

MEDIA IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 is very clear: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.

In fact, the preamble to the declaration puts freedom of speech on a particularly high note: "The advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people."

With this declaration in mind, everyone remembers how the world marvelled at an achievement of epic proportions by my country which had been almost written off as a nation of failures. Our society as a whole managed the elections last April and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President in a manner that confounded even the worst sceptics. The media played an important role from the conception of apartheid to its death. It is still playing a major role even now on the long journey to social equity. Success in the implementation of reconstruction and development is the sure guarantee for lasting peace and stability.

The press's responsibility would be to accurately reflect the hopes, aspirations and apprehensions, optimism and pessimism as they exist within our society. This is the greatest challenge facing the South Africa's media today.

In the abnormality of the apartheid era, it was much easier to strive simply to be normal and defend the right to inform, educate and titillate South Africans and the whole world about the injustices of apartheid. In the new situation of relative normality, the challenge is to undergo what some would characterise as a transition from cessation of conflict to that of reconstruction and development.

Whenever the role of the media in conflict resolution is discussed, we should always bear in mind that the media can arouse strong positive or negative emotions in times of crisis. That is why demagogues and dictators had on many occasions silenced it. That is why also it is the hallmark of a democratic society that it cherishes a free press, even it is most offended by it.

This is because the truth is often the first casualty of any conflict situation, and journalists are often in the first line of fire by those who seek to hold society in perpetual darkness about what the major issues of the day are.

The role the media plays in conflict resolution depends largely on many things such as the structure of the society, ownership, control and structure of editorial staff, tolerance of freedom of speech, the type of government in power versus the conflicting forces versus the media.

Structure of Society

There were clear lines of division within the South African society; pro-apartheid versus anti-apartheid. Some called it a black-versus white conflict. Fortunately the world had declared apartheid a crime against humanity, thus boosting anti-apartheid forces' fight and marking South Africa one of the biggest stories of the century.

Ownership and Control of the Media and Structure of Editorial Staff

The press in South Africa can be divided into two main groups—the community press, often called "alternative press" and mainstream commercial newspapers. The latter is composed of four major newspaper groups, Times Media Limited, Argus, Perskor and Nationale Pers, all owned by white big business—two English language groups and two Afrikaans groups. Their papers control just about the entire newspaper industry in South Africa. Within the establishment press, the English newspapers carry extra editions which go to the black townships. They claim that the papers are regional rather than race. The English language newspapers have traditionally been seen as in opposition to the then ruling National Party. The Afrikaans press has mostly been bound by political and language ties to the NP. What is known as black press has always been white-owned.

The alternative press are newspapers communities set up themselves for various reasons. In many cases they were started because of the propaganda onslaught that blacks got from the government and establishment press.

Television and radio were totally controlled by the government for many years until licenses had been issued to new operators. There are a couple of independent radio stations. And the radio and television stations are themselves subdivided into racial categories and language groupings, part of the apartheid system.

Some black newspapers are owned by white business groups. For example, the Sowetan was owned by Argus. It was designed for Africans, written and edited by blacks. But it was white-owned until recently. The Argus also runs other papers

across the country for different race groups, Post for Indians, The Star, formerly designed for whites, but within which one used to get township or African editions.

This has created problems wherein ownership, is not only concentrated in few hands, but reflects the patterns of racial exclusion characteristic of the old era, demographic composition of management, editorial executives and senior journalists mirrors the same pattern, broader socio-economic issues, such as illiteracy and language constraints which limit the ability of the majority to exercise their freedom of expression.

Just recently, Argus, South Africa's largest newspaper group changed hands. Independent Newspapers (INP), an Irish-based group with newspaper and related interests in several countries, paid in excess of Rs. 125-million for its 31 per-cent stake in Argus newspapers. Effective control of Argus passed from mining house Anglo American to INP headed by Tony O'Reilley and Argus Holdings, Anglo's stated commitment to deconcentrate ownership of the South African press was realised. INP owns 65 per cent of the newspapers in Ireland and is the fourth largest newspaper group in Australia. There has been protests that South African media interests were now concentrated outside South Africa.

The top echelons of our media are dominated by middle-class white males. Sadly, the few changes in the past three years reflect a tendency to get black men into hot seats that are without authority. There is a call for the mainstream press to reflect the change of government. They say it is only when its token black editors uses its influence to serve the interest of the majority that it shall be pardoned. At present it is largely perceived to be utilised for the benefit of big business and political regimes.

It is a pity because a culturally diverse staff would help ensure a diversified news agenda, which would be used to educate as well as inform and entertain, learning how events could be viewed from multi-cultural perspectives.

Tolerance of Free Speech

If there is a commitment to free speech, it cannot be easily qualified. It is a freedom that only has meaning if it includes the freedom to say rough, unpopular and even irresponsible things. It certainly must include the right to criticise anyone even mock a popular leader.

Journalists should always be in the front line in upholding the right to free speech and defending the rights of others including their political opponents to speak freely. Freedom of the press also depends on whether journalists have the support of the public. Freedom of expression, of which freedom of the press and other media is a crucial aspect, is one of the core values of democracy. A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. It must be free from state interference, it must have the economic strength to stand up to bullying by government officials. It must be protected so that it can protect our rights as citizens.

The South African press, despite its lip service to media freedom, has never been free. It has been restricted by its publishers or the state. Censorship was a noose that was tightened as the apartheid state became less secure. South African whites who often reacted with fury to media criticism of their apartheid lifestyle had the media they deserved: an emasculated compilation of trivia that paid little attention to the tragedy that their country had become.

There had been a number of limitations placed on press freedom in most of the rest of Africa. These limitations have sometimes been imposed by dictatorial governments simply because they have the power to do so. It is quite probable that almost any government anywhere in the world would try to control the press if it had the power to do so and had held it fundamentally inimical to the vested interests of any entrenched political party or dictator. Africa has more of such parties and dictators than most other regions of the world and therefore has had less press freedom.

Sometimes the strictures had been imposed in African countries in the name of ideology or in the name of patriotism. This is the same where journalists who were in the forefront of the struggles which overthrow Eastern Europe's socialist bureaucracies, now feel cheated and accuse new governments of turning a blind eye on media freedom.

Some journalists were guilty. They glossed over abuses and shortcomings by certain leaders. It seemed to be unwritten law that some leaders, particularly those considered relevant could never be wrong. If there is occasion to criticise them, that is done very softly and frequently in private.

Our silence as journalists and also our habit of ignoring excesses on the spurious grounds that they are committed by our leaders and can never be excused, makes us as guilty as perpetrators.

Government Versus Conflicting Forces

All governments everywhere, whatever their make-up, share a certain antagonism towards the press. Even though they openly say they are committed to openness and honesty, party and government officials and politicians will usually seek to prevent thorough airing and debate of issues that are uncomfortable or embarrassing or which are critical of their actions.

There is always temptation to muzzle the press, obscure the truth or suppress unpleasant details, all in the name of national good. This is what the apartheid government did and failed.

In South Africa it was tough. We had to contend with a vicious police state that was intent on ensuring that the social realities were not disseminated to the public and on the other hand a hostile public that did not trust the press, including anti-apartheid groups who depended on the press to help them in their cause. The apartheid government suggested that the spread of anti-apartheid dissent and the violence was

because of the wide coverage that the violence was receiving. If such coverage was stopped, the rationale was the anti-apartheid dissent and political violence associated with it would not be so widespread.

There came a time when the apartheid government declared a state of emergency and issued a comprehensive list of definitions of what it called "subversive statements" and the press was forbidden to disseminate them. Hundreds of restrictions and orders were issued and enforced. A blanket ban on reporters entering townships was issued and all live radio and television transmissions from South Africa to abroad were silenced. Some foreign journalists were expelled. A government organisation called the Bureau for information became the sole spokesman on the state of emergency and its ramifications.

A number of newspapers, including the Sowetan, Weekly Mail and New Nation were raided. There was a time when the New Nation and Weekly Mail were banned for a month. Newspapers made use of blank spaces in the place of photographs or reports to indicate censorship. This was also later outlawed. The courts threw out a few of the regulations for being too vague.

As months went by the governments imposed its harshest yet restrictions on all sections of the media, blacking out all non-official news and comment on unrest, illegal strikes, unlawful gatherings, consumer boycotts and rent and service boycotts and any other alternative structures.

The clampdown was backed by the authority to seize without notice or hearing any publication film or sound recording. Fines of up to Rs. 20,000 rand or ten years jail applied for contravention. Publications were no longer allowed to give any indication that they were being censored either by way or blank spaces or symbols. The term "subversive statement" was broadened to include almost any anti-government action.

few newspapermen risked the penalty of 10 years imprisonment and a heavy fine for reporting "subversive" statements. The definition of subversive was so broad and covered virtually anything the government wanted to cover. For an example, no police action of any kind affecting "public order" may be described in the press without official sanction-meaning that reporters who have witnessed brutal, provocative, sometimes fatal attacks by the police on black demonstrators are stifled into silence. The names of arbitrarily detained people may not be revealed except when authorities say so.

Many journalists and editors were detained without trial. There were unofficial laws also. Newsrooms of opposition newspapers were targeted and some times set on fire. Journalists were targeted with threatening obscene calls. Staff reporters were shackled with restriction orders, meaning among other things they could not leave their homes.

Pretoria's repressive laws succeeded in putting the lid on the dissent that brought the country to the verge of revolution. The banning and deportations of journalists moved South

Africa off many of the world's front pages and television screens. The government's measures forced much of the nation's mainstream press to opt for self-censorship rather than risk government censure.

Africa

While this was happening in South Africa, our African brothers who boasted that they were living under democratic government were not better off than us. We all know that the departure of Idi Amin never made Uganda a markedly better country. Kenya is even worse after Kenyatta and the two dozen or so military dictatorships all over the continent continue to rape and ruin Africa at a rate not even reached by maligned capitalists.

Nepotism, corruption, civil wars, the murders of political opponents, social decline, economic mismanagement and many other ills, continue to afflict nations on the continent. In many cases the rot was allowed to set in because the media were not vigilant enough. Media organisations which operated independently allowed themselves willingly or not, to be manipulated by the ruling parties. Ingratiation with the ruling cliques saw many media in Africa merely echoing their master's voices.

For an example, the Mass Media Trust was formed in Zimbabwe soon after independence and the government gained control of the media. Fellow journalists there said they thought the Trust would defend their right to work independently, but soon realised that the politically appointed heads of divisions within the Trust only safeguarded interests of their political masters.

As South Africans fought to end apartheid, the media in Africa was seen as compliant and merely spewing government propaganda. Local upheavals and human rights abuses go unreported even now with front page prominence given to ministerial speeches. The credibility of the media in many African states is so low that inhabitants rely on European media organisations such as the BBC American radio stations such as voice of America to know what is really happening in their own countries.

While many journalists in some African countries have been diligent in their duties and have landed in jails and some exiled, some journalists have been ready to turn a blind eye and spike stories that would otherwise anger or displease the authorities.

The Role the Media Played Under there Circumstances

One of the functions of the media is to check the government and its behaviour. Where there is excess or wrongdoing, incompetence or failure on promises, it has the duty to report.

South Africans, like their counterparts in the world's dictatorships and one party states, were for years cynically deprived of information taken for granted in democratic societies. Secrecy, censorship and disinformation emanated from government. And its behaviour was regularly mimicked by people outside state organisations. The press did its utmost to provide as broad a spectrum of information and views as possible and yet readers were still deprived of choice by censorship and legal restrictions of what can be reported.

Apartheid fell in no small measure because of sustained media exposure. However, at a high cost. Reporters had the guts to pursue their course, and in the interest of real democracy and the liberty of our peoples, they found the courage to do so.

We as journalists, particularly black ones, were faced with serious dangers and conflicts, not only at the war-front where bloody confrontations sometimes took place between anti-apartheid activists and government-led police, but also in our own personal capacities as members of their own communities. That was the reason why at the beginning of 1980s, a commission probing the role of the media described black journalists as the "shock troops of liberation".

The ultimate test that faced black journalists was that of credibility, a problem exacerbated by the maze of laws restricting publication. It did not matter one bit that a journalist witnessed an excess by police. In terms of the Police Act, the onus was the journalist to show that he took reasonable steps to prove that whatever he wrote about the police was true. Invariably, this meant asking for police comment, which often stated the opposite of what happened.

Yet one has to write their side of story, untrue though you know it to be. Because of that, the black community saw black journalists as having danced to the police music as an arm of the repressive government machinery.

A reporter has to live with his people, and if they suspected he was fabricating events, they held new ideas about him. His life may be in danger. He may be classified as a police informer, in which case nobody was prepared to talk to him and his livelihood would be ruined. So in their attempt to report the crisis, black journalists had face the growing risks of being rejected by members of their own communities.

Then there were black journalists who were in the middle, working for an anti-apartheid press and feeling like they were being forced to look at each story through a white prism. At the same time they were under pressure from their political organisations who wanted them to expose more of apartheid injustices. There was advocacy journalism from all sides with confrontationist attitude.

What the South African Media Did

The South African press has always had to circumnavigate a minefield of laws enacted by the apartheid

system-laws such as the Internal Security Act, the Defence Act, and the Prisons Act which were designed to stifle fair reportage and voices of dissent. These voices were in many cases thrown into jail or banned, and journalists had to cooperate by not giving these voices a platform.

The South African press accepted the principle of the indivisibility of freedom and resisted blandishments to engage in self-emasculation. Brave and innovative journalists showed that the press, even if no longer free, was certainly still alive. And the courts too showed their proud independence with rulings which significantly curbed government excesses.

The government knew that its gagging measures inflamed overseas opinion. It knew that anti-apartheid sanctions and disinvestment were already a problem. Why was it willing to risk yet more trouble by muzzling the press? Its purpose was clear. It believed that when news about boycotts, passive resistance and overt violence was published, that news simply encouraged and incited the people to indulge in those activities. As a result the only way in which the news could be kept from them was to keep the news away from all the people, including those who were not revolutionary.

In many people's view, the government's approach was illogical and fallacious. There was no certainty that a press gag clamped down the resistance. It exacerbated matters. The greater danger lay in the absence of news, openly discussed by people.

Newspapers appeared with blank spaces, a silent protest against censorship, until the government warned them that the blanks might themselves be subversive. South African editors, in defending the weakness of their coverage, often pointed to the hundreds of laws restricting the media. Journalists countered, that when the government threatened the media, owners and editors-in terror that their publications would be shut down-emasculated their papers and obstructed reporters more than necessary.

On the other hand with violent conditions that prevailed in many black areas and resultant crime, journalists were being caught in the crossfire. They were attacked because their attackers wanted their cars or cameras and other expensive equipment. Fortunately education and protests by journalist unions reduced the deliberate attacks to some extent, but the criminal attacks would stay with journalists until the social problems that gave rise to crime have been eradicated.

On the other hand despite the dangers, both from the government and criminals, townships had to be covered. Journalists had a duty to report the horror in the country's ghettos, to observe first-hand a climate where atrocities were common place and life was cheap.

There were also certain values most journalists prized dearly, chief of which was their independence. Journalists were also taught to be sceptical, for as often said, news is not something people willing to offer; journalists had to dig for it as most people particularly politicians, believed in withholding news. What they generally offer was almost always propaganda.

A free press existed in South Africa because of the steadfast resistance to censorship by the media over many years. Yet there were newspapers which were apologists for the government. There were also newspapers which were apologists of anti-apartheid groupings. As indeed there will be in the future South Africa. That would be their democratic right. But the role of the newspaper as a critical observer of the process of government and the way public functionaries carry out their mandates, will continue beyond our time.

Conclusion

In South Africa the difference between the 1970s, 80s and now is that our commitment to a cause has changed from liberation to commitment to democracy. We dare not surrender commitment to journalism. Any party that is in power or seeks election must be judged according to its principles, policies and actions.

If South African journalists were once shocktroops of the battle against apartheid, we must become the shock troops of democracy in a truly democratic post-apartheid South Africa. Even Mandela agrees. He has openly stated that a critical, independent and investigative press is the livelihood of any democracy and had to be free from state interference. He believes the press needs constitutional protection so it could protect the right of citizens. "It is only such a free press that can

temper the appetite of any government to amass power at the expense of the citizens".

However there are flashing lights which the media must guard. Journalists fear in South Africa that freedom of the press could suffer as much under a democratically elected government as it did apartheid. At the dawn of the new South Africa, press freedom is still a site of struggle. In spite of some important gains during the process of political transformation, there are battles that must still be won to ensure that the wider freedoms which underpin press freedom are upheld by the government of national unity and civil society generally.

Even within Mandela's democratic government which welcomes a free press, some ministers have advanced provisos that the press must be responsible, and its reporting must be factual and not malicious. These warnings presuppose that the press is subject to two separate disciplines: criminal and civil law and whatever authoritarian idea that might be going through the mind of a politician at any particular moment.

(Discussion paper presented by Rich Mkhondo, Southern Africa correspondent for Reuters, at the workshop on "Media and Conflict Resolution" held on March 18 - 19, Colombo. The workshop was jointly organized by the Centre for Policy research and Analysis of university of Colombo, and Free Media Movement in collaboration with the Asia Foundation, Colombo).

HEMA'S STORY. A NARRATIVE WITHOUT PLOT?

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Introduction

The theme of this essay is the story of a Sinhalese widow. It is a story about a violent event. Unknown people abducted her husband from their home on the morning of 18 March 1989. A few weeks later his burnt body was found.

The story refers to a period of extreme and violent upheaval in Sri Lankan history. In 1987 the Sinhalese nationalist JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, or People's Liberation Front) had launched its armed offensive against the UNP (United National Party) government, and other political opponents who were labelled "Traitors of the Motherland".² The reaction of the UNP government was as desperate as cruel. The army and the security forces were in no position to deal with the 'subversives', as the JVP and its armed wing the DJV were called in official language, and the JVP had indeed come very close in reaching their aim of grasping state power. It was the appearance of death squads aligned with the army and politicians in power and with names like 'Black Cats', 'Green

Tigers' PRRA (People's Revolutionary Red Army) that precipitated the defeat of the JVP. Especially during the latter part of 1989 the counterinsurgency campaign was at its peak with the JVP at the receiving end. The arrests and killings of the leadership in November 1989 was the final blow. In the introduction of his book *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror*, Chandraprema (1991:4) suggests that "probably never before in recent world history has an organisation which gave out the impression of so much power been decimated so completely in so short a period of time".

The terror that came from both parties manifested itself in cruel assaults on people's lives and in a general climate of fear.³ For many Sinhalese the defeat of the JVP meant a waking up out of a state of shock. The extreme and massive character of the violence suddenly was no more. The number of political killings and disappearances decreased rapidly. The exposure of dead bodies on the roads was done away with.