

Some disadvantage - Not here this morning  
May repeat

Richard Steyn

## TOWARDS AN OPEN MEDIA FOR A NEW SOUTH AFRICA.

Before outlining, briefly, some of the impediments in the way of a more open media system for SA, let me make a few preliminary observations about media freedom here, because I think it is necessary to keep a sense of perspective in this discussion.

The media in SA are not free, but are considerably freer than they were before Feb 2. That is not so much because Govt has suddenly softened its attitude out of the goodness of its heart, but because previously banned political parties and personalities have been unbanned and it is now possible to air views that used to be strictly suppressed and censored. That is a profound and significant change. There remains, however, a weight of legislation on the statute book which needs to be removed before we can talk about a genuinely free flow of information in SA. Many facts are still secret, while comment is relatively free.

But let us also recognise that in SA there is considerably more freedom of speech and of information than exists in many Third World countries, in parts of South America and Eastern Europe. Which means that we have a base to build on, a tradition of criticism and dissent, that gives us an advantage in building a new system for a new SA.

There are to my mind five main impediments in the way of a more open media system:

1. Ownership. Here one must distinguish between State ownership, by and large, of the electronic media and corporate ownership of the press. Neither is conducive to what I believe should be the guiding principle of any future system: the entrenchment of 'diversity'. That means more competing radio and tv stations, more competing newspapers and in particular black-owned and African language newspapers. Radio and

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television are not my province, so I shall confine my remarks to newspapers.

I have never hesitated to express the view that we need a greater spread of newspapers in order to reflect better the opinions and interests of the grass roots in this country. Regrettably, because of economic factors and competition from radio and television, the trend in the mainstream press in this country and overseas has been in the opposite direction, towards concentration and rationalisation.

There has been plenty of criticism of press monopolies in this country, much of it aired at conferences such as these. Their shortcomings are well known. What are not generally recognised are the benefits of being economically powerful. Whatever the

faults of the biggest group, Argus, it has always been staunchly anti-apartheid when it was not commercially sensible to be so: it has been in the forefront of efforts to resist Government's moves to licence journalists; whenever it has been necessary to fight the Govt in the courts, Argus has done so, thereby holding up an umbrella under which many independent and alternative newspapers have sheltered. When the World was closed, Argus was able to absorb the loss, open Post almost immediately and keep many black journalists on the payroll.

Newspapers, as you know, are expensive, capital intensive products. In other parts of the world, with the possible exception of Britain, the trend has been towards joint operating agreements, rationalisation and the closure of titles. We should not lose sight of the possibility that efforts to to break up the existing press groups in SA might lead to fewer rather than more titles, and less diversity in the press.

2. The second impediment to freedom of expression has to do with what is known in the trade as 'gate-keeping'. As Irwin Manoim pointed out recently, news is a set of facts gathered and presented in a particular way by people whose judgment of what makes news is governed by factors such as their race, education, gender, social class, experience etc. Obviously, different ideas pre-dominate in different sectors of society. A township dweller has a very different outlook on life from someone who lives in Houghton. A mine worker sees the world in different terms to a shift boss, a migrant worker to a farmer or industrialist.

The mainstream media are indeed dominated by people from similar backgrounds and with similar values. By and large we are white, middle class and have a particular economic outlook

and value system. The phenomenon is not confined to SA, but it is particularly prevalent here. Take Nelson Mandela's and F.W. de Klerk's recent visits to the US as one example. The one was a major happening in the US; the other a low-key engagement. Yet compare the treatment given to the two events on radio and television and in certain sections of the press.

We have to accept the fact that the gatekeeping being practised at present is simply unacceptable to those who are not white, middle class and pro-capitalist, and the onus rests on us to remedy the situation.

3. The third impediment to a more open media system is a philosophical disagreement over the role and function of the media in a newly emergent democracy. Some Africanists contend

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that the role of the media should be to strengthen the unity of the nation and that the watchdog function of the media is less important than the need to unify people, even if this means ~~glossing over~~ <sup>playing down</sup> grievances and bad government. But sunshine journalism is fine in theory, unfortunately it doesn't work out in practice. It glosses over corruption and malpractice, covers up the shortcomings of officialdom and generally results in an uninformed populace and an out of touch government.

Nonetheless the lesson has not been absorbed fully in Africa and I anticipate pressure, in the future, to play down the problems of any new government. We are seeing suggestions of this already in the attitude of the major extra-parliamentary organisations to adverse reporting and criticism from black and white journalists. Black reporters are particularly vulnerable. They are required to take ideological positions and if they don't, they are threatened - often with their lives.

Years of operating in the wilderness has produced a barrenness, a culture of powerlessness, in which tolerance of dissent is almost non-existent. Against this sombre background, it was reassuring to hear from Nelson Mandela two weeks ago that the ANC wants 'open media, discussion and dissension, contrary views, opposition and the ballot box'.

These are noble words and we will be looking to the ANC to uphold them.

4. The fourth impediment to a more open system may yet be the constitutional and legislative structure within which the media will ~~have~~ <sup>has</sup> to operate. We do not know, for instance, whether there will be a bill of rights which establishes a citizen's right to free expression or whether the media will enjoy any kind of constitutional protection. In the end the media will

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be as free or unfree as the law of the land and the government of the day allows. And, as we know only too well, there is a great temptation for any government in difficulties to respond by enacting laws which curb the media. We may have as many restrictive laws under a future administration as we have under this one.

Lastly, if we are to have open media, people must actually want open media. We continually talk about the public's right to know, but what if people don't want to know? In countries in a state of siege, people often don't wish continually to be given bad news or to hear opinions they do not like. It takes a mature, democratically-minded society to understand the necessity for open, unfettered media.

So to sum up: ownership, gatekeeping, differing attitudes towards the role of the media, a lack of tolerance at the grassroots and possible legislative curbs are all impediments in the way of a more open media system. I believe media freedom is going to be crucially important to the new SA and much too important to be left to the media alone to defend.

Of all freedoms, media freedom is perhaps the most precious attribute of any society, because as the editor of the Observer once remarked at the IPI, no matter what is wrong with a society, if the media are free, the facts cannot be concealed forever. That is why media freedom - a branch of freedom of speech - is really the key to all other freedoms.

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But, lest we in the press get too carried with the righteousness of our cause, let me end off with an amusing quote from Tom Stoppard, who has a bruised character in one of his plays remark, 'I'm with you on the freedom of the press; it's the newspapers I can't stand'.