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Plekkie in die Son

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The Afrikaans media has in the past demonstrated an uncanny ability to adapt to change while managing to retain a loyal following. Matebello Motloung considers some of the challenges faced by the strongest vernacular media in South Africa and its role in the democratic dispensation.

The past 13 years have seen the Afrikaans media reinventing itself; not only to reflect the changed socio-political dynamics of this country, but also to remain relevant to its diverse audience. Some have succeeded and others have failed.

"The role of Afrikaans media has changed quite significantly since 1994. Obviously the Afrikaans media had a close relationship with the previous government and the governing party, and that relationship was reflected in the newspapers with the political coverage informed by the ruling elite of that time," says Henry Jeffreys, editor of *Die Burger*.

"Now that the Afrikaans media has been freed from the burden of the political connection it had before 1994, its journalists are free to report on things as they see them and not as they are informed by a political agenda."

Jeffreys, who is *Die Burger's* first black editor in the newspaper's history, says it is because of its heritage that the Afrikaans media's soft under belly continues to be vulnerable to criticism and attacks whenever it reports critically about the government.

However, his appointment indicates that indeed the boere have moved on to deal with new problems.

For one, the Afrikaans readership remains small with little room for growth. The market is becoming increasingly competitive, and newspapers have turned to the coloured market to grow their readership base. Meanwhile, Naspers has moved into the English-language media.

"The potential Afrikaans-speaking audience in South Africa has not grown much over the past five years and you can see that in the stagnant circulations of mainstream newspapers (*Beeld*, *Die Burger*)," says Robert Brand, chair of Rhodes University's Pearson School of Economics.

"That is why Naspers, the biggest publisher of Afrikaans media, has expanded into English-language media as well as media beyond South Africa's borders."

Media24 publishes *True Love*, *Drum* and *Kick Off* in East and West Africa and recently announced its launch of *Idols West Africa* magazine later this year.

Brand says that while the Afrikaans press has struggled to break out of its parochial constraints, Naspers has not. South Africa's biggest media company has also turned itself into a global player.

But locally, the Afrikaans press often finds itself at loggerheads with the government on contentious issues such as crime, black economic empowerment and the changing of street, institution and municipal names.

The newspapers represent pertinent issues their readers grapple with (that is partly why they are such popular reads), but some say the government does not take the Afrikaans section of the media industry seriously enough.

But *Beeld* editor Peet Kruger begs to differ. He cites, as an example, an incident when Arts and Culture Minister Pallo Jordan called *Beeld* and requested that he be permitted to contribute an article explaining the reasoning behind proposed name changes.

Another instance, says Brandt, is when President Thabo Mbeki criticised Media24's coverage of the African Union and *Beeld* wrote to him pointing out that he had based his opinion on an incorrect translation of a report that the publication ran.

"In his next newsletter, Mbeki apologised to *Beeld* and acknowledged that its coverage was fair and professional. I think to the extent that the government takes any media seriously, there is an understanding that the Afrikaans press does a credible job."

So credible it seems, that government is taking note of the recent and favourable coverage the Afrikaans media has been giving former deputy president Jacob Zuma, in the form of *Beeld* newspaper and *De Kat* magazine.

In March, *Beeld* ran two front pages of Zuma's politicking one after another within weeks of each other.

The first article was on Zuma visiting a crime victim and expressing concern about farm murders. While the article was straight-forward and the writing style fitting for a breaking news story, that of the second front page was not.

Headlined "*Só moet 'n tjop mos lyk!*" (That's how you braai your meat!) and published on March 27, the second front-page article showed Zuma at a braai organised by a bi-monthly Afrikaner-language lifestyle magazine DeKat.

The piece starts off with a light-hearted intro reading: "He calls it nyama and they call it meat..." and then continues to give details of the get together, describing how good a time Zuma had in the company of several Afrikaner cultural icons among them filmmaker Leon Schuster and musician Steven Hofmeyr, who appeared with Zuma on the front page.

"There seems to be a sub-text in the Afrikaans newspapers' reporting of Zuma's meetings with figures like Hofmeyr," says Max du Preez, veteran journalist and author.

"The hidden message was aimed at President Thabo Mbeki and his advisers: your opponent is doing something that you should be doing, namely giving Afrikaners more love and attention.

"I think the Afrikaans newspapers quietly enjoyed a revival of the old Zulu/Boere-thing. If the Zulus are being openly and proudly ethnic, it legitimises the Afrikaners doing it too."

However, Du Preez says the Afrikaans media was slightly dishonest in their coverage of the whole Zuma-Hofmeyr affair, which drew a lot of attention and mixed reaction from the public.

He says the Afrikaans newspapers have been consistent in their condemnation of the former deputy president's behaviour and record and have unflinchingly sent the message that they would not regard him as a suitable president of South Africa.

"But there was nothing of this distaste for the man to be seen when he had a braai with some Afrikaners," Du Preez points out.

"I would have wanted them to also point out that (controversial author and philosopher) Dan Roodt was a right-wing

extremist who published dangerous material such as his thesis that black men are genetically prone to be violent criminals."

But Kruger defends *Beeld's* reporting saying that what they did was just to report on news events, which currently form part of a broader national debate on the presidential succession race.

"We are not trying to promote Zuma. We like to reflect what is happening out there and we also like to entertain our readers as we believe in giving information in an entertaining way," explains Kruger.

"We are also asking what is happening with Zuma in our editorial. It is obvious that he is trying to woo Afrikaner readers. Why? We don't know because it's the ANC that will vote for him not our readers. But we also find this interesting as well."

His colleague, *Rapport* editor Tim du Plessis, shares his sentiments. "We've been very critical of Zuma because of the rape and the Schabir Shaik trial. I don't think he is fit to be president. But he understands the Afrikaans community."

It is this understanding that *De Kat* publisher Elzida Becker says she wants to encourage.

"If the only thing I achieved was to get Mr Zuma to view Afrikaners in a different light, I will be more than satisfied," she said explaining why she wanted to feature the politician on the cover of her magazine's latest issue.

The last few months have seen a number of developments in the Afrikaans media. Of note is the closure of *Insig* magazine which has a 20-year history and started off as a literature publication. Media24 says the magazine, which went through a make-over last year, no longer has a place in a market where information has become increasingly accessible from a variety of sources.

In May, Media24 launched a new Sunday tabloid newspaper, *Sondag*, which will compete in the same market as *Rapport* whose copy sales plus subscriptions have been stagnant in the past year - 289,033 (ABC January to March 2006) and 287,632 (ABC October - December 2006).

Sondag is the second newspaper to attempt to break into the weekend market since the failure and closure of *Die Wêreld* three years ago.

Last year also saw a number of English-language titles like *People*, *seventien* and *Getaway* coming up with Afrikaans versions of their publications - *Mense*, *seventien*, and *Wegbreek*.

While *Caxton's Mense* is not performing as well as it was expected to, selling an average of no more than 20,000 copies compared to its English counterpart which sells no fewer than 100,000 weekly, *Wegbreek* is slowly but surely starting to take a slice of the advertising revenue, although its circulation is not nearly as strong as that of its Media24 competitor *Weg*.

According to Nielsen Media Research, *Wegbreek* over the last year managed to capture a 12.6 percent share of ad spend in only five months (July-November 2006). Its older sister publication *Getaway* took some 59 percent (R50.5-million).

Sarie continues to be the biggest women's magazine an average monthly circulation of 130,000 followed by *Rooi Rose* at about 110,000.

Interestingly, Brandt points out, in terms of quality, Afrikaans newspapers continue to be more superior when compared with their mainstream English-language counterparts.

"Naspers/Media24 has been investing in editorial quality as well as new titles, unlike Independent News & Media. So while the Afrikaans newspapers may be narrowly targeted at an Afrikaans-speaking (and mostly white) audience, in terms of the basic journalistic virtues and covering the concerns of their communities, they are doing much better than their English counterparts."

Beeld this year scooped the Taco Kuiper Award for investigative journalism and Media Tenor, the research company that monitors which media is the most often quoted in the industry, last year commented on the quality of Afrikaans journalism.

"The fact that the Afrikaans media generate most of their own content, coupled with their steady climb in citations from other media, is indicative of innovative and creative journalists driving the reputation of these newspapers," said Media Tenor managing director Wadim Schreiner.

Kruger says part of *Beeld's* future plans is strengthening its investigative reporting team while also recruiting more young black journalists for diversity of voice.

While change is inevitable and often necessary in the Afrikaans media, and to a certain extent its consumers, proven ability to adapt is what will continue working in its favour in an industry that is unpredictable and shows no signs of quietening down.

Much ado about Afrikaans magazines

Magazines Copy sales + subscriptions (ABC Oct-Dec '06)

Baba & Kleuter 24,665 *Finesse* 88,520 *Huisgenoot* 337,026 *Insig* 10,981 *Landbouweekblad* 42,618 *Lééf* 39,338 *LIG* 7,615 *Manwees* 3,506 *Mense* 19,739 *Rooi Rose* 105,695 *Sarie* 130,146 *Taalgenoot* 56,648 *Vroue Keur* 87,091 *Wiel* 11,490

How other Afrikaans newspapers are fairing

Newspapers Copy sales + subscriptions (ABC Oct-Dec'06)

Beeld 94,677 *Naweek Beeld* 83,298 *Die Burger* (daily) 82,350 *Die Burger* (Saturday) 101,727 *Rapport* 287,632 *Son* (daily) 72,049 *Son* (weekly) 76,830 *Volksblad* 236,624

The electronic media

- R1.6-billion was spent in the Afrikaans broadcast platform over the last three years.
- 45.2 percent of total Afrikaans broadcast revenue goes to Jacaranda FM.
- Kyknet on DSTV gets 21.8 percent or R352-million from the last three years.
- 45.2 percent of total Afrikaans broadcast revenue goes to Jacaranda Radio.
- R298-million or 18.4 percent went to Radio Sonder Grense (RSG) a public broadcast radio station.
- 7.1 percent and 7.5 percent went to Good Hope Radio (Western Cape) and OFM (Free State) respectively.

The data was collected over a three-year period: March - Feb 2004, 2005, 2006. Source: AIS, Nielsen, South Africa

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