

*Muzi Kuzwayo paints a grim picture of media ethics in an era and an industry where profits prevail over values.*

# Leave sensation to the advertisers

**“T**hey kill journalists, you know.” This was my mother’s response when I told her that as a grown-up, I wanted to become a journalist. She said it in a tone which made clear she wasn’t asking for my opinion. She said it with feeling, and as someone said, “if we spoke with feeling we would say little, but mean more”. I could tell that my mother meant: “You won’t be a journalist for as long as you are my son.”

My view of the world was formed when John Vorster was prime minister of South Africa and Jimmy Kruger was minister of justice. It was an era of arbitrary arrest and banishment, especially of journalists and their newspapers.

When PW Botha declared the state of emergency, lawyers became the de facto editors of the newspapers, to ensure that the story complied with the laws that were designed to stifle press freedom. Ever defiant, Percy Qoboza ran an empty space in his editorial column rather than subject his opinion to the Bureau for Information, only to be told that doing so was subversive. Journalists were neither free to say what they wanted, nor to choose silence.

Journalism was no different from activism. Salaries were meagre because advertisers kept clear of left-wing publications and especially black publications.

Fast forward to 1994. I want to argue that when apartheid ended, South African media didn’t know what to do with their freedom. It was like a pigeon that was born in captivity only to be set free beyond its wildest dreams. But because a pigeon is a pigeon, it will always fly back to its old problems and ignore the new challenges it is facing. Times have changed, and worrying about state suppression of press freedom is now irrelevant, especially since in the last 10 years not a single journalist has been detained without trial, not a single publication has been gagged by the state, and the press is protected by the Constitution. Some point to the occasional conflicts between the ruling party and media, or the appointment of ANC members to the SABC, as evidence of a clear and real danger against press freedom. But that is looking at life through old lenses which are as tired as the line: “You’re saying this because the government is black.”

That someone is a member of a ruling party does not mean he or she cannot make independent decisions. (Nobody has ever complained about the independence of our Constitutional Court. Judge Albie Sachs was an ANC exile and Judge Arthur Chaskalson was in Nelson Mandela’s defence team

during the treason trial.)

To understand the role of the media in our new society requires us to swallow some unpalatable truths about the new media environment. Firstly, we must accept, that when private media companies listed on the stock exchange, they ceased to be guardians of society. Instead, they became businesses whose purpose was to increase value for their shareholders.

Profit is the only yardstick at the stock exchange. And where principle and profit clash, it is the former that loses – as we saw when the *Sunday Times* management and Mathatha Tsedu fought in the papers. Writing in *Business Day*, Anton Harber, Professor of Journalism and Media studies at Wits University, said: “When they chose him [Tsedu], they knew Africanisation was important to him. They knew he had a strong change agenda, including getting rid of the popular and lucrative, but controversial, ‘Extra’ [racially-based] editions.”

The focus on profit – though perfectly legitimate in a capitalist society – will be the media’s undoing. Will media owners buckle under pressure as advertising revenues dry up, or will they refuse to cross the ethical line? Just witness the increase in advertorials and media surveys.

The difference between an advertorial and an advertisement is honesty. By placing the advertiser’s logo – an equivalent of a signature – the advertiser is revealing that this is a paid-for commercial message, thereby giving the public the option to disbelieve the message. An advertorial on the other hand is designed to look like editorial and hide the fact that it is a paid-for commercial message.

The prize in editorial dishonesty goes to surveys because they depend on blackmail advertising. What happens in this case is, a media owner approaches a company or companies to feature in a survey. The surveyee pays a portion of the advertising cost and then passes on a list of its suppliers to the media owner, who will then approach them to buy space in the survey and sing the surveyee’s praises. How can they refuse? They need the surveyee’s business. A survey is also designed to look like an editorial, suggesting the company is making news.

The second truth journalists must swallow is: while the news media must report on the good, the bad and the ugly of government and society, they cannot play the role of the opposition, no matter how disorganised the latter may be. During apartheid it was perfectly legitimate for the media to speak for the silenced majority because their voice

was outlawed. But today that is no longer the case. All sectors of society are now allowed through a transparent and independently-controlled democratic process to voice their opinions in Parliament.

As a new business development director of an advertising agency, I spend a considerable amount of time contemplating the future of the advertising value chain from clients to suppliers, including media. I do this because the success or failure of any players within the value chain will have grave consequences on our industry. To that end I engage in strategic conversations with leaders in different industries to determine threats and opportunities in their industries, so that we can plan ahead.

Media continue to shoot themselves in the foot. Firstly the cost of inserting advertisements in the media has become prohibitive. Clients are now seeking cheaper alternatives to reach their audiences. Witness the increase in viral marketing – sending commercials through the Internet. This is the new word of mouth and is proving to be a cheaper way of distributing commercial messages around the world.

The media market is overtraded, and as the old car sticker used to say, “when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping”. Media owners are behaving predictably by buying the competition. And as if that is not enough, there are calls for the South African government to relax media ownership laws to allow for more consolidation and cross ownership. Although that may temporarily fix shareholders’ problems, it will hurt our democracy.

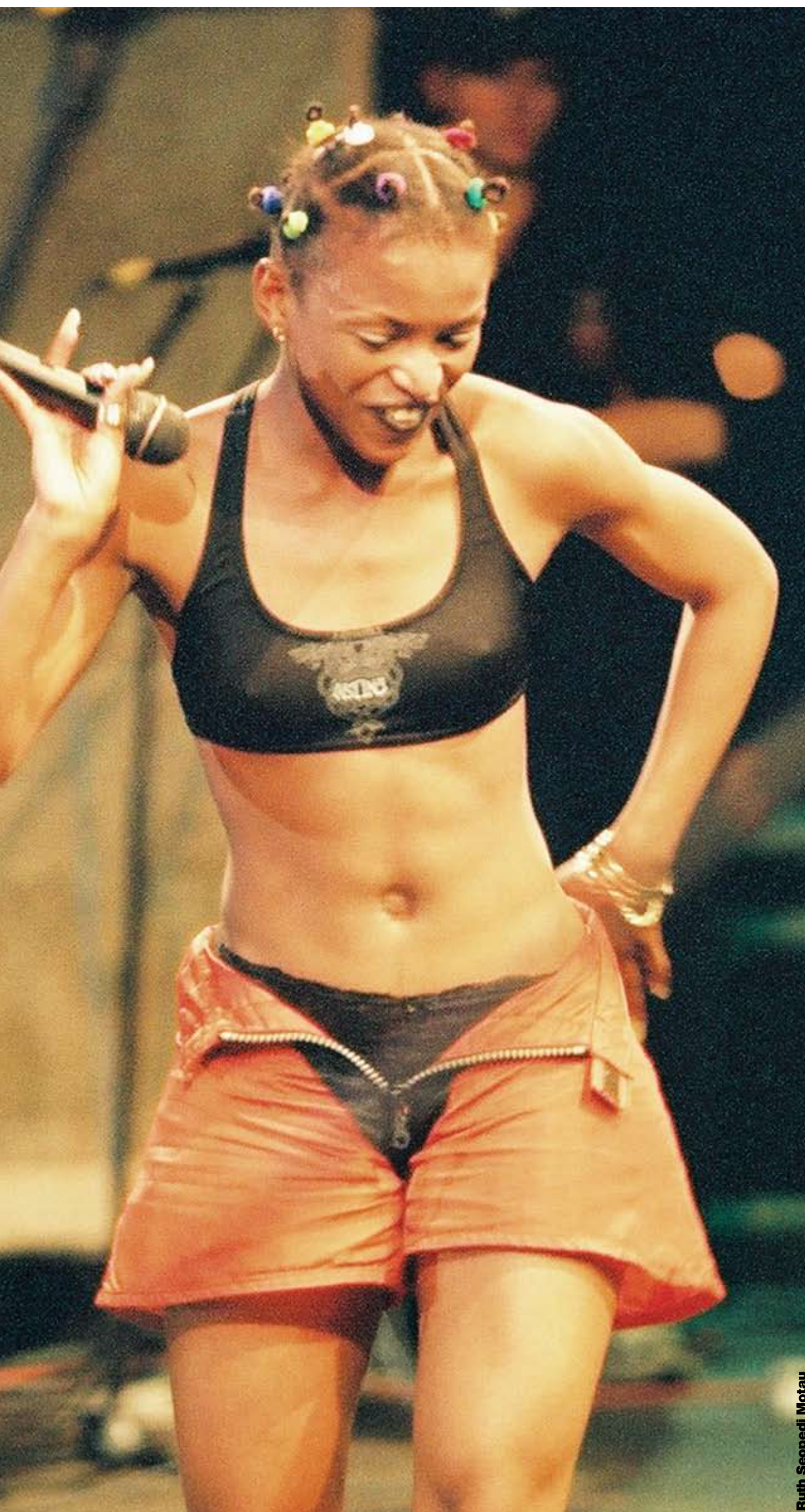
Too much media concentration in the hands of a few cannot be good for democracy. Even in the US, *Fortune* magazine accuses media mogul Rupert Murdoch of using his *New York Post*, “to reward friends and punish foes”. You can imagine what happens in a smaller country, such as ours, where fewer people have deep pockets. Once our democracy has been tampered with, the shareholders will find that gobbling up other organisations only leads to constipation. Then we’re back to square one.

The future does not look any brighter for media credibility. Profits in media are like water defying the laws of gravity. They trickle up, nourishing only senior management and shareholders. Compared with the past, very little money seems to be reinvested in training. Good journalists, tired of earning NGO salaries while management guzzles Moët&Chandon, are leaving the industry for better paying jobs as public relations officers in the government and the corporate world.

The ones who still prefer the calling are burying







Ruth Seopedi Motau



**Muzi Kuzwayo** is the author of *Marketing through Mud and Dust* and group director of King James advertising agency. Muzi spends a lot of his time studying how brands and industries remain relevant as consumers and their environments change. The media and its future relevance is an issue close to his heart.

themselves. Soon the industry will be full of ill-trained or self-taught analysts and journalists who have not learnt the sacred rules of the trade. Plagiarism problems will continue. Journalists will break embargoes and the confidence of their sources; they will aspire to the same lifestyle as the criminals and despots they oppose, and journalism will be synonymous with fiction. All in the name of creating shareholder value.

The worst is yet to come. I call it centralisation of the media; economists call it globalisation. To achieve economies of scale, global companies tend to concentrate certain operational functions. With centralisation, fewer and fewer editors (mostly in first world countries) will decide what is seen, heard or read about in different parts of the world. They will continue to decide whether Kosovo is more important than Rwanda. To quote former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali: "We say we have 16 members in the Security Council. The 15 members plus CNN; out of 20 peacekeeping operations, you [CNN] are interested in one or two. Nobody was taking care of what was going on in Rwanda." Those journalists, placed more than 12 000 km away, will decide whether a conflict at Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal is tribal or political. In Zimbabwe they will decide who is victim and who is villain.

So what kind of media environment would I like to see in the future? Honestly, I think commercial, mainstream media has lost its original purpose. They have crossed the values threshold, and there is no turning back. What do you expect? We live in the Enron era. (News Corp cooked its books 10 years before Enron's collapse). To expect money idolaters in the stock market to change their nature because they bought shares in a media company would be expecting too much. In their defence, they buy shares to make money, not for love. If Jerry Springer or any of the crass reality-TV shows is a way to increase value in their investments, so be it. It is their democratic right, especially in a free-market economy.

Mainstream media can no longer claim to be guardians of society. They have gone too far down the other way. Guardians of society can only be the nascent public journalism movement which I would like to see thrive in South Africa. I would like to see more community radio stations and newspapers supported through public and private funding to achieve that goal. I would like to see a new theory of media business in South Africa, that puts society first, its readers second, journalists third and shareholders last.

I say these things not because I am an anti-capitalist bastard. I work in advertising, the fuel of competition. But I am mindful of what George W. Merck, son of the founder of Merck Pharmaceuticals, said: "We try never to forget that medicine [read journalism] is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow and if we have remembered that they never fail to appear."

I ask you, as journalists, to please remain journalists, and leave hyperbole and sensation to us, the advertisers. We place advertisements in your media because you deliver the right audiences for our brands and your readers trust you. The day they lose their trust they will leave you, and we will follow them.

## References

1. *Fortune*, 17 February 2003
2. [www.time.com/time/international/1995/951023/cover4.html](http://www.time.com/time/international/1995/951023/cover4.html)