

Point counter point

Is the media a divisive agent or the tangible fruit of freedom?



Jimmy Manyi

Some discussion has been generated by my assertion at the recent parliamentary indaba on the media that I did not “feel” black editors in public discourse or the media agenda.

Reaction to my statement suggested that I had been patronising and/or racist in my observation – none of which is the case.

My point of departure was simply the expectations I have of black editors, whose emergence and validation I commend and respect.

Many news organisations now boast more black writers and editors than during apartheid, when such writers and then potential editors felt their world views or political orientation was not accommodated in newsrooms or editorial decision-making forums.

But now, on the eve of 20 years of democracy in a country led by a government with a clear mandate, it is odd that the media agenda appears out of kilter with the popular experience.

This is despite the meteoric rise in the number of black print editors from a paltry 7% in 1994 to a surprising 65% this year.

I argue very strongly that this commendable rise in the number of black editors is not commensurate with the expected diversity of opinion.

It feels at times that the championing of progressive causes is labelled by the media as divisive. Or is it a case of assimilation?

One is therefore not generalising that all black writers or editors are not progressive, but the expectation that a new political dispensation would provide an outlet for previously unheard voices and viewpoints appears to have been disappointed.

It is not needless to reiterate President Jacob Zuma and others’ repeated assurances that this government fundamentally supports freedom of expression – a freedom that many in power today, in fact, fought to establish.

The fact is that those who lead the current government do not stand outside the historical tradition of freedom of expression. In many instances, they are that tradition.

Government is clear that the role of the democratic watchdog is welcome as one of the checks and balances that is as entrenched and as authentic in our democracy as in long-established systems elsewhere.

One would have expected by now that the impact of black writers and editors would be felt in the form of a greater diversity of voices than we have at present.

In fact, the last time a new voice was established in the form of *The New Age*, it was shouted down. “We don’t mind diverse, just not this diverse!” clamoured champions of the supposedly free market.

In spite of the promise of diverse commentary and a greater understanding of the diversity of cultural practices in our richly textured society, scorn and sarcasm is poured on cultural conventions that are near and dear to the majority.

Where is the diversity of voices – in a country where “working together” is our national call to action – when the labour movement is regularly vilified by the media as inflexible and a threat to economic growth, effectively positioning the working class (who also happen to follow the media) as public enemy number one?

Where was the diversity of voice when the African Union developed a roadmap for

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Libya and held this line while military solutions were sought in other quarters?

Where is the diversity of voices when a public health system that serves nearly 90% of South Africans is due for an upgrade to a national health insurance scheme and the plan is roundly shot down?

These instances are part of a pattern of belief and argument that posits that we have merely a veneer of integrity, that our democracy is a sham and that all of this is about to fall apart around us. It is also a way of saying to the vast majority of citizens that they got it wrong each time they stepped into the voting booth.

We cannot expect to build a dignified, proud and prosperous nation by second-guessing ourselves. Our Constitution issues many calls to action and implores the realisation of many complementary rights, including freedom of thought, expression and citizens’ access to information.

All these rights are there to claim in the interests of building an equitable and just South Africa.

The media agenda – whether crafted by white or black editors – should be seen to respond to the constitutional vision in all its facets.



Ferial Haffajee

At the newly democratised SABC in 1994, I sat next to a colleague who worked on files called “black news”. Curious, I asked what “black news” was. He said it was news about black people and areas, which was reserved for black audiences.

A fresher straight out of the liberal space of the *Weekly Mail*, this was my rude introduction to news apartheid. I had read it in the “extra” or township editions of newspapers but here was an opportunity to hear how it had all been put together, an insider’s account of the anatomy of censorship and of how journalism had been employed to work for apartheid.

I think I speak for most of my generation of youngish black editors if I aver that we bring this history and consciousness into our editing. We do not position ourselves outside the edifice of democracy or of the history of liberation.

So the rhetoric which paints us as enemies of democracy and hand-maidens of capital is annoying. And it’s incorrect: a Media Tenor study shows that South Africa’s media is more positive and balanced than countries with which we were compared.

I can’t speak for all, but those of us who are friends are quite clear about the impact of democracy and its attendant equity laws on our career paths. It wouldn’t have happened unless a crusty old industry had been forced to change.

But I do position myself four-square out of the edifice of corruption and democratic decline. And therein, I think, lies the problem. As government-spokesperson, Mr Manyi, you are paid to be blind to this harm, to make it small and to amplify the positive.

There is a lot of positive and, yes, you are right that perhaps we do not cover it deeply or well enough. But there is also a lot that is worrying: waste and an elite high life; and a parallel civil service – one run by the 1.3-million-odd civil servants, the other run by ridiculously expensive consultants.

It is our patriotic duty to expose these things and, while the elite in the civil service and the political class may not like it, our survey shows that eight in 10 City Press readers believe corruption to be worthy of coverage.

The use of consultants to prop up the state is evident even in your patch. While your Government Communication and Information System has a staff that is the envy of all editors, most ministers have expensive, private companies to serve their communication ends.

Is it patriotic or traitorous to point out

these things?

You expect that black editors will think alike and that the common fact of skin colour and a shared history will mean that we act in unison. You also expect that because you are a figure of authority, we will share your worldview, ideology, headlines and agenda.

It is as if you think we are all in a Black Management Forum journalistic chapter and because we are black and you are the chapter president, we will follow you. And because that’s not the way the world works, you don’t feel us and we don’t feel you.

Extrapolate this logic to, say, Indian (from India, I mean) editors, and it fails. But for the Chinese media (and even that’s shifting) and possibly the North Korean media, there is almost nowhere else in the world where your media ideal is practised.

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I would also challenge you to expand your repertoire of reading material. Most of the coverage I read, edited and wrote about the national health insurance scheme has been positive because, as you say, many of us come from a past where we lived through the indignities of an apartheid health system. Is it wrong to ask what it will cost? Surely it is the question on most lips?

The labour movement is fairly covered (can you really say that labour federation Cosatu’s general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi is demonised – he is a media sweetheart?).

This is not only because many of us come from blue-collar homes, but also because the labour movement is regarded as a core institution in our democracy.

Surely, however, it is legitimate to question strike violence and the outcomes of a strike season that has possibly cost workers more in lost wages than what they gained in increases?

And your view that traditional practices are regarded with disdain by a bourgeois media can’t be stood up with any evidence.

The antidote to “black news” has been the plethora of voices and opinions that fill our pages and our airwaves. It is a daily joy to behold, a tangible fruit of freedom.