

STEYN COMMISSION 1: THE PRESS AND TOTAL STRATEGY

Les Switzer¹

The press - in particular, the surviving 'opposition' newspapers - is to be co-opted into Total Strategy. Publications which fail to promote the interests of the State - and it is abundantly clear that the ruling National Party will continue to define these interests - will be silenced. This is the real message embedded in the obfuscations of the 1980 Commission of Inquiry into security news reporting (Steyn Commission I).

The press is to be upgraded from a passive chronicler to an active participant in the new strategies for change envisioned by Prime Minister P W Botha and his colleagues. Furthermore the guidelines to be followed in the process of co-option will undoubtedly be detailed by Steyn Commission II when its report is tabled in Parliament later this year.

The key proposal in the report of Steyn Commission I is the formulation of a "national communication policy" which, in turn, will be "determined and controlled by the national strategy" (paras. 231, 233):

The State and the media need each other ... because the State is one of the media's chief sources of information and conversely, because the State is largely dependent on the media to inform the population. In the case of conflict between State and media interests, State interests in respect of national security are paramount (para. 469).

The commissioners clearly regard the flow of information as hierarchical - from the State to the people (e.g. para. 229) - and legitimate news is derived essentially from official sources provided by the State. More ominously, non-official sources of information, ideas and attitudes - particularly those concerned with the grievances and aspirations of individuals and institutions deemed prejudicial to the security of the State - are seen as potentially (if not actually) illegitimate sources of news.

The assumptions held by the commissioners as to who (or what) constitutes an "enemy" of the State reveal much about the normative framework within which the press is to be evaluated. The State's external enemies are "Marxism and certain Western countries" - led by Russia and the United States - which aim "to replace the present order in South Africa with one that is radically different" (e.g. paras. 47-55, 447, 458-459). These twin bogies render support to the State's internal enemies who, while not specifically defined in the report (but note paras. 68-74), are seen to be anything which undermines or subverts "knowingly or unknowingly" (para. 226) the prevailing status quo.

The commissioners devote much space to the "psychological onslaught" (e.g. paras. 235, 346-347) from within and without which is seen as a "propaganda campaign" that "cannot be neutralised solely by legislation" (para. 429). Hence the importance of a national communications policy to counter "enemy"

propaganda and to promote the policy of Total Strategy.

The commissioners considered the role of the foreign and domestic press in its coverage of security news in this context. While they favoured greater control over foreign journalists operating in South Africa², it is clear that the commissioners were concerned mainly with the South African press and its role in the reporting of police and military news.

In its efforts to get the press "involved in a communication action plan that will operate in the interests of South Africa" (para. 235 my emphasis), the commissioners erected an elaborate facade which appeared to support many of the ideals of a free press. The media's 'watchdog' role - "media must enjoy the right to make public any irregularities on the part of officials or politicians" (e.g. paras. 11f, 513) - was affirmed, for example, and the government was cautioned against "oversensitivity" in denying the press access to information which might be embarrassing but would not prejudice national security (e.g. para. 233). The commissioners urged "a greater and more effective flow of information" (para. 232) and recommended a narrowing of the focus of censorship so that "only disclosures of and reporting on information or facts be prohibited which are ... in fact detrimental to the defence or survival of the State ... its security forces ... its armaments industry" (paras. 281, 502).

The commissioners specifically recommended that the Official Secrets Act of 1956 be amended "to restrict its ambit" (para. 514), for example, and various sections of the Defence Act of 1957, including Section 118 which dealt with news relating to the South African Defence Force (SADF), be revised to make available more information on its activities (para. 515).

As Tony Matthews, Dean of the Law Faculty at the University of Natal (Durban) pointed out in a letter to the author, however, the changes in the Official Secrets Act were not specified and the suggested revision of Section 118 apparently was nullified by the commissioners' recommendation that the publication of information "calculated to cause enmity between any of the population groups ... in the Republic and the Defence Force" be prohibited (para. 404). Prof Matthews was also of the opinion that a new anti-disclosure section in the Armaments Development and Production Act of 1968 (para. 417) recommended by the commissioners would prohibit even the disclosure of malpractices (letter to author 22 July 1980). Thus the carrot offered by the commissioners in the guise of easing a few of the many restrictions on access to information was counterbalanced by appeals for more censorship.

The supremacy of State interests over individual rights was held by the commissioners to be sacrosanct (para. 28). They maintained that South Africa's press was "free" and "independent" (para. 11a) but warned "that any possible destruction of the present orderly dispensation ... will also result in the destruction of the free press ... Press freedom ... does not imply licence to prejudice or harm the national security interests" (paras. 238, 428).

The commissioners also maintained that the "formidable legislative arsenal" restricting security news reporting was "virtually untouched by the authorities" (para. 58a) and suggested that "voluntary co-operation between the press and the security forces ... is only fruitful and successful if backed by appropriate and effective legislation" (para. 512). Although the commissioners disclaimed any attempt at converting the press into a propaganda medium for the State (para. 288) or for the "political party in power" (para. 507), the effect of their recommendations would amount to the same thing.

As "the principal instrument" (para. 452) for transmitting information to

the public on security and defence matters, the press had a duty to inform the public "of the nature and ambit of the threat, of the necessity for sustaining their own will to resist and to carry through their own internal and peaceful developmental action successfully" (i.e. the implementation of separate development) (para. 450). "Governmental credibility must at all costs be maintained and strengthened and the extremely dangerous 'unfulfilled expectations syndrome' must be avoided" (para. 457). In effect, the press was to avoid any news that might give credence to the interests and needs of the vast majority of South Africa's citizens who rejected apartheid.

In a bid to pinpoint the kind of news which was not in the interests of the State, the commissioners offered an analysis of the content of press reports on selected items of police and military news. Three studies were commissioned. SADF news stories in 27 newspapers from May 1978 to December 1979 and again in January 1980 were collected to ascertain the "attitudes" of the press to the SADF and its "influence on the morale" of the defence force.

A sample of these stories (24% of the total or 3 403 stories) was then analysed on the basis of whether the language used was "positive" (pro SADF), "neutral" ("strong objective and factual reporting") or "negative" (anti SADF). The third study focussed on press coverage of the Silverton siege (25-31 January 1980) to ascertain press attitudes towards "the continued maintenance of the constitutional system of State security and of public order". Again, the stories were analysed on the basis of whether the language used was "positive" (in favour of the "constitutional system"), "neutral" or "negative".

The results are summarised below (for details, see paras. 209-226):

	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
SADF News May - December 1979	20	72	8
SADF News January 1980	12	80	8
Silverton Siege News 25 - 31 January 1980	20	73	7

However much one might query the value judgments implicit in the categories used, the criteria allegedly tested and the methodology which was employed³, it is significant that these content analyses actually offered further support for a view long held by observers of the South African media scene: the press, including the so-called English-language 'opposition' press, in reality is not critical of the ruling status quo.

Press coverage of the SADF and 'white' press coverage of the Silverton siege was regarded by the commissioners as "favourable". In fact, the only significant 'opposition' newspaper which registered a "negative" rating was apparently the Sunday Post - the Argus-owned publication aimed primarily at blacks in Soweto. This newspaper received a 0% "positive", 46% "neutral" and 50% "negative" rating for its coverage of the Silverton siege⁴. The recent 'banning' of Post did not come as a surprise to those who read this report carefully, since the commissioners concluded that the newspaper's "credibility as well as its loyalty towards the constitutional system is suspect" (para. 216c).

In a qualitative analysis of the major topics discussed in these reports,

however, the commissioners found that too much space was devoted to "ideological and conscientious objections" against the SADF (para. 213d) and the "negative" image of the police in the Silverton siege stories revealed "a potentially unacceptable alienation of the public from the police force" (para. 216e). The use of "gunmen", "freedom fighters" and "guerrillas" in place of "terrorists" was also deemed questionable by the commissioners (para. 216a) who suggested that these "semantic matters" should be resolved in briefing sessions with security and defence officials (para. 234).

Finally, the placement of stories in one issue of the Rand Daily Mail (24 March 1980) was considered prejudicial to State interests: "This single example indicates the need for heart-searching in the ranks of the media regarding their independence, freedom and responsibility" (!)(para. 239d)⁵.

* * *

As envisaged in the report of Steyn Commission I, then, the press in South Africa will have to assume three additional functions if it is to survive as a "free" and "independent" medium of mass communication:

- a. The press must censor the activities of the State's internal and external "enemies" as defined by the State. (This implies a shift in emphasis in the press's 'watchdog' role from the State to the "enemies" of the State.)
- b. The press must sustain and promote a positive image of the State's security and defence agencies.
- c. Above all, the press must mobilise public opinion in pursuance of the campaign for Total Strategy.

In reality, of course, the voluntary co-optation of the press means the elimination of the last vestiges of opposition to government policy. It would seem that this is the ultimate rationale behind the deliberations of Steyn Commissions I and II.

Notes

1. Prof Switzer gave evidence before the first Steyn Commission in Pretoria last year.
2. The commissioners recommended the registration of foreign journalists and a more effective monitoring of their activities, including the financing of these activities, in South Africa (paras. 196, 237, 361-373, 486, 508).
3. For example, the reader isn't told how the SADF samples were actually obtained (para. 211), the criterion that the SADF had "symbolic and sentimental significance ... for all race groups" (para. 212) is highly contentious, and the arbitrary categorisation of SADF stories as "negative" if they recorded negative events like desertions, assaults, pay and postal delays and even heat exhaustion (paras. 212, 213) is fallacious.
4. During this period, news content in the Sunday Post was apparently the responsibility of a small group of white staffers who were generally at loggerheads with editor Percy Qoboza.
5. In the example cited, an SADF exposé story merited page 1 treatment while

a "potentially extremely dangerous" story on a meeting in Soweto to commemorate the Sharpsville incident was placed on page 4 (para. 239).

Reference

Report of the Commission of Inquiry into reporting of security matters regarding the South African Defence Force and the South African Police Force. RP 52/1980.

FORTHCOMING ISSUES

PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Vol 2 No 1 1981

This is the working title for the fifth issue of Critical Arts. An expansion, sub-title and rationale for the subject will emerge once initial response and the interests of potential contributors are measured.

The working title endeavours to cast a broad net which embraces performance from unstructured forms (performance in an ethnographic sense which includes social behaviour and work activity) to structured forms (performance in theatre, music, dance and festival).

All enquiries and submissions should be directed to: Ian Steadman, Guest Editor, Critical Arts, University of Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, 2001, Johannesburg, South Africa.

* * *

BROADCASTING IN AFRICA

Vol 2 No 2 1981

The working title embraces the study of broadcasting in its widest sense ranging from specific case studies of, for example, gatekeeping mechanisms in the news room to the role and function of broadcasting in development. Other areas of interest would include the history of broadcasting in Africa, its neo-colonial origins, functions, its role as an ideological agency, its structure of ownership and so on.

All enquiries and submissions may be directed to: Keyan Tomaselli, Jt Editor, Critical Arts, c/o Dept of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, P O Box 94, Grahamstown 6140

* * *

MASS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Vol 2 No 3 1981

All enquiries and submissions may be directed to: John van Zyl, Jt Editor, Critical Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, 2001 Johannesburg.

* * *

It should be noted that the board of referees to whom articles will be submitted will assess the paper in terms of the critical perspective established by the Journal in previous issues. That perspective is contextual, studying the arts and the media in terms of social history, popular culture and social structures.
