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The Last Word

Notwithstanding the rather difficult relationship that has existed between myself and the journal over the past 19 years, I have been honoured by the editors of *Communicare* with writing the "Last Word". And this is, *nogal*, the "Last Word" of the Millennium! I will briefly reflect on the nature of this relationship in the context of change and the future of communication studies in South Africa. What role can *Communicare* play in this process as we move into the third millennium *Anno Domini*.

I was invited onto *Communicare's* editorial board by Nina Overton in 1989. I initially demurred for ideological reasons. My English-speaking colleagues opposed my engagement of the 'enemy' - SACOMM (South African Communication Association), with its base in Afrikaans and homeland departments of communication, was then perceived to be part of the National Party establishment. To cooperate with SACOMM would confer legitimacy upon apartheid, they argued. But Overton was very persuasive. I knew that she was a significant force working for democratic political change within the ruling hegemony. She was trying to open up debate between opposing constituencies. Overton unambiguously supported freedom of speech and dialogue. And, I never really bought the idea that non-engagement resolved anything. The journal needed someone to represent the radical constituency, hitherto rarely reflected in *Communicare's* pages, observed Overton. I eventually agreed to be appointed to the Editorial Board and to join the Association.

It was not long, however, before I disagreed with the journal. An article recommended by myself and Eric Louw for consideration by *Communicare* was rejected by both referees. This was Kevin Heydenreich's critique of Paul Vorster's systems theory. On inquiry, I was told that the journal's refereeing procedure was 'scientific' and that the referees had deemed the article "subjective" - and therefore unacceptable. The submission constituted, they averred, an unwarranted *ad hominem* attack on Vorster. Heydenreich's article was later accepted by *Critical Arts* (1992) and then reprinted in *African Media Review*. His paper was amongst the first batch of articles written by resident South Africans to appear in the African Council for Communication Education's journal following the end of sanctions and boycotts.

Critique was, however, still being kindled in *Communicare*. A testy interchange between myself and Eric Louw (1990) on the one hand, and Arnold de Beer (1990) on the other,

indicated that the 'senior scholars', if not Honours students like Heydenreich, would be allowed to joust with each other. The debate started in this journal was argued out in a variety of other forums. Amongst these was the first issue of *Journalism Studies*. The inaugural issue included the previously unlikely 'two voices' incorporated in the De Beer and Tomaselli (1999) survey. The term is Frank Morgan's. He identified 'two voices', because, though the article is co-authored, it also contains a continuing interior paradigmatic debate between myself and De Beer. The article itself represents conceptual *toenadering* [*rapprochement*], indicative of the broader social and political negotiations that characterised the 1990s. It is also indicative of the realisation that the ideological, paradigmatic and theoretical differences that so forcefully and psychotically separated us under apartheid could always have been negotiated, as they have been during the decade of the '90s. It is, after all, in transitionary moments such as that heralded by President de Klerk in February 1990 that new theories addressing pressing problems are forged. New conceptual and transdisciplinary alliances emerge during such conjunctures. This period saw not merely a change of government, but a complete redesign of the political, economic and geographical structures of our society.

One of the restructurings is related to tertiary education. For all its Eurocentricsm and bureaucracy, SAQA has brought most South African communications studies and scholars into sustained and serious dialogue for the first time. It has, however, also renewed tensions between the academy and business with regard to 'outcomes' - most academics consider themselves as educators; while business mainly wants technical skills from graduates. This contradiction - between educators on the one hand and trainers on the other - has to some extent replaced the 1980s stand-off between Marxist and conventionalist constituencies. Educators are now largely agreed that critical thinking - no matter the paradigm - is the *raison d'etre* of the academy. *Communicare* has a clear role to play in shaping this new tertiary educational process and in ensuring the integrity of the academy vis-a-vis increased pressures for the technicisation of curricula.

Communicare has tried hard to identify itself as part of the post-apartheid era. The bulk of Overton's and Sonja Verwey's editorials are clear testimony to this. Even in the 1980s I found the "Last Word" the most interesting and challenging section of the journal. Commentators like Wimpie de Klerk, Brett Davidson, Pieter Fourie, Neville Alexander, Johan Degenaar, Nokwanda Sithole, Max du Preez and Gideon de Wet challenged received orthodoxies and attitudes, if sometimes cautiously. My being invited onto the editorial board was another indication of a move towards *glasnost*, if not *perestroika*. The publication in the 1990s of articles by radical scholars like Louw, Nhlanthla Nkosi, Charles Malan, Ntongela Masilela, Simon Burton and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli was another. But contradictions inevitably occurred in this attempt to open up, to chart new directions, and to incorporate previously marginalised voices. The positivist scientific discourses of the 1980s now jostled uncomfortably with a soon to be largely

dominant media studies critique. This contestation and ambivalence was not in itself a bad thing - in fact it had been standard practice in another SACOMM-linked journal, *Ecquid Novi*. The difficulty occurred, however, in the inability of some authors and some referees to separate *a priori* left-wing rhetoric and sloganeering masquerading as Marxist, or qualitative, analysis on the one hand, from rigorous critique and paradigmatic logic, on the other. This was a problem evident at all levels in all research institutions and universities: the HSRC, *Communicare*, teaching programmes, student theses and essays, publications, state task reports, media monitoring reports, and so on.

Regrettably, the one trend that has defined communication studies in South Africa has been the *absence* of serious intellectual and reflexive debate. This point is largely underscored by the De Beer and Tomaselli (1999) study even as we head towards the year 2000. Yes, articles couched within different paradigms were being published. But this does not constitute debate.

Neo-Marxist media theories and cultural studies, previously excommunicated and demonised, were in the 1990s now uncritically adopted across the discipline, by both Afrikaans and English-speaking communication departments, not to mention literature, linguistics, education, and drama. This appropriation often occurred without thought as to these theories' rigour and historical derivations, their contexts, or their indigenisation. The result was sometimes methodological nonsense, representing little more than ideological expediency. This opportunism tended to be associated with one constituency or another - usually the anti-apartheid one. Some of this 'creative' writing (also from orthodox positions) actually got published in *Communicare*, amongst other journals.

It was at this point that I became uncomfortable with my editorial role on the journal. On querying the publication of a particular 'qualitative' research article, I was told that it was acceptable because it had been 'scientifically evaluated' - whatever that means. A long correspondence occurred between myself and the journal's new editor, Sonja Verwey, on why the referee reports were being withheld from myself. I was, after all, an editorial board member. Eventually, the reports were sent to me. I concluded that while due process had been indeed followed, that the reports were epistemologically naive. Moreover, the referees had failed to discern glaring factual inaccuracies in the article. Inexplicably, also, the authors provided little or no evidence for their statements and accusations.

I remembered Heydenreich's article - rejected for being 'subjective'. But here was an article that was highly 'subjective' (an acceptable position in critical analysis provided that this position is problematised). It was also error-laden, and apparently ignorant of other directly related published studies on the same topic. Why was the one published

but the other rejected? I assumed that the change in political context had something to do with it. Perhaps the article's referees were not really specialists in what they might have spuriously assumed was critical or qualitative analysis. Where in the past 'doing it with numbers' was considered 'scientific', perhaps now 'doing it with rhetoric' was thought to indicate a positive and appropriate response to the new post-apartheid context. For me, this was a key epistemological point. *Communicare* and I amicably parted company. I continued submitting articles to the journal. No matter our differences, *Communicare* does represent perhaps the dominant form of communication studies in South Africa - with its much needed emphasis on organisational, marketing and business, and intercultural communication. I wished the editor well in what was obviously becoming a very difficult task. Managing constituencies as well as conceptual paradigms is never easy. Transitional periods especially are extremely difficult to negotiate within the academy and beyond.

The post-apartheid transition, however, has opened up possibilities for interaction, dialogue and debate. Sonja Verwey's editorials are an indication of this inclusion and expansion. Academic journals like *Communicare* should and do play a fundamental role in this process. The stakes are high in our postmodern world where education and even 'scientific' publication have become commodified via SAPSE, multinational publishing and globalisation of markets. Academics are the last formal bastion of critical, principled and hopefully independent thinking, as we brace ourselves for Y2K. The push towards technicism, political expediency and profits will be increasingly felt by all of us. *Communicare*, like all other academic publications, will have to critically negotiate its way through these economic, discursive and ideological minefields. This task might even be more difficult than was mapping a path out of apartheid.

Glasnost is indeed beginning to occur in South African communication studies, if only amongst a few as indicated by the initial seven South African responses to De Beer and Tomaselli's (1999) survey for the *Journalism Studies* article. However, *perestroika*, as the Russians have found out to their great cost, requires more than simply the substitution of one system (capitalism) for another (communism). Adopting capitalism without understanding that it is connected to the rule of law, the freedom of the individual, and market regulation has been a disaster in Russia. Similarly, perhaps, if cultural and media studies is to be seriously applied as a paradigm in post-apartheid *perestroika*, then a critical understanding of its epistemologies, its histories and its contexts, is crucial. The same goes for any paradigm which adopts or incorporates another, no matter where it is located on the paradigmatic spectrum. In other words, critical historical examination of paradigms, theories and applications should be part and parcel of any field. Synchronic understandings simply add to the problem. And, self-serving sloganeering has no place whatsoever in any form of analysis.

This "Last Word" I hope will persuade us all to review our previous assumptions, theories and strategies. It is a "Word" that I hope will, like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, help us to face our respective pasts, and to negotiate the future rigorously via our preferred paradigms, in terms of broader democratic tendencies, and within the matrices of human rights debates. All of us were entrapped by apartheid in one way or another. All of us have yet to break entirely free of the discursive and ideological structures which defined each of us during the 1970s and '80s. Engagement is the name of the game; debate is the public process; and publication is the forum for both mutual engagement and debate. *Communicare* has attempted to position itself within these anti-apartheid democratic discourses in the 199Os. But it is up to the journal's community of readers, its editors, and its referees to ensure that this positioning is sincere, sustained and developed into the new millennium.

How can this be done? It can be done by instituting strategic editorial policies. Academic publication is not simply a matter of waiting for suitable articles to turn up in the mail. Mapping out, and forging a discipline and/or field, requires a sustained effort on the part of any journal and its editorial board. Knowledge is made; it is a process; it does not just happen, or arrive unannounced in the post. The theme issue on development communication edited by Charles Malan and Robert Agunga (17/1, 1998) is one such indicator of this, as is Verwey's issue on organisational communication (17/2, 1998). Disciplinary journals should be at the centre - not the peripheries - of debate - whether locally or internationally. They should not be places where opportunistic overseas scholars 'hide' their inadequate studies from their peers while neverthless ensuring citations for their CVs. Academic journals should be the fulcrum of discussion and critical epistemological reflexivity, a point alluded to by Verwey in her editorial in 18(1) 1999. Strong editorial direction and planning is a necessity.

The contradictions facing the discipline in the new millennium will not be based on politics and ideology alone, as it was in the past, but on methodology and its relation to the public sphere. The corporate and state push towards technicism and economic and social expediency will clash with the defence of systematic theory and socially useful critical thinking. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 (a factor in the overthrow of apartheid) removed one of the polar opposites which had defined public and academic debate during the Cold War. The post-Cold War political economy of academic publishing in the humanities and social sciences seriously impoverishes African and Third World universities, and even lesser funded institutions in the in the First and Second Worlds. To some extent, the academy has become little more than a partially state-subsidised, underpaid, production-line for a northern publishing industry. Academic print publishing has thus become an expensive commodity, controlled by multinational companies who carve up the world into geographical, language and disciplinary markets.

Communicare is one of the few remaining independent journals not yet gobbled up by big capital. This makes its future role that much more important.

The opportunistic proliferation of questionable journals and articles was one negative response to the SAPSE publication accreditation and research incentive system introduced in the mid-1980s. Publication for publication sake, or for monetary gain, became the order of the day. Though SAPSE did stimulate a long-overdue research and publishing culture in South Africa, it also impeded the editing of pro-active journals, accountable to the discipline at large. For example:

a) while rewarding authors SAPSE fails to recognise that without editors and publishers the authors would have no vehicle in which to publish. Fortunately, *Communicare* has not lacked for hard working editors in the light of SAPSE's silence on the value of editorial activity, but the quality of many articles published therein is questionable. Editing comprises more than just copy editing and technically administering a refereeing process. One respondent to my State of the Discipline survey indicated, "*Communicare* missed out on their mission to higher the standards of research output". Editing is a *leadership* and *developmental* responsibility, a means to shaping the direction of fields of study, paradigms, and theories.

b) SAPSE fails to recognise the value of non-academic and non-SAPSE accredited titles and forms of publication which are important in the distribution and popularisation of academic knowledge. The social sciences have become notorious for 'taking' information and knowledge from subject (especially poor) communities but failing to return to them the results and findings in forms and styles which are accessible and useful to the participating communities' own development strategies. Such work is vital for planning, development, and public debate, especially where the public sphere is concerned. Without this popular connection academic work in the human and social sciences, agriculture etc., remains latent and largely useless to the public at large. Occasional papers and monographs, and accessible writing in professional and development magazines and newsletters, radio, video and TV programmes, work books and pamphlets etc., are perhaps the most likely forms of publication in this regard, in both electronic and print formats. SACOMM and *Communicare* could be, indeed should be, at the forefront of these forms of popular dissemination.

c) The corporatisation of the academy, and its globalisation via the information economy, has resulted in academic knowledge being commodified, marketed, sold and bought. This process has dire consequences for the academy - and for the public sphere in general. While SAPSE did not intend to commodify knowledge, this has indeed been one of its consequences. And, related to this:

d) has been an ensuing practice amongst academics to regard publishing is a product rather than a process. As a product, publication is assumed to offer a final exhibit, a showcase, beyond and external to further debate. Publication is held up for celebration rather than also for critical scrutiny. Publication in this sense is not understood as a moment in ongoing debate, and an intervention from which to develop, critique, and modify on the one hand, and to falsify, discredit and negate, theories, findings and methods, on the other.

To return to my opening statements, what of South African communication studies in the new millennium? The above narrative hopes to identify what can be learned from the past, to rethink our respective strategies, and to suggest ways of reinventing both *Communicare* and SACOMM. Both are undergoing a process of restructuring. The 1999 SACOMM President, Andrea Crystal (1999:1), talks of "repositioning" the Association. She outlines six sound, solid and sensible ways of doing this - but all within the existing SACOMM structure and its prevailing institutional assumptions.

The real task, however, *is how to persuade South African communication academics to reposition themselves vis-a-vis the discipline*. As Les Switzer, previously Professor at Rhodes University, pointed out in response to my State of the Discipline questionnaire,

> It seems to me, as an outsider - albeit one who has had some experience in teaching journalism and media studies in South Africa - that South African academics have a golden opportunity to break out of the compartmentalized straitjacket that was imposed on Communication as a "discipline" when individual departments were first launched in the U.S. around the beginning of this century and exported to the rest of the world after World War II. I'm talking about the traditional divisions of most departments of communication along professional lines - such as Journalism (print), Radio-Television (sometimes coupled with Film), Public Relations, Advertising, Speech Communication (which is still in the midst of a long conversation with itself - from the conventional emphasis on rhetoric and public speaking to interpersonal communication, corporate communication and any number of other types of communication), and now Telecommunication or Computer-assisted Communication.

Specifically, Switzer suggests that:

> Departments of Communication - or whatever else they're called - in post-apartheid South Africa should:
> (a) relocate the discipline within South Africa's cultural traditions (demographic, historical, religious, political, social, economic, etc.); and

(b) reposition the discipline in a global communication market in which power (in terms of technology, programming, etc.) is held by a relatively few transnational corporations.

The overseas respondents to the De Beer and Tomaselli (1999) survey offered similar comments - the need to examine the local in relation to the global. In responding to our article, Frank Morgan, chair of the Professional Education Section of the International Assocation of Media and Communication Research, perhaps sums up most cogently the tasks ahead:

> As South Africa enters a new phase of its social and cultural life, questions arise for its media and communication "industries" and for its media and communication scholars. These include what questions to ask and how to pursue them. Also, whether the expected answers are singular or plural and whether the questions and methodologies must be indigenous or could be imported.

Morgan concludes that our article explains how we arrived at the present conjuncture, and how to proceed from here. Outsiders can find some routes through the South African debates (as Morgan has done here). Why can't we? If nothing else, this is the challenge that awaits us.

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