and empty promises. Seeing an opportunity to make a quick buck, and please their bosses, editors are now selling that credibility to advertisers. They allow copywriters to write their advertisements to look like editorials, and call that deceit 'advertorials'.

They regurgitate slick press releases from PR companies without asking for any verification of the claims. Some even send their own journalists with the orders to find only praises to sing for their clients. When the journalists arrive, they are showered with promotional items which are written off anyway.

The moral erosion sets in. Soon these journalists expect freebies wherever they go. They learn to love and respect the hand that feeds them, and punish the ones that give them nothing. I'll never forget the two journalists who bragged to me about the freebies they get from various PR companies and advertisers. "This", they told me, "was one of the most rewarding things about their profession".

"How could any self-respecting soul regard a free T-shirt or soccer ticket as a good perk?" I thought.

The worst form of deceit in the press is 'wrap arounds'. These are advertorials that are placed on the first page of the newspaper to make the advertisers look like they are making headline news. That is treacherous. Editors who allow such are so low they make the bottoms of admen look like they are higher than the sun. At least admen put the logo so that everyone can see that they are

paying. They earn headline news by being witty or deliberately controversial.

Perhaps the whole journalism profession crossed the line when Isabel Jones started endorsing products. She changed from being a 'guardian of the consuming society' to a cheerleader of products. She sold her credibility and tossed her objectivity for superficial lines written by copywriters. Will she ever take a case against her own clients? How will she ever deal with competitors of the product she endorses? "Objectively", may be the answer. Would you expect me to believe that?

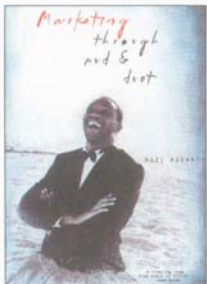
The profit motive is driving newspapers to use all sorts of marketing gimmickry including scratch cards and other forms of coupons. They're reducing the experience of buying a newspaper to that of buying toilet paper. Anyway, when newspapers increase their prizes their profits are reduced even further, and that compounds their problem.

Also, by doing this, editors are helping their readers develop bad habits that will come back to haunt them. They are teaching them to buy on an elusive promise. This is the same promise that killed credibility in advertising. They promised consumers that if they used a certain type of toothpaste their teeth would be whiter. They told us that smoking was good for our image. Now they have to work a lot harder to be believed.

The emerging black consumer market is fertile ground for unscrupulous businesspeople. With a low literacy rate, many people take the written word to be gospel truth. "If it is in the newspaper, it must be true," I've heard many people say. Pensioners have lost their lifetime savings, widows their benefits, and orphans their inheritance. It's not because they are stupid. It's because they are too trusting.

Journalists are our only real line of defence against commercial greed and any other human vice, because our "justice system", as one judge put it, "is like the Sheraton, it is open to everyone". They must break free from the shackles that keep the rest of us lesser mortals in line, and give us a truly free press. Editors must be able to think freely, and unfazed by shareholders. This freedom comes at a price. Sometimes a heavy one! But, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "freedom is not free". Including, I imagine, press freedom.

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SITHEMBILE MAMANE
b. 1973

"Yiz'uvalo, inqobo yisibindi — Fear is nothing, the thing is courage"

This work is based on encouragement when there is a difficult task ahead. The warrior has flying objects depicted around him that indicate that there is a likelihood of danger to his venture and that he could lose these goods. The flying objects are the type of things that the warrior would have carried with him into battle. The shield symbolises courage or encouragement. The landscape in the background reminds him about the land that he is fighting for and the place where this battle took place. The masculine quality of the body of the warrior is emphasised to show that he has to take this quality with him to the battle.