

Objectivity of media is not about which side it is on

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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In the 1994 elections, only one newspaper called on voters explicitly to support the African National Congress (ANC). It is a startling reminder of how the structures of the apartheid media industry carried into the new era.

That newspaper was the *Mail & Guardian*, though the *Sowetan* made a broader call for a vote for "liberation parties". This year, the *M&G* called on people to vote against the ANC, a significant shift.

In the aftermath of the latest ballot, a triumphant ANC launched into the media. Three key figures - Malusi Gigaba, Jacob Zuma and Blade Nzimande - said their success was a victory over a hostile media. This does not bode well for media freedom in the next five years, especially after a number of government threats had to be faced down during the past five.

Let's be frank: there is a lot to criticise about our journalism. But if we are to confront this issue constructively, we have to take the debate up a notch or two. There needs to be more debate about the weaknesses of our media, but we need to face up to the real issues.

Sweeping statements

The ANC's critique always seems to be broad and sweeping, taking in the media as a whole as if it is one body operating in unison. It makes no allowances for the range of newspapers, radio and TV stations and websites we offer, nor that there is now a significant part of our media that is sympathetic to the ANC, and tempers its criticism.

To say that our media are oppositional is about as useful as saying that all politicians are crooks, or white men can't jump.

There are issues of fact. Nzimande said the media had built up Mamphela Ramphele and did not subject the Democratic Alliance to the same scrutiny as the ANC. In fact, Ramphele has a long and venerable history that was not invented by the media. DA leadership issues have been closely scrutinised by at least some journalists. If you are throwing stones at inaccuracy, you need to aim carefully.

There are also some deep contradictions in the ANC's argument. These same leaders tell us they are very concerned at the "overspend" on the Nkandla project, but they target the journalists who went to great lengths to expose it. They forget that those investigative journalists had to overcome repeated attempts by the ministerial security cluster (senior ANC people, that is) to suppress the information, including going to court to force compliance with information law.

Hypocrisy

ANC leaders criticise the media for taking a position and for sacrificing their "objectivity", but they had no objection when those same newspapers took sides with them. At the root of this is a contradiction over the idea of objectivity: Nzimande is dismissive of journalists' ability to be objective, yet he complains if they are not.

The ANC had praise for the alternative media of the apartheid era - both in the 1950s and the 1980s - for taking a strong stand on apartheid and for being advocates of human rights, yet it points fingers now at journalists who make their views clear.

At the root of this is a lack of respect for the notion of journalistic independence. If you back the ANC, your independence is respected; if you are overly critical, then you are serving some other hostile, probably foreign, interest. Media freedom, however, means that you respect the right of newspapers to be oppositional if they so choose. To criticise newspapers for pursuing a line or serving an interest is like criticising a clown for being funny, or an accountant for not being funny. That is what they do.

And the most problematic areas are where...?

Ironically, the most problematic areas of our media are those in which the government has most influence: the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the community media (which it half-heartedly subsidises), the neglect of most African languages, and the cost of bandwidth. It would behove them to pay more attention to these issues.

Where Nzimande is right is that our media need more diversity. But I suspect that the voices that we need to hear more from are not those he wants to hear: the workers of Marikana, the protesters of Bekkersdal, and those who are campaigning for a new left/labour political party.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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