

A public leash for media watchdogs

HAVE the media, particularly in the period immediately following February 2, 1990, reported adequately on the major issues facing all South Africans – in this case political and social change?

Or have the media been guilty of one-sidedness in presenting the case before all South Africa?

This is one-sidedness as distinct from bias in the “normal” and “accepted” South African sense, though it could be bias to mean reporting in favour of the groups at the negotiating forum (however disparate their thinking and their reasons for being at the talks), to the exclusion of those who have refused to join.

It seems to me that the media have, indeed, been one-sided in their reporting of current issues; such reporting, one hastens to add, has not necessarily been motivated by malice though it would not be totally incorrect to say self-interest on the part of the media may be part of the explanation.

For one thing, it is a fact that most media in the mainstream are looking at a “new” South Africa with a view to being still here when a new government takes over.

The media have been less than fair to, say, the Cosag group. It is one thing to believe – as indeed I personally do – that members of Cosag are all entities with dismal prospects at truly free and fair elections, and that their tactics are time-delaying devices designed to lengthen as much as possible the status quo while delaying the future with its unknowns. It is quite another to report only on what shed negative light on the leadership of Cosag and their intentions. Whether Cosag are not everyone’s cup of tea is not the point, the fact of the matter is that they are negotiating partners with the rest of the ensemble at Kempton Park, and must be treated no less.

More glaring on the part of the major media, though, is the tendency to sensationalise issues involving leaders of the African National Congress on the one hand, and those of the National Party on the other.

The leaking of “news” of Mandela making a telephone call to De Klerk leads to all sorts of speculation and screaming sensational headlines, inconsequential nods between Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer are reported with the aplomb and magnitude of, say, John Vorster meeting Kenneth Kaunda for the first time.

For leaders of other, presumably “lesser”, parties to grab the same sort of headlines they would have to be linked to either the ANC or the NP. Thus Mandela meeting Buthelezi commands acres of space and time in print and on the air every day for seven days a week.

This is not to say the event itself is not newsworthy, but to question whether it does merit the almost manic attention it receives. No one in the media, in the meantime, bothers to question soberly whether the one-day meeting will produce

any results, given the already horrible situation of violence into which the country has slid.

Yes, yes, anything remotely capable of restoring peace – such as a meeting between the two men – must be welcomed, etc. But why do the media not bluntly tell the two men that their gesture may very well be a case of too little too late?

Perhaps it is impossible for the media to put things in perspective; the SABC, for example, is not only still carrying the heavy albatross of being the government’s lapdog for so long but now has to contend with a very controversial case of government interference with the appointment of an independent board by an independent panel of jurists.

But having a new SABC board, however impeccable its credentials, will not dispel lingering doubts about the corporation’s ability and willingness to report fairly and objectively – until the top and middle management of the SABC, having been used to years of repeating their master’s voice, are all dismissed.

On the print media front, the same baggage is in place, with the crucial difference that here we are dealing with private enterprises. Legislation creating anti-monopoly trusts may be necessary if media boardrooms are to reflect the true demographics of South African society and therefore, hopefully, to reflect that situation in the dissemination of news.

The public has a crucial role to play in all this. Just as politicians often claim to be speaking on behalf of “the people”, so do media overlords invoke the right of free speech and expression to claim that, in the end, it is in the public’s interests to have such untampered right as it grants not only the press but “the people” the platform to exercise their civil liberties.

The South African public has been used, abused, and even misused by politicians for many decades – and the media, sad to say, have played some part in this.

South Africans must themselves take the initiative by questioning the true role of the media – is it first and foremost to make money and, second, to inform? Or should it be the other way round?

Is it possible to separate news on a racial basis, as seen in the prevalence of so-called “Extra” and “Township” editions designed solely for “non-white” consumption? Indeed, are glib arguments that such editions are designed more on a regional and not racial basis convincing and sufficient?

It is all very well having a new SABC board and a few black faces on one or two major boards of the media, but what it really amounts to – with no reflection on the black members per se – is that it is all oh so token.

Deregulation, we must remember, does not involve only the government. Private enterprise, especially the media with its heavy concentration of power and influence in too few hands, must also deregulate.



by JON QWELANE

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