

“News is a window on the world.

The view through a window depends upon whether the window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street or a backyard. The unfolding scene also depends upon where one stands, far or near, craning one’s neck to the side, or gazing straight ahead, eyes parallel to the wall in which the window is encased.”

– Gaye Tuchman in *Making News*

JOURNALISTS AS MEDIATORS

HANNES SIEBERT & MELISSA BAUMANN argue that journalists should broaden their traditional role of objective recorders to embrace the role of peacemakers and facilitators

EVENTS happen; news is made. Largely the construct of journalists, ‘newsframes’, or selective reportage, yield both ‘windows of reality’ for readers and limit the view. Newsframes in South Africa, in the context of apartheid and heavy media restrictions, have yielded countless perspectives and distortions from all sides. In today’s ‘pre-post-apartheid’ era, though official media restrictions have been dropped, news remains heavily opaqued and partisan. Nasionale Pers, Perskor and, to a lessening degree, the SABC persist with the Nationalist frame. The Argus Group and Times Media continue to promote the liberal, capitalist interests of their owners. ‘Alternative’ publications, faced with the quandary of becoming mainstream in a future South Africa, still generally toe the anti-government, anti-Inkatha, and anti-corporate line. Newsframes are shifting somewhat during this current period of transition, as lines of social and political conflict – the journalist’s axes – are redrawn. But they remain largely intact,

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shaping reality with their particular biases amidst loud rhetoric about press freedom, ‘the truth’, and democratic media. The sad ‘truth’ is, in the words of media analyst AJ Liebling, that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.”

Journalists in South Africa have understandably been preoccupied with press freedom, in concept and practice. The years 1986-1989, particularly, with their hundreds of media regulations and numerous detentions of journalists, fanned the press freedom fervour. *The Star* rallied around the issue with an international conference on “Conflict and the Press” in Johannesburg in early 1987. In recent discussions within media circles about the future of media in South Africa, ‘press freedom’ remains a top priority. Any government – Nationalist, ANC or a multi-party coalition – will have this commitment to reckon with.

But what does ‘press freedom’ really mean? If it means simply the absence of government or quasi-government



ALEX GROEN

interference, then since early 1989, when media restrictions were abolished, South Africa's press has been relatively 'free'. Definitions of press freedom were much simpler when the media restrictions were in place; the onus of truth was on the government's inhibition of that freedom. Now that the restrictions have been lifted, the burden falls much more squarely on journalists' shoulders to report the truth, or at least to more actively promote communication and more earnestly plumb to the causes of issues, not just redundantly describe their symptoms.

THE MPJ: With this opening in the media in South Africa, it seemed prudent to explore opportunities for making ourselves and other interested journalists more aware of the dynamics of change and conflict, and of how what we report shapes those processes. We journalists all shape reality, whether we intend to or not; the 'neutrality' championed by the Western liberal press is a chimera. As the editors of *Cross Times Magazine*, a national journal of news and commentary, we held, and still hold, a commitment to dialogue, reconciliation with constructive change, and the healing and building of relationships. In this light, the Mediation and Conflict Management Projects for Journalists (MPJ) was initiated in early 1990 by the Cross Times Trust, with assistance from the Centre for Intergroup Studies in Cape Town. Its intention is not to transform journalists into mediators *per se*, but to make them much more sensitive to conflict dynamics, to the impact of their work, and to the potential for managing conflict – by defining antagonists' mutual interests and getting to genuine causes of conflict – through the media.

In its pilot year, the MPJ met with scepticism, curiosity and overwhelming support from various quarters. Three workshops held in Cape Town in 1990 drew nearly 50

journalists, primarily from the 'alternative' press. Workshops looked at conflict theoretically and practically, with role plays simulating conflicts that journalists encounter and cover, specifically within South Africa. Participants learned paraphrasing (rephrasing carefully what a person says), intensive listening, non-aggressive behaviour and communication, and various other mediation skills – all of which apply to sound interviewing and reporting. This first incarnation of the MPJ also entailed an intern programme at *Cross Times Magazine*, and organisation towards an international conference on the media and conflict and a related book, which we plan to pursue.

In the near future, as the vicissitudes of funding allow, we intend to take the MPJ on the road, to cities around the country and possibly to smaller communities upon request. An MPJ newsletter is on the cards, as is an 'extern' journalist programme which works with journalists based at various publications throughout South Africa and, eventually, from abroad. Given the current flux of media in South Africa, or at least active debate around the future of the country's media, the MPJ calls upon journalists to re-examine their approaches to media, their own biases and relations to various parties and conflicts, and their awareness of the power of their own work. It encourages them to break the moulds and spring the traps that so many of us have fallen into, whether we report news or merely read it.

MEDIA TRAPS: There are many traps, or ruts, which journalists slide into, or even consciously step into, which decisively shape their 'news frames'. Aside from personal or collective biases, three particular sorts of media traps emerge: muckraking, often masquerading as investigative journalism;

PLEASE TURN OVER

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'positional journalism', which like positional bargaining in negotiations generally reinforces antagonisms; and narratives of violence, often highly distorted and mythologised.

With the 'Inkathagate' scandal earlier this year, reporting in South Africa shadowed that of its namesake, the *Washington Post's* uncovering of the Republican wiretapping of the Democratic Convention at the Watergate complex in 1974. One of the biggest, if not the biggest, investigative scoops in American press history, the Watergate story led to the resignation of President Nixon and the deification of *Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

'Investigative journalism' became a specialisation in the United States' leading journalism schools, supposedly drawing the strongest talent as practitioners. In South Africa, investigative journalism is most conspicuously practised by only a few publications: the *Weekly Mail*, which broke the Inkathagate story; *Vrye Weekblad*, renowned for its diggings on the Civic Co-operation Bureau (CCB); *Beeld*, exposing the Information Scandal; and others such as *New Nation* and the *Star*.

Investigative journalism here faces the same dangers of degeneracy to which it succumbed in the United States, motivated to a drive to go for the jugular, to beat the competition for the sensational story. Obvious in the way that many American reporters have gone for the 'slime' of politicians, the 'honourable' search for 'truth', the supposed defence of the 'public's right to know', is easily contaminated by self-aggrandisement. Indeed, most of the reporters firing questions at Foreign Minister Pik Botha at the SABC broadcast of the Inkathagate press conference were clearly lunging for his throat.

The key is to uncover abuses, but to question one's motives in doing so and to not stop just at incrimination. Long repressed and at least partially silenced by the state, much of the South African press was lulled into not investigating anything very far; the assumption was often that any information given would be lies, anyway. Now the risk is to run amuck with investigative reporting.

The trap of 'positional reporting' snags journalists all over the world. As reporters we are almost universally taught to construct 'objective' news stories around "X said, Y said, X said, Y said", often giving the last word to the party we secretly support – or to whoever has offered the most dramatic closing quote. Like positional bargaining – where one party in a conflict states its position or demands, then the other side does the same, and they each try to 'win' – this approach to reporting plays a zero-sum game. X and Y, the reporter's sources, merely reiterate their hardened positions and no dialogue, compromise or constructive change is advanced. In fact, the reporter's story often reinforces the parties'

antagonisms; differences and criticisms sting much sharper in print.

Certain journalists may claim this is the task of the news story, to 'merely report what was said', but it is too often the mark of lazy, passive journalism. Journalists have almost unequalled access to various parties, and can often ask them questions they would never ask each other; most waste this potential for furthering such communication.

Many have argued that violence is endemic to South African society; content analysis of the country's media leads rapidly to that conclusion. University of Cape Town political scientist Robert Thornton argues that a narrative of violence is being perpetuated by the South African press. One can read almost any publication to pick up the narrative thread. Take coverage of 'the Natal conflict' (is it one conflict, you may well ask?) or the violence of the last few months on the Witwatersrand. Are journalists, like other South Africans, victims of a 'culture of violence', or are they among its perpetrators? Again and again, journalists recycle the same stale 'wisdom' about the source of violence – Inkatha-ANC antagonisms, a mysterious 'third force', the government – and generally fail to get to its root causes. The violence is largely described in terms of political rivalries, body counts and burned homes; its socio-economic context receives short shrift, factors such as backyard squatters, hostel dwellers and more 'permanent' township residents competing for resources, the effects of joblessness, or the destructive influence of broken families on the country's youth. Again, journalists lock themselves, the antagonistic parties and their readers or viewers into seemingly intractable positions. Their narratives rarely challenge the violence, or the conditions of violence; rather they often help build a frightening tolerance of violence.

MIDDLE GROUND: It is much easier to criticise than to construct or create. So with the MPJ, it is easier to identify where journalists stray than to map out alternatives. It's a fair question: can journalists play a constructive mediatory role in the community, or a country, without forsaking or betraying their role as journalists? Should they?

The MPJ's premise is that they can, and that they should. "Journalists stand between events and the public, so in that way they mediate conflict," says Ron Kraybill, a mediator with the Centre for Intergroup Studies and an MPJ workshop facilitator. But just where do journalists have to stand to give the government and the public clear views of themselves?

The words 'media' and 'mediate' both derive from the Latin 'medius', or 'middle'. But 'in the middle of the road', or 'in the thick of it' – where do we journalists reside? The Western liberal view says we must stand in the no-man's land of 'objectivity'. But as we've argued, in highly conflicted

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societies like South Africa's, particularly, this remains an elusive and questionable objective. Israeli journalist and peace activist Michel Warschawski, director of the Alternative Information Centre in Jerusalem, has articulated a radical 'middle ground' which seems appropriate territory for journalists in South Africa. In a speech delivered shortly before his imprisonment for printing 'enemy' (Palestinian) material, Warschawski defines the concept of 'the border', among other divisions, the line between Palestinians and Israelis:

"The system is determined to strengthen the separation border between Israelis and Palestinians, and to stop any process that blurs the border...(But) we should begin building togetherness from today – in dialogues, in cooperation, in solidarity. All these are impossible to do from a safe place in the middle of the national consensus. You build the Israeli-Palestinian partnership on the border, and only on the border that separates these two peoples..."

"I refuse to stand far from the border, in a safe place in the middle. I refuse to be a border guard. My will is to...break through the fences of hate and the walls of separation."

Many journalists in South Africa share Warschawski's commitment to centering themselves in the fray, in the heart of the conflict, where lies the potential for its resolution. "Objectivity' is nonsense in a distorted society like this one," says *Vrye Weekblad* editor, Max Du Preez. "Journalists must be interpretive, and try to be fair and balanced...Our paper is absolutely confrontationalist, we try to slaughter a lot of the holy cows of Afrikanerdom. And we seek conflict, we don't try to resolve it. We cause conflict."

Conflict in itself is not necessarily destructive; if managed appropriately, it can actually build bonds between and within communities. The MPJ, then, trains journalists in conflict management; in getting to causes and not just symptoms; in engaging parties in 'interest-based' discussions, or defining mutual interests; in airing parties' perceptions and fears; and in prioritising process over outcome, or paying more heed to the process of negotiations, to how they're structured and to who is involved – and also to the process of news gathering and reporting, to sources cited and to the process of stories evolving. Too often journalism is outcome-oriented, around an event, announcement, vote or decision, at the expense of the processes leading to those outcomes.

PEACEMAKERS: Many would argue that journalists cannot mediate conflict in sense of resolving it, but we do shape conflict by what we record, by selecting and editing stories, by giving certain writers certain assignments, by the 'facts' we include and omit, by the sources we quote, by what we quote from them. On community, national and international scales, we have mediated as journalists in defining political

agendas and public sympathies. The prospect of journalists-as-peacemakers or facilitators may be hard to grasp, or distasteful, to some. But the potential is there.

"Journalists have key access to both sides," says mediator Kraybill, "and access is the biggest problem in peacemaking. Successful mediation usually involves beginning with information gathering and sharing, establishing a common ground and trust, establishing basic human needs and interests rather than positions. Journalists must try to get people off their positions, away from positional bargaining and more towards an interest-based approach, towards joint problem solving."

Granted, it is a stretch of the imagination to picture South African journalists alongside FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and their respective teams around the negotiations table. Proponents of 'objectivity' howl at the mere thought. But journalists can mediate more informally, in parallel ways to those of professional mediators.

"Mediation is closely related to conciliation," says veteran mediator and Centre for Intergroup Studies Director, HW van der Merwe, "an informal process in which a third party tries to bring parties to agreement by improving communications, interpreting issues, and exploring potential solutions." Why can't journalists do the same? To some degree, don't they already?

Perhaps the journalist's role more readily aligns with that of a facilitator, who according to Van der Merwe concentrates on facilitating communication between conflicting parties and is "less likely than the mediator to be seen as a meddler, or a preacher, or a moralist". When negotiations break down, a facilitator becomes even more critical. 'Facilitator journalists' have the advantage of being less bound by protocol and the constraints of an official negotiations process; they are more able to widen the agenda through their reportage and to suggest constructive initiatives.

ACCOUNTABILITY: At the core of mediating as a journalist is the issue of accountability. Journalists, like mediators, are not meant to 'take sides', but this does not free them from being accountable in certain ways to different parties: their editors, their sources and others they write about, their readers, themselves.

The question of community is key, and related to that, responsibility. As journalist/mediator, we are responsible to the communities we write about. Not that they should dictate what we write, but we should not write about them cavalierly, callously or glibly. Often our awareness of the communities we cover, our sense of responsibility towards them can be critical; it can sometimes mean life or death for certain of their people.

The peace process will go nowhere if we deny the deep-rooted feelings and beliefs of those to whom we feel morally superior

If a journalist is, in an ethical sense, accountable to everyone he or she writes about and to his or her own conscience, then the issue of credibility that so often arises here is more ably addressed. The tendency in recent years of much of the 'alternative' media to be accountable to organisations flies in the face of the 'democracy' so many journalists tout.

LANGUAGE: The medium of mediation, resolution and conflict building is language; journalists concerned about their impact on various conflicts must be well aware of words. The MPJ explores the explosive and divisive, as well as healing, power of language. 'Laundered' or toned-down language as well as trumped-up rhetoric come under scrutiny. Shifts in language patterns, such as the shift from the specific to the general as conflict escalates, are studied. "People often retreat into theory and rhetoric because then they don't have to think anymore," says Kraybill. "Journalists must work with them, get them off the abstract, move them towards how the conflict/issue affects them specifically and personally."

CORE VALUES: How we express ourselves as journalists is a statement of who we are, and of how we relate to others. To be an effective journalist/mediator or facilitator, the MPJ maintains, requires a consistent embodiment of values, awareness and skills which underlie a genuine commitment to peace and justice.

As Krayhill explains, the journalist/mediator must be hard on issues, soft on people. The 'truth' for which journalists claim so avidly to search lies not in structures or systems or philosophies, but in the persons of the people we write about.

So often we look through the frame of only one viewpoint or ideology. We miss the person. We don't look at the person through the eyes of his own value system; we don't take the time. Instead we make harsh deadline-orientated value judgements about naive socialists or fat-cat capitalists or ignorant boers. The peace process will go nowhere if we deny the deep-rooted feelings and beliefs of those to whom we feel morally superior.

The MPJ asks that journalists not retaliate. This means responding to apparent provocation in ways that appeal to the dignity of one's 'opponents' and to focus on solving mutual problems rather than winning battles. It also means often suspending judgement, and paying more attention to antagonists' underlying concerns and perceptions.

Becoming informal, unofficial mediators may not be a choice for many of us. Many journalists, if not all, already are. The point is to understand the power that we wield, and to challenge ourselves on our relationships and commitments within that power.

"In Natal I've been a State of Emergency editor with automatic involvement as a mediator," says Khaba Mkhize, assistant editor of *The Natal Witness*. "For many reporters, death is news. But ask yourself what you want to achieve at the end of the day. A commitment to peacemaking leads to creative writing. Stay away from stereotypes that reinforce pain." ●

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