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# the press and its influence on the education of english-speaking south africans

RENÉ DE VILLIERS

Simply by fulfilling its primary function of making news and information generally and inexpensively available to the people at large, the Press throughout the world has had a tremendous influence on the course of history. And not the least part of that impact has been on education in its broadest sense. It has, of course, been a two-way traffic: just as newspapers have helped education, so education has helped newspapers if only by spreading literacy.

What the introduction of the penny newspaper in England did to people's reading habits is common knowledge. Countless millions have learned to read and read more intelligently as a result of the mere existence of newspapers. I am not suggesting for a moment that all they read — then or now, for that matter — was educational or even uplifting. But it whetted their appetites for information and knowledge and led them to range further afield in search of facts which were otherwise not readily available to them.

But long before the penny newspaper, of course, the Press was a powerful education medium, in Europe as well as much further afield. Edwin Emery, in "The Press and America", tells how, in the 1820s, the Press in the United States was "more and more counted upon to supply the information, inspiration, agitation and education of a society often unable to keep up with its need for schools . . . In many communities newspapers were the only literature available for the bulk of the citizenry. They served as the main educational device until other cultural institutions could take up the slack caused by rapid migrations. European visitors often did not realise the obstacles to cultural progress in such a new land. They sometimes failed to see that the United States was at a stage where rudimentary education fulfilled the needs of much of the population."

What was true of the United States was largely true of South Africa in its early days. Our first newspaper came into existence at the Cape in the early 1820s. And as early as 1850, an English-language weekly, "The Friend of the Sovereignty", came into being in Bloemfontein. It served this sparsely- populated and inadequately educated territory as a weekly for 40 years before becoming a daily newspaper, which it is to this day 125 years later. One only has to look at the early files of "The Friend" to realise what a role it played in keeping the people of the Orange Free State informed of events in South Africa and further afield. In many homes, Afrikaans- as well as English-speaking, it was the only source of contemporary information available to the people at large. As the only daily newspaper in either language in that part of the country till the mid-1910s, it stands to reason that it exerted influence and contributed to the general knowledge and informedness of the population to a degree difficult to compute. It was an educational medium in the best sense of the term.

What is and was true of "The Friend" is true of other South African newspapers, from Cape Town to Pretoria and from Windhoek to Durban. From our cradle days English-language newspapers helped to spread literacy to all people, including those of colour, and in this way alone made a signal contribution to mass education. (It is perhaps significant that South Africa's people of colour are nearly all dependent on English-language newspapers and periodicals for their current information.)

The influence of the Press on English-speaking South Africans has, of course, largely been an indirect one, although this does not in any way detract from its value and significance. This is true of so many spheres. Education needs the stimulus of debate to keep it contemporary and therefore relevant. The

Press has provided the opportunity for this debate, not only in its readers' views columns, but also by canvassing the views and opinions of experts in the educational field.

I remember so well the visit to South Africa of that great avant-garde teacher, A S Neill, in the early 30s, and how, as a result of the interest aroused and stimulated in the Free State by "The Friend", the town hall, seating over a thousand people, was packed for his public lecture. The interest stimulated by that visit was reflected in the columns of "The Friend" for months on end. In this and other ways the Press has been the vehicle for imparting new ideas, new methods, new thinking, whether from overseas or as a result of domestic debate. The influence of such debate could only be healthy and beneficial.

There is another very practical field in which the Press has influenced education very considerably: by constantly drawing attention to the working conditions and needs of the teaching profession. By mirroring public opinion, by drawing attention to grouses and grievances and shortcomings generally, by harping on the need to attract better quality students to the teaching profession, by repeatedly calling attention, for instance, to the need for more English-speaking recruits to the profession. In other words, it has consciously and with intent helped to create the right climate of public opinion in which attention can be given to the needs of the teaching profession or, for that matter, to the needs of parents and children. The results have on the whole been most satisfactory.

Then, of course, there is the field of education policy in which the Press, in my experience again, has played a significant role. My mind goes back to the early 40s and the vigorous debate in the columns of English-language newspapers in particular, on Christian-National Education. Again, by mirroring thought and encouraging the exchange of ideas, the Press was able to open the eyes of many to what it regarded as shortcomings, indeed perils, in a good deal of CNE thinking. And although this did not prevent the introduction of the CNE philosophy and even practice into many schools, I like to think that South Africa was in fact saved from some of the worst excesses of that post-war doctrine by the vigorous action of the English-language Press at the time.

More recently we have had the Press drawing attention to the so-called "youth preparedness" programmes and, in the process, being able to sweep away some of the misunderstandings which arose when the idea was orginally mooted and perhaps even influence the actual implementation in some ways. (Honesty, of course, impels one to admit that some newspapers were themselves partly responsible for creating a deal of the misunderstanding of the programme.)

In a multi-lingual country such as ours the role of the Press in stimulating interest in language is an intriguing one — intriguing because of the lack of unanimity on whether the influence of newspapers on the quality and standard of a particular language is useful or baleful. On the one hand are the perfectionists who find fault with newspaper English, for instance, either because it is too informal or sloppy or often just downright wrong. On the other hand are those who believe that the English-language Press has helped to give the language a positive indigenous flavour, has produced — and so encouraged — good quality colloquial writing without lowering standards; has kept the language modern and contemporary, sometimes even by the judicious use of Afrikaans words and phrases; and has, above all perhaps, kept English a vibrant, viable vehicle of communication in a climate which has not always been all that encouraging or receptive.

Without attempting to hide or excuse the shortcomings of newspaper English, I subscribe warmly to the second category of thinking. By and large the influence of the English-language Press on the English language has been wholesome and has, therefore, been a positive contribution to the education of English-speaking South Africans. In fact, it might legitimately be asked whether, without an English-language Press, there would have been much English spoken in this country today.

Some newspapers — "The Star" is one and "The Friend" another — have published regular features on the proper use of English which have elicited warm praise from teach-

ers as well as readers. So, for example, "The Purist" (in fact T E G Cutten, a senior member of "The Star" staff for many years) kept a regular column going in that paper for a long time; and periodically the best of the contributions have been published in booklet form for general use and distribution.

Similarly it can be said that the work of good and informed critics has been of decided educational value to newspaper readers. I think of the South African counterparts of men like Neville Cardus, whose work, whether in the field of art, music, theatre, or literature, bears evidence of first-class scholarship. Such men cannot be without influence on the education of the community they serve. Similarly, newspapers have provided source material for the historian. The Press of the old Cape Colony was a rich source of such material, just as were papers like the "Eastern Province Herald" (Port Elizabeth), "Grocott's Daily Mail" (Grahamstown), the "Diamond Fields Advertiser" (Kimberley), the "Natal Witness" (Maritzburg) and of course "The Friend".

In the last five or six years there has been an entirely new development in the field of education when some newspapers have embarked upon a far more specific and direct role in education by actually entering the field of instruction themselves. "The Star" was the pioneer, to be followed by other papers in the Argus Company stable and subsequently by two Afrikaans papers in Johannesburg ("Die Vaderland" and "Die Transvaler"). It is worth looking at this new venture in some detail because of its potential significance for the future of education.

"The Star's" involvement — brainchild of the Promotions Manager, Mr "Kip" van Zyl, incidentally — goes back to 1970. Perturbed by the critical shortage of teachers of such subjects as maths, physical science, biology, geography and history, the paper decided to take action in the public interest. Here was a crisis situation involving many of its readers and "The Star" felt it had to do something.

The Transvaal Education Department was offered the hospitality of the columns of "The Star" in which to get the best teachers to contribute articles geared to the needs of pupils and of teachers. In this way, it was felt, experts in their own fields could spread their expertise throughout the paper's readership and far beyond the confines of their individual classrooms. For various reasons the offer had to be turned down so "The Star" decided it had to go ahead on its own. After discussions with the heads of various schools — the Editor of the day had made it a practice to hold periodic meetings with the heads of selected schools to discuss problems of common interest, so the contact was easy — a panel of teachers was commissioned to write articles in their own particular fields specifically designed for matric revision purposes. The teachers were asked to concentrate on those areas of the syllabus which, in their experience, posed the most serious problems.

The public response was immediate and one outcome was an offer to "The Star" by Mr William Smith, M.Sc., (originator and organiser of a tutorial service for university students of the first-year level in problem areas of their syllabi) to sponsor a vacation school on a trial basis — the school to work with the same object in view as the specially commissioned articles.

The newspaper agreed on condition that only first-rate teachers were recruited and that cramming techniques were not to be countenanced. Continued sponsorship, it was made clear, depended wholly on whether these vacation schools could prove that they were providing a needed public service at reasonable cost.

The first school in 1970 attracted 300 pupils. Teachers were hired from both provincial and private schools. They were paid R10 a lesson for 50 minutes and the style of presentation was largely a lecture-technique with sophisticated audio-visual aids to pupil groups numbering between 30 and 100. The following year The Star School, as it was now known, nearly doubled its numbers. Four years later the idea had spread further afield and about 12 000 standard 9 and 10 pupils were being served annually in three centres, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. (By this time Mr Smith had been joined as a partner by Mr Jacques Sellshop, himself an educationist of standing.)

The philosophy behind the undertaking changed almost unobtrusively. Originally designed to assist the struggler, the schools

now comprise sophisticated machinery which offers tuition at three levels: the pupil who has specific areas of weakness and who needs help; the mid-range 50 per-center who wants to improve and possibly aim at the 60 per cent first class; and finally, the elite student who is looking for one or more distinctions.

With the deplorable decline in the supply of teachers available in ordinary schools and the increased demands of the various syllabi being matched by an inversely proportional decline in the qualification of teachers, the organisers of The Star Schools claim that many pupils are here today turning to their organisation for what amounts to their total tuition in specific subjects. Where schools are wihout properly qualified teachers at the matric level, their pupils sign on with Star Schools at the beginning of the year and study certain subjects almost exclusively through the services so offered.

It may be worth setting out the present activities of Star Schools (in Johannesburg), Daily News Schools (in Durban) and Argus Schools (in Cape Town). In all these centres there is a two-week school during the longer vacation and a one-week school during the shorter vacation. (In the Transvaal, with its three-term year, there are two two-week schools.)

In addition the schools in Johannesburg offer first-term, second-term and third-term Saturday classes; and elite classes in English, Afrikaans, maths and science in the evenings, Mondays to Thursdays.

There are also numerous other services such as pre-examination sessions on examination techniques, trial-matric services where condidates can write a paper of matric standard under self-imposed exam conditions and have it marked by one of the matric subexaminers who sends it back to the pupils with half-an-hour of tape-recorded comments and advice. There are also "mini-books" which set out in a bound form systems for studying problem areas. Lately, Star Schools have expanded to offer pupils an inexpensive vocational and guidance testing service. And with His Majesty's Theatre, Star Schools have formed an association to bring good quality educational theatre to the pupils at a reasonable price.

In other words, the philosophy behind Star Schools has crystallised into one of offering a supplementary educational service in an attempt to raise the standard of education. In circumstances of financial restraint Star Schools would admit pupils free of charge. In a situation where pupils are zoned for certain schools and are therefore bound to accept the tuition offered at those schools, Star Schools offers them the opportunity to benefit from first-class tuition available in subjects where it may be their misfortune to be indifferently taught in the area in which they are zoned.

Star Schools believe that outstanding teachers are rare — that they are born and not made — and therefore tries to acknowledge their value and pay them appropriately, namely, R15 for a 50-minute lesson. As far as the pupils are concerned, the fees work out at 50 cents an hour and have not been increased for years.

"The World", the Johannesburg daily newspaper aimed at Black readers (it is also in the Argus Company) has tackled the problem of providing educational services in a different way because of the different needs of African pupils. Weekend World School, as it is known, started in 1974 in an attempt primarily to supplement the notorious lack of school facilities and materials for Black pupils. It is in effect today a kind of free correspondence college with an "enrolment" of approximately 187 000. Every week in "Weekend World" the school publishes a set of articles covering various parts of the school syllabus, with the main emphasis on junior certificate. The response has been encouraging, from pupils as well as teachers and parents. One rather pathetic letter to the organisers is worth quoting in full and uncorrected:

"I wonder why this paper was not introduced ten years ago because our black nation could have been an intelligent nation today. I will first like to thank those companies that has let Wekeend World School available, because the availability of this paper has helped me in solving my educational problems. Article's appearance is very good and some of them explained more better than some of the teachers. So far I didn't notice any futile explanations."

The need for Weekend World Schools, clearly, is great. So more recently "The World" added to its school programme by publishing a "People's Page", designed, it is explained, "to prevent newly literate persons from slipping back into illiteracy" While it is now fashionable for companies to provide literacy training for their Black employees, there is virtually no provision for post-literacy reading, the almost prohibitive cost of books being one reason and the appalling paucity of libraries another. It is this gap which "The World" hopes to fill with "People's Page", in the compilation of which it has enlisted the aid of experts in their field.

It has been found that newly literate adults, fresh from a literacy course, are not able to cope with ordinary English. There is little incentive to read children's "the-cat-sat-on-the-mat" type of matter, so many literacy course graduates revert to illiteracy. That is why "The World's" new page consist of limited vocabulary, adult-interest material which aims to stimulate people in this position to keep on reading and to range further afield — just as the penny paper did in England earlier this century.

"The World" is hoping to expand its school to cover the junior certificate syllabus more fully and to incorporate some matric and standard six instruction. During end-of-the-year periods the JC syllabus is replaced by general educational subjects of interest not only to scholars but to all Africans. Last year these consisted of courses on health education, driving, on Black writers and on Black leaders — education in its widest sense.

What have been the results? The organisers of Weekend World Schools say that last years' JC results for Africans were significantly better than in previous years. While this may have been a coincidence, the newspaper feels that if the trend continues this year, it will feel entitled to claim some of the credit for the improvement. Even without such improvement, I would say, the paper is doing a splendid educational job where it is most needed.

It is not for me to try to evaluate this new venture in the field of newspapers and education nor can I at this stage judge its influence on English-speaking South Africans, White or Coloured. I am sure there is much that can be criticised in the practice and philosophy of Star Schools and one has to admit that there is scope for exploitation by the less-than-scrupulous entrepreneur, should such a venture get into the wrong hands — material as well as educational exploitation. But I believe the potential for good is considerable and it is quite obvious that the undertaking is filling a long-felt and fairly dire need. Here, surely, is a sphere in which the good teacher, the true educationist, can experiment positively and fruitfully if only because he is not hamstrung by red tape and bureaucracy — and by tradition for tradition's sake.

Besides, the element of competition which these newspaper schools introduce into the educational world could be positive and wholesome — provided, always, that the system does not lead to cramming pure and simple. That would be deplorable. On the other hand if these schools, by new methods and different incentives can get children to think for themselves and not depend on spoon-feeding, they could be a useful adjunct to the conventional institutions. The emphasis is and must remain on "adjunct".

I would suggest that what might be considered is a local counterpart of "The Times Educational Supplement". The influence of the TES down the years has been considerable and quite invaluable. Its greatest continuing contribution clearly must be to keep an intelligent debate going on education and its problems and so make the public aware of its never-ending responsibilies in this vital field.