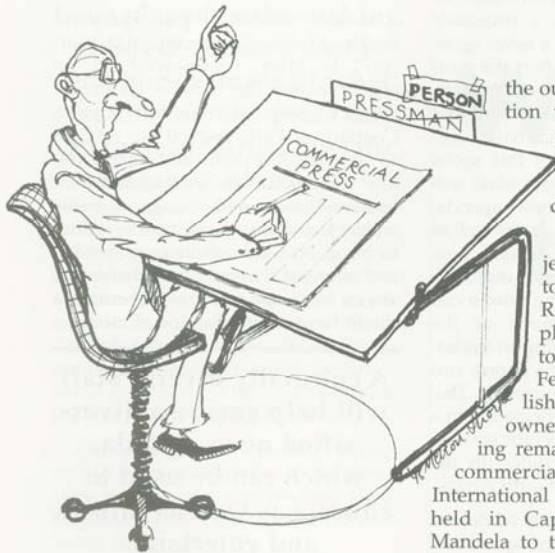


"IMAGE AND REALITY"

A CRITIQUE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRESS



By Les Switzer

THE PRESS IN SOUTH AFRICA will celebrate its 200th anniversary in the year 2000, but for the vast majority of South Africa's literate population there will be little to celebrate. Why? Because this was – and to a large extent still is – a sectional press. These newspapers, newsletters and magazines have been owned and controlled by whites, aimed at or intended for whites, concerned almost exclusively with the political, economic and social life of the white population, and consumed mainly by whites for most of this 200-year history.

The image of a muckraking, watchdog English-language "opposition" press defending the civil rights of all who were oppressed in South Africa, however, was an enduring one during the apartheid era. And this image – reinforced in the midst of draconian censorship laws, widespread intimidation and sometimes even repression – has been generally accepted by mainstream media and media scholars outside as well as inside South Africa.

These newspapers included Johannesburg's *Rand Daily Mail* and to a lesser extent the *Star*, Bloemfontein's *Friend*, Cape Town's *Cape Times*, Port Elizabeth's *Evening Post*, East London's *Daily Dispatch* and Pietermaritzburg's *Natal Witness*. They were deemed to be a kind of extra-parliamentary opposition – telling the truth about apartheid to South Africans and

the outside world in a generation when white opposition parties had virtually collapsed and black opposition parties had been driven into exile.

The same image is projected in South Africa today. Former *Star* editor Richard Steyn, for example, wrote an "open letter" to President Mandela in February 1994 (it was published in various Argus-owned newspapers) deploring remarks he made about the commercial press at an International Press Institute congress held in Cape Town. Steyn took Mandela to task for not mentioning key journalists and newspapers in the "mainstream" commercial press that had opposed apartheid between the 1960s and 1980s, for entertaining "romantic, ahistorical" notions about the contributions made by alternative publications to the anti-apartheid struggle, and for seeking changes in the industry "on the grounds of skin colour or gender alone." The press in South Africa, as Steyn saw it, "is the envy of its counterparts in most African countries and in many emerging democracies around the world."

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But Steyn's view is really the romantic and ahistorical view. He assumed the alternative press was grounded in an "old and developed tradition" of opposition pioneered by the white commercial press. In reality, it was grounded in a tradition of protest and resistance that can be traced back to the 19th Century and in a press that struggled to project images of social reality that were decidedly different from the images projected by "mainstream" white

media. These publications were rarely viable commercially or indeed visible to most white readers, but they have persisted for more than a century in an effort to voice the grievances and aspirations of the majority who had no voice in South Africa.

The alternative press constitutes a unique political, social and literary archive – the oldest, most extensive and varied collection of indigenous serial publications of this kind in sub-Saharan Africa. There have been four distinct phases in the history of South Africa's alternative press:

- **The African mission press (1830s-1880s)**, which represented the pioneer missionary societies and their converts living and working primarily in mission station and outstation communities. The earliest African protest literature can be traced to a few mission journals in the last two decades or so of this era.

- **The independent protest press (1880s-1930s)**, which represented primarily the aspirant black middle class. The roots of an indigenous black (African, Coloured and Indian) literary tradition in English, Afrikaans and various ethnic African languages stems from this period. It would take many forms, including personality profiles and essays devoted to African language, literature and history, humour and advice columns, poetry, short stories, plays, sermons, hymns and other musical compositions.

- **The early resistance press (1930s-1960s)**, which gradually embraced a popular, non-racial, non-sectarian and more militant alliance of left-wing working and middle-class interests.

- **The later resistance press (1970s-1980s)**, which represented primarily the Black Consciousness movement and its press (1970s) and the "progressive" community press (1980s). Resistance media changed dramatically in form and content during these decades. They would embrace (a) various commercial publications still aimed at segregated black and/or white audiences; (b) progressive academic journals and student publications from historically "white" universities, adult literacy texts, published oral narratives, personal memoirs and

popular histories; and (c) a variety of literary, musical and performance texts generated mainly in segregated African townships, informal settlements and historically "black" and "homeland" university settings that were now fully engaged in the struggle for South Africa.

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African nationalist newspapers initially dominated the alternative press, but between the 1930s and 1950s traditional protest publications were bought out and closed down or denuded of political content and merged with a new captive black commercial press. This in turn was controlled by white entrepreneurs linked directly or indirectly to the major English and Afrikaans-language press groups.

The segregationist state was steadily expanding and solidifying its control over the African population during this period, and surrogate newspapers like *Bantu World* (later renamed the *World*) offered a protest agenda that would not offend the ruling elites. *Bantu World* was the flagship of *Bantu Press*, an Argus subsidiary, and it would eventually own or otherwise control a chain of black publications extending throughout southern and central Africa. *Bantu World* would be the trendsetter in the campaign to develop a captive black commercial press that was supervised by white editorial overseers and monitored in white-controlled newsrooms.

The fledgling socialist press filled the vacuum created by the demise of the independent African protest press between the 1930s and 1960s. These newspapers included *Inkululeko*, the Communist Party's flagship newspaper; the *Guardian* and its successors, socialist weeklies that were independent of the party; *Fighting Talk*, mouthpiece of the Springbok Legion and eventually the Congress Alliance; and the *Torch*, organ of the Unity move-

ment. It was they and not English-language opposition newspapers that best represented the transition in discourse from petitionary protest to popular resistance. And it was Black Consciousness publications during the 1970s – and journalists influenced by the BC movement – that provided the main stimulus for the alternative press of the 1980s.

Few English-speaking journalists have actually analysed the content of their newspapers – despite scores of reminiscences, biographies and in-house histories.

In the end, the image of an independent, muckraking, watchdog commercial press projected by Steyn and his peers over many decades falls far short of reality. The struggle to impose meaning on this strand of post-colonial discourse, however, continues in post-apartheid South Africa.

Few English-speaking journalists have actually analysed the content of their newspapers – despite scores of reminiscences, biographies and in-house histories. The evidence we have, however, is revealing. The targets of dissent in this “opposition” press were carefully selected, and anti-apartheid news and opinion accounted for an insignificant proportion of the news-hole. African journalists were given permanent employment in a few of these newspapers only from the 1960s and 1970s, and they worked almost exclusively on subordinate, segregated and decidedly paternalistic inserts or supplements targeted for black audiences. African journalists, moreover, had no control over and virtually no access to other media of mass communication before the 1960s.

Anti-apartheid critics of the English-language press have claimed these “opposition” newspapers (a) focused on “safe” anti-apartheid news stories and on personalities and events rather than issues – ignoring the conditions and contexts in which these stories took place; (b) practised widespread self-censorship as part of their response to the government’s attempts to censor and control communication media; (c) did nothing to deracialise and democratise their own institutions – inside and outside the newsroom; (d) omitted, trivialised or downplayed news that might threaten the economic and political interests of those corporate groups who owned or otherwise controlled these publications; and (e) played the role of a sectional press that served the cultural interests of their largely white, English-speaking readership in much the same way as the sectional Afrikaans press, which was perceived to be the mouthpiece of the Afrikaner community and the National Party.

Even during the apartheid era, only a few newspapers were really critical of government policy before the 1980s.

“Mainstream” newspapers in post-apartheid South Africa are under increasing pressure to be more representative and more responsible in their coverage of events and issues, and some critics are suggesting that the white-controlled press in particular must do more to educate its audience. I would suggest that the South African press can address these concerns in at least two ways before the end of the century.

Even during the apartheid era, only a few newspapers were really critical of government policy before the 1980s.

•The first way points to changing the racial and gender complexions of the newsroom and boardroom. The world the established commercial press represented after Union in 1910 was a white, patriarchal and middle-class world. It was largely oblivious even to contradictions between white social groups and for the most part either ignored, demonised or parodied any opposition that challenged the social order.

As I understand Mandela’s remarks at the IPI congress, the promotion of cultural diversity in the news staffs of the commercial press is a necessary step in the promotion of a news agenda that will ultimately reflect the multicultural and primarily non-Western society that is South Africa. The major newspapers in South Africa have barely explored the surface of this social reality. A culturally diverse staff will help ensure a diversified news agenda, which can be used to educate as well as inform and entertain. Learning how events can be viewed from multicultural perspectives, learning how social differences structure much of the human experience, learning to understand and respect the traditions and values of people unlike ourselves. This is what is essential to participation in a more inclusive and democratic society. And this should be included in the news agenda of the new South Africa.

•The second way points to deconstructing the language of apartheid. Public discourse during the apartheid era was extraordinarily pervasive in setting the boundaries for ideological conformity in social relations, politics, the economy and culture, but so far South Africa’s commercial press has shown little interest in the problem other than deracialising (and degenderising) the more common forms of public address.

Let’s take one example. The Nationalists maintained a firm and

productive alliance with the US and its allies for decades on the basis of a proclaimed pro-capitalist and anti-communist position – a position that continues to appeal to whites and some blacks still polarised by the rhetoric of the Cold War. This rhetoric sought to reduce the language of politics to a simplistic, value-laden dichotomy between two stereotyped abstractions called capitalism and communism/socialism (almost always represented as one by the media). Like most stereotypes, neither “ism” can sustain close scrutiny today.

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, “communism/socialism” is often represented as an anachronism. The ANC’s continued alliance with the South African Communist Party (which has refused so far to become politically correct, follow the trend in post-communist Eastern Europe and change its name and objectives) is perceived by critics to be at best an unnecessary burden and at worst a trojan horse that could wreck any hope a future government might have of reviving the economy.

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These critics have an inadequate, and ahistorical, understanding of South Africa’s past. The Communist Party between 1925 and its banning in 1950 was one of the few organised political pressure groups in the country that sought to give voice to the interests and concerns of African peasants and industrial workers – the vast majority of the population – and the socialist voice in various forms was a bastion of the broader resistance movement during the apartheid era.

These critics also ignore the fact that socialists stemmed from all designated “racial” groups, and their very existence as a community – however fragmented they seemed to be at various moments in time – offered concrete evidence that the democratic commitment to an open, non-racial society has had a history of its own even in South Africa. Finally, these critics discount public statements made by Communist Party officials today, who accept the ANC’s pragmatic economic policies and claim the socialist project will assume a form and function in this country that is in harmony with the wishes of the majority population.

Deconstructing the role that capitalism, socialism and the Communist Party have played in the making of South Africa’s past is just one example of what the commercial press can do to deconstruct the language of apartheid. The narration of news is

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grounded in binary signs – subject and object, male and female, white and black, good and bad, pure and impure, legitimate and illegitimate, sane and insane, normal and abnormal, sacred and profane, skilled and unskilled, capitalism and communism, development and dependency, north and south, metropole and periphery the dichotomies are endless.

Deconstructing the role that capitalism, socialism and the Communist Party have played in the making of South Africa's past is just one example of what the commercial press can do to deconstruct the language of apartheid.

The press' task is no less than an interrogation of the binary signs that comprise the master narrative of apartheid. This is by no means a simple exercise, but it must be done if South Africa is to be the role model for a truly nonracial, nonsectarian society that so many well wishers inside and outside the country are hoping it will be.

Deconstructing these bogus dichotomies would be a corrective step on the road to constructing a new language of reconciliation for the new South Africa.



Les Switzer is professor in the School of Communication and adjunct professor in History and co-director of the Center for Critical Cultural Studies at the University of Houston. He spent 16 years in South Africa, working initially as a journalist and later as an academic. Among his major publications is *Black press in South Africa and Lesotho, 1836-1976* (1979), *Media and dependency in South Africa* (1985) and *Power and resistance in an African society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the making of South Africa* (1993). His latest book, *South Africa's alternative press in protest and resistance*, will be published by Cambridge University Press towards the end of this year.

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