

Newspapers must give us content that is rational

By [Thami Mazwai](#)

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Journalism professor Anton Harber's comment last week that newspapers must make huge investments in developing their journalists if they want to retain readers is spot on, as it is about the quality of product. What passes for journalism these days sometimes perplexes. I refer specifically to Mineral Resources Minister Ngoako Ramatlhodi's alleged conflict of interest and another story, that former songbird and Idols judge Mara Louw is on skid row.



The newspaper industry needs to take itself more seriously, as this is its only hope of survival in a competitive environment that can only get tougher. It must do all to keep its experienced staff.
(Attribution: [Warrenski](#) from Cape Town, South Africa)

Harber rightly argues that "we are not going to get people consuming and paying for information online unless there is also an investment in ... journalists who can then produce unique and valuable content. We are not seeing this (investment) yet". I add "rational" to his "unique and valuable". After all, the reader wants unique, valuable and rational content.

Rational content makes the reader take the publication seriously. News selection is not an exact science and there is more subjectivity than the professed objectivity. Specifically, it reflects the world view or culture of the newspaper and/or writer, sometimes manifested by the publication's mission statement.

This culture or world view is the software that patterns thinking when news is evaluated for use or planning in the publication. Obviously, this traps decision makers into interpreting issues in a specific way. Looking at the Ramatlhodi story, I am trying to understand how he is conflicted.

When is a story not a story?

With all respect, and looking at two points out of several: weeks before his appointment, commentators were lambasting his predecessor, Susan Shabangu, and the government in general for allowing the strike in the platinum sector to continue for as long as it had. Obviously, a new minister would hit the ground running in an effort to deal with the strike.

Second, would it not be a conflict of interest if Ramatlhodi took action, because his personal interests were specifically involved and other interests were secondary? In other words, that there was intent to benefit personally. Are we being told he should not have taken action because he was going to benefit? Better still, must parliamentary rules not be amended if we expect our politicians not to invest?

The late Les Dunn, who taught journalism at the then Argus Cadet School, stressed a "reasonability test" to assess stories. If someone did something that any reasonable person would do, that was certainly not a story.

Poor taste

The Louw story is simply in poor taste. How does falling on hard times become newsworthy, more so for a former artist, as if retired singers should be financially stable? Why the derisory tone? If anything were to be published, it should be a sympathetic approach, as was the case with Jake Matlala, rather than the derisive "look at her now" approach.

Getting back to my main point, it is time newspapers refrained from fitting facts into their culture when evaluating them, as they end up with the abominations I have just described. Stories or events must be evaluated in their own right and all perspectives taken in. However, I suspect we have to look further as this flags something more ominous.

Former editor Mathatha Tsedu once commented on the juniorisation of newsrooms. This could be the problem as winning the hearts and minds of society has become the game in town in which seasoned journalists are recruited as spin doctors by both the private and public sectors.

Dumbing down the newsrooms

Additionally, profit margins in newspapers have been shrinking for various reasons. Thin profit margins have led to drastic cost-cutting, resulting in journalists doing more for less. The worst hit are the general media, which have seen senior staff leave for greener pastures. Youngsters, still in their nappies, then get decision-making positions. This juniorisation has resulted in a virtual dumbing down of news content, in which non-stories make headlines.

As Harber argues, the newspaper industry needs to take itself more seriously, as this is its only hope of survival in a competitive environment that can only get tougher. It must do all to keep its experienced staff and, as Harber suggests, upgrade its journalists. We will then reduce the meaningless scoops.

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