THE LAST WORD / DIE LAASTE WOORD

WHY SOUTH AFRICANS DON'T GET THE NEWSPAPERS THEY DESERVE

I leave the editorship of the Sunday Times with a heavy sense of work unfinished. I did not achieve what I set out to do, and I am leaving in part because for the past couple of years I have seen no chance of doing so.

I'm not asking you to feel sorry for me. Some people are good at success, I'm good at failure. I take it as proof that one has set proper goals.

And in fact, the goal I set myself in the past 10 years was so soaringly ambitious: I wanted to produce a good English-language newspaper. To do that, it was clear, one had first to try to rehabilitate a shattered profession.

At Business Day, I used to mock the eccentricity of trying to build a good newspaper on a collapsing society. On my first day, I was given a staff list of 73, and found on my desk 14 resignations. Most of them from people who were emigrating. In that first year, one third of my staff did emigrate and hardly anybody believed Business Day would survive.

In the event, the society did not collapse, nor did Business Day, and today I look at the newspaper with pride.

The Sunday Times was altogether a different challenge. My predecessor, Tertius Myburgh, used to call it a whore; the elder sister who went on to the streets to put her younger sister through university.

The younger sister, of course, was the Rand Daily Mail, and it was never quite clear to me why the Sunday Times continued its whoring after the RDM died. I well remember the disastrous day when Tertius sacrificed great chunks of editorial space to advertising, in order to cover the Mail's losses.

We have never regained that editorial space, and the loss has had a crippling effect on the newspaper: there has never since been enough space to produce a serious newspaper, and yet
publish all those things which the Sunday Times must publish to retain its multi-cultural mass readership.

When I took over in 1990, the market research showed the effects. The newspaper's market identification was "sex and scandal" and its credibility was virtually nil. Many good journalists simply would not work for the Sunday Times. My letter of appointment told me to use the newspaper to advance the use of democracy, and I could hardly do that if nobody believed a word we said. It was like pushing wet spaghetti.

Since then a good deal has been achieved. Credibility has in fact been restored. Serious people take the newspaper seriously and we were able to play a constructive and useful role during the transition and the elections.

The staff, taken as a whole, are probably the very best that could be assembled in this country. We recently had 300 applications for four vacancies. Both Steve Mulholland, former MD of Times Media Ltd, and Roy Paulson, present MD, supported me in devising new policies designed to stabilise the staff, and I am grateful for their support.

That staff includes black, coloured and Indian people of talent, some in positions of real authority and influence.

We have set the highest circulation ever achieved, by far, and we generated profits of such magnitude that I find them embarrassing. For a long time, I managed the neat trick of lifting circulation while taking the newspaper steadily up-market. After the election, of course, circulations fell sharply and the Sunday Times is only now recovering from that loss, but I believe it is a temporary condition. So where does the problem lie? We have had ample warning of trouble ahead. Mr. Thabo Mbeki says we do not properly inform the public, and that is true. Mr. Justice Chaskalson says much the same thing about our failure to cover the Constitutional Court, and while he might in fairness have made an exception of Carmel Rickard's reporting in the Sunday Times, his criticism applies to other courts: justice is no longer seen to be done because the newspapers no longer cover the courts. Local and regional governments have become pits of corruption because the searchlight of newspaper coverage has been withdrawn.

The Speaker has asked me to give my mind, in retirement, to the question of what might be done to improve our newspapers, and to make them effective instruments of our new democracy. It is partly in response to their plea that I am trying to analyse the problem and to suggest a remedy.

Newspapers exist in a state of perpetual tension between the need to make a commercial profit and the need to serve the public interest, between advertisers...
and readers, between editors and man-
gers. Our newspapers are bad be-
cause that balance has become
skewed. The accusation that we do not
serve the public interest is true, if not
wholly then substantially, and I cannot
defend our newspapers against those
attacks. Everybody knows that when a
newspaper fails to make a profit, like the
RDM, it is in desperate trouble. Fewer
people grasp that when it fails to serve
the public interest it is no less trouble: its
privileges, which include access to
powerful people and constitutional pro-
tections of its right to publish freely, can
be withdrawn. That is the threat which
every newspaperman discerned behind
Mr. Mbeki’s criticisms. But it does no
good to berate Mr. Mbeki - we have to
improve our own performance.
I shall not bore you with tales of old bat-
tles, won or lost, except to say that our
newspapers are to an increasing extent
mere advertising media, crammed with
special supplements, so called “spon-
sored news”, phoney business success
stories, advortorial and other forms of
disguised commercial propaganda.

The main battles of my editorships have
been fought not in the public arena, but
on the line that separates editorial mat-
ter from commercial propaganda. The
advertising community, which includes
some of our own staff, exerts unrelent-
ing pressure to force commercial
propaganda into editorial space, and to
disguise advertising as independent
editorial matter. The reason is obvious:
editorial matter has some credibility,
advertising virtually none. In the battles
I have had support from Steve Mulhol-
land and Roy Paulson, but pressure
comes from old quarters.

If half the newspaper or more is devoted
to advertising, and the other half to
sport, entertainment, manbites-dog
stories, Everest, Miss South Africa, and
your future in the stars - all things nec-
essary to sell the product, where is the
space to do what Mr. Mbeki, and the
Speaker, and Judge Chaskelson want
us to do?

To do the job properly I would need, say,
an eight-page review section which
would attract hardly any ads, and would
take millions off the bottom line. As mat-
ters stand, I cannot even get an extra
half-page for important events, and I
have been trapped throughout my edi-
torship under the restrictive
advertising-editorial ratio that Tertius
Myburgh thought justifiable to save the
RDM. I simply could not do my job
properly, and in the end, I suppose, I lost
heart. Any-way, I ran out of time and
energy.

I do not dwell on constant production
breakdowns, 19 weeks out of 52, or the
vagaries of our distribution, or the failure
to develop a proper home delivery sys-
tem, or the use of inferior paper, or our
truly dreadful printing. To do these
things properly, as they should be done
and are done by leading newspapers
around the world, would cost money.
Over the year I have put forward ideas to
deal with the problems, within the con-
text of profitable operation, but I can't
think of any occasion on which my view
prevailed.
I did try three times to discuss these matters with Ian McPherson, then chairman of SAAN, and on each occasion he averted the discussion by telling me the same story: how American millionaire Charles Engelhardt made farting noises. The fourth time I spoke to him, I asked him: "Why did you fire me?" "I was told you could not read a balance sheet," he replied. "Can I read a balance sheet?" I asked. He answered: "I don't know." At that, I gave up talking to members of the board.

My troubles came to a head under David Kovarsky. I will not bore you with details, but that period saw a full-scale assault on editorial space, with entire sections being set aside for the advertising people to produce ostensible editorial material.

It was, of course a direct assault on my authority and status, and it descended to levels where written promises were broken, written guidelines - painfully negotiated - were ignored, and junior advertising staff felt free to insult me at will.

In the end, Kovarsky tried to force me into submission by putting me on a probation, with monthly performance reviews and a threat of dismissal after six months. I nearly resigned but was persuaded by Joel Mervis to fight it out. After six months, Kovarsky gave me a written apology, but it was a monumental waste of time and energy. But it did give me a fresh understanding of why the institution of editorship in this country, and the stature of editors, has declined so catastrophically from the levels set by men like Rene de Villiers and Joel Mervis and Rainer Ellis. Editors as a class are a diminished breed. Certainly, I have found the latter years of my editorship to be demeaning and sometimes humiliating and I am glad to have reached the end.

I have served newspapers for 40 years to the limit of my health and my strength because I am a democrat who sprang from the very bottom rungs of this society, and newspapers educated me. They gave me a voice. They enabled me to campaign for a humane, liberal, free society. I regret none of it. But, I depart with a plea to the owners, whoever they may be: that tensions between profit and public interest, between managers and editors, between good business and good newspapers, require their mediation. I ask them to make a public commitment to the development of at least one or two good newspapers and to accept the responsibility to see that good is achieved. I do not believe it is possible to produce a good newspaper in English in South Africa unless the overseers will it.

- This is an edited extract of a speech given of a farewell function in Johannesburg.

The Editorial Board of Communicare thanks Sunday Times for the permission granted to publish this extract.