

ARM, EMPOWER

GUY BERGER, Editor of South newspaper, recently addressed the graduation of media trainees from the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town. This is an edited version of his speech.

I have been asked to speak about media in transition, especially in relation to marginalised communities. Political transition of course is what defines the current period, and this has implications for the media. And the fact that political transition has become stalled, become convoluted, violent, partial, uncertain, also impacts on the media. When I worked at Mars, we had highly politicised view of media, seeing it as simply a weapon in struggle.

The ruling establishment had their media weapons, the people needed their own media missiles. We drew from the Leninist view that media were organisers, mobilisers and agitators. In fact, we refined this view in a useful way. Thus we added the roles of educator - which in a newsletter would involve in-depth feature articles; and the role of conscientiser which we saw as being a necessary stage before mobilisation was possible. We spoke too about being a populariser - and this led to an emphasis on symbols, slogans, logos. This view corresponded to the pre-transitional era we were in at the time, when things were divided along clear battle lines, and political choices were simple and straightforward. So what has changed now? In my view, the context is very different today to what it was 10 years ago, and I believe community media also needs to adjust accordingly. There is still, especially in Natal, and in South Africa's rural areas, a situation of clear battle lines and a need for absolute partisanship in media. But in other areas of society, we see a lessening of political differences because the fundamental issues of repression and human rights are not as compelling or severe as they used to be. In the Western Cape, we are discovering to our shock that many of the people oppressed by apartheid actually will vote for the Nationalist Party. We also see how, despite everything, the mainstream media retains its dominant position and

circulation among the public. Finally, we also see how, within our own ranks, there is now space for large debate and for criticism and exposure of malpractices and human rights abuses.

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The one role of the media that we at Mars in 1983 almost entirely neglected was its role as a forum for debate. There was no debate then, of course. The mission was indisputably and simply to smash the racist state and combat the ruling class media's disinformation and cover-up. Today, some of that mission has been achieved in parts: things are different, and in my view media - including community media - needs to see to what extent it can or should stand back from the fray a bit, and provide the space for debate.

This requires some independence of the media from the community and constituencies that it serves. It means less partisanship or less sectarian approaches to the role of media. But as soon as one speaks of independence, one immediately comes up against the question: but what happens to a accountability then? There is no easy answer to this, but at the same time everyone can surely agree that if the only media we had in a society were those that acted as the newsletter mouthpieces of their owners or boards of control, or executive committees, then society would be all the poorer. In my view, one needs a bit of autonomy, where media is not as predictable, where people working in media should be given some space to do things that are creative, that emerge from themselves, that may cause upset with their readers or publishers. Media's role in the 1990s should not only be to arm, empower and mobilise its readers, but also to get them to think a bit and to wrestle with different, uncomfortable facts. We already have a culture of political intolerance all-round in South

Africa, but the only way to turn this around is through a brave media that proves its value by its independence.

Whatever role one is going to play, one has to get to the people with one's media. The big problem facing most media in South Africa today is its inaccessibility to the broad public. It is no good producing a newsletter that gives a voice to a hitherto silent sector of society, if the purpose is simply for the producers to rave off to themselves. The purpose of media is to communicate - and that means that it is crucial to ensure that media producers are not just working for the pleasure of putting themselves in print or image. They have to be reminded that the purpose is to convey intelligible messages to others and this requires quality, standards, a choice of a particular language and style, the use of colour, and so on. And this is all the more important because any media message today has to compete with millions of others, and so packaging and presentation are of major importance.

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We can never be content with second-best design or writing just because it comes authentically from the community. The community will judge media in terms of the best available, and make its choices accordingly. If you cannot compete with TV and radio for people's time, you are not going to succeed. An even bigger issue than presentation of community media is delivery. There must be billions of media packages in South Africa which have not been distributed. So much work goes into planning and producing media, and only at the end do people think of distribution. Which means that, again, the media is not at the end of the day being produced for communication purposes, but for the benefit of its producers alone. Distribution is absolutely fundamental. The same consideration goes for money. Who will pay

AND MOBILISE!

the bills for media? All too often, a community organisation will think it is a nice thing to have certain media. All too seldom, will thought go into costing the exercise in terms of its aims, and into budgeting and funding the venture. Community media, perhaps, is one of the last bastions for funding in South Africa, but even that, I suspect, is likely to crumble over time. Apartheid

is far from dead and gone, and yet funding fatigue is hitting ev-

everything, not least media and media training. There is an argument nowadays, that funding economic development is more important than funding media. The view is that SA needs viable chicken co-ops rather than a vibrant press, black journeymen rather than black journalists. In my view, development is anything but technical. If the public is to debate and help decide on development priorities, for example, if the emphasis should be housing, schooling, or Armscor, and what kind of housing, education and Armscor, then media is sorely needed. Not just any media, but media produced by people close to the communities. And if development policies are to be implemented under public scrutiny, and with a minimum of waste and corruption, again media is needed. If black youth are to know about how to become black journeymen, and women, then media is needed. We have to convince funders about this. Regarding political development, the development of democracy through this transition period, there is much talk today about creating a level political playing field. What good, though, is any field whether one is referring to politics or to



Media participants from the Overberg region recently held a media workshop on how to produce t-shirts and banners which were conducted by CAP and the Western Cape Media Trainers Forum.

production - if it is inadequately and unevenly lit? Media spotlights are absolutely essential to a new order in SA.

They are needed to help light up the dark corners of the field where the foul play occurs. They are needed to help light up parts of the field that are shabbily serviced by existing lights, and where the players need information and perspectives if they are to compete adequately with their opposition. At a recent conference on media training at Allister Sparks' Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, it emerged that at any given time there are up to 2000 students studying journalism around SA. At the current moment, there are also only some 50 new jobs in formal journalism each year. People are being trained in skills they will not be able to put to use, and an enormous amount of time and energy is being misdirected and even wasted. At the same time, if one looks at community media, at any given time there are probably under 30 people being trained in these skills in SA. And yet, the demand in communities for local media far outstrips the supply of capable personnel. There are not necessarily more than 50 paid formal jobs in community

media around SA today.

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But in this time of transition, there is enormous scope for community media to become a viable small business or co-operative growth industry at the same time as providing a vital service to their clients. I hope some of that potential for this may be realised during this political transition, because it will not only affect the character of our transition, but it will leave an enduring set of services in the post-apartheid period. At the end of the day, money is needed for community media - media that can reach marginalised communities in particular. If community media is to have some impact in the broad media arena, it has to be financed. And if funding is not forthcoming, then self financing it as a business or co-operative venture is surely the way to go. Especially if the alternative is to go without community media.