



IT'S TIME TO BURY 'ALTERNATIVE'

By redefining themselves, 'alternative' political newspapers may end up committing suicide just when South Africa needs them most, writes **DON PINNOCK**

WORDS do matter. In the early 1980s an American lecturer in journalism at Rhodes University, Dr Les Switzer, his ears filled with pre-revolutionary sounds

from the townships and his spectacles tinted by hippy rebellions back home, dubbed the new political newspapers in South Africa as 'alternative'. Cohorts of students left Grahamstown as missionaries of this new label. And not long afterwards media theorists, myself included, did the next worst thing. If the chirpy new papers were 'alternative', then those daily and weekly bearers of advertising were 'mainstream'.

The legacy of these labels has done more damage than one might imagine mere words can do. Journalists and managers in the new weeklies, trying to conceptualise their role in a post-glasnost South Africa, are caught in more than simply a word trap. Words are ideas and ideas are the basis of action... the now self-defined 'alternatives' have painted themselves only two choices — to become mainstream commercial or (perish the thought) to become the political adjuncts of the political movements.

Either way, that which pays the piper is seen to call the tune. And the result of this thinking, coupled with the need to survive in the marketplace, could be that the fine old tradition of critical reportage may be about to commit suicide in the moment of our greatest need of it.

An act of atonement might be to widen our choice of words and to re-think some basic assumptions...

Historically, the alternative press is mainstream.

There can be little doubt that the traditions of that press which I will provisionally call 'critical' pre-dated those of 'mainstream' dailies in South Africa and had links into much older forms of reportage.

The daily press, which claims Thomas Pringle as its founding father, conveniently forgets that he was a radical hell-bent on muck-raking. Pringle, who arrived in 1820, had been the editor of a small campaigning paper called *The Star*, described as "the only true radical newspaper in Scotland", and had been influenced by the independent radicalism of British journalists such as John Wilkes, William Cobbett and Thomas Payne. The ideas of these men were to inspire Karl Marx to write the Communist Manifesto.

Cape Governor Lord Charles Somerset described Pringle as "an arrant dissenter" who had "scribbled for a Scottish journal". (Pringle and his printer were soon in court for exceeding their brief, and a long tradition of State harassment of the press began). So the first-born South African newspaper began life not as an instrument of government or commerce but as a rebel.

It goes back even further. The invention of movable type was itself a political act, and it was immediately put to the service of sectoral interests within the Church. Its emergence into secular service was an event watched nervously by the ruling classes. Indeed, the first newspaper officially licensed in Britain in 1622 had its licence revoked for offending the Spanish Ambassador. Printing presses and dangerous ideas were to remain close companions ever afterwards.

Contrary to current perceptions, it was

the commercial press which was born as an *alternative* to press traditions of the day. Indeed, it was in the taming of radical ideas that this press found its conception and it was based squarely on the growing prosperity of the industrial classes. This is best represented by the growth of *The Times*. In 1852 its editor, Thomas Delane, spelled out the new ethic:

"The duty of the journalist is the same as that of the historian — to seek out the truth above all things, and to present to his readers not such things as statecraft would wish them to know but the truth as near as he can attain it."

This founding document of the capitalist free press conception had two important aspects. On the one hand it broke with the idea of the press as a venal activity to be used at will by government or political faction. On the other hand, it bound the press to a Free Trade doctrine in which it owed allegiance to nobody but its advertisers.

This new teaching was based on the fact that by the 1850s *The Times* held a near-monopoly of newspaper sales (being 50 000 copies a day compared to the 5 000 of its nearest rival) and was the mouthpiece of the new capitalist class which demanded a voice of its own and paid for it through advertising patronage. Indeed, the very first elaborations of the new notion of freedom declared *dependence* on commercial advertisements to be the foundation of this freedom.

The Times, and the many newspapers which were to follow its lead, sold news as a commodity and boomed. They confined their political origins to a brief

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editorial and remained, to quote the *Edinburgh Review* of mid-19th century, "ever strong on the stronger side".

The traditions of *The Times* began in South Africa with the introduction of steam presses at the *Cape Times* several decades after Pringle's departure from our shores. But the 'mainstream' political tradition remained — from *Die Patriot* and *Imvo Zabansundu* of the 19th century through the communist, liberal and nationalist press to the weekly tabloids of the late 20th. So we need to bury 'alternative': it does not accord with our history.

A second point that needs to be cleared up in the current debate is that:

All journalism is political. Some papers just do it better than others.

In his assessment of British press practices dating back to the early 17th century, writer Stanley Harrison has observed that "neither at the beginning nor at the end is the newspaper press placed neutrally apart from society — though at the end it endeavours by all means to wear that appearance. Politics is about power and the press is about politics".

Discussions about whether the press is political or neutral generally become linked with ideas about objectivity. Claims of objectivity have, at some time or another, been made by all commercial newspapers in this country in an attempt to legitimate and authenticate their information and to distance themselves from the political press. But it is necessary to look at the differences seen to exist between objective and critical journalism and to consider whether a 'non-political' journalism is, indeed, possible.

In the commercial press, journalistic invisibility has been raised to a virtue, and although we tend to see a novelist as the author of her words, there is a strong tradition which insists that the journalist be nothing more than a conveyor belt for 'facts' and 'the truth'.

This neutrality has been proposed as a way of approaching reality, as a mechanism for transmitting this approach and as a *desideratum* — the ultimate moral goal of the profession. Within this tradition the individual journalist is irrelevant, indeed the intrusion of her 'subjectivity' would be a subversion of the ideology and must be confined to 'editorials'.

The overall effect is that of a world of abstract entities and relations, frozen in time, objectified processes, a kind of verbal Marie Celeste, left intact without any human agents. The actual nature of this objectivity is seldom formally spelt out to a new reporter; it simply becomes an approach to be absorbed 'on the job'. However, the practice of objective journalism raises some questions. Can there be an external reality whose facade can be perceived without distortion? In fact, this view of reality is a conceptual error. What exists is not an exterior reality, but a certain knowledge, a humanisation of reality produced by individual action and conditioned by the totality of society. Claims of objectivity are merely the projection of sectoral interests as universal values.

In truth all journalism is, in some sense, political and it is, therefore, less useful to ask questions about *what* is reported (or whether it is true) than about *how* it is reported, *who* the reader is and which social values are embedded in the text. Indeed the content of newspapers is more easily understood as *ideas* about the world than as facts about it. And the events which are reported are not a reflection of the importance of those events, but are the result of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection. News is a *practice* which, far from simply reflecting social reality and 'facts', intervenes in the *social construction of reality*. *The Star* is quite as involved in this construction as *New Nation*. The only difference, apart from the understandings of their journalists, is the perceived audience.

Finally, let me return to the piper. The crucial debate in newspaper futures is around independence and income. Now there is clearly some relationship between who finances a paper and its content.

The challenge for the critical press is to survive economically without sacrificing editorial independence. But current (crude) media thinking has offered them only aggressive economic independence as an alternative to foreign funding. This is not unlike the route taken by *The Times* more than a century ago.

Another far more positive route is for the critical press to pursue its quest for marketability, but also to be prepared to take money from the devil himself, if necessary, as long as its journalists are defended by a justiciable *Code of Conduct*. As long as their publication dominates the niche market attractive to the funder, critical journalists can argue for funds from anybody as long as their journalistic integrity is protected politically.

The democratic freedoms of a future South Africa are best defended by an independent *political press*. But the idea that the freedom of this press is predicated on independence from political parties and dependence on advertisers and the market is one which buried the political press in Britain for nearly a century. This is a territory thoroughly colonised by the offspring of *The Times* who will not hesitate to cut the throat of any new contenders — and of political journalism into the bargain.

So, I think it's time for the independents to take careful stock of the consequences of advertiser-driven newspapers and to get back to the political principles which gave them life. Or have those principles changed? ●

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