

THE ROLE OF THE PRINT MEDIA DURING THE APARTHEID ERA

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Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the role of the print media during the apartheid era.

A strong characteristic of all state propaganda is its ability, as ideology, to legitimise and validate itself. This was true too, of apartheid. The apartheid system rested on the notion of 'separate, but equal', where separation was justified by the equal treatment handed out to the separated races. Of course underneath this statement lay the maintenance of white supremacy, politically, economically and socially. The role of apartheid propaganda was to continually assert separation as legitimate and necessary and to hide the inequality with distortions and myths which would aim to satisfy all South Africans. For most South Africans, their own lived experiences very quickly taught them the hollowness of assertions of tribal and racial separation, cultural difference and educational equality.

In all of this the media was situated as a voice capable of persuading the public, and being responsible for informing them. The responsibility which rested on the media was to inform the public honestly, whilst remembering their power of persuasion. The people of South Africa were not drawn into believing everything the media told them, but because experience in the society was so stratified, it was often difficult for them to test what they had learnt in the media, with their experiences. What is more, an important part of the apartheid state's strategy was to play to the fears of South Africans. The media was also in a situation of considerable influence and their reporting was often viewed, correctly or incorrectly, as an indicator of public opinion, both by the apartheid government and the people.

It is within the framework of human rights and the recognition of apartheid as criminal that this analysis takes place.

Methodology

Analysing the role of the media is necessarily selective to some degree because it was not possible to look at every press report throughout the apartheid era due to the sheer volume of information generated over the years. Another factor influencing our approach was that of avoiding our research being reduced to a finger-pointing exercise in which blame could be apportioned. We recognised that our study needed to show how the media interacted with the system of apartheid in all its ideological complexity.

Finally our experience in monitoring and researching the media has taught us that much of the media's meaning is encoded through unconscious conventions - of journalism and of the society's attitudes and beliefs. To achieve our aims then, we elected to make use of

a combination of close content analysis, fortified with a discourse analysis. This is because as van Dijk puts it,

“discourse analysis specifically aims to show how the cognitive, social, historical, cultural or political contexts of language use and communication impinge on the contents, meanings, structures, or strategies of text or dialogue.” (1991: 45)

Simply put, discourse analysis evaluates the relationship between text and context in practice.

We therefore selected two significant moments in South African history which reflect political and social opposition to apartheid and its mechanisms, in order to assess press coverage of them. The periods selected are:

- The week from 14 June to approximately 22 June 1976, in order to analyse coverage of the 16 June uprising in Soweto
- The week from 6 August to approximately 13 August 1987, in order to analyse coverage of the National Union of Mineworkers’ strike

We monitored approximately 1 800 English and Afrikaans articles, and developed themes which characterise the ways in which the press legitimated the apartheid system.

Whilst recognising the differences in attitude and role between the Afrikaans and English press, we have amalgamated our analysis of them within the following themes:

- Racism in reporting - the unequal and unfair representation of black and white people.
- The criminalisation of political activity - any extra-parliamentary, oppositional political activity was criminalised through legislation by the state. This theme examines the role the media played in opposing or supporting this.
- Depoliticising of news - the ways in which the political content, and implications of news were depoliticised.
- Failing to challenge and oppose human rights violations - government attempts to censor news and information relating to extra-parliamentary political activism inhibited the role and functioning of the media in reporting news. This theme examines how the media challenged and supported these restrictions.
- Limiting the political arena - This theme explored the ways in which the political discourse of the apartheid system was challenged and inscribed in news reporting.

It is through these themes that the study hopes to highlight the ways in which apartheid operated as a pervasive system through which aspects of civil society and its institutions became incorporated and to investigate the degree to which the functioning of the media allowed itself to be incorporated by that system.

Racism in Reporting

The system of apartheid which informed the social, political and economic relations of South Africans was entrenched in much of the reporting of both situations. More obviously prevalent in the 1976 coverage, our research identified ways in which the unequal status of blacks and whites in South African society was articulated within press coverage.

Whilst all deaths related to the uprising were clearly unfortunate, what was focused on was the death of 2 white people (out of 8 who had died) who were named and whose lives and work were extensively reported on in a number of newspapers, whilst the greater number of black people killed were relegated to (usually) nameless numbers. This demonstrates the unequal treatment of white “victims” compared to black “statistics,” reducing them to an unidentifiable mass.

This can be similarly exemplified in the discourse of the coverage - the representation of the “mobs” in Soweto who were bent on anarchy, looting and arson. Whilst it is recognised that criminal elements emerged within the uprising, the media capitalised on the anarchistic and unruly behaviour of “crowds” and “tsotsi’s” with less attention being paid to the violations of the protesting pupils’ rights to choice and education. The representation of the threatening mob fed into the apartheid motivated discourse of a “Swart gevaar”, where huge numbers of black people who could not be contained threatened the social, physical and ideological space of white South Africans.

By 1987, the apartheid state had become far more subtle and careful in its discourse, quite probably because of the growth of the alternative press, resistant voices inside and outside of the country and the pressures from the international community (which could no longer be so arrogantly ignored, as in 1976, because of certain economic and political pressures and sanctions). The black workforce had strengthened considerably in number and in economic and political clout and could not so easily be relegated to marauding mobs.

The use of violence and intimidation, as in 1976, became a key tool in portraying strikers/students/protesters etc. as ‘mobs’ in various manifestations which continued to threaten the social order. The rhetoric of the state, transmuted to the media, worked to maintain the position of black South Africans, fighting for their human rights, as subversive and dangerous forces.

Depoliticising of news

In 1987 the economic polarisation of the mine workers and mine owners, whilst based in capitalist class relations, was assisted by the apartheid policies of the State which contained (homelands) and controlled the movements (influx control) and opportunities

of black people (job reservation) to the extent that a cheap black labour force was available to the manufacturing and mining industries.

However, press reporting on both incidents predominantly excluded, ignored or denied the political context in which they occurred. In 1976, whilst newspapers questioned how the government had allowed this to happen and the competency of Botha and Treurnicht, constant attempts were made to depoliticise the events, saying that they were purely language based and that they were not related to the broader political movement against apartheid.

History has demonstrated to us the importance of the 1976 uprising in the anti-apartheid struggle and the impact it had on the apartheid State, yet its significance was depoliticised and repeated comments were made in various newspapers that it “was not another Sharpeville” (*Die Volksblad* 21/6/76: 12). It wasn’t, it was bigger than Sharpeville and it added to the tally of the State’s violations of human rights.

Reporting on the NUM strike focused strongly on the non-political nature of the strike with it being an issue to be settled between mine owners and mine workers.

This introduces the question of the relationship between “political goals” and “bread-and-butter” issues in the context of apartheid. Most people fighting against apartheid were fighting for the meeting of basic human rights which they were being denied by the State, the strike fitted into this as it was an attempt to increase the livelihood of workers. The very context in which the miners were striking was political yet most media contained it as a dispute limited to the arena of the industry. All economic and social interactions have political implications, and the South African government became a master at depoliticising the struggle for human rights. Unfortunately, the media fell into doing the same thing.

Criminalisation of protest activity

A common way of representing protest activity in the press was to criminalise it. Thus protesting students became marauding mobs and looters and strikers became intimidators, saboteurs and murderers. This can be linked to the State’s criminalising of black oppositional activity by legislating ways to contain and limit such activity. The discourse which operated within reporting in 1976 and 1987 fed into this. In ’76 in particular, a war psychosis developed which emphasised the violence, arson and threat to white South Africa which the uprising posed.

The use of language such as ‘tsotsis’ and ‘drunken rioters’ added to the criminal image being established. The further portrayal of “instigators” (suggesting some covert force in operation) as responsible for forcing the protest continued to undermine and nullify the students’ protest actions. The protest actions thus moved into the sphere of the criminal. Whilst the police’s actions in firing live ammunition at unarmed students (“Automatics

used on rioting mobs” **The Star** 17/6/76: 1), and their attempt to prevent wounded students being treated at Baragwanath (“...armed police refusing to admit a 14-year-old schoolboy who had been shot three times” **Rand Daily Mail** 18/6/76: 1) was not seen as being negative or unacceptable. The police were instead represented as keepers of law and order . Their role perpetuated the war psychosis where armed action (and the use of armoured vehicles) was needed to hold the threat against white South Africa at bay.

By 1987 media representation of protest activity had become more sophisticated, with the discourse of protest and political representation being well-developed over the years

Whilst the actions of miners originally appeared to be reasonable, as soon as ‘violence erupted’ their activities became criminalised. The claims of intimidation and violence were relative to the statements of both workers and owners and often were not conclusively proved either way. Nonetheless, the media tended to criminalise the activities of the miners even when allegations were not conclusive.

Failing to challenge and oppose human rights violations

The infringement of human rights by the apartheid government included many restrictions on information which the media could report on. The government’s aim was to starve the public of news and ideas which undermined and threatened the apartheid system. This censoring of information, as well as the many other abuses of human rights had a direct influence on the functioning of the media and demanded that these infringements be challenged.

In June 1976 the state made use of two significant restrictions, that of banning journalists from reporting in unrest or related areas and that of banning open air meetings.

The ban on journalists was directly related to the issue of the body count. According to press reports police restricted the movements of journalists and attempted to prevent journalists from entering Baragwanath hospital to interview and count the victims. None of the newspapers we examined questioned these actions nor did they attempt to verify or challenge the official death toll.

By the time of the NUM strike of 1987 the situation regarding press freedom and other human rights was more severe. There was a greater awareness of this, as the emergency regulations made accurate reporting more and more difficult, journalists were harassed and detained and information was harder to obtain. However opposition to this by the mainstream commercial press was not always vociferous.

The Independent Newspapers submission to the TRC argues very forcefully that the commercial press (from the Argus group anyway) tried hard to challenge and evade the restrictive laws. One can fully accept their argument, but that would be to accept that they pushed the laws to the limit, that they left no room for a more radical or vehement

protest. But they did not. Despite their attempts, their commercial imperatives always prevented them from greater action.

This was left to the courageous and sometimes suicidal, efforts of the alternative press including the **New Nation**, **Weekly Mail**, **Vrye Weekblad** and others whose editions were often banned, and who suffered greater harassment and restrictions but who managed to provide information which other media could or would not print.

It would not be fair to suggest that any of the media which underwent the harassment and restrictions of the state made no attempt to overcome it, but the alternative press of the 1980's deserve to be remembered for their courageous opposition. What was true was that many newspapers, significantly most of the Afrikaans ones, were far less vehement in their opposition to the draconian restrictions placed on the media by the apartheid state.

Limiting the Political Arena

All the themes dealt with so far have one thing in common, they all formed part of an attempt by the apartheid system to carefully define the limits of legitimate political activity. The aims of this careful delineation were simple: to maintain white domination under the guise of separate development. Racist reporting, the criminalisation, demonisation and depoliticisation of political activity, the restrictions on media reporting and state propaganda were all aimed at removing the struggle for human rights by the black majority from the political discourse of the country and thus render the apartheid government as legitimate. In practice, in 1976 this meant that opposition to the government was restricted and allowed to exist within the confines of parliamentary politics, political activity outside of parliament was subjected to the restrictions and practices mentioned above.

The problem for the media was where to situate itself within this ideological framework. The Afrikaans press' unqualified support for the apartheid state resulted in their fulfilling of the roles required of them by the apartheid government. The English press, with the exception of **The Citizen**, distanced themselves from the apartheid government. **The Citizen's** pro-apartheid standpoint has never been surprising, considering that it was created by the apartheid state.

But while the English newspapers distanced themselves from the apartheid government, through their white perspective and their reporting they knowingly or unknowingly supported the ideology and discourse of the apartheid system. By referencing homeland leaders, they legitimised them, by bringing a white perspective to bear, they validated white and not black South African's experiences of apartheid. In their reporting on parliament, they defined it as the centre of political discourse, isolating the voteless majority.

By omitting the standpoint of those engaged in the struggle for liberation they maintained the hegemony of the apartheid system. This is evident in all the reporting during the 1976 uprising. Opposition to the government was reported from parliament, from apartheid designated leadership (homeland heads and 'Bantu' councils) or from outside of the country; examples of this are numerous.

Editorials from the mainstream press were critical of the government and police handling of the uprisings, but our research revealed very few editorials which were clear and unambiguous in their calls for the government to give all black South Africans their human and political rights as South African citizens. Further, few editorials recognised the importance of unbanning political organisations and releasing political prisoners. Instead most editorials could best be described as 'reformist' advocating reform centred in parliament and government, rather than taking banned and extra-parliamentary organisations into account.

The Independent Newspapers submission to the TRC acknowledges this editorial pattern, describing it as "the company's gradualist anti-apartheid editorial policies" and stating that this "caused perceptions of collusion with apartheid." This is an interesting and certainly valid conclusion, but our research demonstrates that it was not so much the gradualism of the editorial policy which was an act of collusion, but rather the failure of those newspapers which purported to be anti- the apartheid government, to break out of the discursive limits within which the apartheid system defined political activity and the struggle for human rights.

By 1987, the press was reporting the politics of the South African situation with a far less restricted discourse. In spite of censorship and other state restrictions, the ideas of banned organisations were coming through. But it would be inaccurate to suggest that it was only the press which was responsible for this opening up of the political discourse of the apartheid system - rather the press was responding to changes in the society. Fundamental shifts achieved through protest and extra-parliamentary activity which reached a level sufficiently high to make it impossible for extra-parliamentary activity to be excluded from that discourse.

For all the effort of the commercial English press, the real achievements in the media were those reached by the alternative press. With considerably less funding, and greater restrictions, banning orders and harassment from the state these papers managed to provide news and information which the mainstream commercial press could not.

Conclusion

Our analysis, based in a human rights perspective and making use of a close content and discourse analysis, has examined the role which the print media played during the apartheid era. We conclude that this media, wittingly or unwittingly, often played a role

in legitimising and centralising the system of apartheid. English and Afrikaans papers, whilst operating differently in this regard, nonetheless did not always sufficiently challenge the workings, policies and activities of the apartheid state.

The Afrikaans press, during both of the periods we examined was supportive of the state, faithfully reporting news in a manner and discourse which overtly supported apartheid. Seldom in the Afrikaans media was the government criticised, and there was never any indication that apartheid racism was wrong and an abuse of millions of people's human rights was taking place. The strategies of criminalisation and demonisation of political activity, restrictions on information and the faithful regurgitation of government propaganda resulted in the Afrikaans press' support for the apartheid system.

The English press was frequently at odds with the government over its racial policies, challenging them both editorially and in news reports. However, the English press also failed to significantly challenge the restrictions of the state, it also frequently criminalised political protest and demonised the liberation struggle. This press was also often at fault for uncritical reporting of the apartheid government. At the same time they did attempt to provide more balanced and informative coverage.

But despite their good intentions and their opposition to the government's racial policies, our research revealed that because this opposition was framed within the political discourse of the apartheid system, it legitimated it. It provided the system with a carefully controlled and limited opposition, vociferous at times, yet always defined within a discourse which did not recognise, and deliberately excluded, the political and human rights of the majority of South Africans. However, as the struggle for equality gathered pace and support, the English media began to report news in a more extensive and inclusive manner, providing South Africans with news which they needed in order to become informed citizens, able to decide for themselves the bankruptcy of the apartheid system and to search for alternatives.

But the purpose of this submission has not been to condemn the press, rather to understand how it worked, the role it played and the limitations of that role. Most importantly it serves to teach us and our society about the dangers of censorship, restrictions and an uncritical media. It should also challenge media stakeholders to think about how they report news, about the perspectives which they represent and the problems and benefits of that reporting.

It is also a healthy sign that the heritage of the press in this country is not being glossed over and mythologised. In this respect the MMP strongly supports the Independent Newspapers submission and calls on all media players from the apartheid era to undertake similar projects. The fundamental way in which we, as the media, and more broadly as the society conceive ourselves, lies in how we define the way we were. Simply put, if you don't know where you began, you cannot know how far you have come.

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Media Monitored

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English

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Daily Dispatch
Eastern Province Herald
Evening Post
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Natal Witness
Pretoria News
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The Cape Times
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Hoofstad
Oggendblad
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