

SA media 'easy to spin'



Bylssa Sikiti da Silva

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The existence of a state-controlled major broadcaster, private media's obsession for making profit, editors' and publishers' fear of offending advertisers, costly and time-consuming investigations and low pay resulting in senior journalists quitting the industry, among others, constitute the main reasons why the South African media is so easy to spin. This has emerged at the 'Spin and the Media Conference', currently taking place at Sandton Sun, Johannesburg.

Government and private sector's spin masters and doctors are taking advantage of these weaknesses to spin the media through their lies, denials, attacking truthful reports, avoiding commenting and to some extent taking legal action against what they see as 'defamatory' articles, Ian Morgan, former *Sunday Times* investigative journalist and current strategic brand consultant, told delegates.

As experienced journalists 'flee' the industry in droves due to low pay and deplorable conditions, the quality of reporting declines and media owners get the perception that audiences no longer care about in-depth stories, Morgan said.

Lags behind

Democratic Alliance MP Dianne Kohler Barnard also criticised the SA media, calling it a follower, not a leader, and said that it lags behind its European and American counterparts in a number of respects, most of all technology and the way the news is reported and presented.

While acknowledging that political spin is far more powerful than initially thought, she emphasised that the SA media, especially the SABC, is politically loaded.

"In broad terms, the vast majority of SA press has not only been consumed by the ANC's hegemonic idea of transformation, but its influence and control over social commentary is now so pervasive that transformation has become the first principle from which analysis is borne and most news is contextualised."

There is a perception among many observers that once journalists get spun over and over again, politically manipulated or become embedded without questioning the motive of certain sources of information, they tend to lose credibility.

"Lose integrity... lose credibility"

In her presentation titled 'The search for truth: Experiences from the front line', e.tv producer Debra Patta said: "The most interesting thing about journalism is that if you lose integrity, you tend to lose credibility so no one is going to trust you

again.

“Look at what happened to Ranjeni Munusami and Vusi Mona.”

Patta added: “As many people out there – especially the poor and the voiceless – have lost faith in church, politicians and business, they have now turned to the media for help.

“So we must not sell half-truths and half-lies but try hard to get it right. In this modern day, sometimes the media can play a critical role in society. While we strive to uphold that duty, we must be very careful not to impose our views on our story.

“Don't be cynical but be sceptical and always question the motive of some sources and try to understand their agenda, even whistleblowers.”

However, it has been established that the journalist's job is being made difficult by the PR people's bad faith and lack of co-operation who have something to hide and would do anything to 'spin' in the view of advancing their groups' interests.

Advice

Morgan has this advice for these spin masters, doctors and prophets:

“Don't lie, don't deny unless you do it on the basis of facts, never avoid the press, (they will always remember), don't attack the media and never sue because it is time-consuming and it costs a fortune.

“Selectively admit and apologise, contain, resolve, anticipate next time, learn the skills and train, train, and train. It is not what you say that counts, it is what people hear.”

Likewise, Dickie Arbiter, former press secretary to the Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II and royal spokesperson, said: “In time of crisis, communicators need to recognise the power of the media even though the media themselves are also the spin kings; always acknowledge the issue, find solutions and move on.

“Always remember that good communication starts at the top – words and actions. Never say: no comment.”

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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