

Making a tit of yourself in the media

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

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There's been a lot of bleating recently about "freedom of the press". It picked up momentum at the State Of The Nation Address when the cell phone signals were jammed. Before that happened journalists started resigning from various publications due to apparent interference from new owners.

Government should know by now that you can't afford to be rude to journalists. They bite back - even when they know they're wrong. I, for one, am not so sure that many newspapers and journals have earned the right to "freedom" anyway. It's for one simple reason - bias.

And if it's not bias then it's lies.

The reason people become journalists is because of the power it gives them (well, that and the regular ego-boosting feasts). It's not for the money because they are not well paid. But they do get to ask important people awkward questions and, in doing so, grab some glory for themselves.

If you're a big company and want a journalist to shut up then, in many cases anyway, you simply go to their bosses and threaten to withdraw your advertising. It happens everywhere. It shouldn't but it does.

However, some writers do stand up for their principles it's true.

Take Peter Osborne at the UK's *Daily Telegraph* for example. (A newspaper founded in 1855 and, since 2004, owned by David and Frederick Barclay.) He claims that journalists were either instructed not to run stories critical of their biggest advertisers like HSBC, or their stories were simply not published.



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Then, as if the journalistic integrity of *The Telegraph* had not been damaged enough, their online edition ran a story headlined "Woman with three breasts" (which they knew beforehand was untrue).

I don't know about you, but if I were placing an ad in the bastion of British press and my product appeared next to a story like that, I'd be highly pissed off. He said, quite rightly, that "Newspapers have what amounts in the end to a constitutional duty to tell their readers the truth."

If you take a look at some of the reporting locally I'm not entirely convinced that our guys are living up to that credo. (Of course we have some truly magnificent writers and they'll know I don't mean them - but the weaker journos? The complaints about this story, for example, will come from them).

It's all very subtle. They choose non-complimentary photographs of the guys they don't like whereas they make their favourite guy look really good. They emphasise (apparently) minor points over major ones and cover up potential scandal by ignoring important things. But it's nothing you can really put your finger on. It's actually very clever the way they do it.

As much as I don't care for our President or what his government is doing to South Africa, I get angry when I see second-rate journalism doing what is actually character assassination. This type of reporting must stop because it gives MP's plenty of opportunity to avoid the real issues.

I don't know which is worse, a medium which is (effectively) owned by a political party and bends their stories, or advertisers who threaten to withdraw their advertising when something negative is said about them.

One thing I am absolutely sure of however is that when you mess around with a brand image (*The Daily Telegraph* and its descent to the levels of *The Sun*, for example) then your customers will go elsewhere. It's basic Marketing 101.

Many years ago I was fascinated by something called "the presenter effect". In essence this theory suggests that if the same message, aimed at the same target market, is published in two different media camps (let's say *The Telegraph* and *The Sun* so as not to offend anyone in SA) then the perception of the message will be completely different even though the wording and execution are identical.

Advertisers and their agencies would be well advised to bear this in mind. If you're ever in doubt then contact me direct and I'll consult the elders.

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