CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION: THE RISE OF THE LEFT-WING PRESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The aim of this paper is to encourage debate about the left-wing media which evolved in South Africa during the first half of the 1980s. Its thesis is tentative, its conclusions provisional, but the need for review and reflection about the media practices of the period is pressing. The ideas for the paper came out of late-night sessions over light tables and letraset and from debates with media activists and students following the crippling press restrictions of the second state of emergency.

By the mid-1980s nearly 30,000 activists had been detained under the various states of emergency and a considerable number of these were media workers of one sort or another. For the survivors of those heady years (when the end of apartheid seemed to be in sight) it was a time for assessment. We were left with many organisations crippled or banned, a much-reduced terrain of operation, and more questions than answers - fundamental questions like: What *is* mass communication? What is the relationship between media and movements, and between movements and technology? How do notions of class and the national democratic movement articulate? And even broader ones: What, in ideological and cultural terms, *were* the 1980s in South Africa? How much credence can be given to the state's claim that a revolution was imminent? In the turbulence of the times there had been little space for reflection. By the late 1980s it was essential.

This study does not answer all of these questions. But, given that theories and conclusions are provisional, and that activists tend to colour their history from their own paint-box, three general agreements emerged from these discussions which took place in the Eastern Cape from 1987:

> radical communication practices (as I will define below) played a far greater role in the rise of this insurrectionary climate than is generally accepted by all but the state;
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> the Left's willingness to press the new print technologies into the service of the struggle led to a qualitative and quantitative leap in the use of printed media; and
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> the emergencies were the apartheid state's answer to a massive leakage of executive legitimacy. While the Pretoria govemment *seemed* to be winning most of the battles of the period by force and repression, it was rapidly losing the people to an oppositional culture which owed much of its reproduction to the repertoire of symbols which were daily regenerated and refined through popular communication channels.

Indeed, it is only in the light of these conclusions that we can understand the shift of executive power from parliamentary to para-military structures, and why one of the main recipients of state restrictions under the various states of emergency has been the press. However, the left media cannot be considered in isolation from ideological shifts which took place at the level of the state and the commercial mass media systems during the period.

The State: a Failure of Legitimacy

The South African state, with its obedient television, radio and press networks, not only provided a focus for political opposition, but it also set the boundaries and indeed often provided the spaces within which (and over which) popular struggles occurred. It is generally agreed that a formative change took place at the level of state power in the late 1970s. Some writers have characterised the shift away from the limited Westminster parliamentary system and towards a military-dominated elite within the State Security Council (SSC) as a "creeping coup". Certainly, changes in more than personnel occurred in the wake of the Muldergate affair* in 1977, and this paved the way for a shift in power from an elected parliament (and even from the ruling party) towards an executive presidency and the so-called tricameral system of separate and unequal representation of Indians, Coloureds and Whites.

The extended powers granted to the SSC from 1977 represented a massive centralisation of power. This was followed by a hawkish foreign policy and an attempt to defuse growing trouble in the townships by initiating reforms designed to win black allies and divide the disenfranchised by offering limited powers to elected township councillors. The content of the state's reform initiative was:

> to remove barriers to social mobility for the emergent black petit-bourgeoisie by offering opportunities for entrepreneurship and educational attainment at "white" universities;
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> to incorporate a layer of skilled black workers into a "labour aristocracy" by offering a number of concessions, which included permanent leasehold and home-ownership schemes, relaxation of restrictions on occupational and geographical mobility and a modicum of self-governance in urban townships;
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> to mobilise resources to upgrade the socio-economic conditions of permanently settled urban black residents, while simultaneously tightening influx control to seal off the urban townships and divert job-seekers into the burgeoning dormitory towns, located nominally in the homelands but within commuting distance of employment in white South Africa;
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> to entice a significant majority of so-called Coloureds and Indians into central political apparatuses, albeit as junior partners, and
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> to eliminate those racially discriminatory clauses in the existing apartheid legislation that attached opprobrium abroad but made little or no difference with respect to ensuring white privilege.

Despite the heavy use of state TV and radio to sell these initiatives, the executive's failure to achieve a significant measure of support for them, or rather the success with which popular ideology and organisations systematically shredded them, was to throw the state into a crisis of legitimation and control. But, at the time, it opened up political spaces and provided issues around which the national democratic movement could organise. Another unexpected

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* The Department of Information was discovered to have misused large amounts of secret funds - among other things to finance a daily newspaper. State President B J Vorster and Minister of Information Connie Mulder were forced to resign, and Permanent Secretary Rhoodie unsuccessfully prosecuted.

space which appeared was in liberal judgments handed down by certain sections of the judiciary emboldened by the growth of the mass movement and undoubtedly with an ear to overseas opinion. Although it can be argued that decisions against the state merely helped it to refine legal repression, the presence of judges clearly unwilling to rubber-stamp parliamentary decrees acted as a partial brake on excesses and often forced the state to reveal its hand in key cases against the press and the national democratic movement.

The Guild Press: a Failure of Will

A second player (by default) in the rise of the left press was the mass communication networks. In the 1980s they appeared to lose popular legitimacy at a time when their owners would have most wanted to influence the course of political events. This corresponded to (and partly gave rise to) an increase in the credibility of popular media. In order to understand this shift, it is necessary to ask what mass communication systems actually are.

Although the communications corporations are in the business of making money, the media are, of course, more than merely business enterprises. They are also purveyors of class culture. Indeed, culture - the beliefs, mores, customs and maps of meaning of particular social groupings - is threaded through all social practices and is, in a sense, the sum of their inter-relationship. Journalists in the so-called commercial media - particularly those working on South Africa's English-language newspapers - often find it inconceivable that they may be writing anything but the obvious truth. But I would argue that, by simply conforming to certain professional practices, they work within the confines of a guild of understandings which tend to serve the definitions of reality of the political elite.

The routines of journalism, set within the economic and political interests of communications organisations, normally and regularly combine to select certain versions of reality over others. [1] Day by day, normal organisational procedures define "the story", identify the protagonists and the issues, and suggest appropriate attitudes towards them. [2] In this quiet fashion, not deliberately, and without calling attention to this spotlighting process, the mass media divide events into legitimate main acts and illegitimate sideshows, so that these distinctions appear "natural" or "common sense".

The process by which the world beyond the reader's direct experience is made to look natural could be defined as a communications frame. At any moment the world is rife with events. Even within a single event there are many details and angles. Frames are, therefore, principles of selection, emphasis, presentation and exclusion, composed of tacit little theories about what exists, what happens and what matters.

Communications frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organise the world for journalists and enable them to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely and package them for efficient relay to their audiences. One of the most contested practices in framing is the empiricist notion of objectivity. Empiricism holds that the test of true knowledge lies in observation, experience or the collection of facts, and ignores the personality and culture of the journalist (in South Africa generally white and middle class) and the context of the informant. The canon of objectivity represents the common sense professional view of the guild journalist. [3] However, the cost of the empiricist defence of journalism is to render cultural determinations and effects quite marginal. Opposing frameworks are treated as a problem, a bias, distortion. Guild journalists attempt to strip them away, revealing the verifiable "fact" inside.

This process is not merely technical. Guild practices are both professional and cultural blinkers which tend to narrow the circumference of the journalist's vision. For many (and particularly senior) journalists, this framing process blocked their political understanding at a time when popular insurrection demanded acute peripheral vision. And if these journalists saw little, media managements saw less.

The broader problem here is that the way people act depends, in part, on how the situations in which they act are defined. Meaning is not a natural phenomenon, it is a social production. [4] For this reason, different kinds of meaning can be ascribed to the same events. The communications field can therefore become a battleground of definitions. For one meaning to win credibility, alternative constructions have to be down-graded, de-legitimized and marginalized. For this reason, the guild media - and its readers - were often out of step with the unfolding political drama of the decade.

In the 1980s two other factors contributed towards the conceptual laagering of the white electorate. One was press wars and mergers which reduced the range of media voices, and the other was the escalating legal assault on the communications corporations by the state. Even before the state of emergency, the government's restrictions on communication were severe. This paralleled a declining interest by large financial corporations in print media as a source of profit, an escalating legal assault on non-state communication practices, and an increasing distaste on the part of the commercial corporation, Argus/Times Media for black-directed newspapers.

Ownership of the South African media is among the most concentrated in the non-socialist world, and its management is generally among the most conservative in the country. The guild media are essentially commercial enterprises, intended mainly to make money and only secondarily to supply information. Newspapers, particularly, do not try to push up circulations to offer more people their package of information, but primarily to offer advertisers a wider audience. In return for this, advertisers will obviously pay higher rates. And it is not just any audience that is wanted, but one which can afford the advertisers' products. [5] This was one of the factors influencing the closure of the ***Rand Daily Mail*** in April 1985. With a daily circulation of 116,000, the Mail was the biggest morning paper in South Africa. However, most of its readers were black, and advertisers chasing up-market customers began transferring to more conservative papers. In its final year the ***Mail*** is reputed to have lost R9m. [6]

The closure of the ***Mail*** was only part of a complex process of rationalization in response to both the recessionary climate and state pressure on the English-language press to "put its house in order" and to control "revolutionary influences" in its stable. The process is too complex to detail here, but was marked by very intricate footwork by the Argus Company. Highlights in these moves were the "phony war" between the Argus and South African Allied Newspapers (SAAN) which led to the closure of the ***Mail*** and the ***Express***, and the launching of the ***Sunday Star*** and ***Business Day***. [7] There has been speculation that the ***Mail*** - for years a thorn in the side of the Nationalist government - may have been closed as a trade-off with the state in return for the licensing of the profitable M-Net TV channel. [8] Other moves were the closure of the ***Cape Herald***, ***Sowetan***, ***Sunday Mirror*** and ***Soweto News***, as well as a rationalisation of facilities between the ***Argus*** and ***Cape Times***, the closure of the ***Friend*** and the pulling together of the ***Eastern Province Herald*** and ***Evening Post*** under a single managing editor and shared newsroom.

Two processes seem to have been at work here. For some years Argus/Times Media, Nationale Pers and Perskor were moving their assets away from newspapers and into non-newspaper operations such as entertainment and TV. Argus income from these activities, for example, rose from 19 per cent in 1984/85 to 32 per cent in 1985/86. This included retail outlets, records, tapes, electronic advertising and TV. [9] The launch of M-Net, in which the three major press groups jointly invested R95m, was a further indication of this trend. In their remaining newspaper operations (which in 1985/86 accounted for only 34 per cent of Argus income), the trend, according to David Niddrie, "manifested itself in waning enthusiasm, under mounting state pressure, for newspapers with a high political profile". This resulted, he says, in a move away from ownership of newspapers with the greatest growth potential: the black press. [10]

This is not an unreasonable assumption. The Argus had its fingers burned by the banning of ***World***, ***Weekend World*** (in 1977), and ***Post*** and ***Sunday Post*** (1981). In December 1981 Home Affairs Minister Stoffel Botha reportedly told Newspaper Press Union representatives that the state found the successor to these papers, the ***Sowetan***, unacceptable. At the time, the Argus is said to have contemplated selling both the ***Sowetan*** and its only surviving black-reader paper, ***Ilanga***. ***Ilanga*** was eventually sold, reportedly at an incredibly low price (despite being profitable), to Inkatha in April 1987. One reason could be that the Argus retained the printing side of the paper and divested itself of the editorial section, thus standing to make a profit without the pain of editorial conflict. It has also been suggested that the sale was again a trade-off, this time against the state keeping its hands off the ***Sowetan***. [11] In this context, the comment by SA Society of Journalists organiser John Allen, that "for twenty-five years newspaper management response to government pressure has been to feed the crocodile by making concessions", seems appropriate. [12]

The point of this brief survey of the guild media is to pose the following question. With the massive growth of state TV and with state censorship increasing, white readership of newspapers falling, coverage of black issues in the English press declining and conservative corporations in control of 95 per cent of all paper sales, is it not possible that most whites in South Africa managed to live through a revolution at the level of popular culture without noticing it? More research is needed to substantiate this point, but if impressions count for anything this certainly seems to be the case. One anecdote does not serve as proof, but it is not out of place here. A French journalist who interviewed the white South African delegation of academics and businessmen which met African National Congress (ANC) representatives in Dakar in July 1987 was quoted as being astonished at their political ignorance of the context of political struggles in South Africa. "It brought home", she wrote, "that Pretoria's first weapon is ignorance."

In the townships the position was different. As the news frame of the guild media moved further and further away from township reality, people there continued to watch TV, listen to the radio and read commercial newspapers. But increasingly the information which informed their choices and action came from elsewhere: from the popular circuits of communication and from understandings drawn from events around them which together added up to a fundamental social transformation at the level of popular consciousness. The vehicle for this new consciousness was increasingly to be the new Congress Movement.

The Congress Movement: a New Political Force

The period between 1980 and the declaration of the second state of emergency in 1986 was to see a breathtaking consolidation of popular sentiment and action around the symbols of the Freedom Charter, mass action and democratic organisation. In the ensuing battle with the state, forces which are best described as popular were to engage in a bitter struggle for cultural hegemony in townships, factories and schools - a struggle they appear to have won decisively. Indeed, history may show that the cultural gains at the level of popular lifeways and understandings far outweighed those made in direct political confrontation with the state.

In the previous decade Black Consciousness had coincided (but did not necessarily intersect) with the rolling strikes of the early 1970s, and together these developments helped oppressed people to "dream dreams" about democracy and justice. Together, they fuelled the outrage over school overcrowding and the use of Afrikaans which was to culminate in the Soweto uprising. In 1977 the state banned eighteen organisations, together with the ***World*** and ***Weekend World*** newspapers. The following year new rhythms began to be felt.

On the Reef the new mood was reflected in the pages of the black newspapers ***Post*** and ***Weekend Post***, owned by Jim Bailey. Some journalists made contact with the exiled ANC and ran politically challenging stories. ***Weekend Post*** also republished the Freedom Charter, which had dropped out of sight for nearly twenty years. Then, in Cape Town in 1989, a

boycott of Fattis and Monis products was called during a strike by the firm's workers. Women and youth formed support structures to organise the boycott and to assist striking workers. These were to become the United Women's Organization and Lagunyacro (later the Cape Youth Congress).

The 1980s opened with school boycotts which started in Cape Town and spread throughout the country. Essentially, the boycotts were over the right to organise and a rejection of inferior education and poor facilities. Throughout the year labour action was also escalating, and popular demonstrations across the board reached a high point in May 1981, with mass mobilisations set to coincide with the Republic Day celebrations.

The Congress character of the oppositional structures which developed during the period could be seen in meetings held in various centres in 1981. In Cape Town that November people streamed into the Athlone civic centre for a meeting few realised would symbolise a decisive shift in cultural struggle in South Africa. It was called by the Anti-SAIC (South African Indian Council) Committee in conjunction with the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC) to popularise opposition to the SAIC elections due the following Wednesday. The audience of about 1,000 was soon aware that this meeting was somehow different. Marshalls who ushered people to their seats wore khaki uniforms with green, black and gold ribbons. Around the walls, in huge stencilled letters, were the words of the banned Freedom Charter. Speakers reminded people of the traditions of resistance born out of the Congress Alliance, about the need for unity and the necessity to boycott undemocratic state institutions. They affirmed their commitment to work towards a united democratic society as enshrined in the Charter. As the meeting ended a large ANC flag unfurled behind the rostrum.

Similar meetings were being held in Johannesburg and Durban, but the initiative had come from a national conference of more than 100 organisations in Natal the previous month. The Durban meeting was described by the student paper ***Saspu National*** as "an almost unprecedented gathering of progressive organisations. In many ways, the Anti-SAIC gathering paralleled the 1955 [Kliptown Congress] meeting ... and the key document (at both) was the Freedom Charter". At the meeting the Anti-SAIC Committee called for "links between labour, student, women's and community organisations and the establishment of independent community newspapers".

This conference was, of course, not held in a political vacuum. The student boycotts and labour action had laid the groundwork for mass community action, and in June of that year the Cape newsletter, ***Grassroots***, was calling for "joint action on all fronts". By that October unions and community organisations in Cape Town were engaged in joint talks, and 1981 was remarkable for the proliferation of both community and student organisations. In August of that year representatives of twenty-nine trade unions met in unity talks which were to lead to the formation of the giant workers' congress, COSATU. Indeed micro-organisation was taking place rapidly all over the country. But until the Anti-SAIC campaign little evidence of the debate about a national context for these movements could be found in the left-wing press or elsewhere. For this reason the organisational clarity of the campaign was remarkable - and went far beyond plans to stall the SAIC elections. At the Cape Town meeting a small tabloid newspaper, the ***Call***, was distributed, and was unusual in its strong and frequent references to the struggles of the 1950s and the Congress Alliance. The call, it said, "is for all democratic-forces to unite on the basis of the Freedom Charter ... for unity in action on a broad front ... for us to build on the lessons learnt in the 1950s - the decade of mass struggle - and to march forward without hesitation".

The new Congress Movement thus placed itself squarely astride the history of resistance of the 1950s - and the parallels were obvious: the general accord with ANC principles, the Charter, the Congress salute, veneration for the old ANC leaders. Indeed, the whole repertoire of struggle of the 1950s was re-installed in the campaign structures of the 1980s - but, necessarily, there were differences. Structural conditions had changed. Levels of

urbanisation were far higher than in the 1950s, and during the boom of the 1960s skilled black labour had increased dramatically. [13] Under the hated but widespread Bantu education system literacy had soared. In the mid-1950s black secondary school attendance was a mere 25,000; by the early 1970s it was 300,000, and by the 1980s between five and six million. [14] Yet, in the recession of the early 1970s, thousands had been thrown out of work and black pupils faced a bleak future.

The carnage at the hands of the police in Soweto taught students important distinctions between mobilisation and organisation. The resulting leap in political maturity among pupils of the following decade, who had been given a new sense of their own power by the events of the 1970s, is reflected in this letter to a newspaper from a Cape Flats mother:

> I am very worried about my child who is boycotting ... [he] gets up - he is only in Standard 8 - and he speaks to hundreds of people at the meeting. He is so confident of himself ... I can understand it all, but I feel scared. [15]

The year 1981 also saw the political banner and the electrostatic plain-paper copier come of age. The spread of rebellion was marked by the appearance of political banners on an unprecedented scale. The townships, particularly in Cape Town, became festooned with slogans, from broad calls of "Unite, freedom for all" and "An injury to one is an injury to all" to reflections of immediate struggles such as "Two rooms is a living hell!", "We want electricity". They were produced faster than they could be removed by the authorities, who eventually simply gave up. The banners, together with the many student, community and union newsletters which were produced, had a mass politicizing effect in the urban areas. They gave the sense that "the people" were on the move, and the slogans located the enemy firmly in the camp of the government. The effect of the political ferment on all fronts, together with a high level of popular communication, was to create the context for broad-based national organisations. It was in this context that the Anti-SAIC Committee was formed.

But if the Anti-SAIC campaign was to launch the Freedom Charter and all that it represented, the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) was to draw it into the heart of popular resistance. By the time Dr Alan Boesak publicly called for its launch, plans for the Front were well under way. Seven months later, on 20 August 1983, the UDF was launched at a rally in Cape Town, and by the end of the year it had come to represent more than 500 organisations.

The launch became a symbol in itself: 5,000 people were expected but 12,000 came, representing an estimated constituency of 1.5 million. The rallying cry was mobilisation against the new constitutional proposals and the so-called Koornhof Bills to set up community councils in black urban areas. The UDF's historical lineage could be traced back to the multi-class coalition politics of the Congress Alliance, but it emphasised that it did not consider its own organisational efforts to be a substitute for the "accredited peoples' liberation movements". [16] Interestingly, the UDF did not formally adopt the Freedom Charter at its inception, a tactical move, possibly, to prevent it being labelled an ANC front and alienating its more conservative affiliates. Instead, it adopted a look-alike declaration and the slogan "UDF unites, apartheid divides". (The Charter was officially adopted in 1987.)

As a broad popular assembly of organisations, the UDF resembled less a political party or even a political organization than an "over-ground" legal vehicle for channelling political discontent. The Front's style of operation, its emphasis on democratic accountability, its popularization of songs and symbols of resistance, and a rapidly-developed sympathetic media network, served to catalyse a culture of resistance. Its red, black and gold badge (strongly reminiscent of a graphic in a 1981 Nusas publication [17]) spread like hot currency, appearing as buttons, posters, T-shirts, banners and newspapers throughout the townships and

in schools, colleges and universities. [18]

Alongside all this political ferment another, no less frenetic, tradition was maturing. In a series of meetings following the so-called Wiehahn legislation (which aimed to incorporate, and thereby bring under control independent black unions) the black union movement began to hammer out a common strategy. By 1984 it had been decided to create a new national federation, and on 30 November 1985 the giant Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched in Durban. During the first nine months of that year nearly half a million labour days had been lost to labour unrest. [19] This figure was higher than for any previous year in South African history, and nearly three times the number in 1982, the previous highwater mark.

The state, going through a rare phase of political leniency due to the delicacy of the constitutional adjustments, seems to have been caught off balance by the speed and sophistication of political and union organisation and - at the level of symbolic action - it lost ground rapidly among the disenfranchised. The latter, in a patchwork way, had begun to weld together a class unity which was to last for a few brief but heady years.

The New Technologies: Actors Become Authors

Another factor in the political groundswell of the 1980s was the new print technologies. And the decisive political aspect of these technologies was their mobilizing power. The older print systems - letterpress, photo-typesetting, offset litho - were costly and required sophisticated skills and organisational back-up. Indeed, from the workers' point of view, the means of ideological production until the 1980s had largely been in the hands of white support groups or "the enemy". For this reason, the struggle for the freedom of the press and freedom of ideas had been an argument within the white petit-bourgeoisie. For the masses, freedom to express opinions had been a fiction since they were, from the beginning, largely barred from the means of ideological production - the electronic media and the press.

The print technologies of the 1980s were to change all that. In South Africa the number of treated-paper copiers increased steadily throughout the 1970s, but it was the use of the Xerox plain-paper copier in industry and universities which started the photocopy boom. Photocopying was fast, relatively cheap and produced near-perfect prints in great numbers on ordinary paper. Another technological leap took place in about 1979 with the introduction of copiers which could expand or reduce the size of the image. A further advance of this facility was the Minolta-type variable magnification copiers.

Two results of the photocopy boom which followed were, first, the sudden appearance of cheaply reproduced facsimiles of books, articles and images, for the rapid dissemination of photocopy machines in universities, schools, libraries and businesses made copyright laws virtually unpoliceable. The second result was the discovery by artful innovators that with access to a typewriter and a photocopier one was in the pamphlet business. Photocopiers were miniature printing presses and this gave rise to a flood of pamphlets and newsletters which, with the addition of Letraset and pirated images, had reached remarkable sophistication by the beginning of the 1980s. Other technologies which supported these developments included:

> inexpensive printing processes for T-shirts;
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> devices for the cheap production of "struggle badges";
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> the discovery that an image photocopied on transparent plastic could be magnified enormously by way of an overhead projector and thus traced on to bolts of cloth - in this way huge

banners of great complexity and sophistication could be produced by groups of people with no training in art; and

access to portable video cameras which were within the means of universities, schools and service organisations.

Initially, access to the new equipment was through universities, but by 1985 it could be found in the offices of many service, political and labour organisations. The cheap technologies also aided the development of smaller newspapers, which could produce camera-ready pages for printers with little more than a typewriter, photocopier and light table. For the first time the new print technologies were making possible mass participation in a socialized production process, the practical means of which were increasingly accessible to the masses themselves. The only requirement was literacy.

By the mid-1980s the next technological leap in media production was about to begin, a leap which was to leave the guild press floundering in expensive and cumbersome hot-metal and Atex systems which had cost too much to get rid of. The first IBM personal computers (PCs) found their way on to campuses in about 1984, and by the following year their use was widespread. In 1986 the first IBM clones (Tai-BMs) appeared with cheaper hardware using IBM-type DOS-based software. But the first publishing breakthrough came by way of Apple computers, a company which was to pull out of South Africa for political and economic reasons but which manufactured PC software with exceptional graphics capabilities.

In 1985 journalists from the recently-deceased ***Rand Daily Mail*** got together to start a weekly tabloid with minimal funding. With some Apple Mackintosh computers, an optical scanner and a laser printer they were able to do the work of the entire editing and page make-up section of a normal newspaper in the space of a large desk - at a fraction of the cost. They were soon to add telefax, teletype and inter-city computer networking. The appearance of the ***Weekly Mail*** on the streets demonstrated the possibilities of cheap high-tech newspaper production - and ushered in a new era of desk-top publishing.

Based on the ***Mail***'s experiences - and despite the state of emergency - other weeklies using similar technology began to emerge. This, in turn, created a pool of users able to support a growing network of independent news agencies based on the same data-transfer systems. These agencies, like many of the newspapers they served, became answerable to popular organisations and often acted as training grounds for community journalists. The actors were becoming authors.

The New Media: Culture and Communication

These, then, were some of the factors which may have influenced the development of what might be termed a culture of resistance. Popular culture has to do with the way the dominated classes develop distinct patterns of life and give expressive form to their social and material life experiences. It has to do with social relations, systems of belief, customs and patterns of social and political organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a social individual. [20] However, as I have suggested, the way people act, the way they are, depends in part on how the situations in which they act are defined or signified. Meaning is not given but produced, and is part of what has to be struggled over in any political contest.

Popular communication systems - those means by which information and symbols are publicly communicated - also transmit social patterns and are, themselves, a social relationship. They are, therefore, also sites of struggle between competing definitions of social reality. To define communication in this way is to cast the net wide. Bassets lists popular communication forms as: labour and union press, neighbourhood press, university press, school press, literary publications, information bulletins and one-off publications,

political manifestos, pamphlets and posters, and graffiti - to which one could add popular performance, community video, mass meetings, song and even funeral orations. [21] In this view, communications consist of more than simply facts and images; they are also symbolic and in a sense "hidden". This is well illustrated in an interview with the leader of the military chant often sung at political funerals (called toyi-toyi):

> Toyi-toyi is a way of communicating. Through it we know what is happening in the bush with the comrades who have left. You get to know about their training, their ranks and how they operate ... guns down, guns up ... you feel as if you are in training ... you can see the people sweating when they are doing the toyi-toyi ... they feel involved. I'm one of the people who normally leads toyi-toyi. When I'm leading I feel like a general and I feel like I'm holding my AK ... in that way toyi-toyi makes you strong. People use it as transport ... the cheapest transport there is! [22]

Indeed, it is possible to pick out three levels of complexity in popular communication practices during the 1980s which, to a certain extent, corresponded to the levels of organisation among the communicators. The first level could be termed information, which corresponded to a minimal organisational structure (speeches, songs, slogans, signs, graffiti and limited publications would be included here). A second level, propaganda, corresponded to the extension of the limited organisational groupings and their structured intervention in social conflicts. The aim of communication practices on this level was to agitate, organise and mobilise people on a scale ranging from a single community to a whole country. The main communications thrust here was through banners, flyers and, particularly, student, community and union newspapers.

The third and more complex level of communication practices in the 1980s took place at the level of culture, and corresponded to the consolidation of numerous organised and relatively stable groups which together developed a political lucidity and distinct regional and national forms of behaviours and ways of life. I would argue that what was occurring in the mid-1980s was a shift in popular communication practices from mere propaganda to cultural struggle - a struggle which rapidly began penetrating deeper and deeper into the most sedimented layers of the African population. By educating, organising and mobilising people, this struggle served to escalate the tempo of conflict, bringing them to a point where every blow by the state was a focus for further mobilisation. For example, when all other gatherings were banned, funerals became political rallies, provoking police action which gave rise to more funerals and more political meetings. What was being constructed was a class culture, and one which, towards the mid-1980s, became increasingly self-conscious in the struggle for ideological hegemony.

The growth of communications on this level was dependent on the spread of literacy among the African population. Black education, as many conservative whites had feared, prepared the ground for later social discontent on a number of levels. And as political mobilization increased, activists also developed organizational skills which fed into (and off) popular communications practices. The popular media of the 1980s which depended on this increased literacy was, of course, in no way politically neutral. It was the expression of a popular political project, and was making demands which would need profound changes in the state if they were to be met. On the one hand, popular networks of communication were articulating this project - making explicit the content of a new society - while, on the other hand, demonstrating the repressive nature of the regime. Naturally, these communication forms did not all speak with one voice. What developed was rather the movement of *active* community practices and forms pressing on each other, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, in a process rich with contradiction and self-contradiction, but which together were developing a new historical world view.

After an initial period of adjustment, affiliates picked up the popular line and soon their publications took on a distinctive UDF flavour. It is probable that the affiliates held to this "line" not because they were compelled to, but because their activists, the political spokespeople, journalists and media workers, had themselves become an organic national leadership - a proto-vanguard party held together by constant meetings around the country and linked to their mass constituency by the popular press. Or, to put it another way, in order to organise a mass movement, the organic leadership had to become media activists. This was not a unique situation, and is understandable considering the vast distances between centres, the great number of affiliate organizations and the levels of state repression which made physical movement of activists perilous. In the 1950s ***Guardian/New Age*** fulfilled, in part, a similar function for the ANC, which (at that time) was a collection of semi-autonomous regional congresses which only met once a year at the annual general meeting. In the 1980s, as in the 1950s, this ideological leadership was vital to the struggle. As Eddy Koch has pointed out:

> There is no automatic way in which a class culture is generated out of the experience of common material conditions. This may appear to be a spontaneous process, but in fact involves multiple levels of popular leadership, organisation and intellectual work. [23]

It was for this reason that the circuits of popular communication were so vital to the unfolding political processes. The political turmoil of the time, I would suggest, was leading to the ideological transformation of a nation. On this level, culture became a site of struggle between the dominant class attempting to win a measure of consent for its reform process and the popular democratic and labour organizations articulating a range of alternative radical projects through mass meetings, local organizations and the popular media.

In these circumstances, the Botha government did the only thing history had taught it to do in such circumstances: it declared a state of emergency, sent troops to occupy the townships and detained without trial thousands of activists, students and trade unionists. This authoritarian move did not correspond to a univocal strengthening of the state, however. It involved, rather, the dual aspect of strengthening-weakening, driving the extra-parliamentary political forces to the wall but at the same time sharpening the generic elements of the political crisis and exposing the shallowness of its social project. Given the withdrawal of white political parties from the positions of real power, and given the state's capillary penetration of more and more areas of social activity and its willingness to mobilize the coercive apparatus, the administrative structure stood exposed before the people's demands.

The emergency therefore reduced, rather than increased, the potential for the regulation of conflicts, and forced the power bloc to move in a jerky, concealed manner by way of abrupt movements, direct clashes and short-term bargains. This contributed to an incoherence in government policy, marked by the lack of long-term strategy and the absence of an ideological or social project. By being forced into a politically reactive position by the popular forces, the state lost the political initiative. It is significant that if one studies the National Party's campaign in the 1987 (white) election, the opponent is actually the ANC, a non-competitor in the election. Sensitive observers had picked up these trends as early as 1984. In June that year Denis Beckett observed that:

> the political leaders mainly have little idea of the political shape of the society they are trying to create ... it defies imagination that otherwise perfectly sane and intelligent people ... can honestly believe that an approach which flies in the face of every possible reality from arithmetic to zeitgeist holds out hope. [24]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the weight of the emergency came down on all means of disseminating non-government ideology, sealing off South Africa from the world and from

itself. In this context, it is necessary to re-evaluate the position of some sectors of the guild media. In the politically charged atmosphere of the mid-1980s these newspapers had begun to change. Confronted by the sudden legitimation of extra-parliamentary politics following the departure of MPs Van Zyl Slabbert and Boraine from the Progressive Federal Party, trips to Lusaka by the most unexpected establishment people, and a clamour of political alternatives from the most sedimented layers of society, some English and Afrikaans newspapers began to sense the failure of the state's ideological hegemony. Journalists found themselves caught between newspaper managements moving (and being moved by the state) to the right, and daily events around them moving to the left. Their dilemma was not assisted by the appearance of a leftish, up-market paper like ***Weekly Mail,*** which in economic terms should not have been there at all. The ***Mail*** was followed by challenging weeklies like the ***New Nation***, ***South*** and the ***New African***. [25]

The mood of the developing cultural revolution from below was being filtered into newsrooms through increasing numbers of junior reporters recently sensitized by campus politics and radical student and other newspapers (a tendency which may have been reinforced by a vocal and compelling campaign against military call-up by the End Conscription Campaign, which was later banned). A factor in this process was the juniorization of newsrooms by managements wanting to save on salaries. (On the ***Daily Dispatch***, for example, the most experienced reporter in mid-1987 had no more than a year's experience.) But, like the judiciary, some newspaper editors were also becoming emboldened by the legal space fought for and won by the national democratic movement. Real news began to look possible.

In all, dangerous fissures were appearing in the white power bloc and were being reflected in the newsrooms. The state found itself in an insurrectionary climate with a national and international press corps getting (in the state's terms) seriously out of control. In this sense, the state of emergency was an acknowledgement of an ideological rupture between the ruling classes and the masses as huge numbers of South Africans withdrew their support from official versions of political reality.

In August 1987 this attempt was to be fine-tuned in tough media restrictions imposed on what the government described as the "unconventional revolution-supportive press". Introducing the curbs, the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Stoffel Botha, said the restrictions were aimed at publications which were guilty of "systematic or repeated publication" of material which had the effect of:

> Promotion of revolution or uprisings in the Republic.
>
> Promotion of the breaking down of the public order.
>
> The stirring up of feelings of hatred and hostility toward a local authority or security force.
>
> Promotion of activities of unlawful structures.
>
> Promotion of boycott actions and acts of civil disobedience.

The curbs empowered Botha to close down a publication for three months and provided for the appointment of pre-publication censors. "Elements of the media", he told parliament, "are generating support for the revolutionary organisations through idolising and propagating their symbols ... and their symbols are those of revolution." [26] The editor of the ***Weekly Mail***, which had been taken off the streets for a month by the curbs, gave the country a new word to describe the process. He claimed his paper had been "*stoffeled*".

By mid-1988, however, Botha had come to the conclusion that his department's elaborate procedures for dealing with the press had not entirely silenced left-tending newspapers and

news agencies. So in September of that year he transferred the power to seize and silence newspapers to the Department of Law and Order. (A year later he was to announce his retirement.) Crucial powers over the country's communication systems are now firmly in the hands of the police. [27]

But while over-regulation closes some doors to the media, its very unwieldiness opens others. As ***Weekly Mail*** co-editor Anton Harber has pointed out, the confusion between Acts and emergency regulations, and between central state bodies, state officials and local warlords has created a surprising degree of space for newspapers with the will to publish and be damned. [28] Equally, the new information systems used so efficiently by the Left are also the products of a developing industrial society. Today, modern data-transfers, fax and desk-top publishing have become integral to the workings of capitalist production and services in South Africa. So, while attacks on organisations, papers and people may, for a time, contain the left-wing information industry, quarantine regulations against its means of production are only possible at the cost of deliberate industrial regression.

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Notes

1 The South African guild media is, of course, not monolithic and I am abstracting to a general level for the purpose of illustration.

2 This is one of the reasons older journalists are so disparaging of fresh university graduates - the new recruits have not yet absorbed the tacit (ideological) rules of the game inscribed in daily newsroom practice.

3 This does not deny the possibility of insightful journalism in the guild media. The South African press has produced some notable writers - most of whom seem to have passed through the ***Rand Daily Mail.***

4 S Hall, "The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the oppressed in media studies", in M Guerevitch *et al*, ***Culture, Society and the Media*** (London, 1982), p 102.

5 ***Work in Progress*** (***WIP***) (No 35), p 14.

6 Anton Harber, "Behind Closed Doors: media murders", in ***WIP*** (No 36, April 1985).

7 *Ibid.*

8 D Niddrie, "The Commercial Press: selling up or selling out?", ***WIP*** (No 48, July 1987). Another interpretation sees the closure as being due to bad SAAN management.

9 *Ibid.*, p 23.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p 26.

12 *Ibid.*, p 27.

13 Since 1960 the black labour force had expanded from 500,000 to over 1,500,000 in manufacturing industry and from 1,100,000 to just under 2,000,000 over the same period in the tertiary sector. See H Wolpe, ***Race, Class and the Apartheid State*** (Addis Ababa, 1988), p 89.

14 *Ibid.*, p 82.

15 ***Grassroots*** (April 1980).

16 Howard Barrel quoted in M Murray, ***South Africa: time of agony, time of destiny*** (London, 1987), p. 199.

17 ***Dissension in the Ranks: white opposition in South Africa*** (Nusas, 1981), p 50.

18 Other cultural icons which came to be associated with the Front were images like the Hector Peterson picture (from 1976), *UDF United, Apartheid Divides, Forward to people's power*; terms like: *Viva!* Comrade Mandela, *amandla ngawethu, mayibuy' i Afrika*; and later ANC, MK and AK songs like "*Nkosi sikilel i' Afrika*", the *toyi-toyi* and many others, as well as the Congress salute and handshake, khaki clothes and black berets, political funerals and (not long after the UDF launch) the Freedom Charter. (Documentation of the UDF media is poor, however, and awaits further research.)

19 Murray, *op.cit.*, p 182.

20 See J Clark *et al*, "Sub Cultures, Cultures and Class", in T Bennet *et al*, ***Culture, Ideology and Social Process*** (London, 1981), p 68.

21 L Bassets, "Clandestine Communications: notes on the press and propaganda of the anti-Franco resistance", in A Mattelart and Siegelaub, ***Communication and Class Struggle*** 2 (London, 1983), p 192.

22 In an unpublished paper by Larry Strelitz, Rhodes University, 1987.

23 E Koch, "Without Visible Means of Subsistence: slumyard culture in Johannesburg 1918-1940", in B Bozzoli, ***Town and Countryside in the Transvaal*** (Johannesburg, 1983), p 76.

24 ***Frontline*** (Vol 4, No 9, June 1984), p 14.

25 The appearance of these semi-commercial weeklies and their network of news agencies has much to do with the legal and ideological spaces opened up by the national democratic movement, but needs much more detailed attention than this article has room for.

26 ***EP Herald*** (28 August 1987), p 1.

27 ***Weekly Mail*** (Vol 4, No 36, 16-22 September 1988).

28 Talk at Rhodes University, May 1989.