

# How much to say or do?

An exploration from a public journalism perspective on the community  
involvement of the West Coast commercial community newspaper

*Weslander*



**Heléne Meissenheimer**

Assignment presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M.Phil

(Journalism) at the University of Stellenbosch

Supervisor: Dr. H. Wasserman

April 2006

**Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Date: ..... 9 March 2006

**Keywords:** public or civic journalism, community newspapers, normative frameworks, South Africa

**Abstract:**

Objectivity, impartiality and neutrality are normative values that South African journalists have been taught to aspire to. The South African media are still strongly grounded in a western liberal view of the press as Fourth estate and watchdog, a role that is associated with the aforementioned values. However, in the last decade some in the media like Thami Mazwai and scholars like Ngaire Blankenberg, Clifford Christians, Herman Wasserman, Arrie de Beer and others have questioned the appropriateness of western ethical values like objectivity for the South African media and suggested that there exists a need to develop an Africanised media theory. Some of the options that have been considered to find a workable alternative media theory for South Africa include the African belief system, *ubuntuism*, and the American public journalism movement. One of the issues that should come to the fore in these discussions is the appropriateness of community involvement by community media when addressing problematic issues in that community. A review of objectivity as ethical value raises the question on what is the appropriate limits for a newspaper to become involved in addressing and finding solutions for problems in the community. This thesis explores the community involvement of a commercial newspaper, *Weslander* from a public journalism perspective.

Heléne Meissenheimer

April 2006

**Sleutelwoorde:** publieke of burgerlike joernalistiek, gemeenskapskoerante, normatiewe raamwerke, Suid-Afrika

**Opsomming:**

Suid-Afrikaanse joernaliste word geleer om die normatiewe waardes: objektiwiteit, onpartydigheid en neutraliteit na te streef. Die westerse liberale siening van die pers as die vierde stand en waghond vorm steeds die grondslag van die Suid-Afrikaanse media, 'n rol wat vereenselwig word met genoemde normatiewe waardes. Gedurende die afgelope dekade het sommige in die media soos Thami Mazwai en akademiëers soos Ngaire Blankenberg, Clifford Christians, Herman Wasserman, Arrie de Beer en andere die toepaslikheid van westerse etiese waardes soos objektiwiteit vir die Suid-Afrikaanse media begin bevraagteken en voorgestel dat 'n behoefte aan ge-Afrikaneerde media teorie bestaan. Sommige van die opsies wat vir 'n werkbare alternatiewe media teorie vir Suid-Afrika oorweeg is, sluit in die Afrika geloofsisteem, *ubuntuism*, en die Amerikaanse publieke joernalistiek beweging. Een van die kwessies wat in hierdie bespreking geopper behoort te word, is die toepaslikheid van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid deur gemeenskapsmedia wanneer berig word oor probleme in die gemeenskap. Uit 'n hersiening van objektiwiteit as etiese waarde lei tot die vraagstuk oor hoe die toepaslike limiete dan moet lyk indien 'n koerant betrokke raak in die aanspreek en vind van oplossings vir probleme in die gemeenskap. Hierdie tesis ondersoek die gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid van 'n kommersiële koerant, *Weslander*, vanuit 'n publieke joernalistiek perspektief.

Heléne Meissenheimer

April 2006

## Table of contents

<b>Personal statement</b>	2
<b>Table of contents</b>	5
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	8
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 Demarcation of research field	11
1.3 Research question	12
1.4 Research methodology	12
<b>Chapter 2 Ethics</b>	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Normative frameworks and the media in South Africa	14
2.2.1 Authoritarian governments	15
2.2.2 Free but responsible	16
2.3. In search of a normative theory for the South African press	18
2.3.1 What are the issues?	18
2.3.2 Normative alternatives	20
2.4 Discussion	22
<b>Chapter 3 Public journalism</b>	23
3.1 Introduction	23
3.2 Historical background	23
3.3 What is the movement about?	25
3.3.1 Definition and characteristics	25
3.4 Public journalism: “Do-gooding” or good journalism?	26

3.4.1 Credibility	27
3.4.2 Independence	28
3.4.3 Objectivity	29
3.5 Discussion	30
<b>Chapter 4 Small media in South Africa</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1 Introduction	31
4.2 Historical overview	31
4.3 Grassroots press	33
4.4 Role in the post-apartheid South Africa	34
4.5 Discussion	36
<b>Chapter 5 <i>Weslander</i></b>	<b>37</b>
5.1 Introduction	37
5.2 Background on the <i>Weslander</i>	37
5.3 Interviews	40
5.3.1 Alida Buckle, current editor	40
5.3.2 Innes van Eeden, publisher	41
5.4 Addressing a problem in the community: examples	42
5.4.1 Lack of legal assistance for child support	42
5.4.2 Proposed development of a hazardous waste site	45
5.4.3 Housing crisis in St Helena Bay	47
5.5 Discussion	48

<b>Chapter 6 Conclusion</b>	50
<b>Addendum A: Interviews with current editor and publisher</b>	52
<b>References</b>	54

## Chapter one

### 1.1 Introduction

In January 2004 I started to work as a reporter at a small commercial community newspaper, *Weslander*. Initially started in 1974 as an independent weekly newsprint, the paper today operates from within the Media24 stable, a subsidiary of Naspers. It distributes in the area from Langebaan in the south up along the West Coast to Dwarskersbos in the north and has a weekly circulation of more than 9 500.

During the time that I have been with the paper, the high level of reciprocal interaction that I witnessed between the newspaper and the communities that it serves amazed me. Problems in the community are not merely exposed, but the newspaper actively engages in follow-up with the responsible authorities pressing for appropriate action to address the problems. Initially I questioned whether actively engaging to help 'solve' community problems was not in conflict with the traditional journalistic stance to remain detached from the communities served. The libertarian journalistic ideal of objectivity does imply not taking sides, being impartial and not becoming involved (Retief, 2002: 99). The view of the media as independent disseminator of information is in line with the view of the press within the libertarian tradition (Brown, 2001: 11; Fourie, 2001: 271). This is also the perspective suggested by the motto of the *Weslander*, namely "to keep the West Coast informed".

A question that arose was whether it might not actually be more ethical for a small commercial newspaper like *Weslander* in a young democracy like South Africa to be actively involved in helping its community rather than merely reporting "the facts" (Botes, 1997: 13). Small newspapers, both non-profit and commercial, being closely in touch with the issues and problems citizens in their community have, could play a significant role in enlightening, educating and actively involving their readers to address issues in their communities.

Yet the mainstream press in South Africa (and this would include small newspapers like *Weslander* that operate from within the stable of a large media corporation like Naspers), by and large, adhere to a liberal view of the press as fourth estate and watchdog (within the *Four theories of the Press* paradigm of Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1974) (Wasserman & De Beer,

2005: 4). From this viewpoint journalists are encouraged to remain detached and uninvolved from the situation that they are reporting on. They are expected to remain independent observers, separate from any direct involvement (Glasser & Craft, 1998:8-9). It is traditionally accepted within this paradigm that direct involvement by a newspaper in the solving or addressing of problems in the community would be considered inappropriate, because if the community involvement of *Weslander* was viewed from this perspective, a question would arise as to how far a newspaper like *Weslander* can go when revealing problematic issues in its community before crossing the line of appropriate impartiality?

The answer to this question is linked to normative press ethics, i.e. different views on the role that the press has to play in a society. The past decade has seen a lot of debate on this very issue in South Africa and according to Wasserman and De Beer (2005: 1) one thing that has become clear is that there is a great difference of opinion about what exactly the media's role should be in this country. In this political climate some, like Thami Mazwai, the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) news programming chairman (Bell, 2003) and others (Botes, 1997: 12-4; Steenveld, 2002: 122) have begun to suggest that neutrality and objectivity, the lodestar ethical values of the libertarian tradition, were perhaps not the most appropriate normative values for the media in a new democracy like South Africa; possibly a new normative approach is needed since the media has an important role to play in the democratisation process.

About fifteen years ago in the United States, advocates for the public journalism movement had similar ideas about a more involved role for the press. They believed, for example, that newspapers had a civic duty to facilitate civic action to address social problems or greater political participation. They felt that a gap had developed between the press and the people that they are supposed to serve and that journalists should be more directly involved in facilitating actions in their communities to address problem issues (Glasser & Craft, 1998: 9-12). Several newspapers in the United States got actively involved in projects aimed at engaging with their readers to address issues of concern in their communities. The movement is not as novel an idea anymore and has a fair amount of criticism, but possibly a few lessons could be learned from this movement with regard to the issue of how a newspaper could be more involved in addressing

problems in its communities. Some South African researchers (Froneman & Pretorius, 2000: 60; Fourie, 2005: 21) have looked at this journalism movement to see whether it possibly offered a workable alternative for established media practice in South Africa, but found that the movement didn't offer a way out from surviving market demands and that maintaining citizen interest remained a problem (Fourie, 2005: 21).

In the end commercial newspapers have to be operated so that the business remains financially viable since it is not a sector that receives any financial help from the government. In the development of a more involved and enabling role for small commercial newspapers than suggested by the functional perspective of disseminator of information, it would be advisable to search for an approach that found a balance between economic considerations and social directives. *Weslander* like most other small newspapers, whether independent, or part of a larger media body, operate in a free-market system and have to turn a profit if it is to survive in a very competitive scenario. Fourie (2005: 21) aptly observed that experiences with community media in South Africa "clearly indicate that despite commendable community-orientated policy, and vision and mission statements emphasising community involvement and participation, these media are also subjected to the realities of media economics and dynamics". Of course, since Hadland and Thorne define community media as non-commercial and *Weslander*, operating from within the Naspers stable has commercial obligations towards its mother company, this newspaper does not match, strictly speaking, the parameters set for a community newspaper. Nevertheless, in this study I propose that a small commercial newspaper could to some extent fulfil the role of a community newspaper by being accessible to all the people of the community (Thorne, 1998: 216) and being involved in addressing social wrongs in the community.

Action has already been taken to make community radio more accessible. In the past decade around 100 community radio stations have been licensed and the majority of these "are operated by and for historically disadvantaged communities" (Hadland & Thorne, 2004: 55). Illiteracy is still a major problem within many marginalised communities, and according to Hadland and Thorne (2004: 61) is often given as the reason why print media is not as successful as community radio in these communities.

Firstly it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term “small commercial newspaper”. Hadland and Thorne (2004:10) distinguish between two types of media in the small media sector, community media (non-profit) and independent media (small, commercial). The *Weslander* falls within the latter category.

There is a need to broaden specifically the role played by small commercial newspapers in empowering the marginalised communities of South Africa. Especially since most non-profit community newspapers (many were established during the 1980's to open up access to the press for marginalised peoples) have experienced hardship to survive financially and most have since ceased to operate (Fourie, 2005: 21; Thorne, 1998: 222), whereas publication figures indicate that the small commercial press is booming (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 97). However, this study proposes that *Weslander* is already taking journalism a step beyond the dominant, orthodox framework of objectivity espoused by mainstream papers, when reporting on problems in the community and wants to investigate whether these interventions it could be seen as a form of public journalism.

## **1.2 Demarcation of research field**

The term small commercial newspaper as defined by Hadland and Thorne (2004: 10) refer to newspaper operating with a profit margin (see definition in previous section). A small commercial newspaper can be sold or distributed for free (the so-called 'knock-and-drops'). It can be privately owned, but in South Africa most small commercial newspapers operate from within one of the major press groups for instance in the Western Cape many small commercial newspapers have been incorporated into the Boland Newspaper Group, a subsidiary of the Naspers media corporation. The newspaper serves a particular geographical area whether a town or a few towns, districts or suburbs and covers local affairs, not national news. It is not owned by that community and operates free of government interests (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 97-8; Hadland & Thorne, 2004: 10).

*Weslander*, for example, distributes to all the towns in the Saldanha Bay Municipality as well as Velddrif, Dwarskersbos and Aurora in the Berg River Municipal area. It is one of three

newspapers published by Weskus Media, a subsidiary of the Boland Newspaper Group. *Weslander* is a weekly publication and read by approximately 40 000 readers.

Any study on functions or theories on the role of the press has to refer to research done in the field of normative ethics (Fourie, 2001: 269). A theoretical study on normative paradigms as well as alternative approaches towards the role of press was concluded. It was found that in South Africa a functional approach of a socially responsible press with liberal values such as objectivity, balanced reporting and independence prevails (Retief, 2001: 18-19). It was also found scholars like Fourie (2005) and Wasserman (2005) in recent years started to question the applicability of these Western normative values to the South African media. These debates tied in to the issue of community involvement that I wanted to explore at *Weslander*. Since I am employed at *Weslander*, I had ready access to newspaper copies and could without difficulty assemble suitable case studies for the purpose of this research. Three case studies were selected from 2005, all three illustrate to some extent *Weslander's* involvement over a period of months towards addressing social issues.

### **1.3 Research question**

The study aims to determine whether the community involvement practised by *Weslander* can be seen as a form of public journalism. Case studies of the newspaper's involvement with certain community issues will be measured against some of the principal requirements of public journalism. Ethical questions that arise out of this study will be judged with reference to both traditional liberal normative ethics that hold that news media should be objective, impartial and detached, and the characteristics of public journalism, which proposes that news media should not only inform, but become actively involved in finding solutions to the problems of the community.

### **1.4 Research methodology**

I first completed a theoretical background study on normative ethics to develop an understanding of the normative paradigm in which small commercial newspapers like *Weslander* function in

South Africa. Then the public journalism movement was studied to identify what the movement was all about, what its characteristics were and what the criticism was against the movement. Hereafter a background study on the history of the small commercial press in South Africa was done to see what their history was, what the present trends are and how the political transformation impacted on this section of the media. Three case studies were selected from stories published in *Weslander* in 2005 and were discussed to find characteristics of public journalism. These analyses were complemented with individual structured interviews with the publisher and the editor as well as personal reflections from one of the *Weslander's* journalists. The case studies selected all illustrate to various degrees community involvement by the newspaper when reporting on a problematic issue in the community. The publisher and editor were selected for interviews since they are instrumental to the outlook of *Weslander's* editorial policy and the personal reflections of the journalist was requested to investigate how she experienced a more involved role when reporting on a problematic issue.

## Chapter 2 Ethics

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the normative theoretical frameworks that have been or still are most influential on the role of the press in South Africa. Then I will look at critiques on the shortcomings of the dominant liberal view and see what normative alternatives have been considered.

### 2.2 Normative frameworks and the media in South Africa

From state sponsored beginnings in the early nineteenth century to the triumph of a free and independent press in 1829, through to the twentieth century, especially the paranoid legislative control of the press in the Apartheid years, the role of the press in South Africa has always been a contentious issue. In the decade after democratisation many new factors also entered into the debate: the challenges posed to local media by globalisation, fear of a return to a repressive media policy, pressure to be more demographically reflective of the cultural diversity of the peoples of the country in content, ownership and personnel, and also to be more accessible to the poor and previously marginalised majority (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 7; Wasserman, 2005: 2).

In South Africa the functionalistic *Four theories of the press*, although a criticised and mostly disputed framework (Nerone, 1995: 16), is still considered an authoritative work on normative theory as evidenced by scholars like Retief (2002) in his book *Media ethics: an introduction to responsible journalism* where he uncritically use the framework to explain different normative approaches to the role of the press in society (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 5). The recommendations by the Hutchins Commission in the 1940's for a socially responsible press in the United States of America are also considered still very influential on local thinking about the role of the press, as is clearly evidenced by the ethical codes of self-regulating bodies like the Press Ombudsman and the Broadcasting and Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA), for example in the preamble to the Press Ombudsman's ethical code freedom of the press is said to be "indivisible from and subject to the same rights and duties as that of the individual and rests on the public's fundamental right to be informed and freely to receive and to disseminate

opinions" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 5, 9). Next follows a historical overview on normative ethics in South Africa.

### **2.2.1 Authoritarian governments**

Different governments in South Africa have repeatedly attempted to control the press. The first newspaper in South Africa, *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* appeared for the first time on 16 August 1800, a government publication and the only one allowed. The governor of the Cape had complete control over its contents, but after the acceptance of Ordinance No. 60 of 8 May 1829 guaranteed press freedom, a period of relative freedom from government control followed (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 87; Retief, 2002: 18).

A form of authoritarianism resurfaced under Nationalist rule from 1948 to 1994. The government, ostensibly, in principle endorsed a free press and freedom of expression, but laws like the Suppression of Communism Act (1962) and the Publications Act (1974) were used to restrict or even ban the publishing and distribution of material that was considered "undesirable", "communist propaganda" or "racial incitement" (Merrett, 1994: 44, 65, 80). Many newspapers that dared to differ with government policy sometimes felt "as if an army of bayonets had been unleashed on them" (Claassen, 2004).

Especially after the Soweto uprising of 1976, government unleashed some of the most 'draconian' censorship laws. Some newspapers like *World* and *Sunday World* had to close, other alternative newspapers like *Weekly Mail* (that later became *Mail&Guardian*), *New Nation*, *Grassroots*, *Saamstaan*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *South* had to cease printing sometimes for periods of up to three months at a time, sometimes permanently due to restrictive media laws or intimidation by the security police. Journalists and writers were banned, detained without trial, jailed and freedom of speech was seriously impaired. No interviews, comments or statements by Nelson Mandela or anyone from the banned political parties like the ANC, PAC or the communist party could be published (Claassen, 2004; Merret, 1994: 45).

Thus although freedom of speech was nominally provided for in the apartheid-era Constitution, it was not a guaranteed right. Under the draconian laws of the suppressive Nationalist regime

members of the media had few options – either apply stringent self-censorship to avoid legal repercussions or speak out against government policy and face the consequences or act as an instrument of government. Some mainstream Afrikaans newspapers, like *Die Burger*, openly acted as the official mouthpiece of the Nationalist government (Retief, 2002: 19), most of the liberal English mainstream press and some of the Afrikaans newspapers like *Beeld* cautiously criticised government, but were so limited by legislation and self-censorship that a lot of what was really happening in the country was never published (Oosthuizen, 2002: 86; 93; Oosthuizen, 1982: 47).

Government expected the press to act ‘responsibly’, apply self-control and not endanger public safety by publishing articles that reported negatively on government conduct in the handling of racial affairs (Oosthuizen, 2002: 92; Oosthuizen, 1982: 41). This was considered to be in the ‘national interest’ and the “national interest obviously coincided with the interests of the government in power” (Fourie, 2002: 23). During the Apartheid era the government certainly imposed authoritarian compliance upon the press and reacted harshly to any publications it deemed to be harmful and unpatriotic, but in spite of that a strong libertarian ideal of a free and independent press did survive. It is important to know about this history to understand why bodies like South African Editor’s Forum (Sanef) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) so vigorously consider it their duty to defend freedom of speech. Any attempt by the government to address what it considers to be shortcomings in the media, is viewed with scepticism and fear that the old repressive attitudes towards the media have resurfaced (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 7).

### **2.2.2 Free but responsible to society**

British settlers brought the idea of a free and liberal press to South Africa in the nineteenth century. The governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset, tried to control them but lost with the acceptance of Ordinance No.60 of 8 May 1829 that “stated that the government would act against publications only in the case of proven libel or when irresponsible statements were made” (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 88; Retief, 2002: 18-9). Hereafter press freedom flourished with

many more independent newspapers starting up all over the country until “by the end of the nineteenth century there was hardly a town of any size without its own newspaper” (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 90).

Under Nationalist rule, as was described previously, the government legally tried to restrict and regulate the media. Freedom of speech could only be exercised by those deemed ‘politically safe’ by the government, but they had a very narrow view on the subjects that could be freely written or talked about in the media. In true authoritarian style, government felt it knew best and the media would do well to listen.

Better days dawned with the end of Apartheid in 1994 that also saw the end to many of the harsh press laws. The new ANC government in its Media Charter “committed itself to media freedom and various mechanisms to bring it about” (Oosthuizen, 2002: 98). For the first time press freedom was safeguarded by a Bill of Rights contained in the new Constitution of South Africa. The Promotion of Access to Information Act guaranteed the right to access government information (Retief, 2002: 26). There was a definitive move away from government control of the media towards self-regulation through bodies like the Press Ombudsman that regulated the press and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa for the broadcasting media (Oosthuizen, 2002: 103). All the media houses developed their own normative codes for ethical conduct, thereby signalling that the South African media wanted also to act socially responsibly by furthering professional standards of journalism (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 4). Many institutions, independent of government, like the South African National Editors Forum (Sanef), the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) have also developed to monitor media behaviour and to defend, if necessary, media freedom in South Africa (Claassen, 2004).

According to Oosthuizen (2002: 113) the social responsibility theory is the normative theory most applicable to the current situation of the media in South Africa. Although free from legislative control, the media has instituted its own regulatory bodies and professional ethical codes to regulate all sectors of the media. “These codes acknowledge the obligations of these sectors to

adhere to the legal framework and not to publish content that could harm the social structure as a whole" (Oosthuizen, 2002: 113).

These codes are all grounded in liberalist ideals of freedom from government control and the right of the individual to be informed (Wasserman, 2005: 9).

## **2.3 In search of a normative theory for the South African press**

### **2.3.1 What are the issues?**

In post-Apartheid South Africa it has become increasingly clear that there is disunity on what the role of the press in this multi-cultural new democracy should be. There is a lack of consensus internally among media role players and also externally between government leaders and the media concerning the concepts of 'national interest' and the 'public interest' (Retief, 2002: 21; Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 4). According to Wasserman and De Beer (2005: 4) the term 'public interest' is understood by the media in a liberal way to mean the right of the individual to be informed rather than communitarian rights. Government, however, has indicated that it would appreciate if the press gave more coverage to government achievements such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (Oosthuizen, 2002: 110). It would like to see the press more committed to 'building the nation' whereby is understood support for the projects and work of the democratically elected government (Fourie, 2005: 26; Wasserman, 2005: 12).

Freedom of speech is another term that has also led to tension between the press and government (Fourie, 2002: 17; Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 7). Government has on a number of occasions accused the media of being too critical of government actions (Oosthuizen, 2002: 110), even in media circles journalists have accused others of publishing articles that are "undermining the government in a generally treasonous manner" (Retief, 2002: 21).

Before 1994 access to and ownership of the mainstream media was the privilege of mainly the white population (Fourie, 2002: 20). Broader public participation through greater media diversity has therefore been a priority with the government (Oosthuizen, 2002: 113). The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) was initiated by government to promote and encourage a more diverse media system (Oosthuizen, 2002: 113), a move that media bodies like

the Print Media Association of South Africa (PMSA) warned opened up an avenue for government interference in media affairs (Oosthuizen, 2002: 121).

Although black ownership of media companies has since increased and pressrooms have become more racially integrated, questions remain on whether the 'silent masses' have been given a voice yet. Since 2000 a number of tabloid newspapers aimed specifically at the black and coloured market have seen the light, however, readers are engaged as consumers not as fellow-citizens, so Wasserman and De Beer (2005: 3) therefore rightly question whether the introduction of new tabloid titles have "significantly broaden[ed] the public sphere to encourage a more participatory, democratic exchange of perspectives" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 3). The critics of the tabloids point out that this medium in particular appear to be commercially driven rather than focused on empowering the marginalised poor citizens (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 3). The introduction of *Die Son*, a tabloid daily that distribute in the Western Cape has certainly made an impact in *Weslander's* distribution area. Characterised by a sensationalist approach, it has proved itself to be a very popular choice among especially "coloured" readers on the West Coast. *Weslander* has since revamped the look of the front page and back page of the newspaper in a more tabloid style with big colour photographs and eye-catching headlines.

The issue of access to the media also ties in to the debate on public interest. The media claim to represent the public, but, if the majority of people in the country do not have access to express themselves in the media, to quote Fourie (2002: 37), the government may rightly ask "who do you inform and who's public opinion do you distribute?" The fact is, most media operate as businesses with profit margins; hence government's query whether 'public interest' shouldn't actually read 'market interest'. *Weslander*, for instance, claims to be a community newspaper, but also has to operate successfully as a business with a profit margin, which means that in practice community involvement has to be balanced with commercial objectives.

Lastly, globalisation has placed multiculturalism and the issue of group rights on the agenda. This has also meant that the liberal normative framework with its strong emphasis on individual rights have come under pressure, also in media debates in South Africa (Wasserman, 2005: 3).

A lot of research and scholarly thought has been expended on what the role of the media should be in a newly democratised nation like South Africa (Blankenberg, 1999: 42). The issue was particularly brought to the foreground with “the inquiry of the South African Human Rights Commission (HSRC) into Racism in the Media (1999), the subsequent Media Hearings (March 2000), followed by its report, *Faultlines: Inquiry into racism in the media* (August 2000) and all the media debates, workshops and conferences which emanated from this process” (Steenveld, 2002: 119).

The general consensus is that the media has a vital role to play to help build and strengthen the fledgling democracy, in the first place by providing all citizens with access “to the variety of information citizens need to make informed political decisions; and they provide the means through which citizens ‘recognize themselves and their aspirations in the range of representations’ which confirm and construct their personhood, and their identity as citizens” (Golding and Murdock, 1989 as quoted by Steenveld, 2002: 120). However, as was voiced by Mazwai, some feel that the traditional ‘Western’ liberal values of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality are no longer ideally suited for the role the media has to play; a more Africanised media theory tailor-made for the specific demands of the South African situation is needed (Wasserman, 2005: 11). Considering the important role a powerful medium like the press, also the small commercial press could play in the democratisation process, it is essential that more attention is given to the values and norms conveyed by the press. (Steenveld, 2002: 122).

### **2.3.2 Normative alternatives**

Different normative alternatives have been considered to find the answer for a truly workable and applicable normative press theory for a post-colonial, multi-cultural democracy like South Africa. Similar debates about developing Africanised normative press theories have been held in other post-colonial societies in Africa (Wasserman, 2005: 10). Options that have been considered by Ngaire Blankenberg (1999) and Clifford Christians (2004) include looking at African ethical concepts such as *ubuntu*. For the purpose of this study the focus will be the American public journalism movement, but a short introduction on what *ubuntu* is all about is given here. This is

done because it is important to keep in mind that in Africa very different connotations exist concerning terms like public participation than in Western societies.

Scholars like Blankenberg (1999), Christians (2004) and Wasserman and De Beer (2005) have looked at the applicability of *ubuntu*, a traditional Zulu and Xhosa belief system (the term is derived from the Zulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning a person is a person because of others) as a press theory (Blankenberg, 1999: 43; Christians, 2004: 236). *Ubuntu* uphold the belief that the wellbeing of the collective should be emphasized over that of the individual (Blankenberg, 1999: 46; Siebert et al., 1956: 10-11). *Ubuntu* expects loyalty to the ideals and values of the group with disciplinary consequences if 'unfairly' criticized, unfortunately some harsh punitive measures such as modelling 'Dunlop treatment' or 'necklacing'; burning of houses and assassination" (Blankenberg, 1999: 46) have given a "dark side" to *Ubuntu*. Freedom of expression is qualified as freedom for the community to express its questions and concerns (Christians, 2004: 243). This means that the community has to have some say over what is printed in the press to ensure that its viewpoints are correctly reported.

*Ubuntu* also promotes that "communities are able to expect an effect from their participation, such as an improvement in their material conditions" (Blankenberg, 1999: 47). The media forms part of the community and do not stand on the sidelines as impartial observers, but have an "active role to play in ensuring that the needs of the people are being met" (Blankenberg, 1999: 48; Christians, 2004: 247, 249).

It is felt by Blankenberg (1999: 49) and Christians (2004: 247) that the upholding of the liberal normative values of detachment, neutrality and objectivity do not, in the end, serve the best interests of the community. "What is called for, in the name of development, and also in the name of democracy, is active involvement in development problems, instead of detachment in the name of objectivity and neutrality which are not achievable when the issue is how to improve peoples' living conditions. Objectivity is neither necessary nor desirable" (Blankenberg, 1999: 49).

These debates are similar to the underlying sentiments of the American journalistic movement of the 1990's called civic or public journalism, and will be looked at in greater detail in the next chapter.

Finally, in line with the drive for greater media diversity, *Ubuntu* assigns the traditional role of storyteller to journalists that have to make sure that “a diversity of voices are heard” in the (re)telling of “the stories of the community in order to promote a strong and cohesive group identity” (Blankenberg, 1999: 50-51), “we need to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs, all of which constitute South African society” (Christians, 2004: 250).

## 2.4 Discussion

An overview of the normative thinking paradigms that are most influential in the mainstream media in South Africa show that a liberal view together with a strong sense of professionalism and self-regulation prevails. Through its ethical codes the media has shown that it considers itself as part of the solution to building a better nation for all South Africans. However differences in the understanding of the concept of freedom of speech have led to conflict among members of the media and between the media and the government. Part of the solution to this conflict lies in a re-defining of the role of the media in South Africa. It is a powerful medium and has an important role to play in the democratisation processes in the country. In the past easy access to the media was a privilege of the whites and in the new South Africa it is feared commercial concerns meant that access have only been extended to the wealthy black elite. The media has to become more accessible to the ordinary person, but the ‘willy-nilly’ application of Anglo-American normative media ethics like objectivity and neutrality to the South African situation is no longer acceptable; the time has come to look at normative alternatives like *ubuntuism* and possibly lessons can also be learned from the public journalism movement. This might also be the case with a community paper like *Weslander*, in search of a framework that would provide scope for more community involvement. In the next chapter, an overview of the public journalism movement will be given, before going on to a discussion on the role of small commercial newspapers in South Africa.

## Chapter 3: Public journalism

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will take a look at the historical background to the public journalism movement, what the movement was all about, identify its characteristics and take note of some of the criticism against the movement. This will be done in order to provide a profile against which journalism practise at *Weslander* can be compared.

### 3.2 Historical background

During the early 1990's in the United States an experimental movement surfaced in the journalism profession that became known as public or civic journalism (Charity, 1996; Moscovitz, 2002:64; Stepp, 2000). In contrast to traditional journalism's veneration for objectivity and unemotional detachment, this movement desired greater interaction between journalists and readers (Eksterowicz, 2000:xiii). News media in several cities embarked on public journalism projects, some to promote greater citizen participation in election polls, others to address community problems like crime, racism and homelessness (Moscovitz, 2002:64; Stepp, 2000), but all with the common theme "to push the envelope of journalistic practice to more directly engage their readers and viewers as citizens" (Lambeth, 1998:1).

Advocates of the movement proclaimed it "an effort to empower the public, revitalize democracy and solve social ills" (Moscovitz, 2002:64). Critics denounced it as a "thinly disguised marketing technique that weakens the journalist's hard-fought independence and objectivity" (Lambeth, 1998:1; Moscovitz, 2002:64).

Here follows a short overview of the factors that prepared the way for this change in editorial policy that swept through many newsrooms in the United States, extending the traditional role of the media of enlightening the public to actively promoting "public involvement" (Brown, 2001:11; Stepp, 2000).

Towards the end of the 1980's a number of journalists and editors were concerned over the co-dependent relationship that had developed between the media and politicians, with consequent

public disillusionment and cynicism with the democratic process (Eksterowics, 2000: 8). "Public journalism emerged ... in response to what was taken to be a widening gap between citizens and government and a general disgust with and withdrawal from public life" (Glasser, 1998: 10).

The influential *Washington Post* columnist, David Broder, wrote in 1990 under the header, "Democracy and the press," that journalists "must be more assertive than in the past on the public's right to hear its concerns discussed by the candidates ... We have to reconnect politics and government ... if we are going to have accountability by our elected officials and genuine democracy in this country" (Glasser, 1999: 3)

Simultaneously, the press was also concerned over a perceived growing distance between the press and its readers. The circulation figures of most newspapers painted a dismal picture, "newspapers fear[ed] for their survival" (Stepp, 2000). The situation was an alarming one, media practitioners and scholars, publicly expressed their concern for the journalism profession (Woo, 2000: 21).

Newsroom editors across the country were ready to try a different approach to covering the news, to win back their readers. Some tried sensationalism; others experimented with public journalism projects (Woo, 2000: 22). One of the first to try a more interactive approach to journalism, was the *Wichita Eagle* under the editorship of Davis Merritt that set the trend with a project aimed at improving voter turnout (Brown, 2001: 11; Eksterowicz, 2000: 13). Very soon several other newspapers launched their own projects as a result of the *Wichita* experiment as it became known. The aim of the projects was mainly to find different ways of reconnecting journalists to the communities they served, using techniques like community forums and reader roundtables, voter polls and more sophisticated open-ended interviewing techniques (Campbell, 1999: xix).

The advancement of the movement was helped along by the interest shown by academics like Jay Rosen and monetary support by institutions like the Knight Foundation, the Poynter Institute of Media Studies and the American Press Institute that all eventually became involved in public journalism projects (Eksterowicz, 2000: 13; Woo, 2000: 24). In 1993 the James S. and John L. Knight Foundation initiated the Project on Public Life and the Press (PPLP) as a "two-year effort

to influence professional practice such that journalism can and should play a part in strengthening citizenship, improving public debate and reviving public life" (Charity, 1996). The PPLP convened a series of major conferences where editors "experimenting with public journalism" were brought together with scholars and foundation officials to share their ideas and experiences on the new movement (Charity, 1996). Soon afterwards in 1994, the Pew Charitable Trusts established the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism, one of the most beneficial developments in the history of public journalism. Millions of dollars flowed from the Pew Centre towards grants for the support of numerous public journalism projects all over the country until the Centre closed in 2002 (Cross, 2002; Charity, 1996). The grant system received a lot of criticism from journalism professionals, especially with regard to the implications for the editorial independence and therefore credibility of the receiving newspapers (Wolper, 2003: 26; Woo, 2000: 24).

Actually the "do-gooding" movement came under a lot of fire from the start, criticised by journalists and scholars, especially the elite press of New York and Washington (Brown, 2001; Charity, 1996; Glasser, 1998: 8; Lambeth, 1998: 1). Some proclaimed it a "fraud" and a "bad idea", others called it a "menace", that journalists were there to report or solely give "witness" to what they observed in society, not try to find solutions (Cross, 2002; Glasser, 1998: 8).

### **3.3 What was the movement about?**

#### **3.3.1 Definition and characteristics**

Jay Rosen, Buzz Merritt, Art Charity and others, the foremost advocates and thinkers on public journalism have always refrained from clearly defining public journalism, preferring to keep it 'open-ended and experimental' (Cross, 2002; Glasser, 1999: 6). Jay Rosen said at a gathering of journalists and academics in 1994: "The most important thing anyone can say about public journalism I will say right now: we're still inventing it. And because we're inventing it, we don't really know what 'it' is," (Rosen as quoted in Glasser, 1998: 11).

Though not clearly defined, a few characteristics of public journalism distinguish it from traditional journalism practice. Rosen said on the difference between traditional and public

journalism: "Traditional journalism worries about getting the separations right. Public journalism is about trying to get the connections right" (Rosen as quoted in Glasser, 1998: 8).

Firstly, the primary idea of public or civic journalism is about engaging the public in democratic processes (Glasser, 1999: 8). Followers of the movement proclaimed the democracy to be in trouble and said that news media had to play a more pro-active role in strengthening the democracy through enhancing citizen input in the democratic processes (Eksterowicz, 2000: 3; Walker, 2003: 46). One of the basic principles of public journalism is "a belief that democracy is a way of life, not a system of government" (Lundy, 2003: 46).

Another key issue with public journalism is that journalists must "reconnect" with the community (Cross, 2002; Stepp, 2000). Journalists need to get the views of the "middle ground where most people usually are" (Birge, 2002: 15) instead of always relying on the usual official sources. Pay more attention to the "rational middle ground of issues and less attention to the extremes" (Meyer, 1995).

Journalists need to go beyond informing the public, they should also encourage their audience to "be engaged in the day's news in ways that invite discussion and debate (Glasser, 1998: 11). This new form of journalism "conveys optimism about the future" (Glasser, 1998: 9). In reporting on "major public problems" journalists shift the focus from the negative problematic scenario to positive actions that could lead to solutions (Stepp, 2000). Readers are informed about the problems but also enlightened about possible options to follow to find answers. The news media use techniques such as community forums, citizen polls and reader columns, "help develop civic goals and follow through with news coverage" (Stepp, 2000).

### **3.4 Public journalism: "Do-gooding" or good journalism?**

The public journalism movement raised many eyebrows within the journalism profession in the United States. A fair number of articles and professional publications appeared throughout the nineties with criticism on this "insidious, dangerous idea" (*Washington Post* columnist Jonathan Yardley as quoted by Brown, 2001). The greatest concerns are neatly summarised by Charity (1996) that "public journalism can be tantamount to commercial pandering by media anxious

about their economic future; the practice risks losing the craft/profession's lodestone ethic of detachment and the ideal of objectivity" and that it is too expensive for the budgets of most newsrooms.

Although the public journalism approach differs significantly from the traditional approach in a number of ways, the proverbial jury is still out on whether the movement's methods truly betrayed the profession's "lodestar ethics" or whether it showed a way to restore the credibility of the press with the public.

### **3.4.1 Credibility**

"News organizations depend upon their credibility, which in turn depends upon the willingness of the public to believe in what they do and say" (Woo, 2000: 32). Critics of the movement queried the wisdom of newsroom professionals becoming personally involved in community forums and the message that would send to readers as to the credibility of the newspaper. Woo (2000: 32-33) argued that the public would question to what extent editorial independence and objectivity could be trusted when reporting on a project that the newspaper had a vested interest in.

On the other hand, advocates of the movement firmly believed that public journalism gave newspapers credibility (Cross, 2002). Playing an active role in fostering community participation was pursued in some cases precisely to enhance the credibility of newspapers. In 1997 *The Daily Press* along with eight other newspapers got involved in ASNE's (American Society of Newspaper Editors) three-year \$1.2 million credibility project, which involved organising community forums and other projects (Stepp, 2000). In Lundy Walker's (2003) response to Allan Wolper's criticism on public journalism he wrote that in his experience of public journalism at Pioneer Press their efforts had touched "hundreds of readers" and transformed the newsroom culture positively.

Any commercial news outlet at its bottom line is a business trying to make ends meet in a very competitive environment. One of public journalism's most controversial claims is that public journalism equals good journalism that in turn will lead to higher circulation figures and consequently financial benefits (Glasser, 1998: 13). Critics have accused the movement of being

“nothing more than a thinly disguised marketing technique that ‘weakens the journalist’s hard-fought independence and objectivity’” for only fractional gains in public approval (Lambeth, 1999: 1; Moscovitz, 2002: 64).

Critics like Wolper (2003: 26) argued that dependence on grants from the Pew Center compromised the supposedly unbiased news coverage of public journalism projects. He inferred that bigger news coverage was given to these projects to keep the beneficiaries happy and reporters only covered these projects until the funds ran out.

There are no easy answers to the question whether involvement in public journalism detracts or boosts a newspaper’s credibility. According to Woo (2000: 35-9) there have been some successes but also some failures and research results indicate that readers prefer a press that “describes” the facts rather than one that “prescribes” what should be done to solve the problems.

### **3.4.3 Independence**

One of the key ethical values for news media is the preservation of editorial independence. Under the tenet “Act independently”, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says “journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s need to know,” “avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived” and remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility” (Cross, 2002).

Critics are concerned that convening public forums and then reporting on the subsequent action could lead to accusations of conflict of interest, especially if staff of the newspaper had been involved with the community forum thereby damaging the credibility of the newspaper (Eksterowicz, 2000: 3).

One critic, Allan Wolper (2003: 26), accused journalism professionals of becoming engaged in “bad civic behaviour” for example that “newspaper executives engaged in overt politicking to punish staffers that dared to challenge them”, spoke at fundraisers for political candidates and contributed financially to political candidates.

Others like Leigh Moscovitz (2002: 64) pointed out that journalists could attempt to influence the political agenda by running more stories on certain social topics where their own sympathies

lie. Critic, William Woo (2000: 33), had his queries about a newspaper's editorial independence when reporting on a public journalism project that it is directly involved in.

There is need for caution not to overstep the line. Advocate for the movement, Al Cross (2002), president of the Society of Professional Journalists, conceded there had been cases where journalists had gone too far and compromised their credibility, but argued that this did not mean that journalists should not subscribe to the so-called "Greater Ethic – that members of a community should try to understand and care for each other, and participate in community affairs" (Cross, 2002). In his opinion it is not unethical for journalists to encourage a community to care about its citizens, but they should be careful how they participate in this process.

#### **3.4.4 Objectivity**

According to Glasser (1998: 11) public journalism "rejects, emphatically and categorically, any interpretation of 'objectivity' or 'objective reporting' that holds that newsrooms must stand detached from, and disinterested in the affairs of the community."

In traditional journalism the media only informs, but public journalism goes beyond informing to "galvanizing public support for certain solutions or pressuring policy-makers to take action. In doing so, the press steps outside traditional boundaries of objectivity not only to be a part of the agenda-setting process but also to be directly involved in social problem solving" (Moscowitz, 2002: 64). However the involvement of the press stops at facilitating the democratic process. Advocates of public journalism agree that journalists should positively act to engage the community to debate its problems, but not attempt to resolve the issues. Art Charity said public journalism's golden rule is "journalism should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions" (quoted in Glasser, 1998: 12). Or to phrase it differently, journalists should pay equal attention to both the problems and the solutions (Brown, 2001: 11).

Public journalism upholds the ideal of objectivity in the sense that a journalist should inform the readers of all the relevant facts, but rejects the notion that the journalist then distances him/herself and watches dispassionately from the sidelines (Meyer, 1995).

### 3.5 Discussion

The public journalism movement certainly challenged traditional thinking about the role of the press in a community. It came about as a counter-reaction to single-minded commercialism in the media and advocated that journalists had a responsibility to interact with their readers as fellow-citizens and not treat readers merely as consumers. Yet, despite these noble objectives to “empower the public, revitalize democracy and help solve social ills” (Moscowitz, 2002: 64), the movement was criticized among other things for being a threat to the credibility and independence of the press (Woo, 2000: 33) and impractical, because it would be too expensive to pursue (Charity, 1996). The typical characteristics of the movement include a resistance to passive objectivity, encouraging public involvement in addressing social problems and even pressurizing the relevant authorities into action, a preference for involvement and interaction with the community as opposed to a detached and uninvolved reporting of the facts.

In South Africa some like Fourie (2005), Froneman and Pretorius (2000) have looked at the public journalism movement as a possible workable alternative for South African media, but have found it to be too expensive. However, lessons could still be learned from this movement and it will be interesting to investigate whether journalism practise at *Weslander* actually have a resemblance the public journalism approach.

## Chapter 4 Small media in South Africa

### 4.1 Introduction

Hadland and Thorne (2004) made a distinction between two types of small media, community media (that is non-profit) and the independent media (that is small, commercial) (Hadland & Thorne, 2004: 1). *Weslander* falls in the latter category. The independent small media has the longest history, but have tended to orient mostly towards white interests and concerns (Diederich & De Beer, 1998: 90). Non-profit community media developed in the struggle years (mostly the 1980's) in response to the need of the marginalised black majority to be heard (Merrett, 1994:89), but most of these either disappeared with the advent of the new democratic era in the nineties, or were taken up in mainstream media (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 2). The new political dispensation has required of the media to transform. The press, including the small commercial press, have taken note of the expectation to be representative of the full cultural diversity of the community it serves (Retief, 2002: 20) and of the ANC government's commitment "to empower communities and individuals from previously disadvantaged sectors of society to gain access to the media" (Fourie, 2002: 27).

This chapter briefly outlines the history of the small press, both the commercial and non-profit press, in South Africa. It takes a look at the original function of small commercial newspapers like *Weslander* to be disseminators of information and asks how this function has been affected by the new democratic dispensation and what should be considered to be the new role of the small commercial press. It is also considered whether there could be any similarities between the American public journalism movement and the advocated future function of the small commercial press in South Africa.

### 4.2 Historical overview

The small commercial press has a long and illustrious history in South Africa. One of the oldest newspapers, *Grocott's Mail* in Grahamstown (established in 1830) is still in circulation (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 97). During the nineteenth century, the small commercial press bloomed to the

extent that “by 1899 with the outbreak of the Boer War virtually ‘every little town’ throughout South Africa had at least one newspaper” (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 90; Giffard, De Beer & Steyn, 1997: 80). The majority of small commercial newspapers were owned by whites and tended to focus almost exclusively on white news (Froneman & Pretorius, 2000: 61; Giffard et al, 1997: 80). This happened largely because many of the British Settlers that came to the Eastern Cape in 1820 brought printing presses. It comes as no surprise therefore that most of the first editors were pioneers in the Eastern Cape and that issues which concerned the British pioneers and the Afrikaner Boers were the main concern of these newspapers and were covered from a white perspective (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 90).

The British also brought with them the libertarian tradition with respect for freedom of speech and independence from government interference, but in effect commercial considerations, political beliefs and certain social obligations limited the extent to which these freedoms were exercised. As observed by Froneman and De Beer (2000: 62), the latter make the social responsibility model probably more applicable to this sector of the press. The main function of these newspapers was the publication of local news so that people could know what was going on in their communities and to provide an advertising medium (Froneman & Pretorius, 2000: 62; Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 90). National news was eschewed in favour of news that directly affect the community be it “good or bad, ugly or beautiful – reporting on failure as well as success. The main norm for the local paper when expressing an opinion was: Is it in the interest of the paper’s community?” (Diederichs & De Beer, 1998: 99). *Weslander’s* motto “To keep the West Coast informed” reflects similar obligations towards its community. However, until about a decade ago, *Weslander* like most others focused primarily on the issues and commercial interests of the white community, the happenings in the non-white communities were mostly ignored.

In addition to these limiting factors, small commercial independent newspapers heavily depend for their survival on the income derived from advertisements. Editorial decisions on what stories to carry always have to take the target market that the advertisers aim for into account. Since whites had, and to a large extent still have the dominating buying power, white interests and

viewpoints traditionally had higher priority in mainstream media (Wasserman, 2005: 10). This dependence on white financial support has impacted negatively on the range of news stories carried by small commercial newspapers, particularly with regard to contentious political issues. (Froneman & Pretorius, 2000: 62):

Although some of these papers (eg the *Lowvelder*) take an active stand vis-à-vis provincial politics, others (given their more narrow focus) concentrate exclusively on local politics and issues. But given the precarious nature of their economical basis, it seems that contentious issues are sometimes ignored by the independent commercial community newspapers, which begs the question as to how independent they really are

Thus traditionally the small commercial press has operated with a bias towards white interests and viewpoints. One of the reasons for the emergence of alternative community papers during the 1980's was to make an attempt to fill the void and give a voice to the marginalised black and coloured citizens of the country.

### **4.3 Grassroots press**

"In the 80's community media was often interchangeable with the term 'alternative' media" (Thorne, 1998:212) The alternative press were brought into being at the beginning to the 1980's to give a voice to the "voteless majority" (Merrett, 1994: 123), because the mainstream press, whether because it supported the racial policies of the National Party government, hesitated to appear critical of the government or because the stringent censorship laws made it nearly impossible, were not telling the public what happened in black or coloured communities.

The emergence of these newsprints was helped through technological advances like the photocopier and fax machine and later the personal computer (Merrett, 1994: 89) that made access to the printing world much more affordable and therefore accessible. Some of the titles that appeared include *Grassroots* in 1980 (Cape Town), *Speak* (Johannesburg), *Saamstaan* (Oudtshoorn). Most of them did not last long, but they became an important part of the struggle to bring Apartheid to an end (Merrett, 1994: 89). Government cracked down hard on these papers,

some had their offices raided, others were banned or suspended and in some cases journalists were brought before court (Merrett, 1994: 126).

Ironically, the end of Apartheid in 1994 also sounded the death knell for many alternative types of newsprint, because most had foreign financial backers who now withdrew their support in the expectation that the new democratic government would take care of its own (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 2). By now it had also become clear to the mainstream press in South Africa, including the small commercial press, that their products need to reflect the full cultural diversity of South African communities (Retief, 2002: 20).

#### **4.4 Role in the New South Africa**

With the dawning of a more democratic era in the 1990's, one of the issues that the new government wanted to address was unequal access to media resources (Fourie, 2002: 27). Over the past decade there have been substantial changes in the South African mainstream press scenario. Black ownership of some of the most prominent newspaper titles has become a reality (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 3). Black empowerment consortiums like Nail (New Africa Investments Limited) and Johnnic have come into being and have acquired shares in major media conglomerates like Times Media and Naspers (Diederich & De Beer, 1998: 100; Retief, 2002: 20). Where most small commercial newspapers began as independent publications, over the last two decades that situation has changed dramatically. Today many, if not most, of the small commercial papers have been linked to one of the major press groups or to quote Mkonza "... in South Africa, most community newspapers are not owned by communities but by specific organisations" (Mkonza, 2004: 115).

Tabloid newspapers have hit the "coloured" and black market since 2000. According to Wasserman and De Beer (2005) this development received mixed reactions from commentators, some "see these tabloids as providing especially black communities with self-help information such as health and life skills advice columns, others point to their right-wing political stance and sensationalist approach" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005: 3). They note further that these publications also operate according to commercial imperatives that mean that the poorer majority

probably are still marginalised from media access. In addition, most of the community newspapers from the 1980's didn't survive the next decade; many of these newspapers had received foreign funding during the struggle years, but when the funds dwindled after democratisation in 1994, the newspapers floundered (Thorne, 1998: 222).

The government have made some effort to remedy the situation for example by founding the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) in 2002 "to help less commercial, community media" (Harber, 2004). The purpose of the MDDA is to ensure a diversification of the media (Hadland & Thorne, 2004: xi) so "that marginalised sectors of society of society, including the poor, elderly, women, youths and children, are represented by their own media organisations" (Misbach, 2002). The agency funds and promotes community-based media organisations. Yet, according to Fourie's observation, in practice community media are still finding it difficult to operate in a financially sustainable manner in a very competitive media environment (Fourie, 2005: 21).

In 2005 president Thabo Mbeki in his address at the 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the ANC again "dwelt on the issue of genuine empowerment and participation of the majority of the people at the local level as something critical to realising the vision of the freedom charter". This will only be possible, is Tawana Kupe's opinion, if there is development of "participatory media and communication systems that give a voice to people at the local level" (Kupe, 2005). According to Adrian Hadland and Karen Thorne (2004: 1) "there is the overwhelming conviction both domestically and globally that a vibrant small media sector represents an essential component of sustainable development and a stable democracy".

Kupe observation was that the "dominant mainstream media [still] has a bias towards the major urban areas and to an elite audience ... the media fails to adequately depict the powerlessness of farm workers and failure of local government at that level." The increase in community radio stations was encouraging, but he felt that the "community media we have is weak and suffers resource constraints that are reinforced by the poverty and joblessness of its primary audiences". In consequence "people at local level have no communication forums for debate and discussion on the issues that affect their lives" and that means "decisions taken about issues at the local

level lack popular legitimacy.” There is an “absence of a media that speaks ‘to’ and ‘for’ them”. What is needed is a media that is willing to “listen and become enablers rather than dictators” (Kupe, 2005).

#### 4.5 Discussion

In light of the above, it can be argued that at the very least existing small commercial newspapers like *Weslander*, should consider expanding beyond being disseminators of information to having a more enabling role. They occupy an ideal position to make access to media representation easier and more accessible for “the rural, the poor, the powerless” (Harber, 2004). Many of these papers have an established and loyal consumer base, a significant advantage over new community papers that target the poorer sectors of a community. A study of the American public journalism movement provides numerous examples of projects launched by urban community newspapers to actively involve their readers in finding solutions for problems in their community. Newspapers like the *Charlotte Observer* reported on community issues in a way that was not only informative, but also invited the readers to become involved in resolutions to problems (Moscowitz, 2002: 62). Readers were engaged, not as consumers, but equally as fellow citizens (Fourie, 2005: 21) “in an effort to *empower* the public, revitalize democracy and solve social ills” (Moscowitz, 2002: 64 own emphasis added).

In the application of a more involved and enabling role, it would be advisable to follow an approach that found a balance between economic considerations and social directives, but would provide a role for the community media that is more in line with their daily realities. Fourie (2005) notes that experiences with community media in South Africa “clearly indicate that despite commendable community-orientated policy, and vision and mission statements emphasising community involvement and participation, these media are also subjected to the realities of media economics and dynamics” (Fourie, 2005: 21).

## Chapter 5 *Weslander*

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I gave a historical overview of the small commercial press in South Africa. The societal, political and economic changes over the last decade are of particular importance to this study, especially to understand what impact factors like the new political scenario, a very competitive free-market, the tabloids and the focus on cultural diversity has had on normative thinking about the role of this sector of the media.

This chapter hones in on *Weslander* to observe how this small commercial newspaper practises journalism in the new South African societal context. First a historical background of *Weslander* is given. Thereafter interviews I had with the current editor and the publisher are discussed. Next I look at three examples where *Weslander* over a period of time reported on a specific problematic issue in the community. The three examples were chosen because each illustrates to some extent the commitment of the newspaper to make a positive difference in the community either by making readers become involved in addressing a possible threat to the environment like a hazardous waste site or by solving existing problems like the lack of child support at the magistrates court or housing problems. Each example is subjected to a critical analysis from a public journalism perspective to see whether indeed *Weslander* went beyond the expected limits of social responsibility journalism in the libertarian paradigm and whether the results of this different approach were positive.

### 5.2 Background on *Weslander*

*Weslander*, then known as *Die Weslander*, began small in 1972 as a small independent commercial newspaper, the first regional newspaper in the West Coast area. It's founder, Lourens Schultz, was both publisher and editor and envisioned a regional newspaper that would grow as the expected economic activity expanded on the West Coast. The building of the first iron ore quay in Saldanha and the completion of the railway line between Sishen and Saldanha all fitted in with the idea of a prosperous community that deserved to have its own regional

newspaper. The newspaper appeared once a month and was distributed as far away as Malmesbury and Vredendal (*Weslander 30 Jaar van nuus*, Apr 2002; 18).

After Shultz's death seven years later, a husband and wife Gerrie and Suzelle Fourie, bought the newspaper from his widow. The Fouries made a formidable team; Gerrie was an experienced press photographer and his wife, a dedicated journalist. Together, they transformed *Weslander* into a respected and well-loved newspaper that was first distributed twice a month, then later once a week. In 1998 they decided to sell the newspaper to Nasionale Pers (a company now called Naspers, the subsidiary is Media24), but Suzelle stayed on as editor. In 2000 she handed over the reins to the new publisher, Sedrick Taljaard that acted as interim editor until Erika Venter filled the position. That same year it was also decided to drop the *Die* from the masthead of the paper and since then the paper is known simply as *Weslander*. Taljaard remained publisher until 2002 when Innes van Eeden took over from him. Erika was editor until August 2005 when she resigned and Alida Buckle became the new editor.

When the Fourie's publishing house, known as Weskus Drukkers, was sold to Naspers, the name was changed to Weskus Media and today this company publishes three publications: two weekly newsprints, *Weslander* and *Swartlander* as well as *Weskus Nuus*, a monthly that is distributed mainly in Atlantis. *Weslander* distributes to the Saldanha Bay Municipal area including a few towns in the Bergriver Municipal area where as *Swartlander* is distributed in the Bergriver and Swartland Municipal area.

Since its small beginnings, *Weslander* has been one of the lucky small commercial newspapers that enjoyed steady growth in circulation figures over the thirty-three years of its existence. In 1997, that's as far back as circulation figures could be traced, the average circulation of *Weslander* was 5 896 copies per week (*Weslander 30 Jaar van nuus*, 2002: 3). The most recent ABC figures for 2005 indicate a weekly distribution of more than 9 000 (*Weslander*, 4 August 2005: 11)

Until recently *Weslander* was also the only regional newspaper for the West Coast area, but in 2004 *Swartland West Coast Herald*, an independent commercial newspaper, also began distributing in the same area.

While under the dedicated management of the Fouries, *Weslander* won a fair number of awards. In the Sanlam national competition for regional newspapers, *Weslander* won the Hultzer-award three times in five years as the best regional newspaper in its category. It was once national winner in the Capro Nissan competition in the 1990's and three times the Western Cape regional winner (*Weslander 30 Jaar van nuus*, 2002: 17).

The newspaper has a proud tradition of being involved in the communities it serves. "*Weslander* is part and parcel of the West Coast community," wrote Venter in 2002. "The paper and staff are part of the areas' heartbeat. Missing persons have been found after photographs were published in *Weslander* and criminals sought by the police for quite a while, apprehended. Lost pets have been reunited with their owners. Sometimes problems between different parties are solved even before the article goes to print ... Issues kept in the dark, such as the pollution of our bays and alleged unfair fishing quotas, are highlighted to prevent something similar from happening again ..." (*Weslander 30 Jaar van nuus*, 2002: 9).

According to Venter (*Weslander 30 Jaar van nuus*, 2002: 3) the paper does not remain on the sideline, but it also initiates community projects. Venter expressed sentiments reminiscent of the public journalism ideal that newspapers should not only report the facts, but also be involved in helping solve the problems. Individual editors like Venter and Fourie have played an important role in the type of journalism practised at *Weslander*. It was therefore considered essential to interview Venter and the current editor, Alida Buckle, for their view on the role of *Weslander* in its community. Unfortunately Venter, who immigrated to New Zealand in August 2005, could not be reached via e-mail. I also interviewed the current publisher to find out how much being part of a large corporate media giant like Naspers affected the newspapers stance on reporting about problems from different sectors of the community, especially marginalised sectors. In other words, does pressure to perform well financially impact on who is considered to be *Weslander's* public? The purpose with these structured interviews was to find out what the interviewees thought of community involvement by *Weslander* and what they considered was the newspaper's role in the community. Lastly I will look at three different examples where problematic situations in the community were addressed to see whether a public journalism label could be considered

appropriate for *Weslander* and asked a journalist formerly from *Weslander* to express her feelings towards her experience on reporting on a community issue and becoming involved in finding a solution to the problem. The purpose was to find out how a journalist trained in the liberal school of thought would experience a more involved approach to reporting that is different to what she learned previously, namely that a journalist should remain detached and uninvolved.

### **5.3 Interviews**

Structured interviews with the editor and the publisher of *Weslander*, two persons who have the most direct influence on the newspaper were conducted to explore their personal orientation towards the role that *Weslander* can play in the community. In this section the interviews are summarized and discussed.

#### **5.3.1 Alida Buckle, current editor since August 2005**

During the interview the editor said her vision for *Weslander* is that it should be a community newspaper that serves all the citizens of the West Coast, from the very poor that lives in the informal settlements to the wealthy of high-heeled society.

She was definitely in favour of more community involvement by *Weslander*, for example that the newspaper facilitates a forum as a communal meeting point for all the non-profit welfare organisations and also said that *Weslander* had an obligation to act on behalf of the powerless in the community “sometimes the community is powerless, but we as the press can present their case to the responsible authorities,” she said. Buckle further said that she did not like the idea of a community newspaper like *Weslander* that is detached from the community that it serves, instead, journalists at the newspaper could express their own understanding of problematic issues, but should do so responsibly. This would be preferable to dispassionate “he says she says” reporting. Buckle said she would prefer a journalist to have an opinion, “I believe a journalist in a rural community is allowed to have an opinion, but should also be honest enough to admit when he/she had been wrong” rather than strive for objectivity, because she believes it is impossible for anyone to be objective “you bring your own past with you,” she said.

Buckles' sentiments towards objectivity and community involvement are reminiscent of the ideals of the American public journalism movement. She expressed higher regard towards responsible but involved reporting than striving to remain objective which is in line with what Glasser (1998) wrote, namely, that public journalism "rejects objectivity that holds newsrooms should stand detached from and uninterested in affairs of the community" (Glasser, 1998: 11). Her views on advocacy on behalf of the powerless in the community are similar to what Moscovitz (2002) wrote about public journalism's objective to go beyond informing to "...pressurising policy-makers to take action" (Moscovitz, 2002: 64).

Buckle did acknowledge that commercial concerns played a role in editorial decisions, for instance when choosing the photograph for the front page, but indicated that the informational needs of the readers had greater importance for her. "We are there to put the cause of the community. We have an educational role and an entertainment role. We have the concerns of the community at heart," Buckle said. She also gave the impression that the advertising section of the newspaper was more involved in the commercial obligations of the newspaper than the editorial section. Furthermore, she said she made the final decision on editorial content, the publisher only gave comment after the newspaper had been published.

### **5.3.2 Innes van Eeden, publisher since 2002**

The publisher also said that he saw *Weslander* as a community newspaper that served the community with information, education and entertainment, but it also had to operate in a way that is financially viable because "at the end of the day a newspaper is a business," said Van Eeden. The newspaper functioned independently, but on a monthly basis he had to report on the financial state, staff issues etc to the Boland Newspaper Group, a subsidiary of Media24 that *Weslander* is directly accountable to. From this can be deducted that even though *Weslander* is considered to be a community newspaper that serves the community, this role would be subservient to the financial obligations of the newspaper to operate on a profit margin.

The publisher, in contrast to the editor, is more involved on a daily basis with the financial demands on the budget of the newspaper, like for instance the payment of salaries, rent of the

office building, maintenance of the vehicles and computers, therefore it is only to be expected that financial concerns would have a higher priority for him.

Van Eeden, furthermore, have a higher appreciation for the orthodox approach to journalism, namely to inform, entertain and educate. He said that more involvement by the newspaper could negatively affect the integrity and impartiality of *Weslander*. "No, I feel the newspaper cannot act as judge or advocate. The newspaper can inform," said Van Eeden.

The sentiments expressed by Van Eeden are reminiscent of the traditional approach to small commercial newspapers namely the publication of local news so that people could know what was going on in their communities (Froneman & Pretorius, 2000: 62; Diederichs % De Beer, 1998: 90).

#### **5.4 Three examples of reporting aimed at addressing a problem in the community**

In this section three examples where *Weslander* covered stories on problems in the community are discussed. The reporting style in each example is explored from a public journalism perspective to see whether the style of reporting is reminiscent of public journalism more than the traditional liberalist approach to reporting.

##### **5.4.1 Lack of legal assistance for child support**

In 2005 *Weslander* reported repeatedly (Moses, 2005: 2; Moses, 2005: 10) on the lack of personnel to handle child support cases at the Vredenburg Magistrates Court until in August of the same year a temporary clerk was appointed to alleviate the problem. Media involvement certainly helped to publicize the situation in Vredenburg and possibly even helped to put it on the agenda of the responsible authorities. The journalist, Annelene Moses, who covered the story has since left *Weslander*, but I asked her to recount her own experiences.

In her first article on the problematic situation (Moses, 2005: 2), the journalist directly contacted the responsible authority, Hishaam Mohamed, the regional head of justice in the Western Cape and asked him what was being done to address the situation. Mohamed acknowledged he was aware of the problem, that lack of personnel at magistrate's courts was unfortunately a crisis for

the whole Western Cape, but that he was working hard to address the problem. Directly after the publication of the article, Mohamed complained that he had been misquoted, so his reaction was printed ("Head of justice", 2005: 14) and at the bottom of this article women from the community who had experienced problems with obtaining child support at the court in Vredenburg were asked to contact the newspaper. About a month later another article was published (Moses, 2005: 10) this time telling the stories of local women who had struggled and were still fighting a battle to obtain child support at the local court. The journalist approached the regional office of justice again for comment, but none was received. The following week a local magistrate did explain in full detail in *Weslander* ("Vrae oor", 2005: 11) what the legal rights were of women whose former partners reneged on child support. Soon afterwards in August the journalist together with the women attended a meeting called by the local Member of Parliament, Maxwell Moss and was informed there that a temporary clerk had been appointed to help alleviate the existing backlog in child support cases. *Weslander* reported the good news and also wrote about a new initiative by a local non-profit organisation, the West Coast Women's Network, to start a court support program involving workshops and the training of network representative in every community to help women with the completing of the necessary forms.

I asked the journalist how this experience had affected her and received her comments via email. She wrote that she had felt it was "a crying shame" that mothers carrying their babies walked to court and waited for hours in queues only to be informed that there was no child support money paid in for them and wrote the following:

My editor [Erika Venter] felt that something had to be done. It fell on my shoulders ... I phoned the local head of justice and constitutional development as well as the spokespersons of the minister of justice, Brigitte Mbandla and sent emails. Meanwhile, I was subtle encouraging the women to organise a march and to contact other media, if they wanted to be noticed. A non-governmental organisation was also sending letters on behalf of the women to the relevant provincial departments, but I felt that they were too passive. I made it my personal mission to make sure that the rights of these women and children were acknowledged.

She also contacted the local Member of Parliament, Maxwell Moss, who then organised a meeting between the women, the non-governmental organisation, representatives of the court and the media. The journalist informed the women of the meeting and transported some of them to the meeting. She described her feelings at the meeting as follows:

By this time it had become particularly difficult to put any distance between myself and the story. The borders were blurred and I struggled to be objective. If I couldn't be objective, at least, I had to be just and balanced in my reporting. During the meeting I had to remind myself that the meeting had been called for the women and that my role was to report what happened. I wanted to take on the politicians and jurists and sort them out. How could they allow children to go to bed hungry and how could they allow their own laws to be reduced to useless gibberish on paper. ... During the meeting it was announced that child support official would be appointed on a contract ... at least they [the politicians and jurists] admitted that the situation was untenable and sympathised with the women. The media was criticised, no thank you's, but so it goes. "

In hindsight, she concluded that, although journalists had to be careful about losing their objectivity towards a situation, they have a duty to help the powerless. She wrote the following:

I don't think journalists should become so involved that they begin to doubt their own objectivity. I upset several persons in positions of high authority with my questions and articles. Later on I began to feel that I was doing more damage than good. I began to retreat slowly so that the story could unfold naturally. I didn't want to stand in the way of the women.

I think journalists should pressurize government officials about basic service delivery, but there is a thin line that should not be crossed. But what to do when those who do not have a voice need you to speak on their behalf? If they are ignorant about the right channels to follow, we have to help. That is our role, that is our duty. But it is also important to maintain some distance, we are not the story, we are only the story-tellers."

This story illustrates the commitment of the editorial staff of the newspaper to be involved with problems experienced by members of the community. The journalist not only reported on the problem, but also directly contacted the responsible authorities to bring the problem under their attention and pressurized for positive action to address the problem. This is certainly an example

of “pushing the envelope” (Lambeth, 1998: 1) of traditional journalistic practise and doing more than merely reporting the facts, but actively seeking to alleviate the problem.

The telling of the stories of some of the women who struggled with child support, made it possible for these women to publicize their plight. The aim was to help put a ‘human face’ to the problem to invoke more empathy from the public. By telling their stories, the journalist in this story went beyond the usual authoritative sources to get the views of the average citizen who were most affected by the problem, to quote Birge (2002: 15) the views of the “middle ground where most people are” as was advocated by the public journalism movement.

The style of reporting on this problem furthermore illustrates that *Weslander* not only engages with readers as consumers but also as fellow-citizens (Lambeth, 1998: 1). The newspaper continued follow-up about the problem by confronting the responsible authorities, because it believed it to be in the public interest that the problem be addressed and the plight of these women be made known. *Weslander* did not propose a specific solution or launch a specific project, but, in light of the greater involvement by individuals like the local magistrate and organisations like the Women's Network, succeeded in galvanising greater involvement from the community which is ultimately also a successful result in public journalism (Brown, 2001: 11; Stepp, 2000). The journalist most certainly was pro-actively involved, she interacted with the women encouraging them to take pro-active steps to improve their situation and she pressurized the authorities in question to take action (Moscowitz, 2002: 64) she also became emotionally involved, a situation she found alarming having been trained to be objective and detached. In the end she actually contradicts herself, because she express her conviction that journalists have a duty to speak out for those that can't, but at the same time remain convinced that objectivity is needed.

#### **5.4.2 Proposed development of a hazardous waste site**

Another issue is the possibility of a hazardous waste site being built on the West Coast, a development that could have far reaching negative impacts on the ecology and economy of the environment.

At the end of 2004, a private local businessman set a process in motion for the development of the first hazardous waste site on the West Coast. The matter came to my attention through a small advertisement in the classified section of the *Weslander* regarding the first public meeting. *Weslander* then published a prominent article ("Sites listed", 2005: 2) to better inform readers of the proposed development with the aim to encourage public involvement in the process. Throughout the rest of the year follow-up articles gave feedback on the public meetings (Uys, 2005: 12; Uys, 2005: 15) informing readers of possible impacts on the environment; the follow-up steps in the environment impact assessment process and the options available for public involvement. The readers were also notified of follow-up public meetings (Uys, 2005: 7) and informed when the draft hazardous waste report had become available (Uys, 2005: 17). Balanced reporting was the aim throughout, therefore the views of opposition parties as well as the developer was sought.

There was passionate reaction by some concerned members of the community, although they were all white and had objected either on economic grounds (for instance that property value would be adversely affected) or out of fear that the delicate ecology of the Berg River estuary could suffer environmental damage (Uys, 2005: 12). There was very little attendance by coloured or black members of the community, a reason for concern among the white opposition groups. The public meetings tended to be lively with strong opposition from the attending public to the proposed development. Local citizens to oppose the development of a hazardous waste site formed two action groups. Presently the process is en route to enter the phase where specialist studies by specialists contracted by the consultants will be done.

This example is an example of socially responsible reporting with liberalist ethical values like balance and fact-based reporting but also elements reminiscent of public journalism. From an orthodox libertarian perspective *Weslander* acted throughout as an independent and detached disseminator of information. Articles aimed to give a balanced report with equal opportunity for both the developer and those in opposition to state their case for or against the proposed hazardous waste site so that readers could make informed decisions on the matter (Meyer, 1995). The reporting also aimed to empower readers to be a part of the public discourse on the

proposed development by publishing prominent articles of the proposed development and following up with invitations to participate in the environment impact process. For this reason the articles were done both in Afrikaans and English, but mostly in Afrikaans since that is the language of the majority of people on the West Coast. Usually 80% of the newspaper's content is written in Afrikaans and 20% is in English. *Weslander*, however, did not go so far as to actually host meetings. These reports illustrate that in this case the reporting by *Weslander* on this issue did exhibit characteristics of public journalism, because empowering the public and promoting public involvement are quintessential objectives of public journalism (Brown, 2001: 11; Moscovitz, 2002: 64; Stepp, 2000).

#### **5.4.3 Housing crises in St Helena Bay**

The last example is about poor housing conditions in a housing development in St Helena Bay by a private developer. A complex situation, because the development is on private property therefore local government is hesitant to intervene.

In July 2005 *Weslander* published an article (Moses, 2005: 2) on the plight of five homeowners whose houses were literally falling to pieces, but since the houses were not yet paid off, the owners were faced with the threat that their homes could be auctioned leaving them homeless. The journalist, Annelene Moses, spoke to the affected homeowners and a member of council. The next week she reported (Moses, 2005: 15) that the officials of the local municipality, including the mayor and a Member of Parliament, have arranged to have a meeting with the community on the matter. She also managed to track down the contractor who had originally been involved in the building of the houses, but he refused to comment. Follow-up articles were published the next week (Moses, 2005: 14; Uys, 2005: 11) of more people in similar predicaments who were living in the same area and readers were given feedback on the public meeting that had been advertised (Uys, 2005: 9). At this meeting the mayor promised to appeal to the provincial minister of housing for help with the situation. For the same edition, the editor interviewed the aforementioned Member of Parliament, Maxwell Moss, to get his take on existing problems in the Saldanha Bay

area and Moss admitted that most of the problems brought under his attention had to do with housing ("Behuising", 2005: 2).

Approximately two months later, in September, *Weslander* was informed that the provincial Minister of Housing was visiting the area on invitation by the local municipality and he wanted to evaluate personally the situation in St Helena Bay. A journalist reported on his visit and his promise to respond to the people's complaints with the housing problems (Uys, 2005: 14). No further feedback had been received until February 2006 when the Minister of Housing returned again, but did not have answers yet to the people's complaints (Pieterse, 2006: 11).

This example was chosen because it appeared initially to be a good example of *Weslander's* effort to be involved in societal problems. Several articles were published to publicize the plight of different homeowners from the same community affected by poor housing conditions. However, the reporting appears not to display the same level of community involvement as for instance with the child support stories. There could be several explanations for the more traditional journalistic style on this problem in the community. One reason could be that private contractors, one who refused to comment when approached by the journalist and another who was not a local resident and would not comment originally handled the housing projects, so this made it difficult to contact a responsible authority to pressurise them into positive action. The houses were not on municipal property, so the municipality was not legally bound to address the issue yet did appear to be interested in helping the people since the mayor held a public meeting and invited the minister of housing to visit the community. In contrast to *Weslander's* fairly passive involvement, a more typical public journalism approach would have been to become more directly involved in the community by for instance organising a forum to facilitate discussions to find a solution to the situation (Glasser, 1999: 8).

## 5.5 Discussion

An overview on the history of small commercial newspapers in South Africa shows that traditionally they were not accessible to all the people, being owned by whites, profit-orientated and geared towards how news events and issues affected white readers. *Weslander* had similar

origins, but have since become increasingly involved in all kinds of issues that affect not only whites, but also the coloured and black people in its distribution area. According to both the current editor and the publisher, *Weslander* is a community newspaper that serves all the people in its community, however the publisher did admit that a balance had to be maintained with commercial concerns. He favours the more orthodox approach to journalism, i.e. reporting that informs, educates and entertains. The editorial staffs interviewed, however, definitely lean towards a journalism that is more involved with community issues. The publisher and the editorial staff therefore seem to have contradictory viewpoints on how *Weslander* should fulfil its role as community newspaper, this could pose a problem if for instance the editorial staff wanted to launch a community project. The publisher would have to agree and give his permission to any community project that boasted the backing of *Weslander* and might involve capital expense.

The examples chosen reflect various degrees of community involvement, from a more traditional detached focus on 'merely reporting the facts' to a very emotional involvement and proactive intervention to have a problem addressed. So is the *Weslander* practising a form a public journalism? The conclusions follow in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to see whether *Weslander* had taken a step beyond the traditional 'infotainment' role towards being an advocate for the marginalised peoples in its community. I wanted to see whether its style of reporting on societal problems showed any similarities to that of the American public journalism movement. In light of the case studies and interviews I believe that the editorial side of *Weslander* does exhibit a leniency towards the ideals of public journalism, but it is not the official policy of the newspaper - rather the level of public involvement appear dependent on the editor and/or the particular journalist covering the story. In cases where citizens are involved, that for various reasons would otherwise have difficulty to exert pressure on the relevant authorities to address their problems, reporters and editors of the newspaper have felt compelled to help. The story on the women's plight to be helped with obtaining child support presents an example. The journalist who covered the story in effect took up the women's cause to plead on their behalf that the relevant authorities address the shortage of child support staff at the local court in Vredenburg. Venter, who was the editor at the time, appears to have actually encouraged her to follow a more pro-active approach towards this story. In other stories, the involvement of the journalist has been less.

Officially *Weslander* adheres to the traditional view of the press as disseminator of information to inform, to educate and to entertain. The interview with the publisher, mr. Innes van Eeden, showed that this is also his take on the primary role of the newspaper in its community. However, I have come to the conclusion that many of the editorial staff at *Weslander* has bought into the feeling among some of the media to give a voice to marginalised groups like women, children, the poor and the disabled. This conclusion is based on the pronouncements made by the previous editor, ms. Erika Venter, the interview with the current editor, ms. Alida Buckle and remarks made by a journalist at the newspaper as well as my own experiences there on the handling of stories.

In the light of the above, I conclude further that indeed small commercial newspapers like *Weslander* are in an ideal position to make media access easier for those groups that previously didn't enjoy that privilege. I do not suggest that public journalism is necessarily the way forward, but advise more thought on the development of a more pro-active approach than the traditional

uninvolved “on the sidelines” approach. These newspapers operate on a profit margin; so costly projects like those attempted by public journalism newspapers in the United States would therefore probably not be considered financially feasible (The Pew Institute funded many of the public journalism projects). Yet, particularly because community non-profit newspapers have experienced difficulty to survive, small commercial newspapers like *Weslander* with an established and growing readership, present attractive vessels to open up media access to the marginalised groups.

In South Africa journalists are instilled during their training with a sense of duty to pursue professional journalism guided by Western ethical values like objectivity, balanced reporting, fairness and neutrality. Journalists could find aligning a more pro-active approach with strict adherence to these values problematic as was clearly evident in the *Weslander* journalist’s remarks on her experiences when covering the child support story. In light of the ongoing debates in the media on the development of an ethical normative system that is right for the South African media landscape, I can only concur that more thought in this area is urgently required. Until then, journalists and editors have no other option but to do as their own hearts and conscience tell them to do.

## Addendum A : Interviews with current editor and publisher

1) Here follows a transcript of an interview I had with ms. Buckle on Thursday 02 February 2006 in Vredenburg.

Q: Do you see *Weslander* as a community newspaper and what does the concept mean to you?

A: Yes definitely I see *Weslander* as a community newspaper, especially the editorial section. The aims of the editorial section are different to the aims of the advertising section.

Q: What are the aims of the editorial section?

A: We are there to put the cause of the community. We have an educational role and a entertainment role. We have the concerns of the community at heart.

Q: Who is the community?

A: I think it is the whole community from the guy in the RDP shack to the guy in his yacht in Langebaan.

Q: How do you decide what to have on the front page? What is most important?

A: I look for the most striking photograph. In the end I think it is what do the readers want to read. You have to consider which [photo] will sell the most newspapers, but that is not the most important part of the decision.

Q: Who makes that decision?

A: I do, afterwards the publisher will give his comments.

Q: Do you think *Weslander* should play a role of advocate for the marginalised sectors of the community?

A: Yes! I feel that is where we act on behalf of the community. Sometimes the community is powerless, but we as the press can present their case to the responsible authorities. The authorities can easily ignore the community.

Q: What is your vision for the newspaper?

A: I would like to see that the newspaper creates a platform where all the non-profit welfare organisations could meet to discuss bigger projects that they could plan together. *Weslander* acts as the facilitator.

Q: What are your views on objectivity in journalism?

A: It is impossible for an individual to be completely objective; you bring your own past with you. I don't like a he says, she says story that lets the reader decide. I am not saying you should lead the reader on, but use your logic. I don't like it [that a journalist stands apart from the community]. I believe a journalist in a rural community is allowed to have an opinion, but should also be honest enough to admit when he/she had been wrong.

2) Here follows a transcript of an interview I had with the Mr. Van Eeden on Thursday 02 February 2006 at the offices of *Weslander* in Vredenburg.

Q: Do you see *Weslander* as a community newspaper?

A: Yes, absolutely. The newspaper is community orientated. It serves the community with information, education and entertainment.

Q: *Weslander* operates from within the Naspers stable. Does that affect the independence of the newspaper?

A: No, *Weslander* is directly accountable to the Boland Newspaper Group. We are run like independent republics within a confederation. Only regarding matters of policy do we have to confer with the Group, in all over matters we do our own thing. They do not interfere with our editorial policy.

Q: What about commercial considerations?

A: At the end of the day a newspaper is a business. It has to be able to function financially. It is a business with a profit margin. Once a month I have to deliver a report on *Weslander's* financial state, staff problems etc to the Boland Newspaper Group.

Q: How do you feel about *Weslander* performing the role of advocate?

A: No, I feel the newspaper cannot act as judge or advocate. The newspaper can inform. [To act as advocate or judge] will affect the integrity or impartiality of the newspaper.

## References

- Bell, G. 2003. Journalists are not objective – Mazwai. Independent Online. Downloaded from the World Wide Web: [www.iol.co.za](http://www.iol.co.za).
- Blankenberg, N. 1999. In search of a real freedom: *Ubuntu* and the media. *Critical Arts* 13(2): 42-65.
- Brown, F. 2001. Civic journalism: Still hanging on. *Quill* 89(3): 11.
- Campbell, C.C. 1999. Journalism as a democratic art. In: *The idea of public journalism*, edited by Glasser, T.L. 1999. New York: The Guilford Press: Pp.xiii-xxix.
- Charity, A. 1996. What is public journalism? Five communities, five examples. *National Civic Review* Winter/Spring 96 85(1).
- Christians, C.G. 2004. *Ubuntu* and communitarianism in media ethics. *Ecquid Novi* 25(2): 235-256.
- Claassen, G. 2004. Goed of sleg, maar darem 'n vrye pers. [Good or bad, but at least a free press] *Beeld*, 22 April 2004.
- Cross, A. 2002. A powerful experiment. *Quill* 90(5).
- De Beer, A.S. (ed.). 1998. *Mass media towards the millennium. The South African handbook of mass communication*. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik
- Diederichs, P. and De Beer, A.S. 1998: Newspapers. The Fourth Estate: A cornerstone of democracy. In A.S. de Beer (Ed), *Mass media: towards the Millenium: the South African handbook of mass communication*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik.
- Du Plessis, J.H.O. 1943. *Die Afrikaanse pers: 'n Studie van die ontstaan, ontwikkeling en rol van die Hollands-Afrikaanse pers as sosiale instelling* (Deel 1) [The Afrikaans Press: A study on the origins, development and role of the Dutch/Afrikaans press as a social institution (Part 1)]. DPhil dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Eksterowicz, A.J. and Roberts, R.N.(Eds). 2000. *Public journalism and political knowledge*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Fourie, P.J.(Ed) 2001. *Media studies vol.1: Institutions, theories and issues*. Pretoria: Juta.
- Fourie, P.J. 2002. Rethinking the role of the media in South Africa. *Communicare* 21(1): 17-40.

- Fourie, P.J. 2005. Towards linking normative theory, communication policy and audiences in South African communication research. *Communicatio* 31(1): 13-32.
- Froneman, J.D. 2004. Email communication with the author. 17 May.
- Froneman, J. and Pretorius, K. 2000. Towards a common-sense typology and democratic philosophy for South Africa's 'community media'. *Communicatio* 26(2): 60-64.
- Giffard, C.A., De Beer, A.S. and Steyn, E. 1997. New media for the new South Africa. In Eribo, F. and Jong-Ebot, W. (Eds) *Press freedom and communication in Africa*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Glasser, T.L. 1999. The idea of public journalism. In Glasser, T. L. (Ed), *The idea of public journalism* (pp. 3-18). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Glasser, T.L. and Craft, S. 1998. Public journalism and the search for democratic ideals. *Ecquid Novi* 19(1): 7-23.
- Hadland, A. and Thorne, K. 2004. *The people's voice: the development and current state of the South African small media sector*. Cape Town: HSRC Publishers.
- Harber, A. 2004. Vibrant media 10 years into freedom. *Sunday Times*, 22 February.
- Head of justice objects to article. (2005, May 12). *Weslander*, p.14.
- Kruger, A. 2004. Interview with the author. Paarl. 21 May.
- Kupe, T. 2005. It should be all about what the people need. *City Press*, 16 January.
- Lambeth, E.B. 1998. Public journalism as a democratic practice. In Lambeth, E.B., Meyer, P.E. and Thorson, E (Eds), *Assessing public journalism* (pp. 15-35). Columbia: University of Missouri Press. Pp.15-35.
- Nerone, J.C. (Ed). 1995. *Last rights: revisiting Four Theories of the Press*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- McQuail, D. 2000. *McQuail's mass communication theory, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Merrett, C. 1994. *A culture of censorship: secrecy and intellectual repression in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Misbach, W. 2002. New law will promote community media. *Sowetan*, 05 February.

- Meyer, P. 1995. Public journalism and the problem of objectivity. Paper presented to the IRE conference on computer assisted reporting, Cleveland, September. Downloaded on 05 May 2004 from the Word Wide Web: <http://www.unc.edu/~pmeyer/ire95pj.htm>
- Newspaper Association of South Africa (NASA) background information received from Anne Kruger on 21 May 2004.
- Mkonza, K. 2004. Media in Africa: Current issues and future challenges. *Ecquid Novi* 25(1): 115-151.
- Moscowitz, L. 2002. Civic approach not so different from traditional model. *Newspaper Research Journal* 23(4): 62-75.
- Moses, A. 2005. Eis eienaarskap ná 60 jaar [Demand ownership after 60 years]. *Weslander*, 28 July 2005: 14.
- Moses, A. 2005. Geveg om onderhoud. Hof: Steeds te min personeel [battle for support. Court: Still lack of personnel]. *Weslander*, 16 June 2005:10.
- Moses, A. 2005. G'n onderhoudhulp [no help with support]. *Weslander*, 5 May 2005: 2.
- Moses, A. 2005. Hulp met onderhoud. Tydellike klerk: Werk aan klagtes [Help with support. Temporary clerk: Complaints addressed]. *Weslander*, 4 August 2005: 12.
- Moses, A. 2005. Landdros help vroue bemag [Magistrate helps empower women]. *Weslander*, 4 August 2005: 12.
- Moses, A. 2005. Swak bouwerk ondersoek. Cove-huise: Munisipaliteit help [Poor construction investigated. Cove-houses: Municipality helps]. *Weslander*, 21 July 2005: 15.
- O'Niel, P.H. 1998. Democratisation and mass communication: What is the link? In: *Communicating democracy: The media and political transitions*, edited by P.H. O'Niel, London: Lynne Rienner.
- Oosthuizen, L.M. 2002. *Media ethics in the South African context: an introduction and overview*. Landsdowne: Juta.
- Oosthuizen, M. 1982. Persverantwoordelikheid en rekenskap [press responsibility and accountability]. *Ecquid Novi* 3(2): 40-47.

- Pieterse, M. 2006. Belofte maak skuld. Minister besoek: behuising kwessie [A promise is a promise. Minister visits: Housing issues]. *Weslander*, 2 March 2006: 11.
- Retief, J. 2002. *Media ethics: an introduction to responsible journalism*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, J. 1999. The action of the idea: Public journalism in built form. In Glasser (Ed), *The idea of public journalism* (pp. 21-48). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. 1956. *Four theories of the press: the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sites listed for hazardous waste: Community's input asked. (2005, February 24). *Weslander*, p.2.
- Steenveld, L. 2002. Key issues need renewed discussion about the media's role in our new democracy. *Ecquid Novi* 23(1): 119-130.
- Steenveld, L. 2004. Transforming the media: a cultural approach. *Critical Arts* 18(1): 92-115.
- Stepp, C.S. 2000. Reader friendly. *American Journalism Review* 22(6).
- Thorne, K. 1998. Community media – a price we can afford? In Duncan, J. and Seleokane, M. (Eds), *Media and democracy in South Africa* (pp. 211-245). Pretoria: HSRC and FXI.
- Uys, H. 2005. Afvalterrein bespreek. Velddrif: Kom gee jou insae [Waste site discussed. Velddrif: Give your input]. *Weslander*, 21 July 2005: 7.
- Uys, H. 2005. Draft hazardous waste report available. *Weslander*, 3 November 2005: 17.
- Uys, H. 2005. Fel teenkanting teen gevaarlike-afvalterrein. Ontwikkelaars hou vol: Behoefte vir so 'n terrein bestaan aan Weskus [Strong opposition against hazardous waste site. Developers repeat: Need for site exists on West Coast]. *Weslander*, 10 March 2005: 15.
- Uys, H. 2005. Gevaar in stukkende asbeshuise [Danger in peeling asbestos houses]. *Weslander*, 28 July 2005: 11.
- Uys, H. 2005. Minister besoek oor huise [Minister's visit regarding houses]. *Weslander*, 8 September 2005: 14.
- Uys, H. 2005. Nog geen oplossings. Steenberg's Cove: Huisprobleme [Still no solutions. Steenberg's Cove: Housing problems], *Weslander*, 28 July 2005: 9.

Uys, H. 2005. Weskussers teen afvalterrein. Water loop af na Bergrivier: Duinemol vreet pype [West Coast against waste site. Water run off to Berg River: Dune mole gnaws pipes]. *Weslander*, 18 August 2005: 12.

Vrae oor onderhoudwetgewing beantwoord.[Questions about support legislature answered]. (2005, 30 June). *Weslander*, 30 June 2005: 11.

Walker, L. 2003. Civic journalism 101. *Editor & Publisher* 136(17): 46.

Wasserman, H. 2005. Globalised values and postcolonial responses: South African perspectives on normative media ethics. ??

Wasserman, H. and De Beer, A.S. 2005. Which public? Whose interest? The South African media and its role during the first ten years of democracy. *The International Communication Gazette* 68(1): 71-91.

Wolper, A. 2003. RIP, civic journalism. *Editor & Publisher* 136(15): 26.