

Newspaper columnists allowed wide degree of latitude - expert

 By Issa Sikiti da Silva: @sikitimedia

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Newspaper columnists in South Africa have been allowed a wide degree of latitude, a mentality inherited from the age-old British convention that has elevated them to the status of 'gods', Lesley Cowling, senior lecturer at Wits University's School of Journalism, told a media forum last week in Johannesburg, as the debate about the 'shocking' columns of [David Bullard](#), [Kuli Roberts](#) and [Jon Qwelane](#) resurfaces in the media corridors.



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Such a wide degree of latitude constitutes a 'weak spot' for the media and is problematic, and makes us wonder whether the media should not have some ethical codes for commentary, Cowling stressed.

"Very little research in journalism on commentary"

"It is curious that, in journalism, so much emphasis is put on news accuracy, fairness and balance, but less emphasis is put on opinion pieces and there has been very little research in journalism on commentary," Cowling pointed out, recounting how in her time at *Mail & Guardian* they were not allowed to change even a comma in opinion pieces.

The media forum, hosted by Wits Journalism in Braamfontein, revisited Bullard's alleged 'neo-colonialist' column in Out to Lunch (*Sunday Times*, 2008), Roberts' 'offensive' remarks about coloured people in Bitch's Brew (*Sunday World*, 2010), and Qwelane's 'homophobic' piece in *Sunday Sun* (2008).

While Bullard was subsequently fired and Roberts' Bitch's Brew column discontinued, Qwelane's "Call me names, but gay is NOT okay" tirade earned him a guilty verdict of hate speech in the Johannesburg Equality Court. He has also been ordered to pay R100 000 to the SA Human Rights Commission, which took him to court in terms of the Promotion of Equality and

Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act.

Qwelane, who equated gay relationships to bestiality, has in the meantime been appointed as SA ambassador to Uganda, and has ignored repeated calls by the Democratic Alliance and gay lobby groups to step down.

Become critical case studies

However, the scandal has not gone away and the fire of outcry is still burning, as the three sagas have become critical case studies for any platform debating media ethics. Cowling said: "The outrage caused by these columns raises the question of whether they should have been published at all."

She added: "There is no such thing like complete freedom of expression because there are always limits in everything, and I find it curious when some people say 'I can't do anything because it is freedom of expression."

"There is a tension between what can be said and what constitutes stereotypes, racism and hate speech, among others. I am not advocating for rules that regulate commentary, but I firmly believe that there should be some limits in any form of reporting. So let's have some guidelines and ethics discussions about columns."

"Called editing"

Wits Prof Anton Harber said: "Making a decision whether a column has crossed the line is called editing."

Corrected at 5.03pm on 20 June 2011.

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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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