

# Writing on the wall for Afrikaans press?

A new type of journalism is taking root in the Afrikaans press, according to writer and journalist HANS PIENAAR. He spoke to *Democracy in Action* about current trends in the mainstream press.



**W**hat do you mean by the new journalism that is emerging in Afrikaans?

Well, obviously in the first place I refer to new publications like *Vrye Weekblad*, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and local efforts in the Cape Province. But there is also a Boereglasnost in the mainstream Afrikaans press. A paper like *Beeld*, for example, is beginning to acquire a taste for independence. Recently it has twice expressed reservations in editorials about the silencing of Jan van Eck in parliament, and it has also pronounced F W de Klerk's visit to Boipatong a mistake.

But if one looks at *Rapport*, the biggest Afrikaans newspaper, one would be forgiven – to put it mildly – for believing the opposite. *Rapport* nowadays frequently carries racist articles, like the recent interview with the same Van Eck, or approving references to Barend Strydom, or the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging. And there is a deathly silence when it comes to proven crimes by the police.

I would prefer not to comment on the performance of the paper I work for, but I can say that in broader Afrikanerdom there has been a singular failure by its institutions to tackle the sickness left by apartheid. There has been a spate of mass killings by people whose minds have obviously been destroyed by apartheid indoctrination. Yet there is no campaign to root out these illnesses by the church, or schools, or whatever.

The obvious thing for Afrikaans papers to write about, for instance, is the phenomenon of mass killings by whites. What are its causes, its links with the apartheid past, what do psychologists or futurologists say about the damage it does to Afrikaners? Not in order to jump on any human rights bandwagon, but for the sake of themselves.

**Yet you still believe there is a Boereglasnost?**

Yes. There are excellent journalists on the

staff of all Afrikaans newspapers, especially among the younger journalists. They are extremely professional people who embrace the ethic of journalism. They have chosen a low-paying career with a low status simply because they believe in journalism. Many of them have undergone "new South Africa" conversions in the recent past, especially after exposure to the dynamism of black politics. Most of them still suffer from an excessive respect for authority, like all Afrikaners, but that is also changing. The expressions of racism in Afrikanerdom certainly does not sit well with many Afrikaans journalists. It sickens many of them.



**What underpins the racism of Afrikanerdom, and of the Afrikaans press?**

I think one must try to understand how the Afrikaner mind works. They won't say it, but they are scared stiff about the future and that they will lose their Western lifestyles. So they are latching on to the new debates about ethnicity raging everywhere in the world. In the process they have created ethnic traps for themselves in their moral thinking. Racism is seen as harmless, as a mere aberration even when it involves torture or serial murder. Condemnation of that racism is seen as false, as ideological, as anti-ethnicity and therefore as anti-Afrikaner. I think far too many Afrikaners do not understand that ethnicity is still possible without racism or aggression towards other groups. Certainly

sectors of the Afrikaans press do not understand this.

**Why is the Afrikaans press so reluctant to write about police crimes?**

Well, Afrikaner power has always been dependent on the police; the apartheid state was a police state. One of the most essential and earliest features of apartheid was that the public spotlight was turned away from what happened in black areas, including the actions of the police and officials. This has bred a rule of thumb for Afrikaners: hands off the police, which they apply to this day.

You must also remember that Afrikaners only know the friendly side of the police because they come from within their own ranks. Most Afrikaners find it very hard to reconcile the friendly face of the policeman next door with all the things that come out in court cases. So they simply disbelieve them, and ascribe murder verdicts to conspiracies or the politics of the judge. One can describe it as Boerepsycho, this inability of Afrikaners to accept that policemen have committed crimes, or that their actions constitute crimes in the first place. The same would apply for people in the Afrikaans press, I guess.

**Will the Afrikaans press be relevant in the future?**

It all depends on how strong the laager is that Afrikaners are drawing at the moment. If Afrikaners choose the laager, or are forced into it, an introspective elite will arise which will only be interested in making money for trips overseas and the Afrikaans press will serve this elite. But if the exponents of Boereglasnost continue and become even more daring, and realise what opportunities await them in an open society that develops all its cultures equally, then papers like *Beeld* have enough skills and democratic commitment in their ranks to become important players in future politics.

**What can other organisations do to help Boereglasnost along?**

What they must understand, in the first place, is that Afrikaners are extremely sensitive to any paternalism. For instance, holding up the English press as a model will not work, because there is a deep suspicion that

# Revival on the airwaves



Suddenly it seems, everyone with any interest in a product to sell or information to communicate is talking about the potential of radio in South Africa. The Cinderella medium – forgotten in the fuss over the glamorous power of TV – has made it to the ball and there are hundreds of suitors wanting to dance with her...

By SUE VALENTINE

**A**sk any media specialist what is the most effective means of reaching South Africans on a mass scale and chances are you'll get the same answer. Radio is the new buzz word.

It may not always be for the same reasons, but be it for pure commercial gain or in the interests of people's right to information, of all the media in South Africa, radio is the most affordable, most popular and the one which reaches urban and rural, literate and illiterate South Africans alike.

Besides the two independent commercial stations of Radio 702 and Capital Radio (able to broadcast only on medium wave and with their transmitters based in "independent" homelands), all broadcasting in South Africa is controlled by the state. However, there is a groundswell of interest in access to the airwaves from another, non-commercial sector – community radio.

Although no actual stations exist as yet, plans are most advanced in Cape Town where the Bush Radio initiative (so named for its initial association with the campus radio station at the "bush college" of the University of the Western Cape) plans to begin broadcasting in August.

The concept of community radio has also taken root in Grahamstown where a group meet regularly and are ready to go on air as soon as they can raise the money for a transmitter. In Durban (through the Media Trainers' Forum) and in Johannesburg (under the auspices of *Speak* magazine) others are developing their understanding of how community radio works and how to develop it from the realm of ideas into reality.

There is also talk among civic organisations in Natal of the possibility of starting up community radio stations.

The potential of radio in distance education and literacy training has also come under the spotlight through research commissioned by the National Education Policy Investigation network. In a paper, entitled "The Use of Radio for Adult Education", Julie Frederikse explores the capacity of radio for use in adult basic education as well as the plethora of radio proposals which are mushrooming around the country.

These initiatives include plans (and in some cases they are already being implemented in conjunction with the SABC) by Sached, Cosatu, Nactu, the SA Council of Churches, SA Catholic Bishops Conference and the Matla Trust to use radio as a means of mass communication and informal adult education.

Olset (the Open Learning Systems Education Trust) is another potential broadcaster which claims to represent community interests and is geared towards establishing a national educational radio channel in a bid to address the education crisis in the country.

Most recently, prompted by an offer of European Community funding, the formation of a Broadcasting Development Trust has been mooted. In all probability this trust will become the body to which funding proposals for future non-profit, community radio (and television) stations can be directed.

Skills, initiative and training notwithstanding, the stage is set for South Africans around the country (be they geographical communities or interest groupings) to begin meeting and talking to each other in the modern day village square created by community radio.

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the English press has always been *skynheilig*, that they have been critical of apartheid while lustily enjoying its fruits. English whites are putting all the blame for apartheid on Afrikaners, who retort that they have not invented apartheid, they merely perfected it. There I agree with them. Apart from that, in many departments, like hard news gathering or cultural columns or sheer creativity, Afrikaans publications more often than not are superior to English ones.

## 'Holding up the English press as a model will not work'

So outside organisations would do well to avoid being prescriptive and encourage objective reporting simply by praising it, or by singling out good Afrikaans reporters for special treatment. What Afrikaners also appreciate, like all ethnic groups, is admiration for their culture. In Afrikaans literature there is a strong democratic tradition. Appreciating and encouraging that tradition, and not merely lionising the individuals, would be an important boost for the whole emerging democratic culture in Afrikanerdom.

## What about breaking up the monopoly in the Afrikaans press?

That would be counter-productive. The South African press in general needs monopoly conditions to survive, so taking steps against this monopoly could destroy the Afrikaans print media. And the print media are indispensable for any real democratic public debate.

The Afrikaans press is going to be highly critical of a future government – that should be taken for granted. But in order to be taken seriously, it will have to promote democratic values. That, in turn, could be an important means of defusing ethnic Afrikaner terrorism, which quite possibly will be with us in the future. I think the nurturing of Boereglasnost and the alternative press is a far better option. As for expressions of racism, laws already exist against that, and the Afrikaans press takes the findings of institutions like the Media Council very seriously. In future, of course, people and organisations will make use of anti-racist laws to a far greater extent than they do now. And even if racism often is difficult to prove, Afrikaans papers will want to avoid the negative publicity.

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