

THE GUARDIAN mMQ i W.

Monday May 7 1990

Between

the lines

. Nomavenda

Mathiane

Frontl i ne

JOURNALISTS in South

Africa are experiencing

grave problems. For black

journalists the situation is

even worse. We stand be-

tween the "system" and the

"people", while at the same

time facing our "masters"

who are white and have no

idea of the black world.

Some editors accuse black

journalists of using the

paper to advance their politi-

cal agendas while seeing

nothing wrong with a white

journalist arguing a black

line in the same pages.

White journalists. living in

white areas. enjoy immunity.

They can write any story and

will never be petrol-bombed

or neckla'ced. A white jour-

nalist can be critical of both

black and white politicians.

Black journalists dare not.

White journalists operate

within a fairly literate soci-

ety which understands

media regulations, whereas

the majority of black readers

do not understand emer-

gency restrictions. For them

it is simple. An incident

occurs in a black township

and they see a black journal-

ist. In the paper the next day

no mention is made of what

happened. Either the jour-

nalists are supressing news,

or they are too lazy to do

their work. How are they to

know that before we can pub-

lish sensitive reports we

have to get police clearance?

Then comes censorship

from the liberation move

'Al to

play for

Continued from page 21

Die Patriot is promoting the

concept of a separate Afrikaner

homeland and trying to under-

mine De Klerk. "If ever there

were reasons to adopt the pol-

icy of partition," a commentary

proclaimed. "it is the constant

sight of pictures of dancing.

tist-clenching blacks shouting

the odds about so-called griev.

ances . . . Who needs it?"

"We should do what we

wanted the blacks to do. We'll

3leave Johannesburg. for exam-

ple. for Azania." Du Toit was

ments. There was a time when the press had one enemy and that was the law. Falling foul of this meant detention or whatever the system deemed fit. Today we would rather face a hostile government than cross paths with the movements. -

If a journalist contravenes some silly law, the worst that can happen is that he is thrown into jail and the legal process takes its course. But if a black journalist writes a story interpreted as against the movement, then anything from ostracisation or the gutting of the journalist's house to necklacing is possible. The reporter is labelled and carries that tag for as long as the movement wants. And yet white journalists are not treated in this way. They can ask activists sensitive questions which we would never dream of asking. Liberation movements expect black journalists to be revolutionaries like them. We must not question, only report incidents "as they are". Our political affiliations are questioned and we are expected to toe a particular populist ideology. Putting issues into perspective may earn us a bad name.

It is difficult to sacrifice the truth for the struggle. After all, we are journalists trained to search for truth. to follow hunches, to mirror society. We also owe it to the public to inform, interpret and alert. How can we perform when we must forever look over our shoulders?

At times I wonder if the suppression of news is not an African disease. Look at the number of African journalists who are working in foreign lands simply because they dared question actions of their governments at home. African prisons are bursting at the seams with people who dared criticise the government. Do such stories reach the news papers? If they do, are the editors brave enough to publish them? We know more about what happens in Lithuania than about what goes on across our borders. Already the buzz-word here is about a new and changing South Africa called

PASA (Post Apartheid South Africa). as though the day apartheid goes. love, goodwill. tolerance and openness will suddenly emerge. But the communities are doing nothing to clear the way for a stable and secure PASA. Instead they are doing everything in their power to suppress any voice cautioning the erosion of human rights. It is seen as right to expose the atrocities of the system and condone those done in the name of the struggle. Black journalists are doing good work if they expose the Afrikaner farmers who exploit black workers, but become bad guys when they write about black traders in Soweto working fellow blacks as slaves in their shops.

For all the harassment and bullying of journalists, I still have faith that we will have the last laugh. I strongly believe in the African idiom that nothing lasts forever. One day Africa will learn to take criticism. In the meantime. we will continue to chronicle history as best as we can.

Nomavenda Mathiane is assistant editor of Frontline, an independent monthly political magazine started in 1979. It has three staff and a circulation of 10,000. Frontline has just lost an appeal against R12, 000 damages and costs in a libel action taken by Inkatha president Chief Mangosuthu Buthe.

A woman who rushed into the room with a letter denouncing De Klerk's latest speech.

AT THE other end of the Afrikaner press lies Vrye Weekblad. (Independent Weekly) the most prosecuted newspaper precisely because it is the only Afrikaans one to challenge white rule from the left.

Its editor Max du Preez. a refugee from the commercial Afrikaans press -11 years with Beeld - has particular contempt for his former colleagues. "They hate us," he says with satisfaction, "and that's because we write about them as well. We are seen as fundamentally treasonable. and against everything that is holy about Afrikanerdom.

"We have a tradition here.

When you are an Afrikaner and you turn against apartheid, you

saying when our interview was f'normally become anglicised.
interrupted by a English-speakg Well I'm most definitely not. I
LM,,

I know that my father, uncles,
and cousins are from rural
areas, and they are fine people.
But they are also racists, they
do the most appalling things.
and they vote for the National
Party. It has become clear that
they simply don't know what is
going on in this country."

Vrye Weekblad has a circula-
tion of only 13.000, which does
scant justice to its importance.

As he sat calmly sucking his
pipe. Du Preez faced a R1 mil-
lion libel writ from the deputy
commissioner of police, a

R500,000 writ from "super-spy"
Craig Williamson, and another
R200,000 writ from P.W. Botha,
all stemming from his revela-
tions about South African hit-
squad. And he is appealing
against a six-month suspended
sentence for quoting Joe Slovo
when he was a banned person.

"We are in perpetual opposi-
tion," he said

MEDIA :11

Suddenlyyywhite South Africans have to accept black faces on a white screen, not as terror
ists but as political leaders.

Georgina Henry reports on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's idea of reflecting
th

The changing bias of broadcasting

NE small sign that

the South African

Broadcasting Corpo-

ration is inching _

towards creating a reputation

for less partial news coverage

was the dropping of the nightly

editorial comment from its

main television service.

The official reason for the ,

end of this discredited slot -

government propaganda at its V

crudest - was that "such talks

are no longer suitable". Since

February 2, even its fiercest

critics have admitted that the

SABC is trying to cover a fuller

spectrum of political debate.

The corporation itself would

'say that change came earlier

than February. "It was the

middle of last year that we

started on a new approach."

says Carel van der Merwe, the

director of news who rejoined

the news division 18 months

ago. before the last election.

"We had done a lot of re-

search. looking at social and

political findings. And. at the

end, we sat down and decided

there were 240 statements of

fact about the trends we found

in South African society. Then

we set ourselves four tasks.

And we started negotiation with 14 political parties and 16 leaders. By the end of our discussions we had identified 23 national issues. Then we said let's have election debates in five different formats." a This is typical SABC-speak - desperately bureaucratic. determined to confound you with statistics to demonstrate the complexity of South African politics. and convince you of the hard task the corporation has in reflecting it.

Journalists in the SABC had inhibited themselves in the past, he agrees. "But we have a new situation," he says. "and a new news service that reflects it. I accept that one of our critical risk factors was that we were looked upon as. the lackey of the government. We can't deny that. But I believe we are already undergoing a complete turnaround in the image of the SABC as a reporter of news." But although reporting of the ANC and other unbanned organisations is now a nightly occurrence. the SABC is still a reflection of the agenda set by the government, under a state president who does not interfere with the broadcast media to the extent his predecessor did. Because the government no longer refers to Nelson Mandela as a terrorist. neither does the SABC.

Mr van der Merwe says that politics must be handled delicately by the corporation. "For us as journalists it is easy to switch, but for the South African public . . . suddenly they have to accept that people they were told were former terrorists are political leaders. and they must accept black faces on a white screen."

What the SABC believes. he says. is that there should be 'purposeful reporting and support for the currents and patterns of moderation in our society". There is, he insists, a common set of values which the SABC must reflect. What are they? "Free enterprise is one. Streams of moderation another. Intensification of community values. a third." He says that the SABC cannot suddenly just assume that, because politics is changing. everything will change. "We have to report on government processes and government departments as they still are. We have to report

on what is going on in the so-called homelands even though these structures are under Microwaves on the airwaves: the selling of the new-look SABC attack from various groups in a hurry for change."

Reporting on the negotiations towards change means reflecting all shades of opinion, he says. which means not assuming that the ANC has a monopoly on black support. Support for "moderate opinion" would seem to include Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha but exclude the ANC radicals, the Pan Africanist Congress, and the right of the National Party (which also complains it finds it difficult to get spokesmen on the SAJC).

The SABC was set up in 1936. a supposed independent service with a charter along BBC lines. It runs 23 radio services in Afrikaans. English. and nine African languages; and four television channels in seven languages. The first of these. TV1, started in 1976. TV1 is the flagship. with programmes in Afrikaans and English. TV2 and TV3 are black-language channels. TV4 is described as multicultural entertainment and sports, mainly in English and Afrikaans. .

SABC also runs the external radio services for the government, but recently axed its European broadcasts leading to speculation about the service as a whole. It has a monopoly on television and. therefore, on television news. This may change under pressure from the four newspaper groups, which have a stake in M-NET, the subscription channel. The government is considering their request to run a news service.

Other things, too. may change: last month the government set up a task force to conduct a "full investigation" into broadcasting, including consideration of whether it should be privatised. This has created some controversy, partly over the lack of commercial sector representation, in particular, of groups lobbying for radio and television to be opened to independent outsiders. The task force also has been seen as a move to pre-empt a black government.

The SABC news division is integrated in the sense that it serves both radio and television. but there are separate

news rooms for the different languages. .

The news agendas for the white and black channels tend to be very different. Christo Kritzinger, editor-in-chief of television news, says this is a PHOTOGRAPH: DON MCPHEE
e new social reality - 'matter for the news editors ' themselves. It is a bewilderingly complicated operation. - The night I was there, the W1 newsroom (60 per cent Afrikaans, 40 per cent English) led its 8pm news bulletin on the debate about nationalisation and the ANC - first, a report from parliament; second, a speech from Mandela in which he had significantly softened his position. The Afrikaans news earlier that evening had, . led on the Harms Commission . in London. 3

On TV2 (Zulu and Xhosa), 80 per cent of whose audience lives in Natal, the lead was soliders going into the Natal trouble spots. On TVS (north and south Sotho and Tswana), V the first three stories were if about the "independent home- ' lands". Both black channels had Mandela's speech as the fifth item.

The language and regional s differences of the television ser- '5' vices involve racial divisions. ,3 TV2 and 3 have an all-black i news room, TV1 virtually all . 3 white. TV1 tends to have white 1!; presenters, TV2 and 3 has black. TV2 and 3 have black game shows and entertain- ".4 ment. But all the top jobs are in '1, , white hands. 3

Advertising is important to - the SABC - R500 million (5:125 '3 million) a year, compared with j : R150 million in licence fees. Theuns Van Heerden, deputy j ' director-general responsible for t; programmes, spends the high- t ; est proportion of his television (1 budget on TV1. He says this is because the black channels have a smaller audience, as ownership of television sets is lower among blacks than among whites.

About a third of the budget is :f spent on programmes from ; overseas: not British drama. 3'. because there is an Equity boycott, but a good deal from America. Murder She Wrote is the most popular programme. - Van Heerden says the corporation is slowly beginning to redefine its programme policy.

which means more effort to mix
black and white actors and
music. for example. He looks a 3e
bit nervous. "If you say things
are changing too loudly, people
will think you're advocating -_
this or that. Already there are,
people who accuse the SABC of
being part and parcel of the
ANC." 4 L, ,
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it ; ._v;"
3, yr. .