

Debate

Response to Boloka and Krabill

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Rhetoric can render a debate more robust, but it can also be a symptom of a weak argument. The latter is the case with Boloka and Krabill. The pair are quick to accuse me of 'distortion of the highest degree' and of making a claim that is 'outrageous and completely unsupported'. They lash out at 'anecdotal and impressionistic evidence' – while not hesitating themselves to discern my 'liberal perspective' which they presume to originate in part from 'the recent collaboration between Berger's department at Rhodes University and Independent Newspapers'. I am, they say, evidence of Jacques Lacan's claim that we are influenced by our history. Well, well.

There is a political basis to the use of such strong language and simplistic branding. It arises, it appears, because I described the changes in South Africa's media with the word 'transformation'. For Boloka and Krabill, the term should be reserved exclusively for when the media reflects 'in its ownership, staffing, and product, the society within which it operates, not only in terms of race, but also socio-economic status, gender, religion, sexual orientation, region, language, etc'. This, presumably, is what they mean when they talk in their article about 'true transformation'.

If the debate were only about semantics, we could end here, and perhaps in the year 2050, my two critics may find themselves a little closer to their Golden Fleece of a class-correlated, regionally equitable, etc media landscape. For my part, my article merely examined changes since 1994 – assessing how far we have come since the bad old days. Has there been transformation, or has there not? It depends of course on how you define the term, and clearly we have different criteria here.

Yet, the debate between myself and Boloka-Krabill has a deeper significance than an academic matter of who opts for what criteria. It is also a more than a matter of whether we measure our location in relation to where we come from (my article), as opposed to where we are going to

(their argument). It is about politics, appropriate tools of analysis, and about what empowers political intervention.

To start with the politics, Boloka and Krabill say that ‘transformation is not only about replacement of colours in mass media (although these matter)’. Herein lies a major component of the debate - how much does colour matter? In their eyes, it seems, not much. But is this so? From a racist society where blackness was negated, is it not an advance to register changes in colour in media ownership, staffing and product? I would have thought the majority of South Africans would have seen changes in the racial aspect of power relations as being rather significant. Boloka and Krabill rhetorically ask what the changes ‘mean to the unemployed and underemployed in the country’. Again, I would have thought that quite a few people in these strata, especially those working in a community radio station, or seeing black faces on TV or in print, would take some pleasure and pride in such victories over apartheid. An anecdotal speculation? Consider the bigger point I am making: class conditions are surely not the only significant measure of change (but more on this later).

I have, according to my critics, a political predisposition to look away from the grassroots in my analysis. They say I have tried to ‘understand changes in the higher end of the market without understanding the impact of those changes on the lower end of the market and on those excluded from the market altogether’. This criticism is misplaced. A major thrust on my article considered democratisation, and it is surely self-evident that all disadvantaged South Africans are political beneficiaries (however unevenly) of what my article described: ie the free and far more dense, competitive and racially representative media environment since 1994. You don’t need to own or edit or even read *Sunday World* or the *Sunday Times* to benefit indirectly from their exposés (by black journalists) of private and public sector corruption, or to celebrate that these black-owned publications can use the Bill of Rights and the Bojosi defamation judgement to fend off forces that would curtail coverage.

However, Boloka and Krabill seem to believe that gains in racial justice and political democracy are just superstructural irrelevancies in the face of the economic base being – allegedly – unchanged. The changes so far are ‘necessary, but grossly insufficient for authentic transformation’. Yet in their commendable haste to deepen transformation, the pair lose sight of the significance of what changes (including economic ones) have taken place (about which more below). They are right in saying that to recognise

the limiting circumstances of capitalism and globalisation should not mean that we lower our expectations of what transformation should look like. But if you do not have a nuanced analysis of what has been happening, and what trends it reveals, it is unlikely that your expectations will be anything more than pipedreams. *Transformation* in the Boloka-Krabill lies in the misty future, to be awaited until utopia arrives. Short of this, nothing – in effect – really counts.

By focusing on the issue in an absolutist way, the two writers keep their heads in the clouds, rather than identifying contemporary opportunities on the ground. Boloka and Krabill say that I overstress the changes; they prefer to point to continuities between the old and the new. An analysis does need to take account of both, but arguably it is what is changing which should attract the most attention and which can define the potential, not just the limits, for one's expectations at a given point in time. To paraphrase Gramsci, we need optimism of the intellect, as much as a sober pessimism of the will. My two critics seem to be afflicted by a pessimism of both, because there is no way the changes that have happened meet the standards of their longterm benchmark. Their logic is all or nothing, and there is no conception of the milestones in-between. Accordingly, Boloka and Krabill have no real tools of analysis to inform interventions.

The fact of the matter is that changes in race and form of ownership and control of media (including SABC, the momentous changes in which they tend to ignore) have led to significant changes in staffing and content. Boloka-Krabill dismiss my argument by saying that I reduce transformation of ownership to 'racial tokenism' rather than 'a true transformation of media power'. According to them, Johnnic only belongs to black South Africans on paper; Midi has faced extreme financial constraints. This is not the place to go into detailed assessment (although Boloka and Krabill seem, erroneously to assume that Midi's minority shareholders were all trade unions). If, however, one looks at the entire spectrum of 'black empowerment' ownership in media – including, incidentally, community radio (which has confounded doomsday expectations) – what is striking is that almost every case to date has held out, and often against very difficult odds. Even Nail has hung onto its media interests, despite being compelled to unbundle many other businesses. The survival of black ownership is far from a tokenistic development.

Contrary to what Boloka-Krabill represent as my position, I have not claimed that ownership changes at racial level have changed what they call the 'fundamental nature of the media corporations'. But I do disagree with

them, and the source they cite, ie Tomaselli (1997) – who says the new owners have limited access to allocative and/or operational control. One of the most evident effects of changed ownership has been in staffing, and this impacts directly on control. My two critics say I use anecdotal evidence here. They say that, in spite of continuing inequities revealed by Goga’s research (2000), I wrongly criticise Nelson Mandela (during his presidency) for playing the race card regarding media staffing changes. (Mandela had argued that critical black journalists were trying to please their white bosses.) That Goga’s research was published long after my original article is not acknowledged by Boloka-Krabill. Further, that her work deals with media enterprises as a whole – rather than newsrooms specifically – is also not recognised. What her research does not reveal (as it did not set out to) is the significance of black leadership in the editorial sections of South Africa’s media. Boloka and Krabill try to support their case by citing the frustrations tabled by five African editors at the Human Rights Commission inquiry into racism in the media during March/April 2000. They do not mention evidence at the same inquiry by three African, Indian and coloured editors who said that they do not feel powerless, nor arguments by Afrikaner editors that African editors do in fact wield substantial power.

Clearly, further research would be valuable here, but even Boloka and Krabill would have to acknowledge that there is a prominent lobby of black editors who do not hesitate to use their positions to inject strong perspectives into public debate. It has been the changes in ownership and control since 1994 that have put these individuals into positions of authority to speak and be heard. At an estimate, white editors or deputy editors in nine of South Africa’s papers were replaced between 1994 and 2000 (see Berger 2000:10); and the process has been far deeper in broadcasting. (There have been occasional reverses, but on the whole it has been two steps forward for every one step back.) Does it not mirror racism to suggest that these new incumbents are powerless pawns, dependent on white patronage for promotion, and acting as simple mouthpieces for white interests? Boloka and Krabill might consider speaking to senior African journalist Lizeka Mda, who sued the ANC in April 2000 for suggesting that a white editor had ghostwritten her criticism of that organisation.

As for one major aspect of operational control, one of the victories since 1994 has been the novel introduction of editorial independence by new owners. Tony O’Reilly might be a friend of Nelson Mandela, but his company still appointed as editor Kaizer Nyatumba – who at the time was explicitly out of favour with the then president. Cyril Ramaphosa, black

chairperson of TML, criticised the 1999 electoral endorsement made by Peter Bruce, white editor of *Financial Mail*, but pointedly did not fire him. Would Boloka, Krabill and Tomaselli like to see the new owners interfere with editorial independence, (or like their white predecessors appoint only those staffers who share their political outlook)?

Boloka and Krabill severely underestimate changes in staffing and control. They also dismiss changes in media content. They react rather violently to my modest suggestion that publication of a newsphotograph of dead AWB men (killed while trying to prop up Bophuthatswana) was a visible turning point. All I said was, and I quote, that 'henceforth, the photograph seemed to signal, whites had had their day, and the active newsmakers were black South Africans'. That was not suggesting that overnight there was a total transformation in representation. I was singling out a defining moment where reality intruded into representation in a very powerful way, bringing home the point that white domination was now history. Subsequent changes in real life underscored this as a watershed event, and naturally there were echoes at the level of media content. Any cursory, impressionistic content analysis of newsphotographs today clearly shows a shift away from the old apartheid notion that whites wield power, that whites alone are image-worthy.

To support their position, Boloka-Krabill say that there has been a continuation of the disproportionate representation of white South Africans in the media. They do not say what the correct proportion should be – which begs a big question. White representation is indeed disproportionate in relation to population numbers as a whole. But it probably reflects pretty accurately the power positions of whites in the total society. In short, the proportion of classic newsmakers amongst whites is still higher than in other race groups, because a legacy of power, wealth, status, accessibility, linguistic-advantage, etc, sustains this. For similar class and geographical reasons, news – by standard convention internationally – is almost never representative of an entire society, no matter which society. The question Boloka and Krabill should ask is whether black people in general are still neglected relative to whites, but whether specifically black newsmakers are still neglected relative to their proportions in social life. An even more interesting issue, but unfortunately ignored by Boloka-Krabill, is whether there has been any transformation in the conventional paradigm of news – changes whereby a transforming South Africa also subverts international assumptions about what makes a 'newsmaker' – ie whether new newsvalues

have emerged since 1994, which would insert atypical categories of people into media (rank and file, rural, female, youth etc) More on this point later.

At the heart of my two critics' case is a concern with class. But it is one that operates with a crude model indeed. They phrase their concern as being whether the changes so far have been superficial and 'geared toward maintaining privilege among an elite instead of redistributing privilege'. In defence of Tomaselli (1997) whom I criticised, they say that he gives evidence that racial substitution is merely replicating class structure. The issue here is whether one remains in a paradigm that the only change in capitalist class structure that is worth noting is the elimination of class structure per se. I believe there are significant variations long before this issue hoves into view. What I traced was a move from oligopolised capitalism towards one where capital ownership and control has changed radically. There is in South Africa today foreign ownership, cross-media ownership, pyramid style ownership, broad-based shareholder ownership, development trust ownership, trade-union ownership, political party (Inkatha) ownership, community-organisation ownership, public (as opposed to government) ownership. Most of these are still capitalist forms of ownership, just as Singapore, Brazil, Zambia, the USA and Sweden can all still be called capitalist. But sometimes, as with these countries, the differences are arguably greater than the points in common. The very particular form of capitalist class structure of a country has major implications for privilege, economic growth, political pluralism, and individual or ethnic class mobility. This is glossed over by Boloka-Krabill. But it is not especially useful to generalise and talk about South Africa as capitalist, when the more salient political question is: what kind of capitalism?

To answer this question, one needs to assess issues like: what does the new competition mean for growing the media market beyond an elite? What does it mean to have black Cyril Ramaphosa and black woman Irene Charnley – rather than their white predecessor, Pat Retief – running Johnnic? Rather than explore what the new black boss brings to the table (major negotiating skills, political savvy, connections, sensitivity to the condition of the majority, strong commitment to training, democratic credentials), he is dismissed by Boloka-Krabill as simply having to act in line with the market. That, under his leadership, Johnnic has been revamped from a holding company into a get-ahead integrated media company, editorial independence been respected, a major educational thrust launched

by the *Sunday Times* (and a southern African edition of the paper started), the new *Sunday World* been set up, etc, is left unrecognised.

In the end, Boloka and Krabill leave us with nothing except to say what the current situation is not. But there is another telling lacuna in their argument. It is a real pity that Boloka and Krabill skim over my discussion about the political role of media post-1994, and merely assert (rather than argue) that I have set up strawmen on this point. The four perspectives that I outlined point towards the key question of the 'politics of transformation' – which in my view is more important than any other aspect. The key question here is: contrary to the particular normative and analytical assumptions in the four perspectives I distinguished, what does transformation since 1994 – in a more nuanced analysis – mean for the political role of the media? If, for instance, the SABC faces competition from e.tv, what pressures are put on it to come up with credible news coverage? More generally, will the transforming media become a more-or-less monolithic part of a new establishment, or are there new contradictions that will create rifts, ruptures and a separation of powers?

My original article covered the legal environment, ownership, content, conceptions of media role, and audiences. Much of my aim was to assess the extent to which racial change impacts on, or implies, other changes – especially the politics of media. Notwithstanding their flaws, what Boloka-Krabill have helped highlight is an underlying theme in my analysis, which was not explicitly argued in the original article. This is the question of what gets 'bundled' with the media transformation that has taken place thus far, and especially what implications this might have for the role of media in the social distribution of power in post-apartheid South Africa.

South African liberation orthodoxy used to hold that, in Joe Slovo's words, there was 'No Middle Road'. The argument was that getting rid of apartheid necessarily entailed socialism. There was no substantial black middle class to become the new bourgeoisie – instead, this grouping would have to rely on the workers if apartheid was to go. The mobilisation of the working class majority, Slovo argued, would carry the revolution against white capitalists straight through to the second stage of national liberation: socialism. Of course, times and conditions have changed radically since such theorisation, and many would now say that ANC policy entails the strange phenomenon of a capitalist road to socialism (or maybe just a capitalist road to capitalism!). The bundling together of eradicating apartheid with establishing socialism is no longer there. Thus today the question

instead is: what kind of capitalism, and therefore what kind of ‘bundling’ history has bequeathed us.

Relating this to the media, we need to ask what gets associated with racial categories and racial identities in South Africa today. It is of course the case that race is just one facet of identity, and that class, gender, age, region, language, family status, etc, also play significant (and similarly shifting) roles. But the past of this country structured so many experiences along racial lines, and the enduring economic, psychological, spatial, etc legacy still sustains powerful racial identity. We know well the baggage that many whites (and white journalists) still carry with them. But if transformation brings black workers into capital ownership and control, and black petty bourgeois people into senior media positions, is there likely to be residual meaning in their racial (and class) identities? Does the experience by most blacks of oppression and suppression have a bearing on their attitudes to democracy, development and the role of the media?

Further questions are prompted. Does past involvement in struggle (internally or in exile) affect a journalist’s outlook regarding former comrades now in government or to issues like debates on economic policy? What are the inherited cultural, traditional, gendered, and even tribal components of identity that might impact? With the new patterns of ownership and control, will the values and norms of journalism itself stay the same as black people are increasingly calling the shots and doing the job? And should the globally dominant paradigm of journalism stay the same – or can our historical experiences be ‘leveraged’ into the present in a transformative manner for the practice of journalism itself?

These are, at root, political questions, related to political identity and its implication with journalists’ pasts and their continuing racialised presents. Boloka and Krabill take us no closer to engaging with this, but media workers themselves are wrestling precisely with the challenges. And that, after all, is what media transformation is really all about.

References

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