

Media Accountability: Public Interest or Self-Ideological Interest

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The great King Solomon in the Old Testament days of the Bible admonishes, “Above all, guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flows the influences of life” Proverbs 4: 23 (New King James version). We are human species that actually live from the heart. Our souls settle and establish our belief systems, which determine not only how we do things but why we do them in a particular way. If this is true, then we should not be changed by external circumstances but should rather put our value and belief system to work, i.e our internal property should help put the external in a certain perspective. These are simply the basic tenets of value-based governance, i.e when I can effectively govern myself first (self-control), before stepping forward to lead or regulate any person; when I experience victorious living privately, before I seek to uphold many trophies for the public eye. The external sphere of government is simply a reflection of the internal sphere. In other words, the internal is causative to the external. The type of government that exists in the homes, schools, religious institutions, businesses, associations, or civil (incl. legislative, executive and judiciary) of the country is a reflection of the self-government with the citizens. This also highlights the importance of the Moral Regeneration Movement and other like-minded initiatives.

The democratisation of our country nine years ago has seen some dramatic changes in the outlook of our society. These changes, rightfully so, continue to plunge through the political, economic and social arenas into the actual psyche of the citizens of our nation. I have personally, in more than one way, experienced the meaning of the term “democracy”, and have some understanding of how it can affect one's way of doing things. Although democracy – as, to a large extent, an external factor - should not change one's belief system, it will - at the very least - affect how one does things. In other words, we all have our own beliefs, which shape our value system and are influenced by numerous external factors taking place in our worlds, meaning we all have – and are entitled to - opinions about certain issues, people and systems. How we express those opinions will, in turn, ultimately determine others' opinions about us. And living in South Africa, no one needs educate anyone about the importance of how people feel about each other.

The mainstream media in our country, more than any other time before the early 90s, has assumed a very unhealthy robust attitude that has relegated its role to pushing more business and upper-class interest to boost sales – NOT the public interest. Let me be very quick to justify my opinion: Please understand that I am for the traditional tenets espoused in the freedom of the press. And no, I'm not a self-proclaimed champion of what constitutes good journalism either.

But when one reads countless pieces, features and even headlines that really suggest trial by the media, can anyone naively even suggest that it is for the public benefit? When a conclusion has already been made in the newsroom, before the final copy, about merely an allegation, can anyone naively suggest that it is for the public interest and not self interest? Isn't the media, by so doing, presuming people guilty until proven innocent? Does the media really publish a story because it's for the public benefit or to actually bring some profit? Without insulting readers' intelligence, really, whose benefit is it to write stories – marred with sensationalism and plagued with irresponsible journalism – filled with terms like “prima facie”; “sub judice”; “alleged”; “embattled”; “disgraced” without an explanation of the meaning of these terms to start with. Fine, I - and many others - know and understand the meaning to these terms, but what about the “public” the paper is serving – or supposed to?

Mr Jethro Goko, the Deputy Editor of the Business Day - in a well-attended Media Symposium at the University of Durban Westville on 12 September 2003 – suggested the public needs to “engage” with the media in holding it accountable for these and other ills. But how does one do that in the face of such manipulation and control? For instance, you write a letter of criticism to the Editor that will never see the final copy, and receive the sad excuse “there are thousands of letters we

receive every day” from the Editor. Or if published, it’s “edited” – or simply, manipulated - to a point that even the Editor knows it has actually lost its content value and the message is distorted. Then, the good Editor will write a very derogatory response to the “edited” letter – just how I like it! Furthermore, there are no public forums that are media-initiated to suggest public accountability.

“Why are these papers then receiving such resounding support if they are so unpopular with the public, and why did other papers cease to exist?” was a question asked to me by one columnist after the formal function in a similar debate. There is a fine line, which I need to point out in this regard. Me buying a paper does not necessarily mean I actually support that paper. Yes, in buying the paper, I will increase the circulation levels and readership of that paper, and will be contributing to the profiteering of the paper, but I may not necessarily be its supporter. I may be buying the paper for a particular story or an individual I’m interested in may be written about in the paper, but not necessarily because I love reading that particular paper. In many cases, I may not have any other choice because the paper is the only daily or weekender in my area.

Many newspapers ceased to exist not because they were unpopular, but more because of budgetary constraints. In this case I think of the Evening Post (Times Media - Eastern Cape), Isizwe (Naspers), Rand Daily Mail - the list just goes on.

In the face of these – and much more - media ills, can anyone who has some understanding about how media needs to express itself afford to be quiet? It’s always been said and I agree: “the media has a responsibility to the public to act as our watchdog against the abuses of power and corruption. News reporters should find and shine a light on any national or international problem within government policies and governance, environment, health and business, and should report on positive and negative issues”. The freedom of the media should never be undermined by political power, economic imperatives or journalistic excesses because when it is lost, everyone will lose.

It is Tawana Kupe, Senior Lecturer in the Media Studies Programme at Wits University who said further to the journalists’ role to being watchdog, that the resources to carry journalism come from media owners who have – over the past nine years – been cutting editorial costs for commercial purposes.

However, it is very irresponsible of journalists to report something they are not even sure about or a one-sided story, and rely on “Mr Z was not available for comments”, when Mr Z was actually not even contacted to start with. It is very irresponsible of journalists to steal privileged information, which they are not even sure of, and put it in print. And we’re all familiar with the term “leaked”, ever-used in all major papers. We also know how it backfires on some journalists – I think of the Zuma-Ngcuka saga for one.

The press assumes the public thinks it wants to read a particular story; and so we are given what the media thinks we really want. Really, whose interest is it, anyway? None of my journalist friends – many as they are – should expect a soothing answer as to why people, particularly in political circles, echo the sentiments shared in the advert by the Mpumalanga Premier, Ndaweni Mahlangu in the City Press of 07 September 2003. It is NOT because of what the media should be doing, but how the media expresses itself in carrying out its duties.

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