

A QUESTION OF VALUES

Former Editor of Grassroots' New Era, GUY BERGER, explains why his shock resignation has wider significance for journalism in South Africa

THE story at the heart of my resignation as editor of *New Era* consisted of an interview with controversial Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok and SACP member, Anthony Holiday. The two men had last encountered each other when Vlok visited political prisoners in Pretoria in 1982. As for myself – I too had been in the prison at the time (although unlike Holiday, I had since withdrawn from party political involvement). The interview was almost a meeting of old 'friends', you might say! And it had the ingredients for an interesting story too, many journalists would imagine.

Not so for three out of four members of the *New Era* staff, despite the fact that we had all agreed on the venture. Once duly organised (at great effort), transcribed, typed, edited and distributed, the product met with disapproval. No go, said the assistant editor cum business manager, who was echoed by the administrator and the production editor. The interview, they insisted, should be dropped.

The arguments put forward by the three were that it was not a good interview, and that nothing new was elicited from Vlok. It was also argued that he was not put on the spot – indeed that he had had a rougher ride on SA TV's *Agenda*.

On the other side, I argued the mere mix of the two men was a good journalistic point – indeed a scoop of sorts. I further argued that Vlok *had* said a number of newsworthy things (eg. that the police were both impartial and "dead against Communism", that he was a democrat who had regretted the lack of political momentum under PW Botha, etc.). Finally, I argued that the fact that the meeting of two supposedly opposite

ends of the spectrum did not produce an explosion was in itself of political interest; it showed how a Communist – whose public writings suggest a belief that one should not rock the negotiations boat too much – did not press the Minister too hard. And it was remarkable that the Cabinet Minister made little if any special effort to address his credibility gap within resistance circles, notwithstanding the ANC's ultimatum that he should resign.

In a letter the *New Era/Grassroots* staff sent to the *Cape Times*, they wrote: "The novelty of a Communist in genteel discussion with Mr Vlok does not redeem the piece – particularly when the townships are in flames." In my view, however, this was precisely what added interest to the article.

Other issues also arose in the dispute, independently of the merits of the article. Concerning protocols, the staff argued that stories are continuously spiked in the course of media production, and that this interview should be no exception.

I pointed out that journalistic ethics and protocols required that one had to publish an interview with a senior public figure like Vlok, like it or not. The rules of the game could not be twisted in this regard, else the professional credibility of the publication would suffer.

Secondly, I argued that the interview had been obtained after enormous effort and lobbying and that failing to publish it would automatically rule out future access to other figures in the Cabinet or similar social echelons. It was clear that *New Era* could hardly hope to be regarded as a serious contender in the media if it treated this particular story in such a naive and amateurish way. I suggested that the staff needed to wise up to the nature of power in the dominant world outside of activist circles. The argument failed to convince, however. The article

was dropped, and I distanced myself from the decision by tendering my resignation.

Several issues can be abstracted from the incident, which bear a far wider relevance than just to *New Era's* ups and downs.

Among these are the changing political role, identity and economic base of the alternative press as future scenarios unfold, as well as questions of modernising operational structures to cope with such a transition.

There is also the political question relating to the circumstances under which an individual who believes in democracy takes a stand against the majority decision of the collective.

The Vlok interview highlights some of the general issues confronting opposition institutions in the new period. Historically *New Era* has been a staunchly pro-ANC/SACP journal, which has built up a readership of some 40 000 township activists on this basis. When I began work at the magazine in January, it was agreed by the four staff members that the character of the publication needed to change.

Firstly, the unbanned ANC and SACP each had their own legal mouthpieces. For *New Era* to continue to give "the line" as in the past was untenable. It had none of the essential ties to those organisations which such a role would properly require. In addition, there seemed little point in even considering this, as it would amount to unnecessarily duplicating the roles of publications such as *Mayibuye* and *Umsebenzi*. Neither was there any desire to continue as a propaganda organ.

Secondly, *New Era* had to define itself differently to other publications such as the feature magazine and debate forum *Work In Progress*, which targeted an intellectual readership; *SA Labour Bulletin*,

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with a socialist orientation and a largely trade unionist audience; and *Learn and Teach* with its propagandistic/narrative thrust aimed at very low literacy readers.

Thirdly, it was clear that the post-February 1990 climate had already seen foreign funding rapidly diminishing. *New Era* would have to seriously consider steps towards becoming financially viable in the tough apartheid-skewed marketplace, which, in turn, meant broadening the readership beyond penniless township activists and establishing a profile as a professional publication that could attract advertisers.

These three factors culminated in a radical re-orientation of *New Era*. Its design became less like a journal and more like a popular magazine, with a mix of features with short, digestible articles and briefs.

Politically, the staff agreed that over a transitional period, propaganda had to go. Political education was to follow close on its heels. The new gist was to provide novel information and insight, provocative debate and entertainment. Accordingly the publication broke new ground for itself by explicitly publishing articles that were critical of the orthodoxies. It carried an attack on the ANC for its handling of Winnie Mandela's trial, a hard-hitting interview with ANC military chief Chris Hani, a challenging probe into Stalinism within the SACP, several critical items on the Soviet Union, and so on.

The aim, in short, was to take *New Era* out of the fringes of the alternative and "politico" sector and make it into a viable commercially-distributed and financed popular general interest magazine.

What is clear from the events that prompted my resignation as editor is that this transition from the old to the new – despite having general support within the staff – was ultimately too drastic for the majority. Though the staff rejects this view, my interpretation is that the primary motivation for their refusal to run the Vlok interview amounts to a feeling that he did not come off badly enough or revealingly enough. Staff members did not want to be associated with publishing an item where the Minister had free rein to repeat his pat replies to questions without explicitly being exposed as

dodging the issues in the process. The question then of how broad the staff felt the magazine could go – in this case, carrying views they did not endorse – came up against a Berlin Wall. In spiking the interview, they also showed themselves to be unaware or unconcerned about how this would be regarded in dominant political, business and professional circles.

The transition to the apartheid marketplace thus elicited a clash of cultures which touched on the fundamental direction the publication was heading in. However, it also threw into focus the problems of the direct-democracy methods of operation that prevailed within the project.

If my perspective reflected conventional practices in many, if not perhaps most, periodicals (Western or otherwise), how did the *New Era/Grassroots* perspective arise? And will it be able to survive in the new politically and economically competitive environment?

The *Grassroots* stable publishes *Grassroots* (currently in abeyance pending funding for a relaunch), *Learning Roots* (a high school students' paper) and *New Era*. It was not always run along the lines of direct staff democracy, but today staff members are largely accountable only to their collective self, even though the tradition of consulting externally with selected community leaders still continues.

It goes almost without saying that the lack of a hierarchy which prevails at *New Era* is incompatible with the demands of producing to frequent and tight deadlines. For practical reasons alone, it is essential for this procedure to be modernised to provide for mandates with individual responsibility and concomitant power to take decisions, even if unpopular. Democratic participation by all staff – and by outside individuals, boards and organisations – needs to be structured on a basis which takes this into account.

Certainly, direct democracy has to be replaced by representative democracy. What sort of representative democracy, however, should operate on a democratic media project, both as regards its internal and external relations? For me, *New Era* was too democratic. Yet, staff on a number of democratic publications complain

bitterly at the lack of democratic participation available to them. There are also numerous cases of community, labour and political organisations complaining about the lack of accountability to them of democratic media.

In my view democratic media require a special and unique combination of accountability, participation and autonomy, relating to their institutional specificity in society. Thus, I would argue that in regard to the external accountability-participation issue, one could argue convincingly that there should be a unique scope for discretion and creativity in the mandate of a democratic publication. Such an autonomy would differ from the situation that obtains in institutions such as a trade union federation vis-a-vis its affiliates. A defined institutional linkage between the democratic media and democratic organisations needs to take this into account.

Regarding internal structures of accountability and participation, it is similarly possible for a strong political case to be made why in particular an editor should have a wider mandate than, say, a trade unionist or a political leader vis-a-vis the membership of their organisations. Experience has tended to show that if media are to play a role in building and sustaining an open society – a prospect which has only now become possible in the 1990s in South Africa – plurality of views is essential. The more a diverse range of publications exist, and the more diverse a range of editors can stamp their individual personalities on these, the more dynamic and alive the whole system.

It is clear that the all-too-evident need for flexible and rapid response from the alternative press will not on its own invoke such changes. Instead in *New Era's* case, the transition into the dominant mainstream of society, has been shipwrecked on the rocks of anachronistic political attitudes and practical procedures. ●

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