

Journalism: the caricature industry?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) once wrote: "there are above all two kinds of writer: those who write for the sake of what they have to say and those who write for the sake of writing. The former have had ideas or experiences which seem to them worth communicating; the latter need money and that is why they write — for money. They think for the purpose of writing."

Schopenhauer had journalists in mind when he wrote these words. Journalists, he contended, merely wrote for money and for the sake of covering paper. To them he applied the Spanish proverb: '*Honra y provecho no caben en un saco*' (Honour and money don't belong in the same purse).

To a certain extent I go along with the sentiments expressed above. I do not mean that all journalists are callous and unscrupulous, intent only on lining their pockets by polluting men's minds. But having worked for both the Afrikaans and the English press in South Africa, I know only too well that one sometimes is required merely to fill space, or worse, to write on topics or express sentiments on subjects you are not really interested in or not quite qualified to write about.

This state of affairs, quite common in journalism virtually everywhere, has led me to look at some of constraints of that institutionalized writing called journalism, reporting and/or editorial-

izing. First I was struck by the contradiction that journalistic style is held up everywhere as a glowing example of excellence in the grammatical expression of ideas, while at the same time the content of journalistic prose is criticized for its superficiality, banality and crudeness. Is the excellent form but the expensive perfume of a harlot?

2. IDEOLOGY: THE SCEPTICS, THE CREDULOUS, AND THE CYNICS

Searching for constraints within which journalists work, and which undoubtedly influence the way they express themselves and thereby construct rather than mirror reality, the ideological corset of society or certain dominant groups in society is the most apparent. One could say of the journalist and the ideological atmosphere surrounding him what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about her mother in *A Very Easy Death*:

In her childhood her body, her heart and her mind had been squeezed into an armour of principles and prohibitions. She had been taught to pull the laces hard and tight herself. A full-blooded, spirited woman lived on inside her, but a stranger to herself, deformed and mutilated.

All people fall prey to socially generated conventions and morality. Some are unaware of this strait-jacket they wear, come to feel protected and snug in its fabric of rules and regulations, pre- and proscriptions. They welcome this garment of certainty and lose themselves in it.

Others find it more difficult merely to accept this cloak of non-identity. In moments of distress and anguish they sense the opposing forces of self and society, make feeble attempts to assert their individuality by cynically questioning the instincts and behaviour of the herd. Yet, they seldom embark on a sustained effort to break out of the invisible bonds of slavery, adopting instead a suffering mien and resorting to barbed criticisms of the status quo, the hegemonic culture, the oppressive forces. Their deep uncertainty is cloaked by their resolute expressions.

The third group have an inner resource of stability, yet perceive life to be full of uncertainties and imponderables. They are wary of easy judgments and glib answers, know truth to be tentative and circumstantial. They express themselves in guarded terms, arguing their case rather than blandly proclaiming subjective and idiosyncratic perceptions to convey the ultimate truth.

For the first group, there are no mediators between the scene of action and the human picture of that scene; the second mediate

through belief and generalization; the third mediate with an awareness that their perceptions are tentative, the result of a single perspective and thus partial. Journalists may start out as any of these, but the way in which they perceive reality and act as mediators on behalf of their readers can be seen from the way they express this relationship between reality and its perception. Briefly then, their perceptions may be analysed by looking at the language they use.

3. THE LANGUAGE OF THE JOURNALIST

Journalistic language is designed to address all people, whatever their standard of education or development. It is an instrument of accommodation, of compromise and of consensus. One sees it in the formulae used by journalists in their reports: an introduction should provide answers to the questions *who?*, *what?*, *where?*, *when?*, and *how?* The ideal formula is one which should also provide an answer to *why?*, but this seldom happens in practice.

However, since different journalists will carry different pictures in their heads on the basis of their being credulous, cynical or sceptical, their language will influence the way they use the journalistic formulae. Language, being a process of signification, offers clues to how journalists perceive reality and how they use the bricks of denotation to build homes of connotation. The gullible journalist will find few problems, in that what he writes is free of inference (if only to himself), in that he denotes scenes of action — simply expresses propositions which descriptively capture reality for all to see. The cynic, on the other hand, uses denotation as the raw material of his own ideology by creating different levels of connotation in a hierarchy of increasingly complex associations.

The reason it is possible to do this is because meanings are never created in a vacuum. Words and phrases derive their meaningfulness within particular contexts. Thus, at the simplest level, adjectives provide nouns with contexts:

Word	Type of signification	Adj.	Type of signification
Bull	Denotation: is male animal	Blue	Connotation: is Northern Transvaal rugby player

Placed within a wider politico-cultural context, words and phrases achieve more complex connotations, which always feed on the

denotative base. The conventional and logical sequence of signification between words, from denotative (literal) to connotative (metaphoric or figurative) meaning, is short-circuited in the process, causing words and phrases in journalistic prose to become clichés — words with petrified connotations, capable of interpretation in only one way. Such a word is *discrimination*.

Word	Type of signification	Level of signification
Discrimination	Denotation: <i>discernment</i> (varying individual applications)	Literal
	Connotation: <i>injustice</i> , based on skin colour (varying, but more limited, individual applications)	Analogical
	Connotation: <i>apartheid</i> (an attenuated meaning, widely but uncritically applied in contexts of racial segregation)	Symbolic (of institutional injustice)
	Connotation: <i>Afrikaner</i> (a specific meaning, widely applied to members of one cultural group in a South African context)	Mythic (creates mythic stereotype of a person perpetrating discrimination)
	Connotation: <i>Afrikaner-ness</i> (a specific meaning, widely applied to the dominant group in a South African context)	Ideological (<i>generalization</i> about a group perpetrating discrimination)

One sees in such a schema two developments which are imperceptibly tied to one another: on the one hand, the politico-cultural complexity of the web of connotations (the journalist's lifeworld) increases, while at the same time the conventional meaning of the word is being attenuated, becomes impoverished. The conventional meaning of the word is forced into a strait-jacket, allowing only one single interpretation. Discrimination becomes not only a political concept (rather than a word), but a peculiarly political and South African concept. This concept conjures up in the mind of the reader political associations between discrimination, apartheid and Afrikaner-ness.

Comparing this process to the way meaning is conveyed in graphics, especially in newspaper cartoons, one finds that the two processes

develop along the same lines: a particular feature is taken out of context, is amplified to become the focal point and is linked to a generalized group. Journalistic language uses words and phrases to convey caricatures of people and events.

Looking at James McClurg's observations in vol. 12 (1981) of this journal, one finds that many of the examples he cites fall in this category:

Gay = homosexual
Crash = accident
Shock = surprise
Ban = prohibition

These are words used without adequate reflection and understanding: to be homosexual in this and most other countries may be anything but a 'gay' experience; on the other hand, a surprise need not shock one. It would also be rather cynical to call all prohibitions 'bans'.

However, are we to assume that journalists are the only people engaged in creating caricatures? Certainly not. It seems to me that we are only more aware of their doing this, because many other groups use interest-related jargon of a limited scope, while journalists use all of conventional language and its unlimited scope for signification to do this.

4. CONCLUSION

While it is true that journalists create caricatures and distortions of their society in relating events, language need not always enslave journalists and their readers. Poets and novelists are per definition sceptics, as are scientists, but this need not mean that journalists need to be cynics either in their attitudes or journalistic expression. Like artists, they have to understand the constraints placed upon them by their society and the set of journalistic techniques impinging on their creativity and style of expression. They need not strive merely to have open minds, for perpetually open minds are invariably empty. They need rather to express *themselves*, to provide the context of their perceptions and of the events they verbally portray, and not succumb to reporting as if all things were final and definitive. Perhaps they need to discriminate more — not just perceptually, but also in their choice of words and expressions.