Information Trends in South Africa with Specific Reference to the Development of an Information Policy for the Electronic Media

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The information society in South Africa seems to be much more complex and much less predictable than those in most other countries. In many respects it is a First World country in terms of technology, sophisticated media and computerisation. From that viewpoint, it faces the same kind of complexities than any other technological society. On the other hand, it is also a Third World country and an integral part of Africa: from that viewpoint it also has to face a different kind of complexity, namely that of languages, cultures, life-styles etc. This makes it difficult to assess and anticipate the effects of global information trends such as information overload, alienation and resistance, the information paradox and the information elite. In planning an information strategy for the country, it seems that thorough analysis of the different audiences and their information needs, accompanied by a careful segmentation strategy, is a very high priority. Deregulation and privatisation of the electronic media are also advocated, despite financial difficulties and the risk of information overload. This will call for a greater responsibility and gatekeeping function on the part of communication practitioners in South Africa. Possible options regarding a deregulation policy for the electronic media in South Africa are also explored.

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Communication practitioners all over the world are aware of the incredible developments and rapid changes in the fields of information and the electronic media. The real problem lies not so much in detecting these changes, but in whether the individual practitioner can adapt to them in a way that is reconcilable with his own environment and unique circumstances. Trends in information development may differ from one country to another, and these differences are often most marked between the developed and the developing countries.

South Africa is often typified by outsiders as a Third World country. Although this is true in many respects, its First World components are often overlooked, which complicates matters. Communication practitioners in this country often have to deal with two or more completely different audiences; the one being urban, ultra-sophisticated and very

much in the grip of the technological era; the other being rural, geographically isolated and often lagging behind in literacy, education and general sophistication levels.

Furthermore, these practitioners have to face very paradoxical demands. On the one hand, they have to satisfy the information requirements of a very heterogeneous society, composed of many cultural, language and ethnic groups. On the other hand, information may also call for a national appeal in order to build a national unity, or national belongingness. This proves to be quite a daunting task where in South Africa alone there are 25 language groups (these can in turn be broken down into approximately 12 larger population groups). This does not imply that ethnicity is the only basis for group differences, but merely to illustrate one example of heterogeneity.

A third complicating factor in this country is the degree of control which the government has over the electronic media. Although the broadcasting system is not owned by government, it is controlled by a public corporation which was given a monopoly of broadcasting by the government to which it has to report annually. As far as the other major media are concerned, groups other than whites exert practically no control over the media inasmuch as they are not represented on the boards of control (Marais, 1985). Domination of one group in communication activities contributes to an asymmetry in media exposure and facilitates intergroup conflict (HSRC, 1985).

The Problem of Cultural Diversity

The problem of cultural or ethnic diversity is of course not new in the South African context. In its report on intergroup relations in South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council indicated very clearly the reality of groups and group differences in South Africa, and a relatively high level of tension and conflict between these groups (Marais, 1985).

According to the findings, one of the main contributing factors to intergroup conflict is the lack of communication on both interpersonal and mass communication levels. Mass communication patterns especially, are characterised by one group communicating about rather than with, the other (Marais, 1985). Clearly, this must establish a vicious circle through which existing stereotypes are reinforced.

The ideal is of course equal and open communication between all groups by which the human

dignity of all members of society is recognised, without denying the existence of group identities regardless of whether the latter is defined in terms of culture, interest or ethnicity. This is, of course, not that simple. Language differences, differences in educational levels and political and socioeconomical problems are all barriers standing in the way of open communication. And, of course power; i.e. the desire to maintain political and economic power of one group, often to the detriment of other groups which are regarded as ethnic "minorities" by those in power and are therefore likely to be seen in a negative light.

Whether the different ethnic groups in South Africa can technically be regarded as "minorities" , is of course a volatile question and a matter not devoid of political overtones. As Wyatt (1980) has pointed out however, it is not necessarily the ethnic characteristics but the cultural characteristics that cause the differences in formation needs. The real question which will arise later is whether these cultural groupings should be regarded as one integrated mass or masses by media owners, or whether their information needs are in fact different and should be studied and catered for in specific ways.

A historical perspective

In historical perspective it is very interesting to note that the reasons for negative attitudes towards other cultural or ethnic groups have not changed much since the days of the Greek and Roman civilisations. The Greeks and the Romans were exclusive about citizenship, and did not admit citizenship to three rather large groups: slaves, women, and resident aliens (Wyatt, 1980). Terms such as "prejudice" or "discrimination" were not relevant. To them, there was but one civilisation, and those who did not conform to their ways were summarily rejected as "barbarians" .

Problems arose when a people declined the advantage of a Graeco-Roman civilisation. Most Jews did not want to adopt all the trappings of ancient civilisation, preferring to remain with Mosaic Law, one God and strict observance of the Sabbath. This of course brought along great problems to the powers that were, and strong feelings arose against the Jews due to their unwillingness to adapt to the ways of Rome. The Greeks were a problem too because they took advantage of the native Roman by their cleverness and unscrupulousness and by doing so, often gained political or economical advantages (Wyatt, 1980).

Negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups

thus had two origins:
1. dislike of a people's otherness or exclusiveness
2. fear of economic or political competition.

These negative attitudes and prejudices have of course reappeared in the centuries that followed, albeit in different forms. The origins, however, have not changed. With the emergence of the news media during the past three centuries, it became clear that the views, values and needs of certain groups were ignored due to their cultural "otherness" . This otherness referred to ethnic, political or religious differences (Tichi, 1980).

In the late 19th and 20th centuries more and more minorities stood up for their rights. In the United States media owners and managers were blamed for vilifying or ignoring minorities and ethnics (such as Quakers, Catholics, Blacks and later on Hispanics and women). High-minded calls for change were heard.

On the level of international communication cries of indignation were also heard from developing or Third World nations. The southern flow of communication from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere, dominated by the developed countries, and intensified by technological advances in communication during the last two decades, have caused alarm. Developing countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America have accused the developed countries of "cultural imperialism" , "cultural domination" and "cultural invasion" (Hsia, 1985).

The imbalance in communication flow was denounced as the source of all evils, ranging from the erosion of political or economical policies and the erosion of social norms to street crimes and prostitution. The result was to introduce strict control over communication flow in several of these Third World countries.

Information Trends

An information strategy for Southern Africa with respect to its complex and culturally diverse society, can not be gauged without seeing it against the background of certain longterm worldwide trends in information. These trends have been identified by communication practitioners in the Western world and are currently enjoying a lot of attention in academical and philosophical circles, as well as in the industry (Shaw, 1977; Toffler, 1980; Van der Meiden & Fauconnier, 1982; IPRA, 1984; Overton, 1985; Kruger, 1985). They also formed the main theme of discussion during the World Congress of the International Public Relations Association in Amsterdam in 1985, which mainly focused on the relationship between media and society.

Some of these trends of course, are more visible in certain countries than in other, and what may apply in a super-industrial society may be less applicable in a less developed society. Even so, they may serve as early warning signals to the latter.

1. Information overload

The increasing number of media, their radius of action and their diversification of contents, are said to confront the public with an overload of information.

During recent decades a flood of new media inundated the society. Apart from the subdivision of newspapers in national, regional or local orientated contents, the almost unlimited growth of publications (ranging from light reading to scientific literature), and the now almost "old fashioned" radio and television it was the electronic media which offered almost unrestricted information possibilities. Here there can be referred to cable television, computer programs, video discs and database systems. In South Africa there already exists a teletext system namely BELTEL and a videotext system called TELEDATA.

In the meanwhile distances were narrowed down to small gaps of hours or seconds by the increasing speed of transport and by satellite communication developments. All this made information available and at a faster rate.

Normally information is regarded as a democratising vehicle and hence as good for mankind. An overload of information can have its own detrimental effects however, just as too much light can blind a man. IPRA (1984:12) lists these effects as quantitative or qualitative:

1. **Quantitative** in respect to the individual's capacity to assimilitate all these data. The question is whether he will be able to make an effective and rational choice and what his criteria will be. Or will he develop a natural defense mechanism? (This can be a particular problem in South Africa where the rural, less sophisticated receivers are exposed to the same message than the high-tech city dweller.)

2. **Qualitative** in the sense that the question arises whether all this information will really increase the individual's knowledge and understanding, or whether it will fail to give answers to his individual demands for communication. If the latter occurs, the credibility of the media may suffer.

It follows that the communication practitioner (e.g. the journalist, public relations practitioner, advertiser, marketer, corporate communicator etc.) has to face important decisions. Must he limit his efforts to reach the public to the best of his ability with the information his superiors want him to make public? Or must he choose to be a guide to his public being a translator and selector of information at the same time? While the first may be a rather technical task without too many ethical implications, the latter requires a far more ethical approach.

It must be kept in mind however, that a possible situation of overload is still limited to certain parts of the world. In many countries the administration, as well as local organisations and the business world are struggling with a lack of infrastructure as far as communications are concerned. This is caused by problems such as the existence of illiteracy, cultural and lingual differences, hostile geographical circumstances and a shortage of financial means.

South Africa possesses of strong First World components in terms of industry, technology, sophisticated media and computerisation, especially in its major metropolitan areas. It cannot boast of a high population density figure however, with its population of 28 million spread over an area of 5 times that of the United Kingdom, or more than that of Western Germany, France, Italy, the Netherland and Belgium put together.[1]

Marked differences in culture, lifestyle, languages and educational and literacy levels between metropolitan and rural areas, still prevail. With its First and Third World components, there are obviously information-rich and information-poor areas. This demands unique solutions from the communication practitioner in devising a communication strategy containing a delicate mix of international, national and regional interests. Big daily newspapers in South Africa are moving in this direction, by "zoning" their areas and running special regional editions. The problem remains whether a big daily paper can really meet the needs of the community paper, and vice versa, also taking into account the financial costs involved (Kruger, 1985).

Communication practitioners in Southern Africa thus have to deal with somewhat different problems than their collegues in other parts of the world, such as Western Europe and the United States, who have a wealth of means at their disposal. It can well be suggested that Southern African prac-

titioners should act anticipatory and find new ways of coping with similar situations of overload. It is not that simple, however, to develop such an information strategy. Toffler (1980) as well as IPRA (1984) predict that the effect of media developments on the public will be a strong segmentation. Whether and how Southern Africa should develop a segmentation strategy to cope with a threatening information avalanche, will be discussed in the next trend.

2. Alienation and resistance

A worldwide trend resulting amongst others from information overload, is alienation and resistance. It is interesting to observe that the increase in information also brings along a paradoxical "counter" trend, viz. a decrease in the individual's will or capacity to absorb all this information (Overton, 1985).

The development of the electronic media and satellite communication did indeed, in the words of Marshall McLuhan (1967) make a "global village" of the world. A world sharing the same problems and issues of its time. A resistance against this has developed; a gradual shift from a "we-thinking" to a "me-thinking" syndrome (Shaw, 1977; Van der Meiden & Fauconnier, 1982:134). No longer do people want to hear of a threatening nuclear war, conflict in the Middle-East, hijacking, terrorism, etc. They almost prefer knowing whether their local area will get streetlights, how to improve their gardens, etc. They experience an identity crisis, a greater need for individualisation. Reinhardt (1983) describes the American "self help" tendency as one result of the American community's resistance against massification, as well as their lack of confidence in great institutions (probably after the Second World War and Vietnam).

A sociological factor which is seen to contribute to alienation and resistance, is the breakdown of the individual's ties with his primary groups (IPRA, 1984). Technology, specialisation and the rapid growth or amalgamations in organisations, alienated the individual from his primary groups which are especially prevalent in traditional communities. Primary groups are characterised by interpersonal, intimate and long lasting ties with the family, the community and the church. These are now replaced by secondary groups in which formal and specialized relations are maintained, which alter the characteristics of the "face to face" contacts.

The detachment of the individual from his primary groups, is also attributed to the mass media, which according to McQuail (1969:29) focused

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his attention "on matters outside the normative control of the groups to which he belongs".

Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1982) suggest that it is the shift towards the "me-thinking" syndrome which explains the emergence of smaller-scale media to satisfy the more localised and interpersonal needs of the smaller community and subculture. Regional and suburban newspapers, as well as the so-called "knock & drops" are examples. In terms of the uses and gratifications theory, (a mass communications theory prevalent in the 70's), the emphasis is no longer on what the media do to the people, but what the people do with the media in terms of their own uses and needs for them (McQuail 1969; Fauconnier 1973).

It seems then that the process of demassification results in a worldwide trend towards stronger segmentation, in terms of demographic, geographic and psychographic similarities. A fairly recent study on media trends undertaken in South Africa describes greater market segmentation as one of the most fundamental tendencies (D'Arcy, MacManus, Masius, 1985). In the government-regulated television, this is evident in the greater number of services, a greater diversity and more video recorders. At the moment there are four different services broadcasting in 7 different languages (Afrikaans; English and 5 Black languages which are Zulu, Xhosa, North Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana). On October 1, 1986, a fifth two-hour television service covering the PWV-area, was introduced. This service is purely entertainment-oriented and forms part of the pay-TV system called M-Net (which will be discussed later in this section).

In radio (also government-regulated), there are 23 different services broadcasting in 11 different languages (Afrikaans, English and 9 Black languages). There is also a growth in the number of regional services serving specific communities.

In the private press there is a significant growth in the number of specialised publications and regional papers, which begin to affect the circulation and advertising income of the national daily newspapers (Kruger, 1985). The latter in return, try to ward off these effects by issuing regional editions, as already pointed out.

The emergence of the alternative media also bears witness to new political and cultural information needs of various communities and political subcultures in South Africa. Examples are Weekly Mail (aimed at the upper middleclass "cultural" English market in the Northern suburbs of Johannes-

burg); South (a weekly paper serving the Coloured market in the Cape); Grassroots (a periodical in the Cape flatlands); Saamstaan (serving Coloureds and Blacks in Oudtshoorn); Out of Step (an anti-conscription journal) and Work in Progress (an analytical journal).

The trend towards segmentation was also spelled out clearly by Toffler in "The Third Wave" (1980), in which he describes the succession of what he called the "paper blizzard" and the reign of the mass media, by the demassifying influences of the rising number of local papers, radio and television networks and personal computers.

The deregulation and privatisation of the media is therefore a worldwide trend. At the basis of this issue is nothing less than the very idea of a democratic society with a diversity of private media, in which at least the main social cultural and political groupings can express their views. It is also strongly related though, to the demassification and segmentation of the market, in which the greater diversity of networks and presentations are also there to satisfy the more specialised information needs of the local community.

In South Africa the first signs of deregulation can be seen in that the Government allowed the introduction of subscription television, called Electronic Media Network (M-Net) by a private newspaper consortium. (Currently, there is only one interior private radio-service Radio Pulpit whilst other radio-services such as 702 and Capitol Radio operate from Bophuthatswana and the Transkei respectively). Reasons which promoted the allowance of pay-television were that newspapers in South Africa were particularly hard hit by the recession and the large drop in their advertising revenue, which was "stolen" by government-regulated television. This was indeed not a desirable state of affairs, since it threatened the maintenance of basic democratic traditions by the private press.

Whether the programmes of this new television network will satisfy individual and group needs on the long run, remains to be seen. The service is mainly entertainment-oriented, and although it is growing, it still has to rely heavily on the variable cost structure of overseas programs — since these may initially cost between 10 and 50 times less than the flat fee charged for local content.

Trends 1 and 2: Implication and questions

*It seems that the cries to do away with cultural imperialism of the media and to recognise interests of minority groups are in keeping with the times.

In South Africa with its complex cultural and ethnic composition, it will become particularly important to satisfy in these groups different information needs, by adaptation of media contents, new mixes, more services and publications and ultimately by de-regulation and privatisation of the electronic media.

*These changes are complicated by Third World factors such as the political and economic climate, geographical distances, population density, lack of financial resources and entrepreneurship, local production costs, etc.

*There are definite indications that the print media in South Africa is moving towards segmentation. The South African Broadcasting Corporation boasts with more services, greater diversity in television and greater regionalisation in radio. But to what extent is adequate segmentation possible without privatisation? And is privatisation economically viable and advisable in the light of the limited financial resources, and economic recession and local production and programme costs?

*There are those who argue that privatisation is imperative (especially in countries like South Africa), to do away with cultural imperialism and brainwashing by those in power. A valid viewpoint, but to what extent can one ensure that one does not replace one culprit with another? Particularly, as was pointed out earlier, if South Africa has to rely so heavily on imported programs. On the other hand privatisation may also be just the stimulus needed for local industry and the private sector to supply in the increasing demand for localised programs. The latter becomes even more essential in the light of threatened withdrawals of the distribution of certain popular television series to South Africa, due to political pressures. The international outrage following the South African government's banning of the film "Cry Freedom" , in July 1988, is the most recent example.

*Privatisation cannot necessarily be equated with better segmentation, or a narrower focus on audience needs. Instead, it may precipitate an information overload by uncontrolled buying of overseas programs and an unrestricted flow of information. There are, of course, convincing arguments to the effect that developing countries should allow a free flow of information since no culture has ever been threatened by exposure to a multitude of foreign information, e.g. Japan. According to these arguments, each culture possesses of natural immunisation mechanisms; satiation for one, (selective perception for another) which naturally control the quantity and contents of information being absorbed (Hsia, 1985). This may all be perfectly true, but what about the simple pragmatic consideration of overload, and economic waste?

*Leaving privatisation aside, the question can also arise whether serious segmentation in Southern Africa may not be a little premature. It must be remembered that the media's often vilified "melting pot" function (lately referred to as the "tossed salad"-concept in the United States), is not necessarily negative. It may help to create a middle class (Tichi, 1980) which is not necessarily undesirable in South Africa. The question can rightly be asked whether we can differentiate before we are properly integrated. South Africa may (or should?) still predominantly be in the "we-thinking" phase. Marketing experience shows that the urban Blacks in South Africa do not want to be treated as a separate segment in advertising campaigns (De Kock, 1980), a phenomenon not entirely unrelated to the political system.[2] In the United States on the other hand, minority groups such as Blacks, Hispanics and women, may insist on being freed from the chains of the melting pot and being treated as separate entities.

*A certain imperative for the communication practitioner in South Africa — whichever way he chooses to anticipate information trends — is the need to know his audiences better. A market-orientation and proper market research is essential. Information will also have to be better selected and interpreted for his audiences. This will, of course, require a greater ethnical responsibility and his role as gatekeeper will become more important than ever before. This does not imply, however, that the communication practitioner may become a self-appointed moral adjudicator who voluntarily decides what his audiences can see and cannot see. His role as gatekeeper is required not because he has more power, but because the people — his audiences — have more power. For instance, the final warnings that have been issued by the Government to the alternative media during 1988 may well demonstrate the law of unintended effect. By denying these outlets the possibility exists that Government will — far from driving the "minorities" into conformity — only succeed in allowing them to consolidate themselves underground.

3. The information paradox

The development of information technology leads simultaneously and paradoxically to a greater need for communication on a human level. Ad-

vances in technological developments cannot be forced upon the individual. Technological developments will only be accepted by society if it leaves room for the human factor. Man wants to remain topdog; his need for security, to make his own choices, to control his own life, is inherent to human nature (IPRA, 1984).

This trend can become particularly acute in countries where there are vast differences or gaps in the population's development levels, e.g. in certain segments of the rural population and the underdeveloped, geographically isolated Black communities in Southern Africa. The rural Afrikaner, for instance, may be extremely reluctant to use banking services which are depicted as being foremost in technology, especially when these show how efficient their automatic services operate. The rural Black may not at all be interested in life insurance policies devised for their special needs, when they still believe in the extended family concept. Even in the United States, the so-called "Green Thumb" project whereby agricultural research was diffused to "old-fashioned" farmers by way of video-text, proved not to be successful. Many studies have also pointed to significant differences in the perception and interpretation of information by different cultural, religious or ethnic groups in South Africa (Van der Reis, 1969; Deppe, 1974; Munro, 1984).

In many of these instances the communicator may experience difficulties in getting his message accepted or even understood. Resistance against technological development will only be overcome if the communicator succeeds in creating a demand, and by persuading the individual that the innovation can improve his own life. To be able to do this, the Southern African practitioner will have to nurture a much clearer understanding of his audiences. He will have to act as a "translator" of information, for complexity demands clarification and explanation. Even if man turns away from information on an ever larger scale and retreats to a bastion of petty participation, this development in itself will create a new information market.

All this again points to the need for stronger, more directed segmentation in South Africa, based on market expertise. It also underlines the increasing gatekeeping responsibility of the communication practitioner in South Africa.

4. The information elite

The basic information required to make political and economical decisions, is becoming the mono-

poly of a decreasing number of highly specialised people — a kind of "illuminati" on a small scale. These people are known as the "information elite" (IPRA, 1984), who will themselves become less and less able to make the information intelligible to the man in the street.

Basic information which is of vital importance to society, is already so specialised that it can only be generated, used and communicated within the "information elite" . (This is perhaps the emerging class of "knowledge workers" that Daniel Bell referred to in his book The Coming of Post-Industrial Society, 1976.) The information, may for instance, take the form of mathematical models which can only be grasped and verified by the most intelligent of us. Indeed, only scientific, technical and organisational experts are still in a position to understand such information, since it originates with them and they produce the advisers to the governments and managers who make the crucial decisions.

But they too are shrinking in number, owing to the rapid growth of specialisation in their particular fields. Thus the number of specialists with the ability and the breadth of vision to make use of basic information is dwindling. At the same time the number of people who are unable to understand basic information is growing, and there is no longer any means to make it intelligible to them. This trend, incidentally, supports the "knowledge gap hypothesis" originally proposed by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970), which states that mass communication might actually increase the difference in knowledge between members of different social classes. One consequence of this is that ever fewer people are capable of checking the information on which government and administration are based.

Through this trend the communicator will eventually find himself in the impossible position of no longer being able to do his job as a purveyor of facts. We already have examples of how efforts to simplify and render intelligible information, end with over-simplified statements which depart so far from the original data that they misinform rather than inform in a responsible manner. In a final attempt to convey at least something to the public, certain elements are dropped and no more than results and conclusions are passed on.

There is also a second "elite" group. These are the people who have virtually exclusive access to the media, such as the journalists and the boards of directors who are known as the "media elite"

(IPRA, 1984). This group can complicate matters ever further by the control which they exercise over the flow of information. It can happen that the communicator now simply becomes "sandwiched" between the two elite-groups; on the one hand he does not gain sufficient access to the information he must make public, on the other hand he is not always allowed to make the information public.

This trend can seriously hamper the credibility of the electronic media in South Africa, as was indicated by the HSRC report (1985) discussed earlier. It is no secret that the South African Broadcasting Corporation is accused of not carrying the interest of groups other than the ruling powers at heart. (Fuel was added to the fire by the Eksteen-debacle of September 1987 and April 1988). The credibility of the print media is also at stake. During 1987, two editors and a director of a powerful Afrikaans press consortium resigned due to political pressure. In the same year the Directorate Media Relations was founded, the government's new watchdog over the media, consisting of members mostly unknown to the press. The Directorate's warnings to the alternative media in 1988 also seemed to have pressurised the other large press groups into more inhibited reporting. Forced registration of journalists is the latest possible measure in the pipeline. All these should be causes of concern for all scholars of information and communication. They are warning signals of complete monopolisation of information by elite groups, on which the welfare of an entire nation exists.

Conclusions

At this stage it is not possible to reach definite conclusions as to the development of an information strategy for South Africa. It must be recognised that factors and trends other than the four discussed, can be involved too. Information policies will also largely depend on political and socio-economical developments in South Africa.

Analysis of the four trends in the context of the here-and-now South African situation, points to the following:

1. Communication must become market-oriented. South Africa is a country where (not necessarily ethnic) group needs are perhaps more real than anywhere else in the word. Due to the complexity of its population, the large number of cultural, political and socio-economic groupings and the differences in development levels and information needs, stronger segmentation is certainly needed. Such a strategy will require greater market expertise, gatekeeping skills and ethical responsibilities of the communication practitioner in order to satisfy audience needs and maintain the credibility of the media.

2. Despite the financial difficulties involved, it seems that true segmentation is not possible without the deregulation of the electronic media, particularly where the credibility of the latter is so much at risk in South Africa. Although this may not erase the risk of information overload, it may well prove to be the necessary incentive for free enterprise to step into the market and supply in the increasing demand for local quality productions at competitive prices. Recommendations regarding how deregulation and privatisation can be achieved, will be given in the following section.

3. It is not clear whether too narrow a segmentation strategy may be at odds with the "melting pot" function of the media, which contributes to middle class values of aspiration, upward ambition etc., which may not be undesirable in Southern Africa at the moment. This question will have to be subjected to closer scrutiny.

A deregulation policy for the electronic media in South Africa

In 1986, the Bureau for Information through its Deputy Minister at the time, Mr. Louis Nel, voiced the firm argument that television news programmes cannot be privatised on the grounds that it will become less informative and more geared towards entertainment and sensation.

The question at stake however, is whether a new programme satisfies the information needs of its audiences, differing and varied as they may be, which is of course particularly relevant for the culturally complex and heterogeneous South African audiences. Depending on their demographic or psychographic profiles, these information needs may well vary from highly rational to, say, highly emotional. Diversifying news contents whether in press or on television, is as endemic to a democratic society and free enterprise as diversifying soap powders for different segments of the buying market. If the person buys a bad product, or similarly, a bad news story, the experience will teach him not to fall for it the next time, and to gather more information about the subject before he acts upon it. The only way in which he can do this is by exposing himself to other competing messages as well, and from all this form his own opinion or judgement.

The principle at stake is the choice of the individual to expose himself to as many sources of information as possible, and it is the premise on which the marketplace ideology of the Western World rests. Whether any specific one of these sources is more one-sided, subjective or "sensational" than the rest, is not the question. The fact is that the individual now has access to alternative sources, which may emphasise other sides of which he may not have been aware before, or even cancel previous impressions. All in all, it heightens the probability of his taking cognisance of all possible facets. Even if he refuses to expose himself to news sources clashing with his own views, the end result will be no different from the current situation where certain segments of the South African audience are already suspicious of SABC news because it is perceived as a government organ.

Free enterprise stimulates competition, and marketing experience has shown us that healthy competition more often that not results in a better "product" at the same price. In the long run, producers of products, or news programs, will not be able to get away with misinformation or misrepresentation (at least, with what is perceived as misrepresentation or misinformation by its audiences).

The important question to be asked is not whether news is informative or not, but who decides what is informative and which yardsticks are used. This is a question which can never be decided upon by only one source. The question should thus not be whether the news source is informative or not, but rather how many sources of information there are. All facets of human investigation, study or research are evaluated by the number of sources which have been consulted. If only one had been consulted, the validity, credibility and reliability of the conclusions are invariably at risk.

It should be remembered however, that it is not unnatural or even uncommon that television in South Africa is still regulated by government, since it is a relatively recent innovation and still a somewhat "controversial" phenonemon. The SABC therefore regards its mission, amongst others, as "educational" in nature. It must also be kept in mind that deregulation, should it come to pass, cannot follow a course blindly imitative of those in other Western countries which may be totally inapplicable or impractical for South Africa.

For instance, the natural temptation always exists to use the United States as the model system as far as the freedom of the media and the privatisation of the electronic media is concerned. Inspired by Lockean principles of Natural law, classic American ideology seeks individualism, fragmentation or private power, limitation of government, and protection of property rights and contracts. As applied to communications policy, this philosophy has justified a governmental role that is far narrower than in most other countries, and has based government's residual role largely on the grounds of national security and market failure.

Since the mid-1970's, however, many of the market-failure arguments have been discarded through technological change and entrepreneurial initiative. Furthermore, U.S. efforts to protect individual privacy have been applied vigorously against the state, but not as vigorously against private parties (Botein & Noam, 1986). Many other Western countries reverse these priorities; they are vigilant about private power, and often more tolerant of government authority.

The U.S. thus have diverged from European countries in its general outlook on basic telecommunications policy, as it has moved from a somewhat social democratic New Deal to a marketplace ideology. To equate the situation in Western countries, including South Africa, with the situation in the U.S. is therefore somewhat shortsighted since there exist certain market differences between these countries' basic ideological outlooks and communications policies.

South African situation is furthermore vastly different from the American one because of its Third World components, its heterogeneous society (where the American Society is relatively homogeneous) and its low population density.

It has been pointed out very clearly in this article, however, that deregulation, at least in South Africa, is necessary exactly because of such sociological realities as the heterogeneous and culturally and politically complex society; worldwide information trends such as demassification and segmentation; political pressures to serve the interests and information needs of all people in South Africa which if this comes to pass, may defuse increasing polarisation; and economical considerations such as free-enterprise stimulants and even the need for the local communication industry to become financially more self-sufficient in the light of possibly increasing international isolation.

Privatisation in the full sense of the word, implying equal access of all people to telecommunication channels, is not possible in a heterogeneous

society such as South Africa. Cable television is too expensive and can really be only effective in thickly populated areas from which an acceptable ` rate of subscription can be expected. At this stage it seems an unrealistic solution for South Africa with the possible exception of perhaps two or three cities.

A model which is often considered is the public broadcasting system used in the U.S. This is a system or systems sponsored by different private corporations, the Federal State, local governments or individuals, and ultimately organized by the Public Broadcasting Corporation. Whether this system meets South Africa's requirements can seriously be questioned since too much control can be exerted by a sponsor, while there are too few people in S.A. to make this system really viable.

A model used in Canada and also in the United Kingdom is one where commercial stations supported by advertising are located in thickly populated urban areas, while a non-profit broadcasting system supported in some way by government, covers thinly populated areas that cannot support a commercial system. It is often feared that this kind of system would mean that the private networks take all the profits while government takes the losses. On the other hand, the South Africans may be financially overburdened with the current status quo. It has firmly committed itself to deregulation

in a variety of its functions and its ultimate goals are not, or should not be, at odds with the free enterprise system.

A system which in conclusion, can strongly be recommended for South Africa, is based on a model known as the Independent Broadcasting Authority in Britain. Here government legitimises an independent sender or authority (similar to a Court of Law), and pluralistic supervisors are appointed by government, opposition parties, churches, etc. Geographical areas such as say Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban are given a license to serve certain population segments in certain areas, and the profits are proportionally divided. This system thus operates independently from the SABC which still covers all areas including poor or thinly populated areas.

The above recommendations should be seen as broad outlines which still require substantial research. They are all, of course, secondary to the initial acceptance and conviction of the necessity of the deregulation of the electronic media in South Africa.

1. Population and geography figures were obtained from various information booklets available on South Africa, as well as from the HSRC report. Information on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's broadcasting services was obtained from official representatives.
2. Informed Black opinion (Simamane, 1986), however concedes that Black marketing requires specialisation and should be Black-led.

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