

## Vrye Weekblad and Post-Apartheid Mania: What to do with the Press?

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In this commentary the authors express their opinion on the role that the *Vrye Weekblad* in particular and the Press in general, can play in a post-apartheid South Africa. The article is not based on any empirical quantitative research. Rather, it should be seen as a critical analysis of contemporary conjecture surrounding literature pertaining to this specific topic. The authors postulate that the *Vrye Weekblad* is often mistakenly portrayed as a radical newspaper by those who feel the most threatened by the possible consequences that its messages can produce. The value of this particular medium lies in the fact that it will help ensure that Afrikaans, as a language, will survive. It is able to fulfill this function by showing that Afrikaans need not always be immediately equated with racism or suppression, but in sharp contrast, that Afrikaans can be synonymous with democracy. The difficulties and challenges facing the *Vrye Weekblad* (and other media) as a variable that will play a vital role in not only moulding, but also influencing a post-apartheid South Africa, are highlighted.

It has become fashionable amongst both the ruling and oppositional discourses within South Africa to offer scenarios for our 'post-apartheid' future(s). These discussions, however, are themselves often a derivative of apartheid, be they socialist or Afrikaner Nationalist. With regard to the former, alliance politics of the past few years has resulted in sometimes highly nuanced



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debates about the nature of a South Africa free of apartheid and how to get there.

Unfortunately, many comprising the existing hegemony lack a sense of subtlety, tending to write about the future as if mass political movements do not exist. Often, when they are acknowledged, they are completely misunderstood. These commentators have no understanding of even willingness to engage with the movements, out of which theories about post-apartheid structures are emerging, often at a bewilderingly rapid rate. The most glaring of these commentaries on 'information' and 'communication' have been those published by the Human Sciences Research Council in its 'Dialogue with the

Future' series. Another is Groenewald *et al* (1988) whose perspective on the future of "Communication in South Africa" is utterly naive, contradictory and just plain wrong in its (mis)-understanding of theories, practice and ignorance of relevant popular debates. The misconceptions of this chapter occur even though the HSRC has a basic study of the progressive press on file from its Inter Group Relations Project. In an earlier book, this same study misconstrued the 'progressive' press (Tomaselli, 1986) and repositioned it as the 'anti-establishment' press (Marais *et al*, 1985).

Our present argument is with Arnold de Beer in *Communicare* 8(1), 1989, entitled 'The Press in a Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Functional Analysis'. While his speculations are valid within the confines of the very dated, mechanistic and simplistic Siebert *et al* (1956) models, his predictions are at their most vulnerable when he deals with post-apartheid media. This vulnerability arises from the absence in his theoretical framework of the following factors:

1. Siebert *et al*'s theories entirely exclude the idea of an 'alternative' press. If the theory excludes concrete manifestations, then, according to this approach, they do not, indeed, cannot exist. Therefore, any work relating to press categories and practices outside the four models — authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet communist — is seen to be 'deviant', 'about deviancy' or just plain crazy. Siebert *et al*'s work was a product of the Cold War era — it is of questionable value within contemporary United States (post-Cold War) media studies, never mind in our South African context.
2. De Beer (and Groenewald and the HSRC 'Dialogue' series) entirely ignore the debates occurring within the Mass Democratic Movement (and the ANC, PAC, BC, etc.) with regard to a post-apartheid society (Louw, 1989) and media strictures in that society. These commentators also ignore the current media practices of the MDM (Louw, 1989a). The single limited reference by De Beer to an article by Tomaselli & Louw is lost in a

total misunderstanding of the democratic processes now at work within the MDM and the ANC, and debates about the alternative press, and the relationship of this press to the 'Movement' (i.e. UDF/COSATU/ANC). These authors are also silent on the debates within the MDM and between the MDM and English liberal press on their current and potential future relationships, and to the programme for building a post-apartheid society. This does not deny the fear that the English liberal press has of post-apartheid media policies, which certainly concur with De Beer's position.

3. De Beer relies on the Clem Sunter roadshow, Bobby Godsell, the great labour relations guru of big English-dominated capital, and Simon Barber's profile of somebody else (published in AngloAmerican's in-house journal) for his very untheoretical understanding of political economy, politics and social process. Now that 'free enterprise' has become the way to protect and conserve those Afrikaner economic gains, facilitated by 40 years of National Party rule, the 1950s and 1960s "Hoggenheimer" image of English capital has been seemingly forgotten.

However, we don't want to belabour the point. Rather, in a spirit of constructive debate, and acknowledging De Beer's very real contribution in using the term 'post-apartheid' for the first time in this journal, we wish to discuss some of the issues raised at the Taal en Stryd Conference in April 1989. This Conference was organised by the Departments of Afrikaans of the Universities of Natal (Durban) and Western Cape and *Die Suid-Afrikaan*. The session to which we will refer to was a discussion around a presentation by Max du Preez, editor of *Vrye Weekblad*. By discussing some of the issues raised, we hope to broaden the terrain opened up by De Beer and to inject ideas into what we hope will become a debate in future issues of *Communicare*. (To De Beer's credit, he has already created such a space in the journal he edits, *Ecquid Novum*).

Though colloquial and anecdotal, Max du

Preez's paper on *Vrye Weekblad* was indicative of a number of crucial processes currently unfolding in South Africa. On the one hand, he told us what we always knew about the Afrikaans press in terms of its close relationship to the State, but this could not always be verified. On the other hand, he told the Conference about Afrikaans speakers who have moved beyond being Afrikaners in the narrow nationalistic sense — i.e. they have shifted from being what he termed "professional Afrikaners". Du Preez's paper was not particularly analytical, but the break with two mismatched and antagonistic Press cultures (the English and Afrikaans Press) is what is important here. Rare in discussion by conventional writers of the South African Press are references to the long tradition of black published newspapers with its lineage of politically conscious editors who resisted, first colonialism, then neo-colonialism, and now, apartheid. This is the press of the future and it is allied to the practices and objectives of this tradition that Du Preez has allocated to the *Vrye Weekblad*.

Du Preez rejected the sycophantic grovelling that an editor like Piet Cilli engenders in his coterie of journalists, politicians, students and professors. For the first time an Afrikaans-speaking journalist fundamentally challenged the gurus of Afrikaner journalism, and therefore of Afrikaner political thought. The direct historical relationship between the Afrikaans Press (especially its editors) and prime ministers (many of them former editors) makes *Vrye Weekblad's* existence close to an act of treason. It is well known that editors like D F Malan made little distinction between his role as an editor and his role as National Party activist. Perhaps this is a reason why the government sees no difference between the broader anti-apartheid press and the supposed English Press/UDF-ANC/SACPMoscow-Devil fellow travellers, when in fact, major policy, political and ideological differences separate the various newspaper groups that report on selected activities of this unlikely alliance.

The fact that the Afrikaans language is inextricably intertwined with politics, and

perhaps racist politics, currently makes it an outcast among African languages. But, as Du Preez argued, this didn't have to be so. (This point was also made by Hein Willemsse, Theo du Plessis and Randall van den Heever.) If Afrikaans is to survive as a language in South Africa the theories and practices of scholars at this Conference and publications like *Vrye Weekblad* and *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (not to mention *Saamstaan*), are beacons of the future. If these initiatives are squashed, Afrikaans may well be the newest Germanic language to develop and the first to die, having been responsible for its own extinction.

Reactions to *Vrye Weekblad's* first issue were disbelief and anger. Why the consternation over pictures of Joe Slovo and Nelson Mandela, and reader embarrassment that titles of cabinet ministers were not accompanied by their names and pictures? There is a certain reader naivete here. This naivete is distressingly present in the television series, *Apartheid*, where a cinema verité camera at the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa's (IDASA) Dakar talks exposes collective Afrikaner anxiety about a future South Africa. What about group rights? What about Afrikaans? What about an 'own affairs' Afrikaner culture? Haven't these travellers read the Freedom Charter? This desperate need for reassurance by people in exile, who have suffered under this group is an issue *Vrye Weekblad* is addressing. It seems that this newspaper, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and other institutions like IDASA have a long, hard task in front of them.

*Vrye Weekblad* is not really that radical a newspaper. Neither is *The Sunday Tribune* a radical paper, nor even the *Weekly Mail*. But they are seen to be so by those in power who feel threatened. However, the State does seem to reserve a special degree of punishment for Afrikaners who have strayed from the fold. The financial and legal harassment of *Vrye Weekblad* is an indication of this.

Do Afrikaner Nationalists really believe that they don't have the right to know, was a question posed by Du Preez. The problem is that for so long now, the Afrikaans press

and SABC have shielded Afrikaners from the realities of South Africa. The result is that they no longer have a semantic grid within which to make sense of what appears to be oppositional or dissident information which scratches away at their extremely narrow media constructed world view. Such information is not, in fact, dissident. It only appears to be dissident because of the essentially authoritarian culture that developed through violence to protect an earlier one. While the initial violence was unleashed by the British, this was followed by Afrikaner Nationalist violence against their fellow South Africans. There is a lesson here for all of us, and especially for post-apartheid governments.

The popular non-racial grassroots democracy that has been developing since 1980 was not absent in early Afrikaner nationalist struggles against British imperialism. Early Afrikaner aims might have been selfishly sectarian, but their initial democratic practices were to be subsequently subverted by totalitarian tendencies as white survival became all and everything. Such chauvinistic tendencies, whether cultural, political or economic, should be guarded against in a post-apartheid South Africa. Debates about these tendencies already evident within the MDM do not mean, however, that questions on how to deal with these issues have been resolved. Very often democratic impulses are hijacked by international processes, transnational capital and diplomacy over which internal movements may have little control or understanding.

Yet for all his criticism of Afrikaner Nationalism and the Afrikaans Press, Du Preez offered constructive insights not only into what could have been, but what still could be. He spoke of Afrikaans as 'Africa's newest language', not as the last modern language to develop. He wanted to reserve a niche for Afrikaans-speaking people, not see the demise of the language. Through *Vrye Weekblad* he intends to steal Afrikaans back from its false consciousness and its opportunistic appropriation by white Nationalists. His project is to facilitate the retrieval of Afrikaner self-respect and to

recognise the supreme irony (and violence) that the bulk of the Afrikaans-speaking population were internally exiled as 'non-whites' by their white countrymen. *Vrye Weekblad* has identified this contradiction, one which is growing and which is probably the ultimate threat to the state in its guise as 'alternative Afrikaans' (see, e.g., Willemse, 1987; Davids, 1987).

Ultimately, Du Preez's paper fell between a number of positions. Progressive press workers cannot escape them easily, but they can mobilise the resulting dialectic to begin planning for media structures and practices in a South Africa free of apartheid. The categories of Press that have arisen under current conditions, with the exception of the English liberal press, have all arisen out of conditions of various kinds of politico-economic struggle. The independent social-democratic press represented by *Vrye Weekblad* and *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, along with the *Weekly Mail*, is a recent category to have emerged. As important as the *Mail's* intervention has been, *Vrye Weekblad's* additional significance is that it is an Afrikaans-language newspaper, appealing to disaffected Afrikaners to rethink traditional Afrikaner political allegiances and Afrikaner originated political policies.

The Afrikaans press started as a propagandistic machine for Afrikaner Nationalist power. It was directly accountable to the National Party, Du Preez argued. Until the 1950s, the Afrikaans Press never questioned the National Party though in the '60s it did criticise the implementation of aspects of apartheid. But it never criticised apartheid itself. Even *Beeld's* appeal for the release of Mandela was argued by Du Preez to be merely a mild jousting at authority.

The English liberal press, said to be accountable to English-monopoly capital, views the community (left-alternative) press as a 'Party' press. It argues that this press, like the early Afrikaans Press, may also end up in a similarly uncritical relation to the new government (as does De Beer). It may become equally sychophantic and centrally controlled. We doubt that this will happen because the community it serves is a popular

alliance (i.e. the MDM) of many sectors. So unlike the Afrikaans Press, the left-alternative press cannot adopt so uniform and narrow a line. Already alternative media workers are engaged in critical debates about their relationship as journalists to a post-apartheid government, and even to the present MDM. This aside, perhaps we can learn from the experience of the Afrikaans press that once power is attained, newspapers will find themselves in radically altered relationships with the State. This new relationship needs to be problematised on an ongoing basis.

*Vrye Weekblad*, like other independent social-democrat papers, will also face pressures from certain sectors of the South African Left which will demand "accountability" to the 'Movement'. Certainly, we are aware of some criticism of the *Weekly Mail* by certain critics, that its editors should be 'disciplined' because they have not made themselves clearly accountable to 'democratic structures'. But certain questions need to be asked and specific party/press histories investigated before we make demands for which we on the Left may find ourselves accountable for, and disciplined for, sometime in the future.

How to resolve the problems of 'accountability', democracy and criticism is currently under debate within progressive media ventures. In this regard, the stimulation of a social dialogue or, in Habermas' (1976) term, the "public sphere" as the basis for a new media pattern would:

1. open up debate, and information flow as important elements in the debunking of apartheid practices;
2. mobilize democratic opposition to apartheid; and
3. create a democratic national culture able to sustain itself in the future post-apartheid context.

A democratic press system requires a plurality of press genres and practices. This should serve to speed up the process of peaceful struggle and change in South Africa. Within the context of the contemporary resistance the progressive press serves a valuable 'conscientizing' and 'mobilizing' role for the generation of a non-violent democratic resistance.

Room for the independent social-democrat press which is serving a different sector of society by providing alternative information (not found in the English liberal or the Afrikaans-Nationalist Press or SABC) has been opened up through the process of struggle, both within newsrooms and in the wider society. This Press also plays a role in 'conscientizing' the educated middle classes within an anti-apartheid discourse which is critical not only of irresponsible capitalism, as is the English Press, but of aspects of capitalism as well. It has opened up a sector which would not be successfully 'conscientized' by the more rhetorical Left-alternative press.

The English and Afrikaans Press and SABC provide access into the world views of significant constituencies. However, broadcasting in a post-apartheid society would require a complete restructuring: as a public service the SABC would have to grant access to all significant constituencies, facilitate local initiatives through decentralisation and local decision-making, and make itself accountable to structures representing the broader societal interest (see Tomaselli, 1990). Similarly, the Afrikaans-language press would need to rethink its ethnic assumptions, authoritarian practices and political objectives. While all constituencies should be represented through their media, the blind endorsement of violently enforced minority interests is unacceptable to the MDM.

No single press genre can claim exclusive access to 'truth'. No one genre is in a position to represent all interests in society (as in the case with English-liberal claims). Rather, democracy and social dialogue can be better served by recognizing the need for a plurality of press genres: each representing a specific sectional interest in society. This, of course, means that the authoritarian hammering of any one genre by the state is a violation of democracy. The South African government's handling of the non-Nationalist press is a case in point.

Further, the claim that the liberal commercial model is able to guarantee a democratic press must also be debunked. This model

has in the past eliminated or excluded the reporting of proletarian and black issues. The *Rand Daily Mail* and *Cape Herald* are two examples; the firing of Tony Heard from the *Cape Times* is another. Noncommercial media practices need to be developed for the operation of subaltern group journalism in both urban and rural areas. Failure to develop such media structures and outlets will exclude the most numerous and important constituencies in South Africa. A failure to facilitate a subsidised community press will be failure of democracy, a failure to use media tools for organisation, and possibly a failure of the struggle as a whole.

So, the demand that all newspapers, or even only all progressive newspapers, be accountable to the democratic movement may not be democratic at all. Rather, each press

and broadcasting genre should be accountable to their particular constituencies. This would ensure democratic practices within each constituency as well as a full social dialogue (i.e. democracy) in the move towards a democratic state where inequalities are minimised.

We must work towards a democratic media structure which protects rather than destroys information, voices, access, and constituencies. Such a structure will ultimately ensure the development of a national culture which facilitates the building of unity not by homogenizing, but by encouraging different perspectives and different ways of doing things within the context of national unity. *Vrye Weekblad* is one element on this road.

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