

Outlaw newspaper monopolies

AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN REAL MEDIA FREEDOM IS PLURALISM IN OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL

by
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IT IS a remarkable fact that although Press freedom (taking in both the print and electronic media) is one of the essential bulwarks of a democratic society, virtually none of the Western democracies can claim, after centuries of practice, to have succeeded in creating a genuinely free Press. It is certainly not genuinely free in the United States or Britain, and still has important weaknesses even in the more successful examples to be found in the Scandinavian countries.

An important starting-point is to define the essentials of a genuinely free Press.

The first is that there should be a constitutional guarantee of Press freedom, underpinned by the right of appeal, to the courts in the case of infringements.

Other essentials are: a pluralism of newspapers and magazines reflecting the views of diverse political, social and economic interests; a law against monopolistic ownership of newspapers; and accountable public control over a section of television and broadcasting, as best exemplified by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

However, even when these essentials are guaranteed by law, the operation of market forces is such that it is impossible

for all but the richest interest groups to achieve genuine medium pluralism. Two examples can be cited to illustrate this failure. In Britain only one national newspaper (the popular *Daily Mirror*) supports the traditional alternative government, the Labour Party. The majority of national and provincial papers support the Conservative Party. The Liberals are in a better position because they have the support of the influential *Guardian* and general support from a few independent national papers. Even in Sweden, where the Social Democrats, have held power, on and off, for more than 30 years, the party's only support is a weak and struggling newspaper.

These two examples might be cited as evidence that the vaunted power of the Press to influence public opinion is not all that it is cracked up to be. One is reminded that when President Harry Truman won his first resounding victory he had the support of only one major newspaper, nation-wide. The countervailing force to the 'power of the Press', certainly in Britain and Sweden, has been the role of publicly-controlled television and radio. Nevertheless, even if one discounts the 'power of the Press' to influence the outcome of elections, it is surely unarguable that the climate of opinion on major issues is largely conditioned by the Press. Besides, if a pluralist Press is accepted as an essential condition for a free society, it is clearly important to make this possible and not to leave its achievement simply to the operation of market forces.

My own experience as a journalist both in this country and through my 33 years association with the *London Observer* has strengthened my view that it is not possible to achieve a genuinely free Press, as earlier defined, by leaving the ownership of newspapers and the electronic media to the workings of the market-place. This is not to argue in favour of any form of state control or

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Mayer's concept of incapsulation to the experience of Italians in London.

Beinart's account of the origins of "Indlavini", rural gangs in Pondoland, draws attention to a major third force in Xhosa society which promises to overwhelm or synthesise the old Red-School dichotomy. "Red" implied an involvement in the wider society only insofar as it was necessary to sustain the subsistence economy and culture at home. "School" people sought emancipation by acculturation, emulating the dominant whites — an aspiration rendered meaningless by legislated racism. "Indlavini" groups, like the urban comrades and youth brigades, give expression to the revolutionary consequences of landlessness (which destroys "Red" aspirations) and the failure of acculturation to deliver emancipation.

McAllister takes us into a backwater where beleaguered "Reds" survive with some help from anthropologist friends. Spiegel contributes a lively account of Basotho explanations for the prevalence of extramarital sexual liaisons — rationalising the improper with historical precedents in ways to which the AIDS activists could well pay attention.

Cecil Manona, whose contribution to Xhosa scholarship over the past two

decades as interpreter, guide and counsellor is prodigious, and Virginia v.d. Vliet give perspectives on township life in Grahamstown from the bottom (ex farm migrants) and the top (middle class wives) respectively.

The volume concludes with a beautifully constructed account of the way in which ethnicity is transacted between men and women in the region between Lake St Lucia and Delagoa Bay. In a world where ethnic labels are used as banners beneath which people kill and die, it is salutary to be reminded of how ephemeral they can be. David Webster, who wrote it, died a martyr to that insight, subversive as it is of racist orders.

Transition and Tradition is not simply an anthropologists' book, for circulation among members of an obscure club.

It addresses fundamental issues relevant to the process of change in South Africa. Despite all the misery and oppression to which it refers, its ultimate message is optimistic.

Men and women, even when the victims of multiple oppression — by race, gender, age and poverty, use the material, ideological and social resources at their disposal to make meaningful lives for themselves, transcending where they cannot overthrow their oppressors.

— PROFESSOR M.G. WHISSON



Independence for Tielman Roos and Arthur Barlow group was short-lived

supervision of newspapers which is inimical to Press freedom.

Let me cite first my experience as a journalist in South Africa where I began my career in 1936 on the staff of the *Express* newspapers which were started by Tielman Roos and Arthur Barlow to drive the country off the gold standard and in support of the short-lived Central Party.

The *Express* newspapers (which later included the *Daily* and *Sunday Tribune* as well as an independent news agency, Africopa), were later acquired by the financier, I.W. Schlesinger. When his theatre and catering companies encountered financial difficulties and he needed a substantial foreign loan, the condition for making this possible was the insistence by the mining interests (led at the time by John Martin of Corner House) to sell out his newspaper-interests to the *Argus* group. This put an end to the attempt to create an independent newspaper group not controlled by mining interests. From that point on (despite a brave attempt by John Sutherland to start up the *Port Elizabeth Advertiser*, the success in keeping the independence of the *Natal Witness* and, for a time, also of the *East London Dispatch*), the English language Press came increasingly under monopoly control by the powerful mining houses. (This episode has been partly chronicled by G. Lindsay Smith in his book on the South African Press.)

Later, when I took over the editorship of the Labour weekly, the *Forward*, from T.C. Robertson, and subsequently launched the *Illustrated Bulletin* with Dr T.W.B. Osborn MP, we failed to attract sufficient advertising support to provide a voice for a nascent social democratic movement. Because I refused to work for any newspaper controlled by the mining interests, my career as a journalist in this country was blocked.

much on the lines of the *Guardian* and the *Economist*. The example of these three newspaper trusts pointed the way to a new form of newspaper ownership different from that of the customary strong proprietorial control of the Beaverbrooks, Harmsworths and Kemsleys — all of them strongly supportive of Conservative interests.

Notwithstanding the *Observer's* international standing and its success in achieving the second largest circulation among the country's serious national newspapers the paper found that it was unable to afford the heavy capital costs involved in competing with its main rival, the *Sunday Times*. This forced the paper to find new financial backers. At first, this was achieved without doing damage to its trust status through a deal with a liberal-minded American oil tycoon. After a few years he suddenly and inexplicably decided to sell off his controlling interest to Tiny Rowland of Lonrho. The vagaries of big business interests spelt the end of the *Observer* trust — a sad episode brilliantly told in a recent book by Richard Cockett, *David Astor and the Observer*.

Here, then, is a case where even a rich family (the Astors) and a successful newspaper were unable to withstand the competition in the market place. Instead of control through a nationally-representative trust, the *Observer* fell into the hands of a single proprietor keen to promote his particular business interests in Africa and in his long drawn-out battle over control of Harrods.

The reason why the attempt to maintain control over the *Observer* through a trust failed, while the trust ownership of the *Guardian* and the *Economist* has so far succeeded, is that the former can rely on the high profitability of its sister paper, the *Manchester Evening News*, while the latter was economically well

established and had little serious competition in its field when its trust was first formed.

THE PRESENT trend of newspaper ownership throughout most of Britain, the United States, France, Germany and Holland is towards strong proprietorial control through powerful conglomerates. Men like Murdoch, Springer and, until recently, Robert Maxwell have replaced the earlier tycoons like Beaverbrook, Harmsworth and Kemsley. More recently, we have seen the entry into this band of newspaper tycoons of the Canadian multimillionaire, Conrad Black, the new proprietor of the old Conservative 'bible', the *Daily Telegraph*, the major group of Fairfax newspapers in Australia, and who is now engaged in negotiations to acquire a major stake in South African newspapers.

It is at least arguable whether control of national newspapers by foreigners is a healthy development. One negative feature of this development is that the source of control is externally based. It still remains to be seen whether in the case of Conrad Black he will acquire a controlling interest from Anglo-America, or only a substantial minority interest. The case is still open.

My own reasons for resigning as an associate editor of the *Observer* were twofold. First, because I saw a conflict of interest between the independence of the paper and the business interests of Lonrho. There are several examples of the paper's policies which can be cited as justifying my suspicions. For example, there was no criticism in the paper of the policies of President Moi of Kenya until a quarrel developed between him and Rowland; and when an *Observer* correspondent wrote a justified piece criticising Dr Banda's policies in Malawi,

MY EXPERIENCE with the *Observer* taught me different lessons. Here was a newspaper with a history spanning three centuries (the oldest in Britain), and with an international reputation. After World War 2, the Astor family decided to vest the paper's ownership in a national trust,

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the paper was forced by the proprietor to repudiate its own correspondent and to make an abject apology to Malawi's dictator. Nor has the paper made any criticisms of Dr Jonas Savimbi who is strongly backed by Rowland.

My second reason for resigning was that I saw a great danger in the exclusive right of the proprietor to appoint and dismiss the editor. It is of course argued that proprietors have the right to make any appointments they choose; but in the case of newspaper editors, such an exclusive right circumscribes the ability of an editor to exercise his/her right to make an independent judgment. The editor becomes simply an instrument of the proprietorial interests.

What kind of freedom is that?

I HAVE been amused to see several South African newspaper editors claim that they have never been interfered with by their proprietors. Perhaps not. But the fact is that editors are chosen in the first place because they are known to be supportive of the general policies of their proprietors, although they are free (and often exercise this freedom) to voice their criticisms on particular issues. But who has ever heard of a South African editor criticising the dangers of Press monopoly, or taken the side of, say, the miners against the Chamber of Mines?

Editors are chosen because they broadly agree with the main lines of policy of the proprietors; this is natural, but it is no defence against the charge that editors are not free to take a stand on issues likely to be felt as inimical to the proprietorial interest. Who has ever heard of an open supporter of, say, state intervention in the economy, or of the ANC, appointed as editor of a Times Media or Argus newspaper? Editors can be as maverick as they come (e.g. Ken Owen of the *Sunday Times*), but they have a safe pair of hands when it comes to defending the capitalist *status quo*.

I have no quarrel with a proprietor's right to choose his own editor, but it is a bad day for an independent Press if there are no alternatives to outright proprietorial conflict. It is for this reason that I am a strong advocate of the need for pluralism in the ownership and control of newspapers.

The *Guardian*, the *Economist* and, until its recent change, the *Observer*, pioneered the way to a different form of newspaper ownership — through public

‘Editors are chosen because they broadly agree with the main lines of policy of the proprietors’

trusts. It is essential that these trusts should be commercially viable and not be dependent on state or other subsidies which would undermine their independence and discourage sound commercial practice. I will come presently to consider the financial implications of establishing a newspaper trust.

THE UNIVERSAL experience of newspapers operating in a free market economy is that there has been a steady growth of stronger newspapers (often parts of a conglomerate) and the attrition of smaller newspapers seeking to challenge them. To start a new national newspaper in the present situation — as was the case with the excellent British newcomer *Independent* — requires substantial initial capitalisation. What this means in practice is that commercially unpopular newspapers with a lack of heavy capital investment, and those advocating minority viewpoints, exist only on the margins of the big battalions. This is unhealthy for democracy.

It is a problem that has been recognised in countries like France and Sweden where different methods have been tried to make it easier for weaker newspapers to survive. One way in which the French offer help is to provide cheaper postal and transport rates for newspapers to help cut the costs of communication and transport. While this is certainly a help, it also benefits the stronger newspapers since the concessions are, rightly, applied uniformly.

A more radical approach has been tried in Sweden where the advertising revenues of the bigger newspapers are taxed and the benefit apportioned on a *pro rata* basis to smaller newspapers calculated on the size of their circulations. This has provided some help, but it has not proved entirely satisfactory. But the point is that in France and Sweden, there has been recognition of the need to help smaller newspapers overcome their economic problems.

WHAT LESSONS are to be learnt from the experiences of especially European newspapers in planning for the development of a pluralist free Press

in the new South Africa?

First, that the new constitution should inscribe the right of a free Press as part of a general declaration in favour of free expression of opinion and access to information. It should also, as in the case of the German constitution, proscribe censorship — modified, perhaps, by curbs against racial utterances and hard pornography. Infringements against Press freedom should be made justiciable.

Second, as part of a law against all forms of monopoly (as in the case of the American anti-trust laws), newspaper monopolies should be made illegal. This would require a restructuring of the present ownership and control of newspapers in this country.

Third, the SABC should be restructured on the lines of the BBC with its guarantee of an independent source of income and a Board of representative trustees reflecting the major political and social interests in the country. However, the right of private television and broadcasting companies should be recognised — again along the lines of the British model — though modified to avoid the vexatious criteria for licences introduced by the Thatcher government.

Fourth, special rates of postage and of telecommunications should be provided for all newspapers and magazines.

Fifth, consideration should be given to the creation of regional trusts to provide printing facilities for newspapers and magazines unable to afford the heavy cost of installing modern technology. These services should be provided on non-profitmaking but commercial terms to make them as cheap as possible.

THE TROUBLE I find with the current controversy over the restructuring of the media is that it is being conducted in *hokkies*, concentrating only on individual aspects of the needs of a free Press instead of adopting a comprehensive view of the total problem.

While the ANC document on Press freedom is good as a ringing declaration of democratic intentions it lacks specific proposals about how these are to be achieved in practice. ●