

Sex, lies and bogus headline-grabbers

WHAT exactly is propaganda? Ask most people and they will identify governments as being the purveyors of propaganda. This is what all governments do and we, the media, are the ones who keep an eye on them.

Yet even as we talk about that and the looming secrecy law (which might enable the corrupt in government to hide their deeds), little or no attention is paid to a form of propaganda which is equally insidious: that generated by private enterprise.

This sort of propaganda, like its government equivalent, is a subtle mixture of fact and fiction. And, I regret to say, in a country like ours, where gullibility is a national trait, the spin doctors know most journalists don't pause to ask any questions... unless it involves the government.

Add a bit of sex and you can virtually guarantee that any lie you put out there to punt your brand will be regurgitated unquestioningly by our media.

The latest to swallow some of this propaganda, hook, line and sinker, is the Sunday Times (remember - the same newspaper that told you Transet sold the sea).

Normally we journos are reluctant to criticise colleagues - it's almost an unwritten law, perhaps because we fear being next in the firing line. Too bad...

The Sunday Times ran a breathless front-page story about South Africans becoming more enthusiastic about joining the "mile-high club" (having sex on a plane while it is in flight).



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Supposedly, more than 7 000 people took part in the survey, which showed, among other things, that 6 percent of us belong to that exclusive club. Ten percent of people surveyed from Limpopo said they were members, and an amazing 25 percent of women over the age of 75 said they had joined.

It all sounds so good. The problem is, I could find no record of Travelstart having run such an online survey - either on its website or its Facebook page.

The only similar such "survey" was a Valentine's Day set of questions posted in 2010. The results then were markedly similar. However, in 2010, nobody was asked to give their age or their address.

The bottom line is I think this is cobbled-together rubbish aimed at getting the site's name into the media at minimal cost.

Just like the sex websites ashleymadison.com and cougarlife.com did. (By the way, they are the same organisation and their cooked-up publicity is co-ordinated by one PR person, who is called Chantal. Although she uses different names

on her press releases, she doesn't bother to change her cell number.)

This is more than just a lighthearted bit of fun. These people are inventing stories to get coverage. And we in the media are falling for it. What will happen next? What other piece of apparently believable nonsense will they serve up?

More than that, if organisations are prepared to fake press releases, what else are they doing which is not above board?

Journalists need to start extending to the business world the same sort of cynicism we regularly accord to the government.

Onions to everyone involved in this Travelstart scam.

We had some internal debate last week about whether to accept an ad on this page for News24, which crowed about winning a number of awards. Now, it will probably be a freezing day in hell when you see it accept any ads from us, but that is beside the point.

It paid us for the ad and we cannot claim to be in favour of free speech if we try to curtail the rights of others to have their say in terms of commercial speech.

Besides which, well done guys: any awards for newspapers are good news because they show that predictions of our death may have been somewhat exaggerated.

But I would like to award News24 an Orchid for astute marketing. When it wanted to announce its awards, it needed a place where the people who count in the ad and media industry would be paying attention.

And they came to us. Well done!