

CONFERENCE REPORT

A CRITIQUE OF THE MASS MEDIA AT THE ASSA CONGRESS

Les Switzer

The Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA) held its 11th annual congress at the Holiday Inn in Maseru despite a virtual boycott by academics from states other than South Africa.

There was considerable variation in the quality of the papers presented during the three-day conference (24-26 June), and at several points in the proceedings questions were raised concerning the relevance of the topics and the credibility of some speakers. Several delegates walked out of one speech, for example, amidst charges of racism, into another, charges of more racism and out again.

Nevertheless, papers on aspects of rural development in Africa - including those of the two main speakers, Absalom Vilikazi (Zululand) and Gavin Williams (Oxford) - were generally well received as were others concerned with housing, trade unions, influx control and the implications of technological change on blacks (Africans, 'Coloureds', Indians) in the urban areas of Southern Africa. Once again, the contrast between structuralist, mainly Marxist, and alternative explanations of the events and issues discussed was evident throughout the conference.

In what appeared to be a first for ASSA, four papers focussed on the role of print and broadcast media in South Africa: John van Zyl "Broadcast mass media and change in Southern Africa"; Les Switzer "Towards a political economy of the Black Press in South Africa"; Ruth and Keyan Tomaselli "Mass communication and the dissemination of apartheid ideology"; and Graeme Addison "Total strategy as total propaganda: the socialisation of danger". Keyan also presented a paper on "Problems in ethnographic film making - the case of 'Ikaya'".

Ideology is a central theme in three of the four papers to be summarized in this article. The Tomaselli paper makes the strongest statement on the role of the mass media in communicating apartheid ideology "to foster the conditions for the most efficient reproduction of capital". The authors maintain that ideology is not "superimposed" on the public but is "indivisible from the relations of production" - the political, cultural and socio-economic infrastructure - which determines the nature of South African society. Apartheid ideology (and the authors include "liberal ideology" under this rubric) articulates the information, ideas and attitudes of the ruling elite which is defined as an alliance of white capitalists, white petty bourgeoisie and working class remnants together with the increasing co-option of the black petty bourgeoisie. As an integral part of this "class alliance", the mass media "mediate" the reality of South African society for the oppressed

majority - the black working class.

The Tomasellis suggest that the black petty bourgeoisie is being wooed "albeit on unequal terms and without political representation" because apartheid (and liberal) ideology

"needs to foster the conditions for the development of a numerically small, stable and skilled work force to service the manufacturing industry, commerce and the professions. This is the economic imperative behind the lifting of restrictions and the limited recognition of the urban based petty bourgeoisie".

With these theoretical considerations in mind, the authors attempt to show how apartheid ideology has been projected by the commercial press - the so-called English-language 'opposition' press, contemporary black newspapers and magazines and the emerging, relatively autonomous Afrikaans press. Broadcasting presents a special case, since it is under state control:

"Whereas the press functions primarily to reflect white interests, the South African Broadcasting Corporation ... plays a more active and direct role in designating and providing models of class behaviour geared to safeguarding the interests of capital".

Radio and television, the Tomasellis maintain, sustain the status quo. Programme content is geared to

"maintain the relative positions of social roles in the cultural and economic hierarchy and to make accessible a pre-determined ideologically filtered reality ... the cultural meanings carried in the texts of radio and television broadcasts operate primarily to bring that reality into line with the social experiences and aspirations of white South African society."

The authors explore the nature of bias on SABC and focus particularly on the ways in which the values and norms of the ruling elite are projected on Radio Bantu and internalised by its black listeners with the effect of helping "to reconcile individuals to their given social positions". The communication of apartheid ideology via Radio Bantu is particularly important in the rural areas where the population rarely has access to competing media. The wooing of the petty black bourgeoisie, very noticeable on Radio Bantu, will undoubtedly take on a new importance when the new black television service is introduced:

"There is no doubt that this service will concentrate on preparing a numerically limited group of blacks for their social roles as labour units in 'white' South Africa. The content will be specifically geared to socializing this nascent petty bourgeoisie into an urban based, though geographically separate lifestyle".

Arguments that 'homeland' based radio-TV stations will offer viable ideological alternatives are seen to be "fallacious" as the Tomasellis clearly show in the case of Transkei's Capital Radio and Boputhatswana's Channel 702 which, in terms of economic structure and ownership, are inextricably linked to South Africa's white capitalist elite. The authors conclude what is undoubtedly the first outline of a radical critique of the mass media in South Africa with the view that

"at all levels of the mass media ... there is dissemination of apartheid ideology. The only difference between the various arms of the media is in the level of intensity and the directness, or alternatively, its sophistication".

Black publications are primarily organs of protest, and the "protest tradition" is the dominant theme throughout the convoluted history of the Black Press in South Africa. Black publications "cannot be artificially separated from (black) society", however, and Switzer argues in his paper that an analysis of the structural conditions underlying class conflict can provide a useful framework for interpreting the Black Press.

In an attempt to provide such a framework, Switzer cites Althusser's definition of the state in capitalist society as one which incorporates the private as well as the public sector. Private, primarily persuasive, organisations (identified as ideological state apparatuses or ISAs) are contrasted with public, primarily coercive, institutions (identified as repressive state apparatuses or RSAs). The key to the maintenance of the state in modern society is in the private, not the public, sector. Althusser's location of the class struggle within the ISA as well as outside of it has at least two implications for this paper: class strife within an ISA can promote ambivalence among the oppressed classes to their situation but it can also encourage subordinate class defiance against the power elite.

To help clarify the problem of how ruling and ruled class ideologies operate within ISAs, Switzer looks at Gramsci's ideas on the way in which middle-class values are internalised by the working classes at the level of what Gramsci calls 'abstract consciousness' - the effect of which is to neutralize class conflict through the search for consensus to ensure social stability and hence the status quo - and 'situational consciousness' by which "the working class also has a sense of its own objective reality". The two operate in conflict with each other - hence the problem of what Gramsci calls the 'contradictory consciousness' of the oppressed classes. The concept of 'contradictory consciousness' can also be said to operate within the ISAs which attempt to mediate class conflict.

Briefly, Switzer contends that

"the communicators and consumers of Black Press news and opinion, information and attitudes articulate the same fundamental petit bourgeois class values and norms. As such, they served (whether or not they were conscious of their role) to perpetuate the vested interests of this class ... The Black Press never was an independent entity with a consciousness of its own, as the Africanists claim, but rather it formed part of the apparatus of social control whereby the (white) ruling middle class maintained the status quo".

The three main phases of the Black Press - mission press (1830s - 1870s), 'independent' press (1880s - 1920s), captive press (1930s to present) - are analysed within this structural framework to suggest how black publications could be said to have formed part of an ISA in South Africa which articulated the 'contradictory consciousness' of the oppressed classes.

Switzer outlines the ambivalent ideological position of those who owned and controlled the Black Press, the journalists who criticised the unequal distribution of benefits within the social system and advocated constitutional change while continuing to promote the maintenance of the structural status quo throughout this period. He focusses particularly on the most contentious phase - the 'independent' era of the Black Press which saw the emergence of a black petty bourgeoisie intent on voicing "the grievances and aspirations of this class in its attempt to find a place in the white controlled political and socio-economic system".

An attempt is also made to show how the 'contradictory consciousness' of ruling as well as ruled ideologies was reflected in these publications, and Switzer concludes by suggesting that the expanding 'situational consciousness' of the black petty bourgeoisie has narrowed the "ideological gap" with the subordinate urban and rural working classes. This has had the effect of rendering most contemporary black publications virtually impotent as potential or actual ISAs in South Africa. The alternative - the use of the Black Press as a "weapon of ideology against the classes in power" (Althusser) - would seem to lie in the increasing number of community-based publications being launched outside the established press.

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The role of mass media in development has been a topic of considerable controversy in the developed as well as the developing world. Before the 1970s, the "paradigms for development" emanated from the west and, as Van Zyl points out in his paper, the main arguments usually assumed that more media would mean more information and ideas which "would inevitably cause rapid and extensive change in underdeveloped society". The nexus of western values and norms underlying the relationship between mass communication and development - simplistic notions of under-development and unrealistic indices of how to measure development (e.g. per capita income), the presumed necessity for technological growth in a free enterprise economy coupled with the importance attached to maintaining strong links with the developed world, and the widespread belief that the 'failure' to develop lay with the developing world - came under increasing attack from the 1970s.

It had become clear that mass media had failed to promote development. It has become even more clear in the past ten years that 'development' is a complex process in which the media plays, at best, a contributory role:

"Development came to be seen as participatory change towards the kind of economic and social system a region decides it needs".

A major attack on the 'cultural imperialists' of the west emerged with the 'New International Information Order' which was formerly proclaimed in 1976. Its main target was

"the dominance of the United States in communication technology and in world communication markets ... an inequitable and self-perpetuating state of affairs".

A parallel development was a renewed interest in the communication process as a whole and particularly in the role of oral opinion networks in the diffusion of information. The importance of the receiver, the urban-rural environment in which media operate and the developmental value of the information transmitted have also received more attention from communications researchers.

Van Zyl maintains that

"the use of media in development in South Africa only exists as a faint glimmer in the eye of the media specialist".

Focussing on broadcast media, he points out that SABC's Radio Bantu programmes in various ethnic languages and "semi-independent" stations in Transkei and Bophutatswana together spend 30 minutes a day on agricultural news with an added 30 minutes two days a week on health information. This is the only use of radio broadcasting in development:

"SABC provides a programme of benign neglect from which the receiver gains no benefit".

Van Zyl concurs with other critics of the television service in describing the proposed 'TV2' channel for Blacks as "a blatant misapplication of funds". Special programmes made for the "supposed interests" of urban Black viewers - as distinct from the interests of their urban white counterparts - "pre-supposes a quality of delusion ... previously untapped". Programmes aimed solely at a rural audience even if they are relevant - a remote possibility in South Africa - cannot be justified economically and Van Zyl maintains: "In every sense, it is a futile operation".

While radio and television almost everywhere in the developing world are controlled by the state which generally uses the media to promote "national integration and loyalty to the centre", in South Africa the broadcast network is used to exploit ethnic consciousness. Since Afrikaner and African nationalism are incompatible, Van Zyl suggests that a role for radio and television in South African development might be found by decentralising the broadcasting service. The promotion of "independent regional stations" together with the use of new broadcast technology (satellite and cable), Van Zyl concludes, might make it easier to cater to

"the needs of specific (socio-economic) groups ... The varying stages in development in the different areas in South Africa and the varied cultural demands of the many language groups makes this regionalism desirable".

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'Total strategy' is the current catchphrase now being used by the P W Botha administration as a pointer to the "paramilitary" posture the government is erecting

"to prepare South Africa militarily, economically, politically and psychologically to fight a 'total war' against the 'total onslaught' on white domination in South Africa".

An important element of the strategy is the emphasis given to the propaganda war which Addison in his paper characterizes as the "socialization of danger".

As a military doctrine, the concept of 'total strategy' can be traced at least as far back as 18th Century in the writings of the Prussian military philosopher Von Clausewitz. Addison shows the extent to which the new military strategists who have gained power in Botha's regime have taken over and refined the concept until it is now "essentially a totalitarian and anti-democratic doctrine". Because South Africa has entered "a developing civil war situation" the new doctrine is being rapidly extended to all areas of South African life; in particular, the propaganda war where the aim is

"to engender voluntary (as distinct from coerced) support for the ruling elite".

Government control and manipulation of media agencies is thus one aspect of the 'total strategy' programme. The mass media in South Africa are to be co-opted in the "national interest" to wage psychological war against an omnibus enemy - Marxism - which Addison defines in this context as "a generic label for the liberations movements in Southern Africa". His paper focusses on the military's attempt "to influence and control news media content" in a campaign to provide a

"comprehensive propaganda plan, aimed at enemies of the government both within and outside the country".

Addison contends that the propaganda campaign is a form of "neo-nationalism"

grounded in a strategic appreciation of many factors relevant to white 'survival'. Race is rejected, for example, in favour of "self-determination" in a "constellation of states ... led by the major industrial state, South Africa". The "underlying unifying principle" of 'total strategy' is capitalism, and the role of monopoly capital in the growth of the military-industrial complex is the cutting edge, as it were, of the propaganda campaign.

The link between monopoly capital and white minority rule, however, is an extremely fragile one. Addison maintains that

"Afrikanerdom, with its authoritarianism and its racial mania, has yet to come to terms with its potential allies, the English-speaking liberals and the black petit bourgeoisie ... It would be a mistake to believe that total strategy ... is anything like fully satisfactory for many fractions of capital".

The fragility of this potential alliance prompts Addison to suggest that the military strategists

"are poorly equipped to handle the confusing complexities of urbanised industrial society"

and he feels that in reality

"it is the aim of the military to regiment society even more thoroughly than has been the case with civilian control by Nationalists".

This is clearly evident with the mass media, where news manipulation - especially in police and military matters - usually is rejected in favour of news control. Coercion - primarily in the form of legislation - continues unabated even though the first Steyn Commission (on security news reporting) called for a rapprochement with the press by suggesting, among other things, that media should act as a watchdog on public institutions. While the commission's appeal for a 'national communications policy' is viewed with misgiving by the press, Addison believes that the journalistic profession will inevitably "be co-opted to serve government policy". Corporate media, concerned with the survival of their commercial enterprises, "are steadily being drawn into the strategic planning process at the top levels". It is made easier because on the whole "both bourgeois liberalism and neo-nationalism" see Marxism as "the common enemy". Co-option is also eased by the fact that press and broadcasting are mainly controlled by four newspaper groups and one state corporation.

Voluntary co-option, however, still requires a strategy which will attract the support of those who are prepared to accept the "paramilitary option" for survival of the status quo. Addison concludes:

"The total strategy continues the tradition of repression in an intensified form, but it also holds out the carrot of consensus to potential allies ... if they won't be co-opted then they will be coerced and propagandised like all the rest who are getting the total war they never wanted".
