

ADVOCACY JOURNALISM

Has it advanced Truth or is it merely the flip side of the propaganda coin?

DURING the war in Vietnam, American propaganda always projected Ho Chi Minh's army as incapable of withstanding American firepower. "US troops will have those Commies on the run, and come home to victory," broadcast the generals and state officials to the Vietnamese, the American public and the world. Unfortunately, the Americans believed their own propaganda, underestimated 'the enemy's' strength, and lost the war. Today, nearly 20 years later, America still suffers from that trauma.

Falling for one's own propaganda is not uniquely American. In South Africa's prolonged low-intensity internal conflict, the regime – and its opposition – have fallen just as hard. The State's sophisticated propaganda machinery converted the ANC, UDF, SACP and other organisations into 'terrorists' with supposedly as little support as America attributed to Ho Chi Minh and his Vietcong.

The emergence of the alternative Press in the eighties was to counter this: *Grassroots*, *New Era*, *New Nation*, *South*, *The Weekly Mail*, *NewAfrican* and a host of others, in effect, joined a battle against the State's representation of 'reality' and repression of the majority's voice.

When Cape Town-based *Grassroots* was formed in 1980, the intention was that it would "write for the people", that it would be their voice and help them to



*New Era reporter
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sees the need for
advocacy journalists
to learn the lessons
of the past decade
and transcend the
propaganda
war*

build democratic organisations such as civics and women's and youth organisations. It also became a vital link between organisations such as the ANC and the UDF and the people – in times of repression, under the State of Emergency, perhaps the only link.

"All roads lead to Rocklands", we said when we launched the UDF in that part of Mitchells Plain in 1983. From there "all roads" always led somewhere – barely described, but strongly invoked to rally the masses.

We thought it important to exaggerate the strength of the ANC and to sketch Nelson Mandela larger-than-life. Any internal organisational problems or flaws were attributed to apartheid, State propaganda, repression. We were uncritical of the Mass Democratic Movement and swept most contradictions and controversy under the carpet. Internationally our sentiments rested with the socialist-oriented countries in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Their projected success inspired our struggle; we refused to look further.

In our attempts to hang apartheid and its perpetrators we became infected by the very methods – and perhaps values – that we found abhorrent. The SABC gave coverage virtually only to the ruling National Party. By and large they kept the population in the dark about government foul-ups and cover-ups, about the CCBs, the Operation Vulas, the alleged SA oil reserves. State-supporting newspapers failed to encourage debate and openness around issues of national importance –

PLEASE TURN OVER

open schools, Group Areas, endemic violence and countless others. Yet, in engaging in the propaganda battle with the State, we shot ourselves in the foot.

This reactive inversion of all State propaganda can be seen as a child of circumstance. Too many *Grassroots* and *New Eras* have been banned, too many media workers harassed and detained. We have been pushed up against a wall of desperation by the power of the State, a formidable opponent when we 'alternative' media represent only two percent of media in the country.

The weapons nearest at hand have been stereotypic images and clichéd rhetoric: charismatic revolutionary leaders, clenched fists, toyi-toying crowds, rabid police, Casspirs, barricades and flaming townships with the echoes of "We the people" and "Forward to this, forward to that..."

We have a scarred media tradition, and only just now are many of us realising how our own media has been injured in the war against the State. What started out as necessary propaganda and positive projection became the reality for too many of us. We overestimated our own

strength and support. We falsely presented the ANC/MDM as being interchangeable with 'the people'.

In order to build a true democracy, we need a new type of journalism. Democracy needs a society that is fully informed, in order to participate consciously and fully.

This places particular demands on the alternative media. At its last annual general meeting, *Grassroots* received a strong mandate from its organisational affiliates to become more critical of all parties and to not align itself with any one party.

The implications for all of us alternative media workers is that we can no longer paint idyllic pictures of the liberation movement and no longer shirk the task of criticism and self-criticism in order to stimulate debate. We need to shake off simplistic analysis and to admit the complexity of forging a 'new South Africa'.

This means that in order to be informative, as alternative journalists, we need to be informed ourselves. This requires thorough research around issues, events and discussions. It also means that we

cannot simply give views that simplistically counter State viewpoints. We need a pro-active rather than a reactive journalism. We need to transcend the propaganda battle.

Also, we need to acknowledge that we are not 'the people', nor is any single political organisation, or all of them put together.

We activists, or activist-journalists, remain a small section of society. Our perspectives therefore cannot exist solely within the framework of the ANC or SACP. Our main responsibility is towards ordinary people, and it is their genuine experiences, hopes and fears to which we need to give voice.

Finally, we need to begin to write without anger. We need to look at reality and set about reflecting it in ways that will not destroy our integrity or our values in the long term.

This does not mean that we should not take a political position or not choose sides. However, it does mean that these choices must not blind us, or in any way excuse us from challenging ourselves. ●

This article first appeared in Cross Times.

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