

MOULDING THE CLAY OF A NEW DISPENSATION

*Deputy editor of the Star, **SHAUN JOHNSON** argues that 'mainstream' media have many faults, but they are still precious assets that can be moulded to aid development*

IN this South Africa which is hopefully, finally, on the brink of beginning its transition to democracy, what is the 'mainstream' in newspaper terms? Is it a stream which should be diverted — and, if so, how? Is it a stream which should be dammed up, or allowed to flow on?

I take it as read that most people accept, as I do, the limitations, as well as the powers, of the press. It seems clear to me that in terms of mass penetration, radio is the media's big brother now, and will become more so when it is belatedly unshackled by the government.

Television, which is about to enter the exciting phase of independence it should have entered a long time ago, will always be more immediate, more glamorous, and possibly more directly influential than our newspapers. This is not unique to South Africa; all around the world the printed media is fighting — and often losing — a titanic battle against its electronic brethren. In our country, too, newspapers are half the size they were a decade ago, and shrinking. Long-standing titles are disappearing. Newspapers still reach only a fraction of the population.

I make no easy assumptions about the preordained survival of the existing papers — even my own — either in economic or political terms.

But newspapers there will be in the new South Africa, and they are a significant potential force for good or evil. Increasingly, I believe, their importance will lie in the quality of the myriad services they supply, rather than the cold statistics of the numbers they reach or the party they endorse in elections. Some will grow within the limitations of increasing educational parity, availability and affordability, others will shrink and close.

I asked what the 'mainstream' is today. Well, in the case of the *Star*, the established English-language daily I work for, it is interesting to note that soon, after a lifetime of being in opposition to the government of the day (the quality of that opposition is subject for a different debate), it will face the prospect of being broadly in tune with the new, developing democratic structures of State.

The same applies, I should think, to many of the brave weeklies which kept the candle of protest alive in the darkest days of the 1980s. This is a source of pleasure, and to an extent vindication, but it is going to force us to look long and hard at what we are really

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here for, and how we can play a "developmental" role — by which I simply mean helping to develop a decent, prosperous society — without being slavish praise-poets, mean-minded underminers or, needless to say, trivial titillators.

But the 'mainstream' means to most of us the established mass media, and the term carries with it a bagful of connotations. Of course the lopsided structure of press ownership and control has come under the microscope. It has been self-evident for so long that I'm reluctant to spell out the obvious yet again.

I prefer to look at it this way: the major press groups are a fact of our lives, and you can damn their power and exclusivity until you are blue in the face, or you can look very carefully at what they are and what they are not — and within that context, see what can be done to make them want to serve their society better.

I stress this: make them want to serve their society better. I know very little about the other big press companies, but I know something about the one I work for, the *Argus* company. I believe that for all the accusations which can be levelled at the 'moguls', they have given us something precious, worth preserving and improving upon.

That is a professional, established, and diverse press — diverse in terms of the numbers of newspapers available, if not ideology. That is the basis from which I start: if it were attempted to break down this foundation, and start from scratch, I believe we might never even reach the same imperfect point again. And that would be a terrible waste.

I have learnt, through painful and humbling experience, that the politics of a newspaper is only one part of its selling appeal. I am fully aware that if my editor had to choose between firing me, and firing the racing editor, I'd be packing my bags.

There are many other practical, even mundane, services it provides which make people — right across society — want to buy it. And as we have surely all learnt by now, if you want a general interest newspaper to grow and prosper, people must want to buy it and advertisers must want to advertise in it. Foreign funding was crucial, but impermanent; State funding on its own could not sustain even a fraction of the limited diversity we have at present.

PLEASE TURN OVER 

MAINSTREAM PRESS

So those of us who see journalism as among other things a marvellous calling; one that can root out injustice and improve people's lives, have to be very realistic when formulating options. As far as the 'mainstream' press is concerned, I would like to see us take the clay we already have, knead it, and mould it.

The diversity we should aim for operates on a general and on a specific level.

Generally, we need as many newspapers of different types as possible. There should be "qualities", simple-English papers, pop tabloids, if necessary party-aligned newspapers, and valuable specialist papers which are supported via structures like the Independent Media Diversity Trust, to give them a fair chance to establish themselves. That is the right mix, and I do not think that this vision is one from which all media bosses would shrink. The experiment with the ownership structure of the *Sowetan* is not an insignificant development.

In sum: I think there should be some newspapers which appeal to and are useful to the masses, some which appeal to those with secondary school education and above, and some which appeal to the intelligentsia. They should be representative of the voices of all the different

peoples of our country; and all can help to build a "South Africanism", using the language their readers want them to use.

Specifically, the culture within existing mainstream papers needs to change further. This has been obvious for a long time. But I think there has been a tendency, because of the flaws of the 'mainstream' press, to underestimate the fluidity and unpredictability within it now. From political groups, this is often born of frustration and I understand that. But I think it is specious and hollow at this stage to talk monochromatically about "the media" as if there is no discernible difference in the way various newspapers are treating developments — like, to use two recent, tragic examples, the murder of Chris Hani and the Sebokeng massacre. There were vast differences, as anyone who spent half an hour doing a case study would be able to tell you.

The mainstream is an unfolding, uncertain phenomenon, and there are opportunities for diverting the stream in the direction which those who see journalism as a developmental tool believe in.

On a broader point, in politico-repressive terms, the South African press has never been as free as it is now. The old system no longer has the power or the will

to beat it into submission; the new system is not yet in place. What we journalists do in this period of transition will live with us for a long time to come. Among other things, it will inform the views of those who are soon to assume their rightful places in the government of this country.

There has been much to be ashamed of, in places, in the press. There has been distortion, disinformation, scare-mongering; a recurring inability to see reality from someone else's — particularly a voteless someone else's — perspective. But there has, in places, also been growth, learning, change, open-mindedness, responsibility and goodwill.

This reflects the internal battles that are going on, to varying degrees, in newsrooms around the country. These, in turn, reflect the larger battles being fought on the national stage. But I have no doubt that the exponents of the latter beliefs are winning. And I believe that those outside who share the same vision should not, out of frustration or ignorance, abandon them. ●

SHAUN JOHNSON, a graduate of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, delivered this paper at the recent media and development conference at Rhodes.

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