

THE ROLE OF THE ELECTRONIC AND S B MEDIA
DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD¹⁾

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The present process of reform in South Africa is supposed to accomplish a Transition to Democracy. Unfortunately many people (especially in the ranks of the privileged minority) are inclined to understand under "Transition to Democracy" what they like or what will suit their large vested interests the best. For those in the NP-establishment a "transition" comparable to a change in government from (say) the Conservative Party to the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, is regarded as too radical. They want a "transition" from the NP-government to a Coalition-government in which the NP will still be in a position to maintain its grip on the levers of power and will still be in a position to protect what these people regard necessary and even essential to be protected.

At a Conference like this, we cannot - to my mind - put too much emphasis on the point that the legitimacy of the South African system cannot be restored without an adequate and proper restructuring of the relevant power relations. The best description of the "Transition to Democracy" in South Africa was given by Mr Mandela on the day he was released from prison. In his speech on the Parade he said: "The White monopoly of political power must be ended and we need a fundamental restructuring of our economic and political systems to address the inequality of Apartheid and to create a truly democratic South Africa". Mr Mandela clearly understands the structural dimensions of the "Transition to Democracy". It has to do with the "re-structuring" of the relationships of Power, Property, Privileges and Access, and with the extremely unequal distribution of these things between the privileged (mainly white) minority and the deprived (mainly black) majority.

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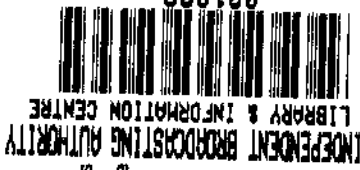
The Power, Property, Privileges and Access concentrated in the hands of the Establishment has segmented and accumulated in its present unequal manner not by chance but because the power relationships of Capitalism, Colonialism and Apartheid were - over the last (say) 120 years - used and "exploited" by a small minority to enhance their sectoral interests in a very blatant way to the detriment of the interests of the population at large.

The present Establishment is based on four formidable power blocks - the political power of the National Party, the organisational and bureaucratic power of the Bureaucracy, the economic power of the corporate or Capitalistic sector (with its international linkages) and the propaganda power of the Media. If these four centres of power have been "isolated" or "compartmentalised" the structural change need in every centre, for an adequate "Transition to Democracy", would still have been a formidable task, but it would have been manageable because we would have been in the position to concentrate separately on transforming each centre of power. It is, however, extremely important to realise that these four centres of power has been forged - over say the last 20 years - into a closely-integrated "Compact of Power". Any attempt to change the structure or the power relations in one centre of power - for example Political Power - will have all kinds of ramifications in the other centres of power and will elicit unforeseen resistance from unexpected corners.

If we contemplate the inequality of Media power within the "Compact of Power", the "powerlessness" of the media at the disposal of the Liberationists is quite similar to the position of the media in Third World countries vis-a-vis the enormously powerful media networks in the First World. In both cases the powerful media determines the flow of information, of ideas and of opportunity in a decisive way to the benefit of the rich and the powerful and to the detriment of the poor and deprived.

We should not underestimate the resistance and the complications the "Compact of Power" - with its overlapping vested interests - is going to cause during the Transition to Democracy. To succeed with a smooth Transition in a reasonable timespan, it is imperative that the "Media" should be the "power block" to be "liberated" first from its "bondage" in the "Compact of Power". The Media should

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be set free first to enable it to oil the wheels of the rest of the Establishment for its painful journey from the discredited land of Apartheid over the Mountain of Transition towards our desired land of Democracy. At present it seems as if the wheels of the Establishment (including the Media) cannot move properly because the power, the vested interests and privileges that have - over many years - got rust onto these wheels.

The proper "liberation" of the media from its structural "bondage" in the "Compact of Power" is not only of strategic importance for the Transitional Period, but also to succeed with Democracy and to be able to maintain and to perpetuate Democracy in a future non-racial South Africa. From a democratic point of view we definitely cannot afford that the Media should again become "enslaved" by the political, bureaucratic and/or capitalistic "power blocks" as has happened in the "old" South Africa. We need a relatively free, open and independent Media not only during the Transitional Period, but also in the future South Africa to play the highly needed role as watchdog to guarantee the continuation of not only democratic government but also good government. The Liberationist organisation with a good chance to become the future governing party should acknowledge - especially at this stage - the need for an independent Media that will not be hand in glove with the new government but will continuously put it under the necessary Media "pressure". We are standing at an important and unique "junction" in both our political and media history. We should "explicit" this opportunity to plan deliberately for as much "structural space" for the Media as possible in an attempt to prevent a repetition of the "enslavement" of the media to other "power blocks".

The task of freeing the Media from its structural "bondage" and to "create" the necessary structural "space" and freedom for it in a future South Africa, will of course be an exceptionally difficult one. My task today is not to address the "liberation" of the Media as a whole, but only to talk about

the role of the electronic and state media. To liberate this part of the media from its enslavement in the "Compact of Power" will be difficult but perhaps more attainable than the other parts of the media. To understand the need and the possibilities of "transforming" the electronic and state media to play its proper role in the Transition, I deem it necessary to give a short overview of the history of the electronic and state media over the last 40 years and to highlight how the NP-government deliberately "transformed" this media in the early sixties and again in the early eighties to turn it into an effective instrument for its ideological propaganda campaigns.

Dr H P Verwoerd was the first prime minister to realise the necessity of underscoring the apartheid policy with an ideology. To "transform" the SABC into a propaganda machine of the NP-government, Dr Verwoerd dismissed the then chairman of the Board, Mr Tielman Roos (a "bloedsap") rather unceremoniously in 1959 and appointed a personal friend and confidant, Dr Piet Meyer, as chairman of the Board. Like Dr Verwoerd, Dr Meyer studied in Germany during the early 1930's and was an admirer of Hitler and Goebbels. He was an employee of Rembrandt and learned a lot about marketing from Dr Anton Rupert. In his dual capacity as chairman of the Board and as chairman of the Broederbond, he played a strategic role in "selling" the Verwoerdian ideology during the 1960's. As a propagandist Dr Meyer was formidable. Dr Verwoerd would not have been nearly as successful in spreading his ideology if it had not been for the excellent "service" Dr Meyer and the SABC delivered for him.

In contrast with Dr Verwoerd, Mr John Vorster was not an intellectual and also not ideologically orientated. He was not interested in propaganda, but as the "super policeman" his main interest was in maintaining "stability". With this aim in mind, he tried to take all the "dangerous" elements out of the system. His concern with stability played perhaps a role when TV was introduced during his term in office. He may have regarded it as a method to keep potential trouble-makers from the streets.

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During Vorster's period as prime minister, ^{at} Meyer continued as chairman of the Board. Vorster did not unduly interfere directly with Piet Meyer's propaganda activities. But from the early seventies P W Botha and the so-called Cape Liberals in the NP realised that the SABC was strategically placed in the escalating ideological "struggle" between the Verligtes and Verkramptes for the soul of Afrikanerdom. 1) This battle was won by the Verligtes when the split in the NP took place in February 1982.

P W Botha became prime minister in 1978 and Piet Meyer retired in 1979. It created the opportunity for P W Botha to "transform" the SABC yet another time. This time the SABC was transformed to become an offensive instrument of the Total Strategy to counteract the alleged Total Onslaught. The two chairmen during the eighties - Prof Wynand Mouton and Dr Barend Fourie - were not strong and ideologically oriented personalities. It created the opportunity for the Botha regime to intervene directly with the SABC in at least three different ways.

Firstly, P W Botha, as the minister responsible for the SABC for a long period, intervened directly with the Director-General's office whenever things were broadcasted or televised that were not to the personal liking of the government and especially Mr P W Botha. In due time P W Botha even appointed Kudu Eksteen from his Foreign Affairs "kindergarten" as Director-General, while Dr Barend Fourie was appointed as Chairman of the Board. During this period the SABC became an extension of the pro-South Africa - no, the pro-Nationalist - propaganda of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

1) I hope you will allow me a short personal note. When I was appointed to the Board in 1972 as someone to put the case for the Cape Liberals, my "brief" was to challenge Dr Piet Meyer and his Verkrampste Establishment. I do not know whether I did a good job. All I do know is that Dr Meyer never liked me - to put it mildly. I can say that I thoroughly enjoyed the task of challenging him and his Verkrampste Establishment. Unfortunately I had to pay a big price for this "enjoyment" - it "trapped" me in the Board and the NP for 15 years.

Secondly, the SABC was used systematically during the eighties to propagate the new ideology of the Total-Onslaught-cum-Total-Strategy. Nothing demonstrated and symbolised this ideological "onslaught" of the SABC better than the regular "Pik and Cliff shows". On almost every Sunday evening Cliff Saunders was on TV to inform the viewers that he has discovered new evidence "dat daar wragtag n Kommunis en n Bevydingsteoloog agter elke Karoo-bossie skuil". This information created excellent opportunities for P W Botha to reassure the viewers about the invincibility of the Fortress of Civilisation and Christianity in the southern part of the Dark Continent. At these occasions P W Botha also promised all the good people in the Deep Plate-land that the NP government will maintain good moral standards - in every walk of life!

Thirdly, at the height of the Total Strategy, secureaucrats worked on an almost permanent basis in the news offices of the SABC to "assist" the newspeople to remain within the bounds prescribed by the extensive security legislation that was enacted as part and parcel of the Total Strategy. Unfortunately I cannot supply any detail about the "assistance" delivered by secureaucrats in the news offices of the SABC. Their "participation" was never put before the Board. I suppose their task was to supply the SABC with "technical advice". I presume it was regarded to be in the "national interest" - as defined by the Botha government - to make doubly sure that a public corporation like the SABC was not breaking the law!

I do not have any firsthand knowledge of what has been happening at the SABC during the last five years. That it remains an instrument of propaganda for the Establishment is evident for anyone listening and looking at its services. I find the distinction the present chairman, Prof Christo Viljoen recently made between a "good" public corporation (like the SABC) and a "bad" state corporation, very interesting. I must be honest. I do not understand the distinction. Perhaps the ANC should employ Prof Viljoen to advise them about how private companies can be "nationalised" to become "good" public corporations and how to ensure that they will not degenerate into "bad" state corporations!

In a paper about the electronic and state media I have no choice to say something about M-Net. Not because M-Net is part of the electronic state media, but because it was created by a state charter given to M-Net by the Botha-government. It happened at a time when a very comprehensive network of patronage was in place as part and parcel of the Total Strategy. The condition of the charter was made even more lucrative in the De Klerk period and M-Net wants even additional "chartered favours" to make their state-created "property" even more profitable.

I lately became interested in the development of the phenomenon of economic property. During the Middle-Ages economic property - as we know it today - was almost non-existent. In the development of property from say the 14th century, the state played an indispensable role in giving legal status or title deed to property - in "empowering" the owner so to speak. Those that were "empowered" to own property received it mostly as a government favour and it happened rather arbitrarily. It is really strange that neither the freemarketeers nor those with large vested interests in the capitalistic system are prepared to acknowledge the role that patronage and favouritism played in the capitalist system.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am very much in favour of the institution of property. But as a political economist I am concerned with the "functionality" of property and even more concerned when property is distributed as unequally as is the case in South Africa. It is also necessary to take note of the fact that new types of potential property become available regularly due to technological progress. An interesting example of this is the potential property that had been "created" by the development of the electronic media. As in many countries in the world the state determines in South Africa when, how and on what conditions this kind of "property" can become operational.

We should, to my mind, judge the "new property" that was created

when the state charter was given to M-Net against the background of its propaganda potential and against the very unequal distribution of property in South Africa. We should also take note of the fact that the M-Net played a rather important instrumental role in "cementing" the "Compact of Power" between the four centres of power mentioned above. If all these considerations are taken into account, one cannot but ask questions about the merit of government's decision to "give" this lucrative "new" property to M-Net. I am aware of the fact that large vested interests are involved with M-Net. But large vested interests are in any case involved in the structural reform needed for a proper transition towards a democratic and more just South Africa. There can be little doubt that the M-Net charter, the condition of this charter and the possibility of similar charters to XYZ-Nets will have to be (re)considered as part and parcel of Media reform.

Let me conclude in making a few suggestions.

Firstly, there can be no doubt about the need to democratize the Board of the SABC. The present Board is simply not representative.

Secondly, we probably need an "interim arrangement" as far as the SABC is concerned - even before the democratization of the Board can take place. One possibility is to appoint an additional Director-General (or whatever his position is called now) to "manage" the SABC jointly with Mr Wynand Harmse. This person should be someone with media experience and with credentials acceptable to Liberationist organisations.

Thirdly, something ought to be done about M-Net and similar "chartered companies" but I do not want to be specific about that now. As an admirer of Adam Smith I am rather sceptical about "Merchant Monopolists" that derived their monopolistic position from charters and patronage. I took note of M-Net's recent decision to abandon Channel 7. As an "interim" arrangement it could be considered to replace it with Channel Codesa from (say) 7 pm to 8 pm every evening. It is not in the interest of the rich and the super-rich only to be exposed to American

movies. Channel Codesa can be used to inform the rich and the super-rich about the plight of the poor and the very poor on the other side of the track. It can also be used to convince the capitalists - both the big and the small capitalists - about the economic necessity of redistribution. It can also be used to educate the Fat Cats - both the old and the new Fat Cats - about the moral value of voluntary restitution.