

Does SA media lack substance or just courage?

 By Chris Moerdyk: @chrismoerdyk

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When foreign media such as the *Christian Science Monitor* suggest that [South Africa's news media lacks substance](#), I don't for a minute believe that "substance" is the right word to use.

The word we are looking for is "courage."

Grateful for your sacrifice

But, it is the kind of courage that Japanese kamikaze pilots had to have in the Second World War. The kind of courage that, if you succeed, you will certainly be dead and maybe, just maybe, your death will not have been in vain and, at some time in the future, some successor of yours will be grateful for your sacrifice.

SA's newspaper industry has gone through a torrid two years of gritty survival, with magazines, radio and TV not too far behind.

The consequence has been an enormous amount of pressure on editors to produce content that keeps people buying newspapers, listening to the radio and tuning in to TV. An exceptionally daunting task given the fact that, for example, there are two cellphones for every single inhabitant of the country and the subsequent ease with which consumers can increasingly easily access news faster and cheaper than ever before.

Particularly through social media and the growing wave of citizen journalism that is allowing the world to see what is happening at news hotspots before the media actually arrives on the scene.

The right mixture

Editors, I believe, are faced with all manner of difficult choices. The most obvious being to keep looking for that stereotype mixture of political sensationalism, character assassination and extremist ideology that seems so prevalent today and to which the *CSM* was alluding.

This is evident in the amount of publicity that Julius Malema has been receiving for quite some time now. He makes newspaper front pages, as well as radio and TV news headlines, every time he opens his mouth. As the *CSM* pointed out, the more radical and astounding his utterances, the more the media laps it up.

I am convinced, by the way, that Malema is probably one of the best politicians in this country when it comes to getting

media publicity. I am convinced that purposely shooting his mouth off is all part of a well-orchestrated strategy. One has to wonder whether he is not playing the media for a complete bunch of gullible idiots.

Bucket-loads of scandal

The thing is, I don't blame editors for focusing so much on Malema and spats within the tripartite alliance. I don't blame them for going the character assassination route because, contrary to the perception that the media is digging all of this up, they are being fed bucket-loads of scandal by those very politicians wanting to score points over competitors or get themselves up party lists.

It's a temptingly easy route to take. It's probably also the least career-destructive.

But, is the media consumer in SA not getting a bit tired of all this? After all, if everyone took the mass media so seriously, then the ANC should actually have lost the recent local government elections.

Instead, the ANC came in with almost two-thirds of the vote and, as Gwede Mantashe mentioned at the time, SA must be the only country in the world where a party wins almost two-thirds of the vote and is nevertheless considered to have done badly.

What they want

Getting back to the question of substance, what editors face today is the option of just carrying on with the assumption that politics is still the most newsworthy topic of all or whether to assume that it isn't and to start giving readers, viewers and listeners what they want.

Trouble is, media research is not going to help them because I firmly believe that it is extremely difficult to find out what consumers of news want simply by asking them, because the lie factor is enormous. No-one is really going to admit that they don't want to read about politics and would prefer instead to really get into coverage of celebrity shenanigans and who made whom pregnant in Hollywood.

Mass media is by implication media for the majority and one has to beg the question whether the majority of South Africans care what newspapers have to say about politicians and would rather read stories about goats with two heads and a tokoloshe with the power to cause instant impotency.

Not quite that simple

Could this be why the *Daily Sun* is so popular when other newspapers are struggling? It is probably not quite that simple.

SA's news media doesn't lack substance, just courage. But, it would take an editor with considerable bravery to kick Malema, Nzimande and Zuma off the front page and replace them with goats, tits and tokoloshes.

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For More list added at 3.07pm on 30 June 2011.

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