

New world, new

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hat distinguishes South Africa from countries like Venezuela, Cuba, or Vietnam is that it has strong and independent institutions that offer the protection of basic rights and create the space for a participative form of government contained in our Constitution.

An independent judiciary and separation of powers, a robust and independent media, an independent central bank, strong trade unions, a dynamic private sector and vibrant non-governmental organisations are high on the list of institutions that have ensured that the Constitution has emerged intact in the first generation of the post-apartheid era.

Flawed and lacking as these institutions were under apartheid, the important factor is they survived in a form that they could be transformed

by John Battersby

by a just and democratic order.

So what is the role of the media in a divided society in transition from a racial oligarchy to a shared society?

As well as to educate, inform and act as a watchdog against the abuse of power, is there an additional role that the media can play in a society which cries out for symbols of unity, belief in a common set of values and ways of making the Constitution stick in a society divided along racial, socio-economic, modern/traditional and urban/rural lines.

Is there a role the media can play to inspire people around a broad set of national goals – social cohesion, ubuntu, safeguarding the rights of others?

The print media in particular has already undergone significant transition since 1994 which has ensured that newsrooms are representative and ownership diversified. Today the media has become one of the vital instruments of ensuring accountability.

Having worked in the print media for most of my professional life, it is hugely encouraging to see a new generation of editors engaging in robust and honest dialogue with government and other institutions over the future shape of society.

But has the media played the role that it might have done in inspiring ordinary South Africans to embrace the rights offered to them in the Constitution and to coalesce around a set of values that have to underpin any sustainable society?

What has become of the nation-building concept introduced and practised by the late Aggrey Klaaste during his reign as editor of *The Sowetan* and beyond?

In a one-party-dominant state with a low-degree of social cohesion arising from the country's deeply-divided past, there is clearly a major challenge as to how the Constitution will become a living document in which democracy thrives and citizens are aware of their rights and exercise them in way that ensures that government and all institutions are accountable.

Events of the past six months or so have been a reality check for the society after nearly 15 years of democracy: while South Africa has come a long way since the 1994 elections, the unfinished business of transition has put the spotlight on the social, political and economic faultlines which could jeopardise democracy.

What is clear is that the decay of the apartheid era – and the moral ambiguity that has arisen in attempts to speed its demise – has made the road ahead a lot less clear than it was 14 years ago.

Like the shoots of new-born saplings in a forest, the new growth is finding that it has to push through a lot of detritus to find the light.

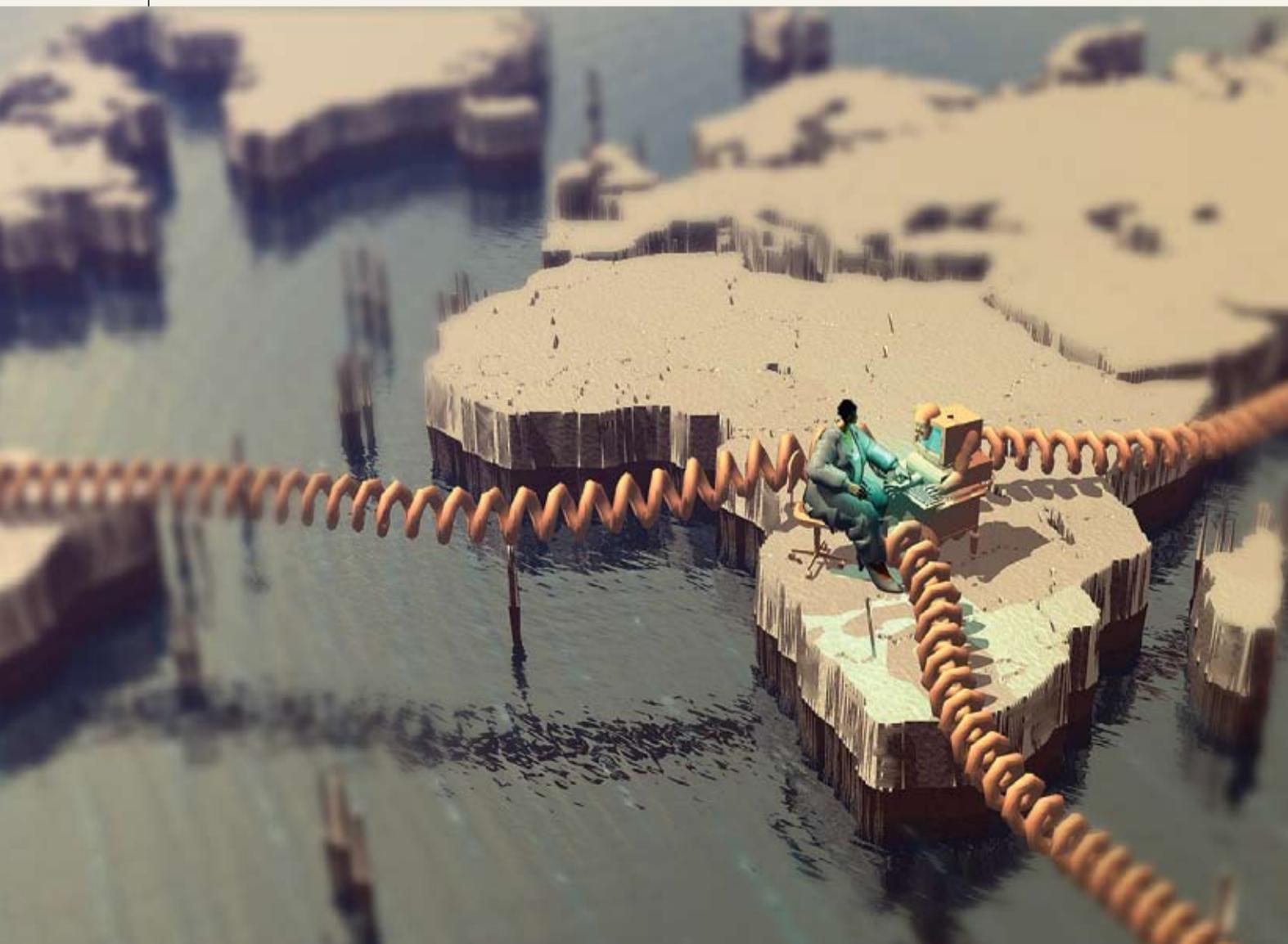
To further complicate the challenge of resetting the country's moral compass is the backdrop of a rapid and fundamentally changing world in which the absolutes and opposites of the Cold War period have given way to the challenges of synthesis and inclusivity in a globalised but unsustainable international order.

Humanity has not yet come up with a business plan that ensures medium to long-term survival for the planet. But there is an increasing global focus on how to devise one that works.

Out of this process has come a broad consensus of what needs to be done to ensure the survival of the planet: the architecture of global institutions – such as the UN, the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) – need to be drastically overhauled so as to create a multi-lateral global order capable of closing the gap between haves and have-nots.

Secondly, there needs to be a massive trade-off between the industrialised and developing worlds on the issue of climate change in a way that will balance the dictates of development with those of the environment in order to ensure survival.

The emergence of a new economic order – which is likely to see the United States, India and



models, new responsibilities

China as the world's three largest economies by 2050 – is drastically changing the paradigm with which the world sees South Africa and other emerging high-growth states such as Mexico, Turkey, South Korea, Brazil, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The assumptions of the past century have been based largely on the view from Washington and London and the G8 club of nations based on economic domination and governmental systems based on democracy and human rights.

But this system has not only failed to address the massive global disparities of wealth and opportunity but has entrenched the inbuilt inequalities and deepened the faultlines threatening global security: terrorism with its underlying causes of poverty and underdevelopment and environment-threatening climate change born of an economic system which puts acquisition above self-preservation.

So what is the responsibility of the media in an emerging democracy such as South Africa against the backdrop of a fundamentally changing order? Does it need to reflect a more global view of how South Africa is perceived? Is the view from Beijing, New Delhi, and Moscow not an increasingly important part of that world view? Should we not be exposed more to different models of accountability? Why is China a far more accountable and responsive system than Myanmar (Burma), even though they are both centralised governmental systems? Is the Indian model of economic growth – based on democracy – more sustainable than that of China with its centralised governmental system?

And what of the media's role in contextualising South Africa in terms of the African continent? There has been a dramatic change in the past 15 years in terms of coverage of Africa and African issues in SA media, from virtually nil to a substantial part of overall coverage.

The last frontier: Africa

Since 9/11, but more particularly against the backdrop of the current credit crunch and slowing of the global economy, Africa is the focus of more interest in the city of London and other global financial centres than it has ever been. The continent is regarded increasingly as the last frontier for global growth.

Just as investors felt that they had to have a foot in the opening door of Chinese opportunity 30 years ago, so now is the case with Africa. In the past six months, there has been a proliferation of Africa investment funds appearing in the market and Africa investment seminars abound.

After decades of marginalisation in the global economy and on the media spectrum – except for the usual stereotypes of conflict, famine and corruption associated with Africa – Africa is in the spotlight. The international media has played a major role in this trend.

In the past 18 months, CNBC has come on line

Africa is the focus of more interest in global financial centres than it has ever been. The continent is regarded increasingly as the last frontier for growth. Just as investors felt they had to have a foot in the opening door of Chinese opportunity 30 years ago, so now is the case with Africa.

with a 24/7 Africa Business Channel, Al Jazeera has brought a more synthesised global paradigm to its reporting on Africa where its new English service has set up major bureaus in Johannesburg and Nairobi, Reuters has established a dedicated Africa website, and CNN and the BBC have – partly in response to these initiatives – bumped up their Africa coverage.

There have been perception setbacks in Kenya and the crisis in Zimbabwe is holding back much of sub-Saharan Africa's potential but once the deadlock in Zimbabwe is broken there is the prospect of the SADC becoming one of the world's most promising growth regions with South Africa as the infrastructure hub and the investment platform.

The media's role in the rapidly changing perceptions of Africa as an investment opportunity rather than a basket-case has been crucial. It provides a good example of the role that the media could play in South Africa. But there needs to be a consensus or social compact involving the media and government before that can happen. The Constitution provides the framework for that consensus:

- The government needs to engage the media at all levels and establish a system of open communication and proactive generation of stories which emphasise the emergence of the new in South Africa.
- The media in turn need to change their paradigms. The domestic media need to position South Africa as part of the new emerging world order. The international media need to look beneath the surface and contextualise South Africa in terms of the changing global order.
- The South African media need to recognise that South Africa has a major challenge in inspiring

people to realise their rights under the Constitution and that the media can play a major role in that process by seeking out the stories which reinforce this process.

- Nurturing a society which upholds the rights of others and the principles of ubuntu – putting the interests of the community on a par with those of the individual – needs to become a national project in which the media have a crucial role.
- Support for a national campaign of good citizenship which seeks to instil a sense of individual responsibility and accountability and a set of values which enshrines the values of the Constitution.

In addressing the recent International Media Forum in Johannesburg in May, ANC deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe spelled out the basis of such a consensus: "We want the international community to have confidence in the direction our country is taking but we don't want the confidence to be founded on spin and advertising campaigns... rather on an informed understanding of what the country is about... and to be able to form views and make decisions on accurate and balanced accounts."

His statement would provide a good basis for another round of engagement between the government and the media in the elusive search for a common understanding and basis on which to differ.

Battersby writes in his personal capacity.