

REVIEW ARTICLE

Press Time: Black Publishing Then and Now South Africa's Alternative Press. Voices of Protest and Resistance 1880-1960, L Switzer (ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Thami Mazwai is not usually at a loss for words. But this articulate advocate of Africanism, a prominent black journalist who has now turned publisher, was left deflated by Nelson Mandela at an editors' meeting in 1997. At the time, Mazwai was chairperson of the fledgling South African National Editors Forum (he was later to resign in a blaze of publicity, citing unyielding conservative white colleagues as the reason). In this capacity, he kicked off the second meeting between the Sanef council and the state president by remarking:

'Reports of what you, Mr President, said in Harare have concerned us. You were reported to have said that the media is controlled by conservative whites, and that black journalists are told what to do. We felt this was unfortunate because we had raised it before. Control of the media is changing: a number of companies have made strides in black ownership. Not far enough, but there are some strides, at TML for instance. This does not mean a change in operations, but this will come as the new owners implement their programme of transformation and affirmative action. There is also the example of Perskor and Kagiso Trust. A lot of other blacks want in, but we feel there should be some recognition of progress that has been made' (Mandela, 1997).

To which observation, the South African state president replied:

'There is no point in beating about the bush with problems. Whatever measures have been taken, the truth is that the media is still in the control of whites, and in many cases, conservative whites, who are unable to reflect the aspirations of the majority. This is not to reflect on their integrity, but on their background. I accept that some steps have been taken to deal with this. But let us be accurate: black companies that are supposed to be in charge of enormous assets are a hollow claim at present. Because they are heavily indebted to white companies. Black companies are

virtually bankrupt because they don't own their assets. The process has started, but it will take a very long time before blacks, that is Africans, Coloureds, and Indians, can say "Now, blacks control their own press". ... We do not have black journalists saying what they would like to say. They have to work on papers, they want to earn a living. While there are a few exceptional journalists, many like to please their white editors' (Mandela, 1997).

Reading Les Switzer's book on the history of the alternative press in South Africa leads one to ask what has changed. In one of the finer chapters of the publication, Switzer recounts the history of two leading black papers at the turn of the century: *Imvo Zabantsundu* and *Izwi Labantu*. The former was set up in 1884 and was subsidised by white Eastern Cape English-speaking settlers. When they, and editor JT Jabavu, turned against Cecil Rhodes, the rival *Izwi* - bankrolled by Rhodes and supporters - was set up in 1897. When the South African war broke out, *Imvo* urged the British to reconcile with the Afrikaners; *Izwi* slammed the Afrikaner insurgents. In the end, it was also whites who determined the fate of the both papers. *Izwi* editor Alan Kirkland Soga developed an anti-capitalist tone to the paper, as a result of which his backers fell away and the paper collapsed in 1909. Jabavu and later his son ran *Imvo* as a personal political mouthpiece with an ever-falling circulation (just 2000 in the 1920s). The decline culminated eventually in a full-scale sellout to Afrikaner capital in the form of Perskor. But today *Imvo* through Perskor has become part of black empowerment group Kagiso Media headed by Eric Molobi.

Perskor's interests of course have been in retaining some of its lucrative contracts for state printing. Early-1998 saw a merger on the cards between Kagiso/Perskor and former Information Scandal-linked company Caxton which holds the telephone directory contract. After 100 years, who makes the money may finally be changing. It is a nice irony in recent years that blacks can start making money out of white consumers, as the ownership of white oriented media like the *Citizen* or Radio Algoa has passed to consortia with strong black shareholdings. What concerns Mandela most, it seems, is less the effective ownership and financial returns, however, than the fact that this has not yet meant a change in who calls the editorial shots, and thence in the content and stance of these media.

Black Press Barons

Switzer's book shows how difficult it has been to have effective black ownership and editorial control in South Africa. Sol Plaatje helped build up the

Koranta ea Becoana, founded in 1901 by the white editor of the *Mafeking Mail* by, for example, setting up news exchanges with 61 publications across the world. But when the boss went bankrupt in 1907, the paper staggered on for two years before dying. Plaatje launched a new paper in 1910, saw it collapse in 1912, and then raised donations from the African community to buy a press for 400 pounds. But his new *Tsalo ea Becoana* folded in 1915 under pressure of wartime shortages.

The *Bantu World* was founded by a white man, Bertram Paver, in 1932, and though he rallied more than half the shareholders from the African community, after 14 months the paper was bought up by the Argus company. Editor RV Selope Thema claimed to be free of overt influence of white management. But as Switzer comments:

Social control in the newsroom did not have to be communicated officially, because Thema, like other editors of Bantu Press publications, conformed to the policies of the newspaper proprietors (1997:191).

A partial exception to this pattern was Natal newspaper *Inkundla ya Bantu*, founded in 1938 by African entrepreneurs Paul Knox Bonga and Phillip Goduka Katamzi, owners of the Verulam Press. The paper had Govan Mbeki as its effective editor in the early years, and was run by the (then) outspoken Jordan K Ngubane between 1944-51. Even though it too succumbed, this was at least one case of a black financed, owned and edited paper that survived - for 13 years in fact.

It is almost a truism that the decline of the independent black press in South Africa was rooted in the smashing of the black middle class which could have provided a sufficient middle class base for its survival and success. When the class went, so did its press. It has only been in the 1990s, that representatives of incipient black capital have re-appeared on the media scene - in the form of Nthatho Motlana (chairperson of New Africa Publishing Ltd), Cyril Ramaphosa (chairperson of TML) and Eric Molobi (chairperson of Kagiso Media). They have, as Mandela argues, borrowed substantially to get where they are, but they have also mobilised extensive black savings, not least in the insurance industry and in union-controlled pension funds, to acquire the newspapers now under their control.

Using charts by analyst Robin McGregor, Tomaselli (1997) has recorded the ownership patterns of the new acquisitions. However, while Tomaselli claims that the result will be substituting the 'semiotics of apartheid' with the 'semiotics of class' (1997:66), the question of the impact of 'Africanisation' on these papers is more complex than this. Data is needed about the new profiles of staffing,

contemporary race- and class-bound content and declining/emerging markets for those newspapers now with black owners, plus the managerial impact of these owners as well. Without such, one cannot meaningfully pursue the matter. To date, at least, it would seem that these new 'barons' of the press have not directly intervened in 'their' publications (Berger, 1995). With most publications, and especially in the case of the biggest circulating paper in the country, the *Sowetan* (which has a charter of editorial independence), such interference would be likely to encounter strong resistance from the reporters affected.

The Modern Alternative Press: 1980s-90s

Superficially, the rise and fall of papers like *Izwi* and *Inkundla* resonate with the past decade which saw the emergence and collapse of the contemporary alternative press - *New Nation*, *South*, *Vrye Weekblad*, *New African*, *Nemato Voice* and others. But this modern generation was more like the subsidised *Izwi* than the entrepreneurial *Inkundla* in model, dependent as it was on external funding. By the 1980s, capital formation in the African community was even less likely to take place in media than had been the case half-a-century earlier. Investing scarce capital in a publication at any time after the 1950s was a risky endeavour that could have left African backers to carry the losses of a banned publication - or worse the loss of their personal freedom to a banning order or imprisonment. That the only alternative publications that existed in the 1980s and early-1990s drew on foreign funding was an indication of the way that historical obstacles to black-owned publishing had mounted through the century.

Given this context, the modern generation of alternative publications were never commercially viable - so much so that even the black-owned New African Investments Limited decided to close the stalwart surviving alternative weekly *New Nation* during 1997. The 1980s-90s alternative press played a political part in a particular period, and when the political rationale for their funding fell away, they could not continue in the marketplace.

Switzer's book does not extend to this generation, but their character is highlighted by another strand of the press that is covered in the book. This is the politically-aligned black press. Gandhi's *Indian Opinion*, formed in 1903, was so politically over-determined that it banned all advertisements in 1912 and relied only on donations from India and subscription revenue after that. The *Workers Herald* (established in 1923) was the organ of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, and while it carried adverts for black tailors, printers, carpenters, etc, it was never intended to be a profitable publication. When its editor Henry Tyamzashe was fired for insubordination in 1929, the paper ceased appearing. *Inkululeko* was the organ of the Communist Party of South Africa, and was run

by activists and editor Edwin Thabo Mafutsanyana (followed by Michael Dipuko) from 1939-50 when the party was banned. The most successful oppositional newspaper was the *Guardian*, launched in 1937 and published under various titles until 1952. With writers like Govan Mbeki and Ruth First, and half its income donated by readers, it was an integral part of the resistance movement, and only went under due to political repression. Likewise, the alternative press of the 1980s-90s existed for political reasons and their fortunes rose and fell in relation to the political movements to which they were tied.

Petty Bourgeois Publishing

Switzer's book includes several content analyses of many of the predecessors of the modern alternative press. As may be expected, the political papers had far greater political news than other black publications, even if the *Guardian* boasted 'the best tipster in Cape Town'. It was the *World* that covered sports and introduced women's sections. Predictably (and here one must question whether Switzer's content analysis is worthwhile inasmuch as it confirms the obvious), *Imvo* had a moderate discourse and content, while the *Workers Herald* was more militant. While the *Herald* had over 40 per cent political news, *Imvo* had less than 17 per cent (1997:156). *Inkundla* had very little sports, crime or accidents (1997:231). In contrast, the *World* had just over 10 per cent of its coverage devoted to politics and trade unions (1997:205). *Ilanga*, founded in 1903 by John Langalibalele Dube, reflected in its content the politics of accommodation and conciliation. (Unfortunately, the chapter on *Ilanga* by R Hunt Davis Jnr provides no useful information on the finances, production or circulation of the publication).

What is more interesting than the extent and tone of political news is Switzer's finding that so much of the press content represented the interests of the urban petty bourgeoisie, and that there was the corresponding absence of rural or working class concerns. Even the *Workers Herald*, it seems, was guilty of this. According to Switzer, both *Imvo* and the *Herald* attacked white domination - but were silent about African miners and farm workers (1997:176). Even the *Drum* generation, according to chapter author R Neville Choonoo, shared the middle class values and aspirations of the very white liberals they criticised. There were the farm and prison exposes of Henry Nxumalo, but there was 'virtual silence' about the turbulent 1950s (1997:263). *Indian Opinion*, at least in its early days, was 'written by an elite for an elite, which was mainly the Gujerati commercial class', comments chapter contributor Uma Shashikant Mesthrie. A chapter on the African Political Organisation's newspaper (1909-1923) by Mohamed Adhikari notes:

Despite some rhetoric about the need to cultivate Coloured race pride, the aspirations of this social group were almost entirely assimilationist (1997:128).

The same elitism, of course, cannot be laid at the door of *Inkululeko* or the *Guardian*. Although the CPSA leadership was largely white, most of the bylines in *Inkululeko* were African, says Elizabeth Ceirog Jones, author of the respective chapter in the book. As regards the *Guardian*, Ruth First stands out for having conducted powerful investigative journalism that reflected the exploitation of farm workers over a 12-year period starting in 1947. (Her uniqueness is well analysed by chapter writer Don Pinnock).

In some ways, the widespread lack of concern with the masses in much of the historical 'alternative' press reflects what Switzer claims to find from his content analyses - that there is a shift in discourse from protest to resistance between the 1920s and the 1950s. Although the evidence marshalled in his book is not quite that clear, it is plausible to discern the gradual construction of a multi-class African nationalism through the past century as it took shape in the black media. The earliest publications were engaged largely in a project to protect the interests of an African middle class across tribal lines. Dube, for instance, campaigned against the 1913 Land Act, advocating an African (middle-class) rather than Zulu (peasant) identity in *Ilanga*. *Inkundla* carried articles in English, Zulu and Sotho. Mirroring this, *Indian Opinion* strove to publish in Gujarati, Tamil and English.

In this way, one begins to see in Switzer's book the constitution of racial communities by their media, and for their media. And content of the papers reveals how the communities concerned became less exclusively middle-class dominated over time as each racial petty bourgeoisie was compelled to reach downwards to cultivate the fertile soil of support from the lower classes - often using the media to do so. Switzer himself periodises the 'alternative press' as the mission press (1830s-1880s); protest press (1880s-1930s); early resistance (1930s-1960); and the later resistance (1970s-80s). The turning point, he credibly argues, is in the 1940s, when petty bourgeois politics fade in a crusade for the rights of all (1997:35).

This kind of analysis is a valuable insight into the history, but it also has relevance for today. Thus, it may be argued that current clamour for the white-dominated media to become more racially representative is a resurgence of these petty bourgeois politics, freed of the need (if not the ideology) to ally with the masses. This is not to suggest that black petty bourgeois interests are somehow illegitimate, and that nothing less than the interests of the subordinate black classes dominating the media will do. However, it is to draw attention to a deeper question than the colour of the owners or scribes in the press as critiqued

by Mandela. Journalism, generally, would do well to focus less on white community news; but it would do even better service to society (including the middle class) if it went beyond black middle class concerns. That requires a change in the paradigm of journalism, which despite the limits imposed by the economics of the media and the general need for middle class audiences, is not altogether impossible. A change like this is not automatically the consequence of changing the colour composition of the media. What irks Nelson Mandela, ironically, is perhaps precisely this: that black middle class journalists have accepted the paradigm of a watchdog role for the media. In my view, a new paradigm ought to retain this particular feature, and even strengthen it where possible. The point is, however, that much else needs to change - especially if the media is to do more than pander to a racially-mixed middle class. Switzer's book, by highlighting the petty bourgeois in the press over 100 years of history helps to highlight the limits and the possibilities of transforming the media in the current period.

Academic Merits

The book had a scathing review in the *Mail and Guardian* in 1997 by former *Rand Daily Mail* editor Benjamin Pogrund. He erroneously accused Switzer of tarnishing all white-owned media as conservative, and went on to trash the university where Switzer had done some of his research: it was because Switzer had been at Rhodes in Grahamstown - claimed Pogrund - that he had become so out of touch. I wrote a letter to the *M&G* at the time, querying why Pogrund was so anti-Grahamstown when after all he applied to head the journalism school here in 1994. (I got the job, not him). Don Pinnock, who was also hammered in the review, also wrote a letter to the paper. So too did Switzer himself. In the end, the *Mail and Guardian* published just one response - from former *Guardian* editor Brian Bunting, who took issue with the way that Pogrund had picked on information he had given for the book.

One deduces that a newspaper is not the vehicle for a serious review, let alone a serious debate, when it comes to a serious academic book, and Benjamin Pogrund is not the kind of reviewer to rise to any such challenge. However, this review in *Transformation* would not be complete without some comments on the quality of the work. Switzer has done a fine job of collecting a series of articles and stitching them together with his own work in a meaningful way. There are weaknesses; one is certainly the R Hunt Davis Jr chapter. Another is that Switzer would have done well to acknowledge that the compilation falls short of being a comprehensive survey. There are omissions like the ANC's *Abantu Batho*. And

if a non-alternative paper like *Bantu World* is featured, why not the Chamber of Mines' *Umteteli wa Bantu*? Surely all were alternative to the white press?

Part of the problem is not merely a probable lack of material. It is in Switzer's loose use of the term 'alternative' as a coverall label for all the publications featured (excepting *Bantu World*, which is described emotionally as the 'captive black press'). The result is sentences like:

Imvo was essentially a community newspaper specialising in news of general interest to the mission-educated community in the eastern Cape. The *Workers Herald*, on the other hand, was competing with *Umteteli* (and possibly *Abantu-Batho*) as a national newspaper.

To what extent were *Imvo* and the *Herald* an alternative, and in what way? Switzer is silent here. If 'alternative' means black and oppositional, what exactly was the role of editors like Ruth First, Brian Bunting and *Drum's* Anthony Sampson?

It may be that Switzer means 'alternative' not so much in a racial sense, as in the sense of a different option for readers. As with the self-image of the 1980s press, this would cast 'alternative' to mean a press that was 'the alternative' as opposed to 'an alternative' - an incipient mainstream in other words. If so, in what way was there actually competition as Switzer claims, bearing in mind a context when ambitions were confined (the *Workers Herald* still spoke of White leadership - 1997:177), circulations were small and infrequent, and, one speculates, there would have been a hunger for all relevant reading matter amongst the black middle classes?

Switzer acknowledges that the book assumes 'a certain stability of language and specified frames of reference that endure in time and place' (1997:13). This assumption looks rather flimsy in the light of excuse retrospective framing about competition on his part, or claims like the *Indian Opinion* 'made for rather dull reading' by Mesthrie (1997:104). It is the same flawed assumption at work in contentious claims such as those by Pinnock that Ruth First's journalism 'helped to build a new self-image for African women' (1997:321), or that she 'left behind a style of political journalism that was the bedrock from which a left-wing press was to re-emerge in the 1980s' (1997:328). This is to assume social effects of this journalism in a teleology that is highly questionable.

And in one apparent lapse of rigour, Switzer seems to assume that the circulation of the *Workers Herald* can be read off the membership figures of the organisation (1997:155, 228). This would really seem to be a retrospective reading into a situation, and it represents a claim about which one can only have grave doubts.

Still, what the book leaves behind is a record of a publishing history that has remained hidden for a long time. While Switzer has written as a pioneer on the topic for more than a decade, this is the first time a coherent theoretical framework has informed his work. He has, to an extent, succeeded in his professed aim of demonstrating that traditional content analysis (even if not especially valuable) is not incompatible with more modern focus on discourse and class. More importantly, the final product casts additional light on the present. It may also, I hope, inspire further research in this field in the future.

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