

Fear in the newsroom



By [Anton Harber](#)

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Journalists seldom choose journalism for the money. Some do it because they feel they can do public good, some because they like the access it gives them to the powerful. Some just love the excitement of news and a front-row seat in the making of history. Some want to be celebrity reporters. There is a host of reasons to do it, but few involve the hope of getting rich.

That is why there is such an independent spirit among most journalists. If someone is going to tell them what to write to serve their narrow interests, then they might as well cross the floor into public relations or corporate communications and get much more money for it.

But what do we mean by editorial independence, a phrase that is often used and abused? It is not the right to do as one likes, as one generally has to work within institutions that need to serve readers, advertisers and owners. It cannot be that one is unaccountable or that newsrooms are free-for-alls.

When fear overrules news judgement

What it generally means is that, within the parameters of an institution, the journalist is free to make a decision based primarily on what are often called news values, the notion that the decision of what to publish or broadcast is based first on what their audience needs, wants or should know.

When reporters fear they will lose their job if they show crowds booing President Jacob Zuma or - as I am told happened at the SABC last week - if they show African National Congress supporters wielding bricks against marching rivals, then there are party-political interests overriding news judgments.

When newspaper editors feel they have to run yet another comically flattering interview with their new company chair - as appears to be the case at the Independent newspaper group - then they are serving narrow financial interests above the interests of their public. They start to feel like corporate communicators, a field governed by a different set of values and ethics.

Editorial independence can be complicated. Owners have the right to hire and fire editors and that is how they set the parameters and values of the organisation. They choose people they trust to produce the kind of product they want. A wise owner then lets the editor get on with it, knowing that to keep their integrity, the editor will have to make some decisions that irritate the owner. It is when an owner appears to fire an editor for making a news judgment, or imposes their personal interests on news decisions - as appeared to be the case recently at the Cape Times - that there is an outcry. Editors have to maintain a fine balance between the interests of the public, their readers, their advertisers and their owners. Get that

balance wrong and you lose credibility and standing, and soon you lose your audience and advertisers.

The value of editorial independence

At Independent newspapers, a new phenomenon is happening. To achieve her goal of breaking the control of what she calls "a small but very privileged and racially definable minority", group executive editor Karima Brown is centralising head-office control of opinion and political coverage at the group's 16 titles under herself and group op-ed (opposite editorial) and analysis editor Vukani Mde. It will be interesting to see what effect this has on audiences and advertisers, the more so because some of the early victims of her campaign appear to include some of the more progressive voices in the group.

At a time when editorial independence is under threat from politicians, advertisers and owners, it is worth reminding ourselves why we value it. I would boil it down to one reason: it produces better, more interesting and useful journalism.

Homogenous newsrooms are run by fear and control, conditions inimical to interesting reporting. The best newsrooms are places of debate and contestation between different viewpoints fighting for space and attention, where journalists' colleagues are testing their accuracy and fairness, and they are encouraged to be creative, imaginative and disruptive. This is the spirit of independence. That is why the SABC, for all its resources, struggles to produce good journalism. And that is why we worry about the future of journalism at Independent newspapers.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).

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