

No new role for the press

Can newspapers promote political tolerance? Do they have to? Well, they're definitely not keen! RONEL SCHEFFER writes from the recent Somerset West conference on political tolerance.

PROF Willem de Klerk had all my sympathy when he stood virtually alone appealing for a deliberate media campaign to promote democratic values in the run up to the election. Such a campaign, he believes, could "mean the difference between night and day for South Africa".

De Klerk, former editor of *Rapport* and currently a communications academic, said the media could foster political tolerance through a voluntary code of conduct on handling explosive news during the election. Editors could also reach consensus on a framework of democratic values and regularly repeat these in their publications. He suggested five values: freedom to vote; multi-partyism; the freedom to be in opposition; no intimidation and no violence; and accepting the election results.

"If all the media repeat it, it is bound to have impact," said De Klerk.

The response to De Klerk's suggestions, particularly from the print media, was negative. This was in spite of strong statements from NGO delegates about the urgent need – and indeed desire – on the ground for information about democratic values.

Sunday Times editor Ken Owen, eloquently belligerent, didn't waste any time to protest that it implies censorship and propoganda. He chose the narrowest possible interpretation of the proposal and virtually hauled De Klerk over the coals. The two of them, Owen told De Klerk, had never managed to work together in the past as editors. He was per-



PROF DE KLERK: *We must plant the seed.*

plexed that De Klerk should now bother to suggest something as daft as yet another code when the existing press code was already a mistake.

De Klerk listened in silence as the other editors and journalists confirmed the need for political education and emancipation in our society, yet failed convincingly to explain why the media should or could not play a more active role in this regard.

We heard about the dangers of imposing roles on the media; how the news could not be tailored to promote tolerance or suit democratic practice; how all newspapers barring a few right wing news sheets were in any event already pleading for tolerance (presumably in the poky holes of their editorials read by 10 percent of readers); and how editors intend being sensible during the elections. There were suggestions that the teaching of political values was the domain of the politicians; some were not even sure that newspapers could or should play an educational role in the community.

There was no direct support for De Klerk's proposal, although most of the senior black journalists present agreed that something needs doing and would be done by their newspapers.

One fears for the institution of editorship.

Editors know it all, they've seen it all. They hold forth about press freedom, but what they really seem committed to is the oppressive freedom they wield in their newsrooms; the freedom to resist at all cost an expanded vision of the media's role in society.

Newspapers report the news and comment thereon. Any suggestion that they could in addition, individually or collectively, deliberately embark on other projects – like the democratic one in this coun-

try, for example – is to make them handmaidens to a cause (i. e. other than the editor's ego, of course). It must be time to seriously extend the debate to how the media can actively use their resources to deal with problems in society – without compromising on news criteria and journalistic principles.

The difference between Willem de Klerk and Ken Owen (who doesn't even see the need for voter education in his newspaper) probably is that De Klerk, also a former dominee, has some experience of what it means to belong to and intimately interact with a relatively disadvantaged community as a leader. When you have a powerful tool like a newspaper in your hands and your people are hungry for knowledge, threatened by destructive practices or in desperate need of education – you use it. That's what Afrikaans publications like *Die Huisgenoot* and others did very successfully in the '60s and '70s, however misdirected many of their efforts might have been.

Alas, at the conference it looked as if journalists are more concerned with proving that they are not responsible for creating the high levels of political intolerance in our society.

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and editors as to the role of the media, it seemed there was general consensus on certain items – albeit somewhat tacit. Irrespective of the reservations expressed by certain editors, Berger included, their newspapers run regular columns on education for democracy.

Simplistic reporting which implied "quick fixes" or which sensationalised outbursts of violence were not in anyone's interests. Instead, journalists were urged to under-

stand and explain events in context. The "why" needed to be reintroduced into news and current affairs reporting.

The language and idiom in which news was reported was critically important – unless readers, viewers or listeners were addressed in languages and concepts which were familiar to them, media messages would not reach people.

The SABC, as a public corporation with a monopoly on radio and television, was sin-

gled out as bearing a particular responsibility to carry programming which reliably informed and educated its audiences. Because of its history and lack of credibility, the SABC was urged to involve as many organisations (which have the appropriate expertise and resources) as possible in the process of voter education and information in the run-up to election day in April.

Sue Valentine is media director with Idasa.

Press must tell the whole story

By **SUE VALENTINE**

The urgent need for journalism to establish a standard of careful, explanatory reporting – both now and after the elections – was emphasised by former *Rand Daily Mail* editor and director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, Allister Sparks.

Unless there was careful, contextualised coverage of events in South Africa, simplistic and even dangerous interpretations were likely to persist or emerge well into the future.

Sparks said the demand for “ventriloquist journalism” would continue, but that reporters should be encouraged to break away from “episodic, stenographic” reporting.

He warned that in its present state, South African journalism was not well placed to provide sensitive, in-depth reporting. He said it seemed that the stock headlines used to describe the complex process of the negotiations process at the World Trade



SPARKS: avoid “simplistic” journalism.

Centre were: “breakdown” or “breakthrough”. Such “shorthand” headlines served no purpose. Reporting and headline writing needed to be creative and journalists should be tough on all the issues. This, however, did not mean that stories should be overdramatised.

Sparks also criticised the structures of ownership of newspapers in South Africa, saying the marketplace was overtraded. “There are too many newspapers – six dailies and 10 weeklies in the PWV area ...

They are not sufficiently diversified ... there are too many voices coming out of the same two stables (the Argus company and Times Media Limited).”

Too many newspapers were trying to survive off the same small advertising revenue base which led to limited space being available for news. He said, for example, that in the *Cape Times* there were only 30 columns of actual news space – half of what there should be for effective reporting of the day’s news.

The same competition for advertising revenue led to newspapers sensationalising and “hyping” the news – the exact opposite of what was needed in order to promote thorough, in-depth understanding of the news of the day.

The pre-occupation among newspapers with “the bottom line” meant that newspaper staffs were too small and journalists worked under severe constraints: they were underpaid causing a juniorisation of the profession and the staffing of newspapers by inexperienced reporters.

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The logic is simple: if you didn’t cause it, you need not do anything about it. Said South African Union of Journalists organiser, Karen Stander: “When you impose responsibility for political tolerance on the media, you are also blaming it for intolerance.”

Two foreign observers – Angela King of the UN observer mission and Michel Amar of a Canadian educational trust – expressed frustration with the apparent reluctance of journalists to commit themselves to playing a role in promoting tolerance.

Amar said there was no contradiction between press freedom and adopting guidelines on democratic values. Journalists could internalise these and decide how they would give editorial expression to such values.

King said some comments indicated that many of those present completely underestimated the power of the media. “Rather than saying can we do this or that, we should just

go ahead and do it,” said King, adding “it is our collective responsibility to instil responsibility.”

De Klerk later conceded that a code to further tolerance was not a necessity. What was important was that newspapers must be



FROM THE FLOOR: Jody Kollopen (*Lawyers for Human Rights*) and Eric Apelgren (*MPD*).

willing to follow an educational programme on the values that are relevant to the communities they serve. “We must plant the seed,” he said.

An appeal by Eric Qabaza, editor of the oldest black newspaper in the country, *Imvo*

Zabantsundu in King Williams Town that newspapers should exercise some restraint on “unhealthy competition” during the run-up to elections seemed to fall on deaf ears.

“Every newspaper is there to make money, but if we have a common obligation to serve the people of our country, it’s time we worked hand in hand. You think I might just be saying this because I come from a small paper, but I have a big daddy (*Imvo* is owned by Perskor). If we can just hold hands for nine months then people might say that the media helped to teach them about political tolerance.”

While not agreeing to a definite role for the press in promoting tolerance, there was consensus that voter education was needed and that most newspapers would probably make a contribution.

Generally, it was felt that newspapers could do much to improve the way in which they reflect the news. Karen Stander urged editors to take the debate around this issue into their newsrooms in a democratic fashion.

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