A mirror on the world or the market?

Does the media have a responsibility to forge a new society, by presenting an ideology of a future non-racial, non-sexist and equal social order in its programmes?

By MOIRA LEVY

YOU'VE witnessed the scene many times. A group of young guys gathered in a pub. The setting is not recognisably South African, but by stretching the imagination slightly it could well be. They are colleagues...more than that, good pals, and they are there to celebrate – a return, an imminent departure, a career highpoint, or just life itself and how good it's been to them.

They are happy, healthy, well-dressed and well-fed. As they raise their glasses, you know they share an impeccable taste in beer. In fact, they appear to share the same impeccable taste in dress, style, humour – they have everything in common, except of course their race. For these young men embody the principle of non-racialism, and they make it look as easy as downing a Lion or an Ohlssons.

And where is it that we encounter these New South Africans? Ironically, of all places, on the SABC. Where once we were faced nightly with images of the apartheid status quo, we now see them, or variations of them, on our TV screens every night. South African viewers, new and old, observe them eagerly – we too would prefer to live in a beer advert, rather than in today's messy, painful transition and turmoil.

And it doesn't stop with the ads. Nowadays, between the American soap operas, SABC-TV is giving a daily dose of New South Africanisms. Platforms of – largely – reasonable people holding reasonable and rational debates, without as much as a mention of the years of racial hatred and hostility of the past – not to mention the years of it still to come.

CCV leads the way in all of this. What started off as a thinly disguised black channel, the amalgamation of apartheid's TV2 and 3, has now come into its own as a messenger of the future.

Speaking at an Idasa media seminar in February, CCV general manager, Madala Mphahlele, said he sees his TV station playing a central role in forging a new national identity.

At the seminar – entitled Media in Transition: New Markets, Same Message? – debate crystallised around the essential question: Should the media lead or follow?

The crux of the debate can be summarised as follows: Does the media have a responsibility to forge a new society, by presenting an ideology of a future non-racial, non-sexist and equal social order in its news broadcasts, adverts, quizzes, panel discussions and soap operas?

Or is its responsibility to faithfully and accurately reflect, and thereby possibly reproduce, the existing inequality, prejudice, disaster and darkness of our society?

Mphahlele declared that CCV has taken as its starting point the dictum that the media have a responsibility to society to pave the way.

He talked of the media's task to stay one step ahead. To stay in business, he said, the successful media should not be pitched at the point at which society finds itself at present, but at the point it aims to reach in the future.

In the '90s, since the demise of the *Rand Daily Mail*, few blacks read 'white' newspapers; significantly fewer whites read *Sowetan*, *City Press* or any of the 'black' newspapers. Newspapers reinforce and reproduce the parochialism of apartheid society, Mphahlele said, instead of the universalism and diversity of what our society could and should be.

Here is where TV has a role to play. 'We want to make diversity a positive thing that can enhance the quality of all South Africa's communities. It is this diversity that makes this country unique, and TV can play a role in developing the frame of mind that recognises this.'

TV has the power to break down barriers, he said. 'That is why Hertzog always said no to it.' It has the capacity to introduce other worlds into our own living rooms, and when the worlds of our neighbours are sometimes as foreign as far-off countries, TV can play a powerful role in informing and educating.

'Because TV can reach people in their homes, it has the capacity to act as a powerful catalyst.'

The beer adverts, just like CCV's Newsline panel debates and, indeed, for example, the recent David Frost interviews, bring the issues and images of the New South Africa into many South African living rooms.

Mphahlele cautioned that this raises question about language. He has encountered the criticism that the advent of CCV 'robbed' blacks of their own-culture, own-language TV channel. He argued that if TV succeeds in reaching a broader public and, in so doing,

Madala Mphahlele: media must stay one step ahead.

The world of the beer advert...some believe the media could pave the way to it.

- bridges age-old gaps and divisions, then it is achieving something that few others can.

He gave sport as an example: in the past whites scorned soccer as a 'black game'. Today, said Mphahlele, South Africans of all races want to watch South Africa compete internationally and to have English commentary. 'TV can address some of these dichotomies'.

The seminar debate centred around whether it is possible to produce media for markets that cross racial and class lines and embody world views that are based on, as yet unrealised, future possibilities.

Some seminar participants rejected this idea, arguing strongly that media management policy needs to be based clearly on the needs and demands of specific markets which, in turn, must be identified by thorough and extensive market research.

General manager of the *Sowetan*, Rory Wilson, argued that this is the route to media viability. And its starting point, he said, must be editorial independence. This is what brings in the readers, which in turn secures the advertising. 'An editor has a bounden obligation not only to write what he likes, but to write what services the marketplace.'

He cautioned that the media, like any other business, needs to identify its market and target it carefully. Or run the risk of losing consumers, and with them, advertisers, to another, more acceptable and potentially less threatening, products.

He cited the Johannesburg-based daily, *Business Day*, as a newspaper success story, with its clearly identified and narrowly defined market guaranteeing advertisers' interest and support.

'A possible solution is to identify markets not as race groups or even classes but as interest groups'

Wilson went on to say that while the legacy of apartheid lives on – and it shows no sign of disappearing in the immediate future – black and white news consumers occupy such different worlds, and therefore constitute such different markets, that their media, if it is to be viable, must necessarily be different and separate.

The danger that this creates is of backward-looking media that assumes a white, middle-class market – because that is the market it has always catered for – and, in so doing, perpetuates an old order, oblivious to the dramatic changes that are taking place daily.

A possible solution, posed by Mphahlele, was to identify markets not as race groups or even classes but as interest groups, with specific concerns and needs. In this way, parochialism gives way to regionalism and local media becomes a way of serving the community and not simply addressing it.

That means fostering the kind of journalism that tells the story not of whites or blacks, but of South Africans. It means giving a rape in Botshabelo the same coverage as a rape in Sandton. It means putting a picture to the name of a township murder victim, and names and life stories behind the statistics of daily police crime reports.

The real challenge facing the media in South Africa is not only to report on, but to reflect, the transition process. It is not to simply wait for conditions to change, but to facilitate that change. It is to have the courage to step out in front, reporting the story of South Africa-in-the-making, and not only the South Africa of then and now.

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