

**GUEST
EDITORIAL**

IN South Africa two approaches to journalism — two philosophies if you like — have grown up side by side. On the one hand there is the “orthodox” or “traditional” school, which holds that the press ought to record and reflect events; on the other is the “radical” (for want of a better description) school which argues that the press’s role is to shape events and change the course of history. Some talk of “objective” versus “advocacy” journalism. There is a third school of developmental journalism, which the cynics call “sunshine” journalism, premised on the belief that the media’s primary duty is to educate people and build a nation, not harp on the shortcomings of a developing society. I leave developmental journalism, important though it may be, out of consideration here.

The mainstream press, certainly the English-language press, by and large has adopted the orthodox approach, even while being severely constrained by political and legal pressures. The “alternative” press, which grew up in a vacuum created by the government and the mainstream press, has taken the “advocacy” route. But the differences between the two approaches are not precise and there is now a marked degree of overlap between the two. Even within the mainstream press there have been sharp differences between English and Afrikaans language newspapers. The former has been much less committed to a political party than the latter, which for many years regarded its primary duty as being to return the National Party government to power with as big a majority as possible. Theirs was as much of an advocacy role as any alternative newspaper’s. As was the SABC’s. Both the Afrikaans press and the SABC sought assiduously to shape history, and both failed conspicuously to achieve any lasting success. Let that be a lesson to those who are contemplating the launch of another party political newspaper.

Since 1990, however, all our newspapers — mainstream and alternative — have modified their attitudes. The mainstream media have become less constrained and more outspoken, the alternatives more market-orientated and commercially-minded as their funding from abroad has diminished. Faced with the inroads of television and an economy in serious decline, all newspapers have had to pay more attention to what readers actually want, rather than what journalists think that their readers want. At the same time, papers are having to decide where they stand philosophically. In the past one took up a position according to one’s view of apartheid. Now it is

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**RICHARD
STEYN**
Editor-in-Chief
The Star

more difficult. The major parties are becoming more multiracial, and are espousing universal values. Difficult choices are having to be made.

Journalists too are having to re-appraise their attitudes. Many journalists who supported the liberation struggle have become more and more disillusioned at the anti-democratic tendencies of some of the political parties and the intolerance of their supporters. It is gradually beginning to dawn on all of us that the press needs to hang together in these difficult times of transition or run the risk of hanging separately in future. We need, in short, to unite behind a set of common values.

This is the theme of *Breaking Story*, a challenging new book on the South African press by Dr Gordon Jackson of Whitworth College, Washington, USA. Dr Jackson, who did much of his research at the journalism department at Rhodes, laments the lack of any clear, common philosophical base or value system to guide South African journalists. He believes that without such a set of values, journalists are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the future. I must say that I wholeheartedly agree with him.

So let me, somewhat tentatively, suggest a way forward for journalism in the new South Africa. I hope that others will contribute to the debate.

First and foremost, we need to throw away the divisions of the past. South African journalism still portrays many of the divisions of the apartheid society. We have different trade unions for journalists of different races; most of our newspapers belong to the Newspaper Press Union but some do not.

We have a Press Council recognised by some and not by others. The Council has a code of conduct observed by some and ignored by the rest. We run different courses for trainee journalists, and compete with one another for funding from abroad. And all this in a profession not slow to preach to others about the need to let bygones be bygones and come together.

Second — and here I borrow from the Poynter Institute in the US’s guidelines — we need to focus our minds on what business we’re actually in: i.e. supplying information and providing a forum for public discussion to preserve and enhance democratic society. We have to keep our many diverse communities talking to each other.

Third, we need to settle upon a code of conduct — an ethic of journalism — that can guide us along the road ahead. The foundation upon which that code should be based is a commitment to free speech and democracy. And by democracy ➤

I don't simply mean the absence of apartheid, but a system of government in which, to quote Peter Berger, we have two institutions — regular and real elections, and a body of civil rights and liberties. "The first makes sure that periodically we can throw the bastards out of office, while the other ensures there are some things the bastards cannot do even when they hold office."

Democracy cannot be built overnight. It is a slow and painstaking process. As a prominent Polish politician remarked rather ruefully at a recent conference attended by the ANC: "We are in a situation where a totalitarian regime fell apart, but democracy is not yet in place. This is largely due to a lack of understanding of how a democracy works. Democracy is not only about elections, majority rule, a multiparty system and a new government. It is, first of all, about relations between people and relations between the authorities and the people."

I believe we have a duty in the new South Africa to bring that insight home to people, to

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responses to this
call for unity.

impress upon them that democracy is not about having everything your own way, but about settling differences through negotiation and compromise.

As to the specifics of that code or ethic, Dr Jackson suggests five values upon which such a value system could be based:

- the principle of truth-telling
- the principle of justice
- the principle of freedom
- the principle of humaneness
- the principle of stewardship (i.e. honouring and safeguarding the power that is given us).

Some of these values are contained in the Press Council's current code of conduct but that code is not universally recognised and needs to be re-examined and debated before it finds general acceptance among journalists. ●