

Learning from our mistakes

The way to regain credibility is for media to hold themselves accountable to the same standards they apply to others, says William Bird.

Various media commentators have referred to 2003 as the media's worst year, and judging by the number of high profile incidents knocking media credibility, this certainly may be the case. In particular, 2003 was rounded off with the humiliation and fall of Vusi Mona and the discrediting of Ranjeni Munusamy in the Hefer Commission. The various cases of plagiarism, locally and internationally, further undermined media credibility. 2004 to date has been equally damaging. Coverage of Judge Siraj Desai, who was accused of raping Salomé Isaacs in India, saw various media ignoring basic ethical principles and being guilty of staggeringly poor gender reporting. There can be little doubt that the media face clear challenges to their credibility, but to focus only on these is to ignore the incredibly positive strides the media have made in the last 10 years.

Some of the most positive strides are structural. Prior to 1994, there were no community radio stations. Now, there are over 80, adding considerably to people's right to receive and impart information. Prior to 1994 the SABC offered the only free-to-air national television channel. Now we have etv and the promise of regional channels. Media ownership has also changed in the last 10 years, from largely white-owned and controlled to some black ownership and control. The Media Monitoring Project's (MMP) monitoring has also revealed positive changes in content.

In the early 1990s it was still commonplace for media, when reporting crime stories, to refer to the race of victims and perpetrators. Such reporting was often skewed, with white people most often being the reported victims of crimes and black people identified as criminals. It was also commonplace in the early 1990s for media to refer to gender-based violence, even if it ended in severe injury and sometimes death, as "lover's tiffs". Some media also delighted in providing graphic detail of what a rape victim had been wearing, both at the time she was raped and in court, often directly suggesting, the rape was partly due to the clothes the woman was wearing. References to people with disabilities as "retarded", "dumb" and "burdens" were also

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commonplace. While there are still instances where similar references are made or inferences drawn about race, gender and disability, these are now the exception. To have moved away from racial identifiers as key elements in criminal stories, and where women were frequently blamed for being abused, should indeed be celebrated.

Perhaps one of the most positive changes in the media is in the area of gender. The MMP has monitored media coverage of all the democratic elections in South Africa. In 1999, the monitoring showed that female sources constituted a mere 9.8% of all sources in election items. During the 2000 local government elections this went up to 10%. MMP's monitoring of the 2004 national elections shows that the number of female sources in election items has gone up to 23% – a clearly remarkable achievement, but there is still a long way to go.

Some areas are not quite as positive and are still dominated by unbalanced and unfair reporting. In the last three years, some media have taken a variety of steps to improve reporting on Africa. As a result of these efforts, coverage is starting to be more diverse and not limited to death, disease, war and disaster. The African Union, Nepad, peacekeeping, as well as stories on economics, health and development across Africa appear regularly.

ThisDay, the *Mail&Guardian* and SABC radio frequently provide fascinating and different African stories. In spite of the positive moves made by editors to link up with other African editors, many media still marginalise Africa, offering few stories in favour of European-, UK- or US-based items. Many of the problems in reporting on Africa relate to resources and capacity, but these cannot be used as excuses for continued unbalanced reporting.

Nowhere is the imbalance in reporting on Africa clearer than in the coverage of disasters. A mid-2002 plane crash over Switzerland, in which 70 people were killed, was afforded prominent, extensive and detailed coverage in the media. The incident was treated as a tragedy, and numerous explanations for the disaster were provided. At almost the same time, there was a train crash in Tanzania, in which 200 people were killed. It was given far less prominence,



few explanations were provided, and there was no follow-up coverage. In January 2003, a space shuttle exploded on re-entry to the atmosphere. Seven people were killed. Again, there was detailed analytical coverage provided as well as follow-up stories. At the same time, 300 people were killed in a train crash in Zimbabwe. Coverage was graphic, but offered little or no explanation, and there was minimal follow up. This year, 400 people were killed in two weeks in Nigeria, in what some media referred to as clashes between Christians and Muslims. While some media made clear efforts to cover the killings, they still received significantly less prominence, explanation and analysis than for example minor incidents in Iraq.

One of the most worrying current trends in media reporting is the violation of people's rights to dignity and privacy, which often occurs in times of trauma and grief. This trend was highlighted most recently by the coverage of the collapse of Brenda Fassie who was reported dead, while she was still alive in an intensive care unit. The poor



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and inaccurate reporting of Fassie's condition was highlighted by President Mbeki, who called for the media to cover her illness with respect and sensitivity. The nature of the coverage was the subject of various media debates and talk shows. Sadly, other people and tragedies have experienced similar coverage. Following the Ellis Park soccer disaster, families were shown going to the morgue to identify their loved ones. In many instances family members made clear attempts to hide their grief from the media, and some members of the media in turn made clear efforts to invade their grief and privacy anyway.

Children, in spite of the special protection accorded to them in the Constitution and various pieces of legislation, frequently have seen their rights violated by the media. The MMP's Empowering Children and Media project, run with Save the Children Sweden and UNICEF, found that one in 10 stories on child abuse named and identified the child concerned – which is not only unethical but also illegal. Section 154 (3) of the Criminal Proce-

dures Act states that it is an offence to name and identify a child as a victim or witness in criminal proceedings. But it is not only through identification of children who have been abused, that their rights are violated by the media. In some cases, the language used may also rob the children of their dignity.

The case of a young boy who fell down a drain and drowned, was covered extensively in the media, and the story was followed through. While generally sensitive to the family of the child, one newspaper chose to name him "Drain boy". In another story, a girl was reportedly forced by her employers to have sex with a dog (the story has subsequently been shown to be false). Some media dehumanised the girl and referred to her as "Dog-sex girl". In addition to this, the accused were named by some media and subsequently victimised; as a result, they are taking legal action.

One of the most concerning aspects of the media's lapses, be they in terms of violating rights to dignity and privacy, or poor ethical choices, is

that few lessons seem to be learned. The first major credibility lapse in the *City Press* wasn't the Bulelani Ngcuka spy story. There was another high-profile incident just prior to that, about an alleged racist incident involving rugby players Geo Cronje and Quentin Davids. *City Press* had to publish a front-page apology for an editorial on the incident.

Invasion of people's rights during times of grieving has been highlighted by coverage of Fassie's death. However, less prominent people regularly experience such invasions by the media. Children, who have been abused, continue to be named and identified in the media. This year a young boy, who had been sodomised, was named and identified in a prime time television programme. Again, this was not the first time such a violation occurred. In 2002, in reporting on the abduction of a young boy, who was later found by the police, the boy's parents first learned their child had been abused when they heard it on a radio news bulletin. In addition to the errors made by the media, there is the problem that errors are frequently repeated.

Getting it wrong doesn't always mean that the media's credibility will suffer as a result. There have been some cases where the media have erred and have regained their credibility in the way they addressed the complaint. In one of the incidents referred to above where an abused child was identified, a member of the public lodged a complaint against the media. The broadcaster took immediate steps to remove the clip from the programme and apologised to the child, parents and the public. Not satisfied, the member of the public requested the broadcaster to take further steps to ensure the child's rights were protected. The broadcaster again immediately contacted the boy and his mother and arranged for counselling for the child. The manner in which the broadcaster addressed the problem was credible and suggests there is some cause for optimism.

One of the key elements in preventing future errors in judgment and poor ethical decisions lies in improving the accountability and responsibility of the media. At a South African National Editor's Forum (SANEF) workshop in May aimed at addressing ethics in the media, one of the issues raised as a way to regain credibility, was for editors to be more accountable and transparent. Journalists at the conference called for editors to explain why they had reappointed certain discredited journalists. In one of the work groups journalists called for media houses to adhere to ethical codes of conduct and to implement methods of ensuring accountability to the codes – particularly for editors.

It was noted how few media actually had their own ethical codes of conduct. The SABC editorial policies are a positive step in the right direction in terms of creating accountability. Critical to regaining credibility and developing accountability is the need for media to apologise for what they get wrong, and to explain why. These suggestions need to be expanded and debated, but they do at least offer constructive and positive ways forward.

The media are often praised for the role they play in holding government and various other parties accountable for their actions, and for exposing corruption and bad practice. It seems only fair to suggest, that in the same way as democratic institutions like the government are expected to be open and transparent, media should be as well.

Given the media's public service roles and responsibilities and their importance to the functioning of a democratic society, they can be expected to hold themselves to the same standards that they measure others against.



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