

# 31. Labour ‘broking’ with the media

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Since 1994, there have been many developments on the South African labour front, including the adoption of the Labour Relations Act of 1995 and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997. These laws were about undoing the legacy of exploitation and inequality in the workplace, remnants of the apartheid legacy. These changes took place at a time when the South African economy was joining the global economic system that had shunned it because of its discriminatory and oppressive pieces of legislation. These laws were an outcome of the prolonged struggles waged by workers, supported by labour journalists who gave voice to the struggles.

Even during apartheid, workers were able to get their voices heard through labour reports. Before newspapers like the *New Nation*, the *Labour Bulletin* and others championed labour journalism in the early days in South Africa. This is the journalism that legitimised the struggles, and told the stories of workers mobilising and fighting for fair wages, improved employment conditions and decent benefits. The uniqueness about labour journalism was its ability to contextualise the struggles, and allow divergent ideological voices to be equally heard in the battle of ideas.

“labour journalism has provided human-interest stories in relation to poverty and unemployment”

But after the end of the Cold War, and after the democratic breakthrough, the triumphant imposition of neoliberal ideals went unchallenged and post-1994 labour journalism found itself having to navigate this new era, where the only thing regarded as sane in many newsrooms was that which reinforced the correctness of neoliberalism. During this period, coverage of labour issues started to be under intense pressure in the newsrooms that were willing to blindly support the narrative that the free market ideas were a perfect solution. This new narrative started to demonise workers’ struggles as an unnecessary impediment to economic progress. The negative and hostile attitude shown by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s administration in the United Kingdom against unions in the early 1980s gained a lot of traction around the world, including South Africa after 1994. Workers’ strikes were negatively covered, and dry statistics were

used to calculate the value that was being lost by the economies during these strikes.

However, there was a new Constitution in the country that recognised the rights of workers who had previously been treated as nothing more than glorified slaves. This meant that while there was a push for more globalisation, less regulations, and flexible labour laws in many parts of the world, the opposite was happening on the South African legislative front. The value of labour journalism in the democratic dispensation has ensured that South Africa remains a country with a vibrant trade union movement. The decline in unionisation (now around 29%, according to Statistics South Africa 2019) and density have meant that unions rely on labour journalism to magnify the voice of unions through their coverage most of the time. The evolution of labour journalism can be seen in the successes and failures of the trade union movement itself over the last quarter of a century. Not only in South Africa, but all over the world too, the last quarter century has witnessed a precipitous decline in the social position of the working class. The trade unions have struggled to defend the working class against the onslaught of capitalism.

The same way that South African businesses have spent millions of rands annually to oppose workers’ organising themselves in the workplace, they spend even more millions ensuring that a pro-business narrative prevails in many newsrooms through advertising, lobbying and influence-peddling. The narrative of privatisation as a perfect economic model gained a lot of traction in the country, and, as a result, many state companies were privatised. Few labour journals and magazines like the *Labour Bulletin* raised pertinent questions. This counternarrative was able to reduce the momentum gained by government to outsource everything to the private sector.

Labour journalism has continued to provide the necessary balance in the coverage by telling the human interest stories behind all the cold statistics and figures that have been bandied about in relation to poverty and unemployment.

The technological revolution has forced media companies to keep up with one another - the digital environment has caused havoc with traditional business models. This has led to media houses reconfiguring their newsrooms as well as cutting down on staff members. There are few newsrooms that still keep labour desks. Labour journalism has been incorporated into the economics or the politics desks, and this has had an adverse effect. In a 24-hour news cycle, newsroom pressures have resulted in a culture of ‘smash-and-grab’ journalism. The period of short sound bites leads to media organisations being tempted to outdo each other for catchy headlines. There is little interest in explaining issues in detail and providing the necessary context. The competition for advertising also means that ‘whoever pays

the piper calls the tune’.

At a time when big business has been escalating its offensive in terms of the restructuring of the workplace, casualisation and retrenchments as part of responding to low-level economic growth since the 2009 recession, the public discourse has been biased against organised workers. Unions have been blamed and attacked for defending their members, and, at times, the media have played workers against the unemployed to divide the working class. The public service strike that took place after the 2010 FIFA World Cup is a case in point. When workers went on strike after what was considered to be a successful tournament in the country, the media narrative was that they were undoing the good work that was achieved during the World Cup and undermining investor confidence. It took a few labour journalists to interrogate the underlying issue that led to the strike, like the non-implementation of the Occupational Specific Dispensation that was promised to workers in 2007. The lack of understanding by many media houses of the 2007 collective bargaining agreement led to many of them using soundbites to cover complex issues that required detailed explanation. The same thing happened with the Marikana tragedy that claimed the lives of 44 during the violence-ridden 2012 strikes in the Platinum Belt in the province of North West. The dominant narrative from many media outlets was of union rivalry that turned deadly, and an incompetent government that did not know how to deal with protests and strikes. This allowed the employers to avoid the necessary scrutiny. The ‘divide and rule’ tactics by employers and its failure to honestly engage with workers fuelled tensions. The Marikana massacre and the subsequent Lily Mine disaster in Mpumalanga have been kept in the public domain by the handful of remaining labour journalists who still have the capacity to cover events from many angles and in detail.



This corporate culture of many newsrooms has been seen in the coverage of debates around the national minimum wage and the National Health Insurance. While the attitude of many newsrooms was to dismiss these as narrow and self-interested policy demands, media platforms managed to give a voice to the workers and their organisations to show that these are possibilities. The newsroom culture of many outlets has been heavily influenced by the position of advertisers and potential advertisers.

Economic commentators and policy experts, who have been given more space in the media to share their views and perspectives, come from the private sector. The pool has also been narrowed, and this has meant that the private sector has an upper hand in influencing the narrative and the public discourse. All of this is not accidental, but it also speaks to the ownership patterns of South African media. Current patterns of concentrated ownership and control of the media promote commercial interests and the logic of the private capitalist market. The print sector is still dominated by four big players, namely Naspers, Leshaba Media, Caxton, and Independent Media. Another mainstream media player includes M&G Media. These companies also dominate the entire value chain of the market especially printing, distribution, and advertising.

As the Congress of South African Trade Unions noted in its submission to the Press Freedom Commission, these companies “all reflect the outlook and prejudices of the capitalist class that own them – pro-big business, the ‘free market’ and private enterprise”. The African National Congress summed up the crux of the problem in its 2007 Communication Discussion Document by saying, “the media is a contested terrain and therefore not neutral, but reflects the ideological battles and power relations based on race, class and gender in our society. It cannot claim that its role is merely to reflect interests – rather it helps to shape those interests.” President Nelson Mandela once observed, “A critical, independent and investigative media is the lifeblood of any democracy” and “the tragic absence of diversity in the South African media has been a matter of grave concern to us over years.”

The lack of diversity in the print media goes beyond ownership, - it also reflects on the issues of class content and the availability of newspapers in languages other than English and Afrikaans. Many workers in this country do not speak either of these languages, and this has limited the capacity of labour journalism to address audiences in their own language.

So, concentration and freedom of the press become real issues because the owners of large conglomerates do not want ‘unwelcome’ news reported. And, most people are getting their news from television, which is becoming more and more trivial. Stations broadcast, what they call, ‘infotainment’. This is not real information, and plenty of it is just stories which have no news value, and do not explain to people the way the world works. This culture can be best summarised by what Patrick Le Lay head of TF1 News in France said, “Look, my job is to prepare people’s minds, and to prepare them to receive the messages of Coca Cola. My job is to make sure that their consciousness is ready to receive this message. Therefore, the consciousness cannot be too filled up with facts which might be distressing. It can’t be too filled up with anything that might stimulate people to actually think it has to be filled with the things that just prepare them to be receptive to the advertising message.”

The corporate culture has also impacted on the nature of the coverage by the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) since 1994. While it previously had been used as a voice and platform to prop up the apartheid

apparatus, the public broadcaster had to grapple with a changing landscape and an unworkable funding model in a democracy. The absence of a sustainable funding model had a direct effect on its long-term strategy. Programming that was supportive of education, health, poverty eradication, rural development, crime prevention and other societal priorities became more miniscule compared to programming that was entertainment-based. This affected labour journalism in a negative way because it meant that for the SABC to remain competitive, it needed to adapt to new conditions and cultures. Out of 18 public radio stations under the SABC, only SAfm managed to allocate a slot for labour, which has fallen away. This means that many news outlets are closing spaces for labour journalism

Changes in the landscape have left alternative outlets like the Labour Bulletin facing a precarious position, and this is not good for labour journalism. Community media is also facing an existential crisis as it is unable to provide coverage of labour matters. The media sector is experiencing unprecedented change and evolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even scholars are still trying to better understand the massive changes and transformation occurring across the media sector. The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been unique in terms of the impact of technology on the media and communication industries. With the introduction of converging technologies such as the mobile smart phone and multiple digital platforms, the industries are not only in the process of transforming themselves, but are also being transformed by many external factors. The transformation did not happen overnight, and the process has been accelerated by several external factors like globalisation, regulation, economics, and technology. Technology has both enhanced and disrupted the media economy. Innovations in

technology, in terms of distribution and reception, continue at a rapid pace. This offers both challenges and opportunities for labour journalism. Audiences are more empowered than at any other time in media history. They no longer just consume content - they also make content in a multitude of ways, whether through blogging, podcasting, uploading videos, or social networking. In these new media markets, consumers can access or download content anytime they want from anywhere in the world. These trends are creating havoc among traditional markets, and leading to confusion as to the definition of media and communication markets in this new era.

While we have seen increasingly less coverage of core labour issues, the reality is that most of this is no longer about a deliberate paradigm shift. But it is an evolution that has also seen specialised reporting in fields like health, science, education, arts and culture, and legal reporting disappearing from many newsrooms.

This though still offers more opportunities for workers to enter the space and make sure that their stories are told in a more comprehensive way. While the commercial media was not interested or able to commission a documentary on what happened at Marikana, the alternative media did so. Workers were able to tell their stories, and families whose members lost their lives in the tragedy, were given a voice.

Labour journalism will survive only if it adapts and embraces new changes. Over the past 25 years, it has managed to temper the 'greed is good' culture by telling the stories of those who are at the bottom end of the economic pyramid, and reiterate that the economy is about the people. The age of technological solutions can and should play no small part in allowing journalists to give workers their rightful place in the media sun.



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