

*Desiree Lewis examines the necessity for an alternative media as a voice against pretended democracy and manufactured consent.*

# Encouraging the subversive spirit

What is exactly meant by the term “alternative media” is enormously contentious. Thirteen years ago, Keyan Tomaselli offered an analytical explanation, which transcends the loose self-definitions of media productions themselves. He uses the term “progressive-alternative” to describe media, which “offers a dialectical alternative to the dominant values of the capitalist press and provides a different agenda for news values”. Tomaselli shows how, from the early 1980s, the alternative media functioned as part of a robust critical information system. Its promotion of social dialogue and participatory ideas about producing and distributing information reinforced its critical content in contesting hierarchical media institutions, as well as oppressive values and relationships. Although Tomaselli makes it clear that the alternative press had a particular role to play under apartheid, he encourages us to consider far-reaching ways in which the alternative press transcends and challenges: it is “alternative” not only because it contests overt authoritarianism, but because it can advocate and exemplify a vision of democratic goals, of community and interaction, that are radically different from the hegemonic mainstream one.

The enduring liberatory role of an alternative press seems to be missed in the emphatically conjunctural perception of South Africa’s alternative press. This understanding is manifested in the book: *South Africa’s Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid*, published four years ago by L. Switzer and M. Adhikari. Examining the range of print media that emerged in the struggle against apartheid, contributions focus on the politics which shaped the fate of media productions, at the same time assuming the specifically context-bound role of the energy, courage, subversiveness and determination these demonstrated. The implicit claim is that the unique dynamism and energy of the dissident media voices does not really play a role today.

It is indisputable that the vitality of the alternative press was fuelled by contingencies associated with apartheid repression. But in what follows, I want to revisit the question of why these voices so rapidly disappeared, and what this disappearance means.

South Africa’s current public information system is one in which purveyors of information across the political spectrum energetically work to cement the new nation. Largely supporting Thabo Mbeki’s recent claim that “a primary aim of government

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must continue to be reconciliation, nation-building and democratisation”, the perception of the strategic importance of linking reconciliatory nation-building to democracy has generated a distinctively South African momentum around “manufacturing consent”. In South Africa, the new nation is premised insistently on the “imperatives” of alliance, compromise and accommodation. From the left-wing orthodoxy of the SACP to the right-wing’s opportunistic moderation and moves towards inclusiveness, many collude in the writing of a national identity that smoothes over contradictions and blurs rifts.

The consensus about nation-building is manifested in the media. Whether or not purveyors of information share the same goals regarding, for example, the desirability of neo-liberalism, an extraordinary unanimity persists in the assumption that the building of a unified national identity is still an inevitable and reasonable priority long after the fall of the apartheid government. This is why, 10 years after the first democratic election, the perception of South Africa’s democracy as a “transitional” one persists. The idea of needing to defer real transformation and thinking about the radical and popular struggles generated before 1994 endures in the context of “tactical” commitment to healing, reconciliation and alliance-building now, in the interests of democracy later. Much of the seductive power of current national myth-making is therefore manifested not in the fact that most South Africans accept reconciliatory rhetoric, but in the fact that the national myths have come to be seen as strategically reasonable and necessary. A decade of democracy brokered through negotiation and compromise has led a range of opinion makers, information systems and the like to carry – albeit often with resentment or resignation – the burden of accountability to the unified nation, so that democracy is often projected into the remote future. We remain locked into an eternal “transition”. From this perspective, apartheid is used as a yardstick for measuring freedom and democracy. And according to this logic, we must be free today because we were so unfree before.

When it comes to weighing up what 10 years of freedom have really meant, there is a grim record. Adam Habib describes it in the following way: The commission for the Department of Social Welfare estimated in their statistics in May 2004, the country’s poverty rate at a staggering 45 to 55%. It suggested that 10% of African people are malnourished. And 25% of African children are born stunted.

Most independent studies suggest that, while the inequality level between white and black has been decreasing, the gap is widening within the African population and the country as a whole. These statistics are horrifying. If they had occurred in any country of the industrialised world, a state of economic emergency would have been declared and governments would have fallen. In South Africa, however, not only has this not happened, but it has been difficult to get public institutions to recognise the enormity of the problem.

It is not only public institutions that refuse to recognise the “enormity of the problem”. We all somehow remain reluctant to acknowledge the grim scenario, to move to a point at which we push back the boundaries around measuring and valuing democracy in the new South Africa.

The tendency to defer critical evaluation of democracy seriously undermines what Habib has called “substantive uncertainty”, a climate in which social movements, political parties and a vigorous non-commercial critical media “loosen up the existing configuration of power in South African society”, and increase citizens’ leverage over state elites to further democracy. In such a climate, the open conflict, explicit criticism of government and thriving debate in the public sphere put pressure on ruling elites to become more accountable to their constituencies, and generate radical and substantively democratic change.

Whether fuelled by a belief that there should be consensus to resist the threat of the rightwing; or by loyalty to liberation parties, individuals and organs that previously spearheaded anti-apartheid resistance; or by the accommodating claim that 10 years is a very short time, there has been a persistent censoring of critical talk about the achievements and gains of democracy. Even the language for describing democracy is revealing: less and less do we find in “progressive” spaces and forums talk about freedom, justice or liberation as benchmarks of democracy. More and more the talk is riddled with references to success, achievement and progress.

A transformation of social values both reflects and buttresses the change in discourse. On this level, materialism and pragmatism overtake visionary, radical and liberatory thought. This results in a heavily technocratic definition of democracy. Our current ways of measuring democracy shut down on the radicalism and possibility associated with terms such as freedom, liberation and struggle, extolling the procedural, technical and material signs of





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“development” associated with neo-liberalism.

The ominous nature of all this is masked by procedural mechanisms for democratic choice and process. Democratic procedures for endorsing limited elitist options prevail, and many choose to ignore this because the argument is that “now is not the right time because our democracy is too precarious”, or “it is tactical and necessary to join forces given the danger of a unified rightwing opposition”; or the belief in South African exceptionalism, which fosters the view that, unlike Zimbabwe and the rest of Africa, South Africa will never have “those problems”.

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman took the title of their book (*Manufacturing Consent*) from the words of an American journalist who knew exactly what the consensus-making process was all about. Walter Lippman, recognising the doctrinal role of the media in liberal democracies after the Second World War, spoke about the new “art” of persuading people that they are free.

The manufacture of consent reflected a situation in which the public information system swayed a population with millions of unemployed and poor citizens into believing they were free, because formally, everybody had legal rights and the right to vote.

In South Africa’s current democracy, the manufacture of consent often hides the fact that democracy is “real” primarily at a formal and procedural level. It mystifies the extent to which democracy amounts to freedoms that privilege particular classes at the expense of others. It masks a situation in which democracy revolves around the elite’s manufacture of “collective” messages in the national interest, and in which neo-liberalism paves the way for foreign investment and domestic

capitalism alongside the growing impoverishment of the majority.

The complicity of the media with this situation is evident in the way ostensibly progressive platforms participate, implicitly or explicitly, in celebrating neo-liberalism, consumerist values, the success stories of the black middle class. They are generally functioning within a commercial framework. In turning to some of the new “alternative” publications, which seem to be taking the place of publications formerly devoted to democratic expression – magazines for youth or magazines devoted to culture – it is alarming how completely these accept the icons, codes and modus operandi of a dominant consumerist society. Whether we consider the overwhelming advertorials in a magazine like *Roots*, or the distinctively American hype around moneyed image and brand names in *Y Magazine*, what we see is worlds away from the subversive values that drove magazines like *Staffrider* or *Speak*.

My argument here is not motivated by a sentimental belief that we re-embrace the agendas and forms of previous “struggle” media. In fact, there is much about democratic transformation and free thinking, the “struggle” media did not address. My point is: we have strayed frighteningly far away from conceiving of a desirable role and visionary meaning for an alternative media in our current socio-political climate. Consensus-making agendas and reconciliatory rhetoric have so engulfed the collective unconscious, and information systems in particular, that we seem unable even to think about the feasibility of a role for what Tomaselli defined as the progressive-alternative media.

Habib identifies the strategic task facing South African society as the reintroduction of substantive uncertainty, and a situation where dissident and

oppositional thought and action seriously unsettle the status quo. Habib explicitly separates consensus-making from democracy, and urges challenges to the hegemony of myths about a seamless nation, the narrativising of a nation by those who continuously speak on behalf of others.

He argues that unpredictable dissent and uncertainty should take precedence over coerced consensus, so that democracy can be imagined outside of confining narratives that rationalise the goals of powerful minorities. In this projected context of dissent, those social movements currently driving real democratic changes, such as the Landless People’s Movement and the Treatment Action Campaign, would work in concert with an information system that truly transcends the status quo. And a substantively alternative media would have a role to play – no less urgent 10 years after the first democratically-elected government than it was before.



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