

political involvement, and also of why the opposition group should now be referred to as the "Congress People". There is no written evidence to indicate that the ANC were active in the area, but as in the risings in Sekhukhuneland in 1957 the links on an overt organisational level may be tenuous, but a strong possibility exists that the ANC were involved in the area.

Lastly, the question arises as to why overt violence should have broken out again last year. The immediate answer of course lies in the attempts by rangers and officials to vaccinate stock. But this begs a further question - why should the Agricultural Department have intervened in an area that according to tribal councillors had not been touched for at least 25 years?

There is an unexplained report in the Rand Daily Mail of 28th August 1978. It states that 63 Matlala tribesmen who were convicted under a wrong proclamation had their convictions and sentences set aside in the Supreme Court. The convictions had been under the Riotous Assemblies Act. This might be the beginnings of the present unrest. It certainly relates to a renewed initiative by the Department of Agriculture from 1978 both to replan areas where the original planning had fallen away, and to plan areas that have thus far remained unplanned. It is possible to tentatively suggest that the entrenchment on Bantustan ideology and the related devolution of functions of control from central government to 'homeland' administration is one

reason why planning is again being pushed. (As the contradictions relating to the 'homeland' system sharpen - as the various Bantustan administrations find themselves dumped with an ever-increasing population of unemployed, old and starving, the need for control becomes stronger. Planning is but one of the ways to secure control, and to stifle all opposition).

The resistance of the Congress People is grounded in the attempts to prevent the alienation of both land and cattle. The ultimate effect of the Bantu Authorities Act is to turn resistance directed against the central government into a situation where the divisions and splits that they have instituted mean that two groups who ultimately share the same oppression are fighting each other. In the case of the Matlala people, both those who have accepted and those who have rejected planning share a similar material situation. The issue has become one of power, and the conflict over the past 20 or 30 years has taken on a new dimension in that support for 'Lebowa' and its structures is an issue that is increasingly important.

Lastly, while it would seem that for the moment anyway, the Congress People have been crushed, the factors which caused them to resist dispossession for so long can only intensify. Increasing landlessness, unemployment, poverty and starvation must ultimately be the material factors that will break through the ideology of 'homeland independence' and reveal to the Matlala tribesmen that their struggle

is not against each other but against the structures which oppress them.

THE PRESS

In an enslaved state the rulers form and supply the opinions of the people. This is the mark by which despotism is distinguished; for it is the power by which despotism is begun and continued... Among the most powerful advocates and auxiliaries of these abuses we must class...newspapers.

from Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Prospectus for 'The Watchman'
(1796)

I AM a white journalist working on a newspaper owned by one of the four major Press groups in South Africa. I have written this article not to offer solutions to the problems faced by myself and my colleagues in the commercial press, but to pose some of those problems. I hope by doing so to generate some kind of response from those whose function has become to mystify instead of to clarify. If my perception of those problems is at fault, perhaps that too will add to an understanding of them - I am, after all, the product of my background, and that, for my entire working life, has been the commercial press in this country.

Identifying the commercial press as allies of those who rule and the institutions which enable them to do so is not so much a radical critique of the press as a tautology. Newspaper owners and managers, who ultimately decide who decides what goes into our newspapers, are no different from the owners and managers of any other profit-oriented institutions; their interests are in maintaining the status quo or, at most, changing it to meet their interests. It would be ridiculous to expect anything else from them or from their appointees, their editors.

Extending the logic downwards, it would seem that editors are equally likely to appoint their ideological allies as reporters, sub-editors etc. But there is a myth surrounding the profession of journalism - a largely media-created myth - that journalists are seekers out of truth and exposers of exploitation and corruption, that journalists are the guardians of the rights of the people.

The result is that the profession attracts not only unintentional advocates of the dominant ideologies of our society, but those who forlornly hope to challenge them.

Unfortunately, and this is where the problems of myself and my colleagues in the latter group begin, they enter a work structure tuned, through long experience to giving the least offence to the greatest number, survival of the flexible, not of the fittest.

They enter institutions where frame-

works for judging 'newsworthiness' have not suddenly sprung to life in isolation, but have grown up in the societies in which the newspaper, and more importantly, those who write and produce them, function. Recruits to the profession are therefore taught the criteria of what constitutes news and what isn't important. Their 'news sense' grows in the newsroom. 'News judgement' is not something inborn and brought in from outside, but is a self-perpetuating set of value-judgements.

Because of the necessity of daily and weekly publication, newspapers have also grown to relate only to those events that are, time-wise, reportable. Situations or conditions in a society are not 'news', they don't happen at regular intervals. Events do.

Something that happens on Monday night is reportable in Tuesday morning's newspaper. The lifestyle of migrant labourers is not. At best it is 'background' until someone releases a study of that lifestyle on a Monday night.

Of course, that someone has to fit the description of a 'newsworthy person' a member of that elite best described here as 'quotees' - but more of that later.

All of which paints a fairly dismal picture of life in a newsroom which journalists themselves would vigorously reject. The feeling that one is 'doing something' by quoting a quotee opposed to apartheid does much to alleviate other feelings of alienation from one's commodity.

It is that 'something' that I and my

colleagues do at our typewriters and computer terminals every day, and the way in which that 'something' beams out a more conservative subliminal message than anything our editors with which I am concerned here. It would be pointless to examine here the grosser aspects of racism and sexism inherent in women's pages, extra editions, racial categorisation of those in the 'news' or girlie pictures. Most of these are part of the unchangeable framework fed to us as 'that's what our readers want'.

But it is conventional wisdom that we as journalists can decide what our readers think about, not how they think about it.

The Star's recent survey of black responses to the Silverton siege shows that despite the screaming headlines of 'killer terrorists' and 'innocent victims of terror', about 90 per cent of Sowetans had a positive response to the action.

Which seems to bear out the conventional wisdom. But a couple of other examples give the lie to it.

The recent attack on Booyens police station was described by police as unprofessional, and the fact that 150 bullets and three RPG rockets were fired without hitting anyone, seems to bear this out. Which feeds another media myth - guerillas in Africa are sent in with insufficient training. To put it in context: Only one bullet in 25 000 killed anyone during the Korean war, so the Booyens guerillas weren't too bad after all, but how many journalists or their readers

knew that? They accepted the 'unprofessional' label and all that it implied.

The second example

A second example is the murder of Dr Rick Turner. Because the murder was seen as an isolated event without any contextual background by the journalists reporting on it, they accepted the preposterous claim by an unidentified telephone caller that the murder was carried out by 'the ANC and Black Power Movement'.

Durban security police described the claim as 'very interesting' - and a page one lead was born. That it was absolutely ridiculous to anyone with an ounce of logic mattered not at all to the writers, subeditors and night editors of South Africa. They obligingly fed their readers an obvious lie which intruded again and again in subsequent reports of the murder, and no doubt lives on in the minds of many South Africans as fact. The papers which featured the

ANC murder claim most prominently, subsequently refused to carry official ANC denials - on the dubious grounds that they could not legally quote the ANC, although they had had no problem quoting the 'ANC and Black Power Movement' spokesman on the night of the killing.

Another example: if a newspaper reader were to read of a mine management decision to condemn over 30 miners to death by sealing them in a mine in which a fire was raging, because to allow the fire to continue would have stopped production, the reader would obviously be

horrified. A mine was in fact sealed in the Western Transvaal in 1978 to kill a fire. More than 30 black miners were left to die inside. But because the press used the opinions of the mine management as fact and said the men were doomed even if the mine were not sealed, the matter was over in three days and nobody questioned the management's decision.

Our deafening silence and corresponding public complacency on the potential dangers of Koeberg is another case in point. As is the neat categorisation of strikes, demonstrations, and riots as illegal acts by using crime reporters to report on them.

Then there is the matter of the quotes. The people we quote, more than anything else we do, puts us solidly on the side of those who benefit from this society.

It is obviously important to get the views of those who rule us. But quoting the Official Opposition? Even the most enthusiastic PFP supporter must realise that it serves little function but to legitimate the idea of South African democracy. Harry Schwartz has no effect on military policy, but we quote him on all things military. Likewise Raw. Sure the men at either end of the SADF's rifles would be more relevant? Instead of quoting pass offenders on the horrors of pass laws, we quote Suzman and Motlana, who have never had to live through those horrors.

On the Silverton siege we quoted the Institute for the Study of Terrorism, the Freedom Foundation and almost anybody else

irrelevant we could find. Only The Citizen had the initiative to actually contact the men responsible for the story, the three guerrillas (they telexed the Volkshuis building).

The way we use our quotes tells our readers that there is a group of people who have an inherent 'newsworthiness', who just are important. Their views are the most valuable we can find. And the fact that none of these quotes are challenging any of the fundamentals of our society cannot pass unnoticed. The message is clear: the most valuable views we can find are saying that the structures of this society are correct. And those views accept the value systems imposed by the oppressors and exploiters, even when disagreeing with them.

We are trying to tell our readers that these people are important, in our objective view and what they are saying is the truth. What we should be telling them is that our quotes, our definers of issues, are merely the best we can find because many of the people who would otherwise be important are banned, in jail, in exile, or part of a social stratum with which we have no contact. We should also inform our readers that there are probably many 'leaders' among factory workers and farm labourers with whom we have never come into contact, because they are not, like Motlana, on the telephone. And that there are probably dozens of labour leaders

with far greater constituencies than our quotees, but we have never met them because we rarely report on labour matters except from an employer viewpoint, and then only when there is an event - a dispute.

And that we spend most of our time in town so we don't have much contact with rural responses to the system.

Of course, we don't tell our readers any of that. We imply that what we are feeding them is a valid, broad spectrum of opinion. And because of deadlines, we don't have time to define our quotees for ourselves, we leave that to our rulers. So even if South African newspapers had not recognised the Muzorewa regime, the amount of space we devoted to his mouthings implied our recognition for us. QED: the bishop was as important as a real prime minister, we implied. QED: the interim regime was valid. QED: the internal election was valid and Mugabe and Nkomo were therefore anti-democratic and thus terrorists. Likewise with Namibia and South Africa. Armed clashes are isolated, unsituated events. Guerillas attack for no other reason than that they have guns. Which doesn't mean we have to include a list of all injustices ever perpetuated in South Africa in every story we write on guerilla conflict, but we could challenge our quotees to define what they say in slightly broader terms than: Mandela is guilty of high treason.

There is a presumption in what we write and the way we write it of support for liberal, democratic principles - unless our quotees specifically deny. If

we are to give our quotees credit for that belief, we have a duty to force them, through our questioning, to live up to that belief. To allow the Koornhofs and Oppenheimers free rein to say what they like about an issue and to allow them to define the terms in which they speak about it is to allow them space to propagandise their own ideologies. It is not balance or truth.

To allow a policeman to define the terms in which we report a demonstration or a strike, is to allow him to define police action as defence of liberal, democratic principles.

Our assumptions of liberal democratic principles have been outflanked by PW Botha's 'change or die', and the upsurge of propaganda advocating 'free' enterprise.

Our stories

The subliminal message of our stories was that we wanted change and freedom. We've got them and we don't know how to respond to them.

We need to do more than find another, more acceptable quotee. We need to examine the presumptions inherent in everything we write or we will face the possibility in the coming years of becoming, as the journalists of Rhodesia did, active supporters of their rulers' repressive ideologies rather than what we are now, passive purveyors of those ideologies. They did not start off as Coleridge's 'advocates and auxiliaries' either, they were just journalists.

The solution is not to get out of the commercial press. We are stuck, for

better or for worse, in it. The British labour movement has not been able, despite 50 years' effort to get an alternative national paper off the ground. The history of Spark, New Age, The Guardian etc. - and the slow death of The Voice demonstrate the futility of even considering it in South Africa

The 100-odd laws that limit what we write, and the conservatism of our editorial executives, make our task more difficult, but they do not prevent it.

