

Grassroot action in South Africa

The first presentations at the Lusaka Symposium were devoted to South Africa. By challenging apartheid and repression at a local level, grassroot communication is an effective way to oppose Government policy in South Africa. Keyan Tomaselli, director of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit at the University of Natal in Durban, looked at the rise of grassroot organisations and how they are preparing an alternative structure for a democratic South Africa. Cecil Sols, who works for Dynamic Images in Johannesburg and Keromang Maselwane, director of the Soweto Media Project, a project of the Interchurch Media Programme, spoke about their involvement in media skills training in the Black township of Soweto.

The rise of grassroot communication

Keyan Tomaselli

South Africa's first community newspaper, set up in 1980, is called Grassroots, but the term 'grassroots' is not very widely used in South Africa. The term 'progressive press' is more frequent. Progressive press or progressive media originates from the broad progressive movements. Progressive organisations came together in August 1983 with the formation of the United Democratic Front. The UDF itself developed from processes set in motion after the 1976 Soweto uprising. It then became clear that to oppose the Government by protesting in the street was simply suicide — you were shot at. At the same time, the economy was shifting from agriculture and mining to commerce and manufacturing, which changed the structure of cities. Large numbers of black people were now considered permanent urban dwellers, even if they weren't allowed to buy the land or houses in which they lived.

With urbanisation comes greater literacy because workers have to be able to read instruction manuals. And once you have learnt to do that, you can read *Group Media Journal* or *Media Development*. So the different stages of economic development bring different opportunities for mobilisation and for forging democracies, certainly at local level.

The term 'alternative media' is problematic because it has a negative

connotation. It is an alternative to the State and big business media, although in South Africa these are sometimes one and the same.

Participation

At a conference in October 1987, a government spokesman said that more people had the vote in South Africa than two years previously. But what he refers to is *a* vote, not *the* vote. They have a vote for a candidate in an area demarcated by race.

When the Government talks about involving black leaders in democracy, it means black leaders it has chosen, rather than leaders that might have been chosen by the people.

As an individual, it is almost impossible to contest anything that the state does, so most individuals now work through organisations. For example, the UDF is constituted by some 700 different organisations throughout South Africa.

Community

The term 'community' has also been hijacked by the South African state. The Government forces 'communities' together. The Indian community for example is not one community. There are Moslems, Hindus, Harikrishnas, Christians. But there are three or four group areas for 'Indians' in the country.

When the Government talks about community, it includes all the Indians in South Africa, whether they live in Natal or the Northern Transvaal, no matter what their differences.

Many of us here do not come from working class communities, or we have moved away from the working class in the process of becoming church workers, academics or community organisers. We tend to leave behind our class experiences. But it is important that we do not impose middle class values and solutions on working class conditions.

The working class has taken the lead in the attack against the state, against the Government and apartheid, through massive worker federations like the Congress of South African Trade Unions. They have a remarkable ability to communicate between themselves and to work with non-working class organisations, to develop national strategies to attack apartheid.

Since 1948 the South African Government has been very clever in the way that it has divided communities and people who speak the same languages, like the Zulu and the Xhosa. It has appropriated media, particularly mass media, to legitimise its own dominant political position.

The National Party is primarily composed of Afrikaners who derived from early Dutch settlers in the 16th century.

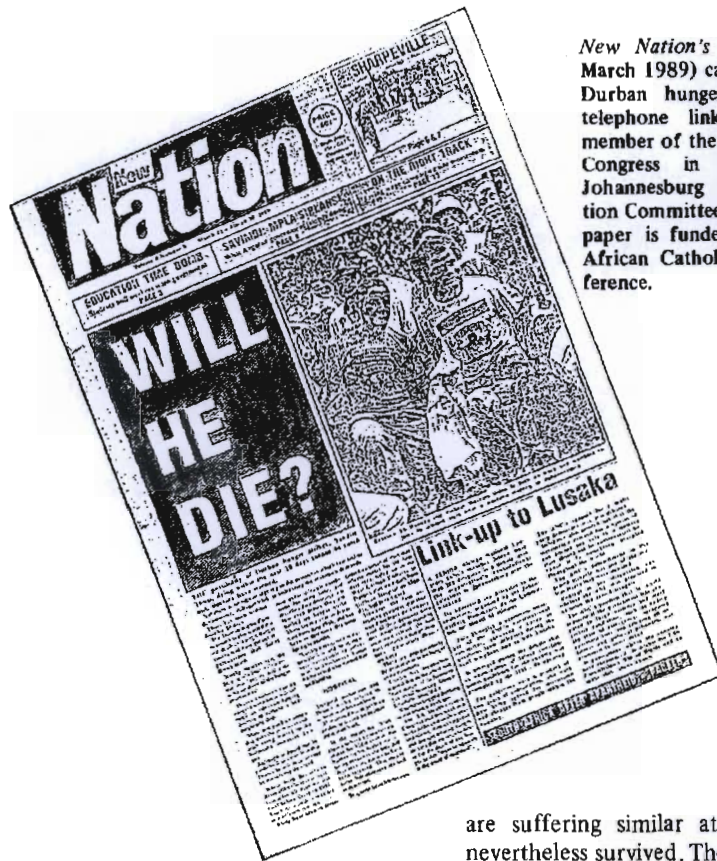
Afrikaans was the last modern language to develop, and was officially recognised in 1925. Afrikaners recognised the importance of the mass media in popularising and giving credibility to their language. Afrikaans would not have developed as it has without the print media, radio and film, and from 1976, television.

The South African Government understands the importance of media very well. I think it actually over-emphasizes the importance of media. That is why they have imposed such incredible curbs on what the press may or may not report, which in turn, has generated further resistance.

Black-oriented newspapers were set up from the 1830s onwards, usually as a result of mission education. These newspapers did not last long because of financial problems or because in the first half of this century, big capital bought them out and turned them into commercial concerns. Until recently, media and culture were not seen as a major part of the struggle by the opposition in South Africa. But if you do not have media, you do not have developed strategies of communication and then it is very difficult to mobilise people, either nationally or regionally.

In the early 1980s the development of small format video, personal computers and other cheap and easy to use printing technology enabled communities to challenge apartheid and repression at a local level.

Grassroots in the Western Cape arose from the Cape Action Housing League which was mobilising people against the state for raising rents. *Grassroots* began to encourage readers in its local area, about 200,000 altogether, to mobilise on similar kinds of grievances, such as the lack of water taps and bus fare rises. By 1984, four years after *Grassroots* started, there were some 80 community organisations represented on its production. Each organisation held meetings and agreed that information should be provided on what the people wanted to know, not what journalists or communicators wanted to see in newspapers. The newspaper was finally put together by a group of four permanently employed organisers in the newsroom, and the paper was distributed by community representatives. So the community was involved in the conception, planning, production and distribution cycles of the newspaper.



New Nation's front page (30 March 1989) carries stories of a Durban hunger striker and a telephone link-up between a member of the African National Congress in Lusaka and a Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee conference. The paper is funded by the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Those permanently employed in the newsroom did not see themselves primarily as journalists or communicators, but as community organisers. Media in this case was secondary to the need for political organisation.

Grassroots is one of a number of initiatives across South Africa. Some did not survive for reasons of finance, illiteracy, state repression or lack of organisation. *The Eye* (Pretoria) did not last long, partly because Pretoria is in the heartland of the National Party constituency and it is very difficult for the black communities to organise there.

Grassroots has survived bombings, detentions, and shootings. But it can no longer operate in the originally democratic way. It is now published clandestinely by a small group of people who are no longer able to keep in contact with the original organisations which contributed to its production. This shows how the state, which talks about broadening democracy, is in fact smashing democracy. It does not want it because it endangers the Government's position.

Since 1980, other papers have been set up. There is *Saamstaan* (Stand Together) which is an affiliate of *Grassroots* in the Eastern Cape. The organisers

are suffering similar attacks but have nevertheless survived. There is *UmAfrika* in Natal and at national level, *New Nation*. All these newspapers are experimenting and developing structures for the future, so that if and when fundamental change comes, those structures will be in place. Hopefully, the people will retain control over the newspapers. (When I watched Zambian television last night it was like watching South African television, with only the State President and various other ministers speaking). After a revolution, left-wing contents take the place of right-wing contents, but the communications structures themselves often remain inaccessible to the people. They stay as authoritarian and centralised as before.

If there is one positive thing coming out of the Government's hanging out to power in South Africa at the moment, it is that this is giving us time to theorise and develop alternative structures.

At the national level, the Association of Democratic Journalists (ADJ) has been set up as an alternative to the South African Society of Journalists (SASJ), which is primarily a white trade union. The SASJ recently became multiracial, but is composed of fairly apolitical journalists. The ADJ explicitly works for democratic change and has worked with the SASJ in contact with the Media Workers Association of South

Africa (MWASA), a Black Consciousness trade union, on the national 'Save the Press' campaign.

So by putting pressure on alternative news agencies, by making them register with the Government in July (1988), the Government has brought the ADJ, SASJ and MWASA together to work out a strategy to protect the press. So successful was this campaign that the Government cancelled its demand for registration of journalists.

Video

The Film and Allied Workers Organisations was set up earlier this year to mobilise progressive film and video makers to develop regional structures, so that film makers will be able to control what films are made in the new society and ensure that power is not centralised. It also aims to protect different regions from being portrayed solely by film makers from other regions who presume to speak on their behalf.

However, local strategies might require a different initiative in Natal, to say, the Western Cape. The National Media Training Association was formed in 1988 so that instead of different organisations and universities having their own alternative journalism workshops or video workshops, they can all now be coordinated through a national body.

New forms of expression

There has been a huge development of 'worker performances', where trade unionists work with teachers to develop plays around worker issues on the factory floor. The workers are the actors. Their audience is composed of the other workers. These performances lead to vibrant and energetic discussions of the problems by the audience. There is no

set script; the performance changes daily. They become powerful means to conscientise workers on exploitation, repression and to mobilise people on certain issues.

Funerals have become an important issue in South Africa. Mass meetings are banned under the Riotous Assembly Act. Any meeting of more than two people on a street corner could be considered a riotous assembly. The one area which remained open for politicisation was a funeral, particularly of an activist who had been killed while involved in working for the community. The state began to limit the number of people attending a funeral and to ban certain people from speaking at funerals. But the state has not been able to gain total control over the numbers attending funerals, which have become a major element in resistance communication.

Local and national strategies

All local strategies should be conducted in the context of a national strategy. One of the tasks of progressive organisations is to transform the less progressive organisations. For example, when the *Weekly Mail* was banned for a month (November 1988), its editors published a statement calling for the alternative press to develop a common strategy with the anti-apartheid English language press, to cope with the Government attack on press freedom. While the two presses are different in terms of politics and methods of production, a tactical alliance does need to be established. That requires a tremendous amount of negotiation.

In addition to facilitating transformation among the repressed communities, we also need to educate the people who

have voted the Government into power, about the need for change.

The Church

The Church has played a fundamental role in the development of South Africa's progressive media. Churches have been involved in the struggle for a long time, and will play an even greater role as the state bans more and more people's organisations. It is more difficult to ban churches because then the Government would have to face international protest. However, the Government condemns the *New Nation* as a communist newspaper, in an attempt to taint the image of the Catholic Bishops' Conference which supports the newspaper.

Structures for the future

It is important that we maintain regional and national communication structures which are developing from grassroot communication. Even if they are smashed, the theory which has grown up will still be there when change eventually comes to South Africa.

We are developing something unique in South Africa: a true democracy, and an alternative set of structures which nestle within the dominant structures. There are now two societies in South Africa: one is the dominant ruling power, which is crumbling and the other is the alternative developing leadership which represents the majority of the people. ■

The above text was edited from a recording made at the Symposium, and was not a specially prepared article.

Township experiences

Video and photography

Cecil Sols

Dynamic Images started with a team of four coordinators in 1984. It was formed from two projects with similar objectives. One was concerned with photographic documentation and the other with video training. Both had similar problems of resources.

Dynamic Images aims to serve underprivileged and oppressed people, for whom it is not easy to acquire skills, and who are forced or choose to remain outside commercial or state subsidised enterprise. It is committed to sharing skills to produce documentary video

and photography, using a language appropriate to our situation.

There is very little training for black people in our country. Our universities mainly cater for the white community. There is an unfair situation in which you find that nearly 80 per cent of