

Essay by
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IN A
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“¡Más vale morir de pie que vivir de rodillas!”

This uncompromisingly defiant call, “It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees,” has been attributed to the man I call Cliché Guevara. But the famous phrase may have originated much earlier with a Mexican journalist, Práxedes Guerrero, who, leading a firefight between 32 well-armed guerrillas of the anarchist Partido Liberal Mexicano and about 600 Federales in the Chihuahua town of Janos on the evening of 29 December 1910, literally died on his feet, and in doing so helped light the fuse for one of the most profound transformations of the 20th century: the Mexican Revolution. He was 28 years old.

Guerrero also wrote for Ricardo Flores Magón’s famous newspaper *Regeneración*, and edited the El Paso, Texas, paper *Punto Rojo*, so it is clear that he straddled, or rather combined, two disciplines: that of the journalist and that of the activist; his writings – and his revolutionary activities – putting him directly in harm’s way. It is equally clear that it was his conviction that radical change was necessary in Mexico that led him to take up both the pen and, as the popular revolutionary song had it, “the 30-30 carbine”.

There is a long tradition of the journalist-activist in Mexico. Take for example the remarkable Juana Belém Gutiérrez de Mendoza who first published her feminist journal *Vesper* in 1901. She became an important Mexican revolutionary figure and *Vesper*, relocated to Mexico City, would survive despite repeated government bans – and despite Gutiérrez spending many spells in prison for her writings and activism – remaining in circulation until 1936, a remarkable longevity given exceptionally dangerous conditions. She was also the editor of the feminist journal *Iconoclasta*, established in 1917 within the ranks of the Mexican Regional Workers’ Federation.

The famous 1911 Plan de Ayala which was the direct inspiration for the radical Mexican Constitution of 1917 – in anticipation of how our 1955 Freedom Charter inspired South Africa’s democratic constitution of 1996 – was written by the Ayala town teacher Otilio Montaña Sánchez, with input from revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata and

the anarchist-communist *Regeneración* journalist-cum-unionist Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, who had served three jail terms for his politics, and who Zapata had befriended in Mexico City.

In similar fashion, journalist-activists have shaped the South African social and political landscape. We need only look at the work of communists like Alan Lipman who wrote for newspapers such as *New Age*, who helped in the process of drafting the Freedom Charter, and who engaged in acts of sabotage alongside the liberal African Resistance Movement after he broke with the SACP over the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

New Age was later banned and Lipman forced into exile, but we can also examine the work of supposedly apolitical photographers like *Drum* magazine’s Bob Gosani who took damning secret photographs in the 1950s of the ritual humiliation of naked black prisoners in the notorious number four prison in Johannesburg, images which remain seared on the popular conscience today. That was as much journalism-as-activism as the work of more explicitly political journalists such as Steve Biko or Ruth First.

Journalism-as-activism has shaped much of our understanding of the world we live in. Where would we find the essentially human, and humane, insights into world-shaking events without the likes of communist journalist John Reed’s gritty eyewitness accounts of the Russian Revolution as portrayed in his book *Ten Days that Shook the World*? How impoverished would our understanding of poverty and welfare be without the incisive writings of Martha Gellhorn – later to earn fame as a war correspondent, active well into her eighties – about the dustbowl dirt-farmers of Depression-era America, as reflected in her book *The View from the Ground*?

Why should we care?

That is both the crudest and yet also the most crucial question to be asked by and of journalists when socially-conscious reporting is discussed. In a world driven by hard-edged, macro-economic agendas, and coloured by the brutal cut-and-thrust of daily political life, is there any point to social

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responsibility, a topic that has something of the tree-hugger to it?

After all, we have journalistic codes of ethics that are explicitly constitution based. We have a vigorous climate of debate within and about the media, and we have Section Nine institutions that protect the public that we write about, and for. Journalists in South Africa are justly proud of two intertwined and sometimes conflicting traditions: those of the “objective” school who hold facts paramount, and those of the “advocacy” school who hold progressive social change paramount. Sometimes these are mis-characterised as opposed western/capitalist and African/developmental styles of reportage.

In 2000, a Piet Retief sawmill owner was so determined to destroy an attempt by his workers to unionise that he physically and psychologically abused the workers, formed a yellow alternative union, and then slashed salaries, paying the women workers – the men had given in to his bullying – R11 a month. Meanwhile, he flew about in a helicopter and fed his dogs huge, juicy steaks. Broke and heavily indebted to loan-sharks, these women were completely unbowed by their boss’s tactics and were resolute in wanting to build their union. Why should we care?

In 2001, I crawled 200 metres along a coal seam into the bowels of a hill near Idutywa, Eastern Cape, to report on “illegal” miners – skilled workers who had lost their jobs on the Reef, the Free State goldfields and elsewhere – who were taking their lives in their hands mining poor-quality brown coal. Why should we care?

In the internecine warfare of the Midlands in the 1980s and 1990s, one of the bloodiest battles was fought over the unionisation by Cosatu of the BTR-Sarmcol tyre factory in Howick. At least 39 people were murdered and 970 Cosatu-aligned workers fired. In 1998, after a legal battle lasting 13 years, the dismissed workers won reinstatement and Judge Pierre Olivier’s landmark decision was that no employer could dismiss almost 1 000 workers without considering the social impact.

Yet in 1999, German investor Klaus Daun (aka “Close Down”) shut down Mooi River Textiles, throwing roughly 800 workers out into the cold. The economic impact on the town was devastating: R5 million a month in workers’ spending power evaporating overnight; the local property market crashed and everything from large chain stores to the banks shut their doors; crime soared, tourism died and even the municipality floundered as its rates base was destroyed.

That’s why we should care. Yet most of my colleagues prefer to caricature strikers as selfish, and working-class concerns as of only narrow importance. So I was the only reporter to bother to follow that cause-and-effect chain on the ground, exploring how job losses affect not just blue-collar workers, but everyone, and stories that affect everyone are always legitimate news stories.

South African journalism today largely lacks social consciousness because many journalists are too ideologically blinkered. It does not matter if they are pro-capitalist or anti-capitalist, pro-Zuma or not, pro-Mugabe or not, pro-Castro or not, there is an inability and unwillingness to judiciously weigh up the evidence of both sides and to examine issues holistically. Stance outweighs substance. Allegiance outweighs analysis.

My personal experience

My political progress was initially as slow as my rather naive journalism development, though I early on gravitated towards the resurgent anti-racist and anti-militarist anarchist movement in the early 1990s. My growing experience in conflict reporting during those dramatic years of the insurrection of 1985 to 1993 – our own Second Intifadeh if you will, following the famous insurrection of 1976 to 1977 – politicised me further. In Gellhorn’s phrase, I was becoming ever more interested in “the view from the ground”, in reporting the experiences of the poor, oppressed and marginalised.

This in turn led to me joining a succession of anarchist resistance organisations, with ever-more defined politics, platforms and programmes of direct engagement in social struggles, resulting in today’s Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front. Where journalism took me into the townships during my lengthy working hours, activism took me back there in the evenings and over weekends. I became a shop steward in my union, the rather white-collar, craft-oriented South African Union of Journalists and learned the hard lessons of union organising (organising journalists is very much like herding cats!). I became an investigative journalist specialising in covering everything from defense and conflict, to extra-Parliamentary politics and labour, all the while helping local activists to organise township and hostel libraries and political meetings, and helping out at working class organisations like the Workers’ Library and Museum.

I naturally had to try to ensure that I retained my sense of journalistic balance and fairness in the middle of all this, giving credit where it was due, and

trying to put myself in the shoes of my interview subjects, especially those I strongly opposed: the nationalists, both black and white. So, on the one hand I have sat in the lounge of PAC leader Clarence Makwetu near Queenstown, interrogating the ironies and complexities of the land restitution question, and on the other, I have spent hours talking to Afirkaner Weerstand Beweging farmers, trying to get under the skin of the supposed racial certainties of their relations with their black neighbours. The trick was to be in favour of veracity, and to spend the time needed to sufficiently grasp all points of view, all life experiences.

The curious thing is that while journalism taught me research skills and a respect for ordinary people, activism taught me organisational skills, self-discipline and public speaking, all things I use in my work today.

So what is missing?

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They are too remote. They far prefer to operate by telephone than doing the hard, after hours legwork that real journalism often requires. Crawling 200 metres into the side of a hillside or walking the docks at night is too risky and therefore simply not done. Living comfortably in the suburbs, they shudder at working in rural areas. It is far easier to wait for some authority to issue a press statement.

They are too prissy. They are too scandalised to speak to the accused in the dock, even though the accused are presumed innocent by law until convicted, and are the very reason for the trial. They

are afraid to speak to convicts in jail even though they can be visited and interviewed just like anyone else. They are too proper to speak to the hookers, the beggars and the poor on their own turf, on their own terms. They are too beholden to interests other than veracity. Blinded by their own personal tastes, prejudices, agendas and the influence of their friends, they are not willing to put aside their pre-conceived notions and get to the heart of the story. Allegiance outweighs analysis.

How do we fix it?

Above any particular journalistic talent, dogged willpower is needed to make stories come alive, values which news editors must instill.

We must have the will to get out of the newsroom and do the legwork. With many stories this is time-consuming, lonely work, but in all cases, irreplaceable in terms of understanding the story, and working in the field is by far the most rewarding part of journalism.

We must get to know the society in which we operate. No, neo-Nazis, prisoners and prostitutes are not always nice folk, but if we don't know them, we not only fail to understand racism, prostitution and prisons, but ignore great primary sources.

We must get behind the headline. We need to get to understand socio-eco-political processes, the social engines that drive phenomena, in order to properly interpret them. Unbiased yet judicious curiosity is a great virtue.

To answer my original question: why should we care? We should care because socially-aware journalism is not soft on wrong-doers or on the facts. It is detailed, contextual, analytical, sociologically-informed reportage from the ground, which tenaciously pursues veracity, covering the underreported majority of the human experience, and so in doing, delivers valuable information to our diverse audiences, empowering their life decisions.



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