

Writing for black readers — Responsibilities, obligations and problems of the black journalist in South Africa.

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Introduction

The publication of special editions for black newspaper readers in South Africa is directly traceable to the notion of "writing for black readers." These editions — generally referred to as "EXTRAS" — gave the idea effect and they are today produced by many newspapers in the country.

Economic considerations aside, the editions were launched ostensibly to promote "detente" and "dialogue" between the country's black and white radical groups. They were also supposed to be the voice of the voteless and voiceless residents of the townships and other black areas, to inform their white rulers and compatriots about the conditions in these areas and about the aspirations and the needs of the people living there.

The apparent rationale for their birth was that many whites were ignorant of the true conditions in the black areas around them and for that reason, calls for change by blacks and other whites had little or no impact. The "EXTRAS" would remedy the condition. They would serve as cross-cultural instruments to bridge the "ignorance gap" by facilitating the free flow of information between the races.

This discussion will demonstrate that these editions have not fulfilled this objective.

Apparently few whites have benefitted from the publication of these editions — in spite of the fact that some have been in existence for more than two decades. What has happened is that more "black news" has been published in the country since they were launched, but little of it has reached a significant number of white readers — among whom are the decision-makers of South Africa.

The notion of "writing for blacks" has thus seemingly not generated an atmosphere conducive to effective intercultural communication in South Africa. The resultant scenario and the apparent failure of the special editions as instruments of intercultural communication will come into perspective as we take a closer look at their rôle in the newspaper world.

The extent to which their publication has affected the black journalist's perception and understanding of his responsibilities and obligations as a professional craftsman should also become clear during the discussion. This, in some cases, will be found to have become highly distorted or even warped. What must be remembered is that this is a form of knee-jack reaction or defence mechanism on the part of the black journalist to "protect" himself from a situation beyond his control.

This is a serious problem which, obviously, leads to other problems and consequently a vicious cycle.

The Rôle of the Special "EXTRA" Editions for Black Newspapers Readers in South Africa.

Most of the information in this section has been drawn from a study I presented for a B.A. Honours Degree in Communication at the University of South Africa this year under the same title.

In the study, the "hard news" content of randomly selected editions of *The Star's* "Stop Press" and "Africa Edition" and the *Rand Daily Mail's* "Morning Final" and "Extra" were used as a sample. This involved an analysis of ten copies from each paper for the five-day week June 2-6, 1980.

The "Stop Press" and "Morning Final" editions were used as "control" copies against which the pages changed to compile the "black editions" were compared. Articles and pictures removed from the "controls" to make room for "black interest" stories and pictures were counted. Articles and pictures retained in both the "controls" and the "black editions" were also counted.

The Findings

The Mail's Morning Final had seven pages replaced on June 2 for the Extra edition and six pages remoulded on the following four days. The first four pages carried "hard news" while the others treated "soft news" in the form of township entertainment and sports. As already pointed out, only the "hard news" pages were analysed for the study.

During the five days, 166 articles in the Morning Final were replaced with 177 in the Extra. Of these, 72 were retained in both editions on the same days and on the same pages. Nine were kept in both editions on the same days but on different pages. Thus, 81 articles were retained in both editions during the week.

This means that readers of the Morning Final lost out on 90 (171-81) stories which appeared only in the Extra that week. On the other hand, readers of the Extra missed 85 (166-81) articles carried only in the Morning Final.

The same Page One lead story was retained in both editions on June 3, 4 and 5 giving *The Mail* a 60 percent front page main article "integration

level". However, on June 2 and 6 the lead articles for the Morning Final were distinctly "white content" while those for the Extra were obviously "black content".

The Mail showed as stronger bias for "black content" pictures for the Extra on the front page than was the case with the lead stories. The three editions for June 2, 5 and 6 carried distinctly "black content" pictures during the five days.

In the case of *The Star*, the Stop Press had two "hard news" pages replated for the Africa Edition on June 2 and three pages on the following four days. As in the case of *The Mail*, the other remoulded pages carried township showbusiness and sports.

During the five days, 107 news stories in the Stop Press were replaced with 141 articles in the Africa Edition. Seventeen were retained in both editions on the same pages on various days and four on the same days but on different pages. Thus, 21 articles were retained in both editions during the week.

This means that Stop Press readers lost out on 120 (141-21) stories which appeared only in the Africa Edition. On the other hand, readers of the Africa Edition missed 86 (107-21) articles published only in the Stop Press.

The Star showed a 60 percent bias towards "black content" articles for its lead stories in the Africa Edition. This edition showed an 80 percent "black content" picture bias. *The Star* revealed a poorer news and picture "integration level" than *The Mail*.

Observations

These findings clearly show that an appreciable volume of news and pictures about people in the black areas is being published by these newspapers, but much of the information is lost to both their white and black readers. Thus, a primary goal to supply the white reader with more information about his compatriots in the black areas is not being satisfied.

The special editions can serve as effective instruments of intercultural communication only if they let the white newspaper reader in the heart of Bloemfontein know what is happening in the backyards of Batho Township while they inform the reader in Johannesburg what goes on in Soweto and vice versa. Since it is in the nature of these editions that they are "racial" in their make-up, their continued publication can only inhibit the desired free flow of news between South Africa's white and black communities.

Their publishers cannot argue with conviction that the "black content" stories and pictures given prominence in the "EXTRA" editions achieved this status primarily on their newsworthiness. It can, however, be

successfully argued that the stories and pictures were so displayed since they were “black oriented” and because the editions were aimed at black readers.

The editions thus open their publishers to criticisms of “bias and distortion through selective emphasis and omission”. The papers also lay themselves open to accusations of racism. Such criticism will remain while the editions are published.

Their continued existence also seems to be generating a kind of “South African journalism” in which the “colour” of a story or picture becomes the basic determinant for its placing in the paper. This can only be seen as an untenable development which can lead to a degeneration in which South Africa will cultivate journalistic standards at variance with those applied in the rest of the free world.

Journalistic responsibility

Basically, the responsibility of the journalist — and this should not be confused with “Press Responsibility”, a vexed subject in its own right — may be seen as having three prongs. He is primarily answerable to his employer but, I believe, he also has some accountability to his profession and the readers.

There are expectations to be fulfilled at all three levels. His employer expects him to produce “printable copy” to earn his keep. His profession demands that he uphold its canons to avoid pulling it into disrepute. He must also be seen to be honest, truthful and accurate by the readers.

Failure to meet these responsibilities and to satisfy the aspirations to a significant degree, has led to serious problems and will continue to do so until the situation is corrected.

Journalistic obligation

To meet his responsibilities and assuage most of the aspirations of his employer, profession and the readers, I believe, it is incumbent upon the journalist to equip himself adequately with the skills of his trade. He must attain a certain minimum level of proficiency to enable him to acquit himself well in his job. These are but the bare essentials which he must acquire himself. His employer can help him improve himself in certain cases, but it remains his duty to see that he gets the necessary tools. Without them he forfeits any claim to being a journalist.

For a variety of reasons, some black journalists refuse to accept these basic responsibilities and obligations or they choose to put their own selfish interpretations to them. They end up with a distorted view which consequently leads to numerous problems. Some of the consequences are discussed in the following section.

Journalistic responsibility, obligation out of focus

There can be little doubt that the perception of “news” will continue to be distorted in South Africa for as long as “colour” determines news evaluation for placing in different newspaper editions. While this trend persists, some black journalists will continue to feel justified to argue that “serving our community” should take precedence over certain professional ethics and certain norms in their gathering and dissemination of news.

This attitude tends to lead to a distortion of the journalistic responsibilities and obligations discussed earlier since they have to conform with the perceptions of the journalists. For instance, some argue that whites impose their own view of “objectivity” on news evaluation and for that reason they also claim “the right” to apply their own standards — regardless of the consequences.

This can only lead to further deterioration in news evaluation standards with concepts such as “objectivity” assuming new definitions in terms of white and black perspectives. Journalism and South Africa cannot allow such an untenable situation to continue. But, while the special editions remain, so will this problem.

To resolve this impasse, black journalists must be encouraged to accept that they have the SAME responsibilities and obligations as their white colleagues. They should be made to realise and accept that they are subject to the same journalistic codes of ethics as their white counterparts and should, therefore, satisfy the same high professional standards.

This exercise cannot succeed while they see themselves as journalists working for “different papers” — the EXTRA editions. To them, this situation can only mean that they must have responsibilities, obligations and problems peculiar to themselves. The exercise has a chance to succeed only if the black journalists can “see” that they have the same responsibilities as their whites colleagues. Thus, they should be given these responsibilities on merit.

It should be remembered at this point that where men are treated like children, they tend to behave like children.

How the special editions are perceived

Regardless of what some publishers may say about the apparent popularity of the special editions, many blacks and some whites find them often offensive and indefensible. This can be ignored by the publishers only at their peril.

A (white) reader of the *Rand Daily Mail* has referred to the Extra in a letter to the editor (January 9, 1981) as “your ethnic edition” and added: “I do not consider myself or any other person as ‘extra’ ”.

Mr. Percy Qoboza, former editor of the effectively banned Post and Weekend Post, has called the "Mail Extra", specifically and by implication other special editions, a "monumental insult" to blacks. He, like many other blacks, take exception to the continued publication of the editions by newspapers which continually criticise the practice of separate development in the country.

The Citizen takes frequent snipes at the *Rand Daily Mail* about its Extra and on December 12, 1980, a critical editorial on the subject ended with these words: "What is happening is that the Mail is already too black for white readers but not black enough for black readers". It also made the following points:

Furthermore, Black Consciousness leaders jibe at the idea of the Mail providing a special edition for blacks as if its main edition is not good enough for them. They feel that this is a kind of condescension, a form of discrimination, since it means that what is good enough to be printed in the Mail Extra is not necessarily good enough to be read by all the Mail's readers, including whites.

Notwithstanding the "running battle" between *The Citizen* and *The Mail* and the highly emotional tenor of the editorial, it still has to be conceded that these are valid arguments against the continued publication of the Extra by *The Mail*, and for that matter, all the other special editions by both English and Afrikaans language newspapers.

The fact that the Afrikaans newspapers support the present South African government's policy of racial separation makes their publication of special editions understandable but not acceptable.

Except for the incumbent South African government and its supporters, not to mention the other groupings to the "far right", many people in the country accept that South Africa has a multiracial integrated society which no force or political party policy is likely to unscramble.

This attitude is continually confirmed in editorials and letters-to-the-editor columns of the so-called liberal English Press. Even some Afrikaans newspapers are beginning to accept this fact. Thus, it should be logical for these papers to spike their special editions and replace them with integrated or "open" editions for all their readers.

If for no other reason, the so-called liberal newspapers like *The Mail* owe it to themselves and their readers to do so as "a matter of principle". These papers — which daily preach racial equality — cannot continue to damn apartheid but persist to sell the system by printing separate editions for their black and white readers. Their attitude can only be seen as the ultimate in cynicism, to say the least.

Scrapping the special editions will have several immediate effects, besides facilitating the highly desirable news flow between the various communities in the country. There will be an immense saving in expensive newsprint. "Racist" criticisms like the one cited before will be obviated. The papers will have demonstrated their honesty as "practitioners of what they preach".

It should be expected that some people will continue to insist on exclusivism in South Africa. There will be those whites who may insist on newspapers "for whites only" while some blacks may produce papers for blacks. These papers should be the exceptions to prove the rule with the "open" newspapers forming the "Mainstream Press" in the country. The special editions have served their purpose and they must be laid to rest.

The ignorance gap persists

The leader of the Official Opposition, Dr. Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, said during the recent censure debate in Parliament that the Government perpetuated as state of "euphoric ignorance" by keeping the truth from the electorate. While his remarks were not directed at the Press, they underline the ineffectiveness of the special editions as instruments of intercultural communication in South Africa, because most of the "truth" appears daily in these editions, but it does not reach the white electorate.

Soon afterwards, on July 28 (1981), another distinguished South African called the ignorance gap in the country "frightening" and urged for its closure without delay. Mr. John O'Malley, editor of *The Argus* and this year's winner of the SASJ's Pringle Award, told businessmen in Cape Town that apartheid and the SABC had left South African whites "profoundly ignorant" of black thinking. As extensions of the apartheid system, the special editions are highly responsible for the undesirable situation.

Mr. O'Malley said South African newspapers had a great responsibility to reflect the country's realities as faithfully as they could. His appeal will come to nought while the special editions exist since they are a negation of the country's realities.

The basic flaw with regard to the special editions as instruments of intercultural communication is that — as demonstrated before — most of the information generated in the black areas does not reach a significant number of whites. It is merely re-routed back whence it came to the black townships.

A significant discovery made during research for my study was that many white newspaper readers remain unaware of the existence of the special editions. A random telephone survey conducted among 100 respondents in Johannesburg and Pretoria suburbs revealed that six out of ten were ignorant of the fact, and only two out of ten had once bought a "black" edition.

Conclusions

The following conclusions may be drawn from the preceding discussions.

- The publication of the special editions gives neither black nor white readers “extra” news. In fact, they rob readers of a lot of news each day they are printed.
- The editions have a negative effect on objectivity, news evaluation and perception of various journalistic principles. News is generally “colour tainted” in this country because of their existence.
- They perpetuate the political, social and, to some degree, the economic status quo.
- While the editions survive there can be little chance of reconciliation between the non-racial but mainly white Southern African Society of Journalists (SASJ) and the exclusively black Media Workers Association of South Africa (Mwasa), whose members must per force perceive their rôle as journalistically different.

On the other hand, the position of the black members of the SASJ will remain invidious while Mwasa will continue to be regarded by some as anything *but* an association of journalists and other media workers.

Suggestions

These suggestions are made in spite of the present South African government’s policy of apartheid and the laws that enforce it. They also take into consideration the attitude already adopted by most English newspapers in the country.

- The special editions should be seen as a failure with regard to bridging the “ignorance gap” between black and white South Africans and as instruments of intercultural communication.

One paper has changed the name of its special edition from EXTRA to “Regional”. Since the edition is still aimed at black readers, the paper is merely indulging in a popular South African pastime — the “Naming Game”.

- These editions should be scrapped and replaced with “open” editions. All newspapers in the country are already on this tack since they publish the same editorials, letters-to-the-editor, leader page commentaries, advertising and, to some degree, features.
- Black journalists must be encouraged to accept that they have the same responsibilities and obligations as their white colleagues. This should be done by giving them these responsibilities on *merit*.
- The South African Press should move away from the notion of “writing for black readers”. Papers should publish for all readers regardless of their colour. The various editions on a newspaper should place articles subject to availability at “deadline”, and “colour content” should not determine the edition.