

# Waiting for Movement

*The state has a future media policy. So do the monopolies which own most of the media. So, asks David Niddrie, how long do we wait until the ANC develops one?*

**T**he idea of a 'media summit' to draw together the formations of the democratic movement and elements of the media itself to formulate a position on the media needs of a democratic South Africa was first mooted early in 1989.

In media circles, where isolated initiatives in this direction were already underway, it was greeted enthusiastically. Largely at the prompting of the Association of Democratic Journalists (ADJ), regional media summit committees were established to begin discussions in preparation for a national media summit, which Cosatu and the United Democratic Front undertook to convene.

Since then ... nothing. The regional committees have for the most part withered away and from the centre - from the national convening committee under *New Nation* editor Zwelakhe Sisulu - silence.

The democratic movement is thus moving through a transition period and, presumably, towards a democratic society without an agreed and articulated

media policy.

Even on the issue of a possible ANC daily newspaper, there is not agreement. Since 2 February several leading ANC figures have said the movement was planning one; others have said, equally firmly, that it isn't.

Virtually the only clear and uncontradicted statement to emerge from the democratic movement on media in the last nine months is that they think press freedom is 'A Good Thing'.

This is hardly a definitive statement. Virtually without exception, all significant political formations are saying the same thing.

Others, meanwhile, are hard at work to ensure that their views on how the media should look are the ones that dominate in the future.

A task force appointed by president FW de Klerk's government is doing it at the SABC. The Media Council, a non-government body established under government pressure by the media industry, is proposing changes to legislation affecting the media. It is doing so without consulting any of the formations likely to have to govern the country in terms of these revised laws.

The Argus company - the country's biggest newspaper group, publishing more than half the newspapers sold in South Africa every day - is also seeking to pre-empt major post-apartheid restructuring of the print media. But with a political vision worthy of a company which took its name from the vigilant, 100-eyed being of Greek mythology, Argus is attempting to do so by making the ANC, and anyone else who may swing some weight after apartheid, an offer it is going to be extremely difficult to refuse.

**B**efore going into the details and implications of these initiatives, it is necessary first to establish what might be considered a definition of press freedom appropriate to the plural political democracy likely to be established in South Africa.

Press freedom is no more than one means of exercising a prior and more general right - that of freedom of expression.

At its most basic, freedom of expression grants to individuals the right to





## ANC MEDIA POLICY

speaking freely to their immediate circle of acquaintances.

Denying individuals this right - as the government did for the 30 years prior to the legalisation of the ANC, the PAC, the SACP etc. on February 2 - can be a powerful political weapon. Ask the man sentenced to three years' imprisonment for writing 'Viva ANC' on his tea-cup at work a few years ago.

But freedom of expression goes further than this localised right.

Communication in South Africa, as in all other large and complex societies, takes place not only by word of mouth, between individuals. Information and opinions are distributed and received via the printed word (newspapers etc.) and by the broadcast media (radio and television).

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the resulting dual dictates of freedom of expression. It acknowledges as a basic human right not only 'the right to freedom of opinion and expression', but also the right 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers'.

But equality of access is a crucial yard-stick by which the exercise of any right is judged.

It is on the basis of inequality that most of the world rejected apartheid.

The most graphic demonstration of this is the fact that just over 6-million South Africans have since 1984 enjoyed the right to elect representatives to the tri-cameral parliament. A further 15-million did not - they enjoyed only the 'right' to elect representatives to some form of bantustan structure. This was unequal, and the world therefore concluded that democracy did not exist in South Africa.

Applied to freedom of expression, this logic demands that all South Africans enjoy equally the opportunity to express their opinions: both at the level of expressing themselves to their immediate circle and, more broadly, to the audiences available to the national print and broadcasting media structures.

While the 'local' right has arguably existed equally for all South Africans since 2 February (although restrictions, such as that on advocating communism, remain), no such automatic right of access to the national audience exists.

Every one of the 1,5-million-plus newspapers sold in South Africa every day is published by one of six interlocked companies, which between them also

own M-Net, the national news agency, Sapa (which they own jointly with SABC), the national newspaper distribution networks, and the country's major paper production plants.

And the four biggest of these companies are controlled, in turn, by South Africa's three corporate giants - Anglo American, Rembrandt and Sanlam - which between them control more than 70% of the country's public stock companies.

A handful of 'alternative' or independent media publications have carved for themselves a niche in the media, but the fact remains that they are essentially fringe publications. *Argus* and *The Sowetan* alone sell more copies every day than all the 'alternatives' combined sell in a week.

Control of broadcasting is even more concentrated, resting almost entirely with the National Party, through SABC.

Access is thus not a right, but a privilege granted on the basis of who the media owners choose to give it to - editors, reporters etc. and who they, in turn select as 'newsworthy'.

As a result, there is little correlation between opinions expressed by the media and those which appear to hold general sway in society - on the issues of sanctions, armed resistance to apartheid, and on the much-debated question of a democratic government's intervention in the economy.

This is not the result of any conspiracy between the owners, editors and reporters.

Harvey Tyson asserted two months before retiring as editor of *The Star*: 'In 17 years as editor ... I was not once approached by shareholders, board members or management about editorial (content).' But two decades earlier British political scientist Ralph Miliband had countered a similar argument: 'Editors write what they like because managers like what they write'. Boards of directors, unsurprisingly, appoint editors who agree with them.

We thus currently have a media in which there is no guaranteed right of access, but which, because of its control structures, unintentionally skews national debates.

An appropriate definition of press freedom must thus go beyond simply acknowledging the right of those who own the printing presses and radio and television transmitters to exercise their right of freedom of expression. It must recognise the need to grant this right to all people through diversification of

control.

Because current disparities of access are experienced not by individuals, but sectorally - the opinions and concerns of black people, the working class, women, and rural populations are particularly under-represented as sectors of society - solutions offered must redress the sectoral imbalance, itself primarily the result of apartheid.

**B**ut if the specifics of those solutions must come from the contesting parties themselves, on the basis of democratic debate, one final issue must be raised. Why not nationalise? The media is, after all, a national resource like water, electricity the railways or the post office.

State monopoly media do not have a successful history, almost invariably gravitating towards a single perspective view of society, inevitably that of the ruling party - much as the commercial media inevitably speaks the language of those who ultimately control it.

In Eastern Europe their failure to record the growing discontent of society further widened the gulf between ruler and ruled.

And closer to home, in multi-party Zimbabwe where Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF rules by popular mandate, the state print and broadcast media is criticised even from within the ruling party as 'his master's voice', reflecting what the government would like to be, rather than what is.

And in South Africa itself, SABC provides a particularly gross example of state-monopoly broadcasting.

The problem with Cliff Saunders is not that he is biased in favour of the white government and its allies, but that his bias distorts the view he presents of the world.

A democratic alternative to this bias is not bias in the opposite direction, but an accountable and representative broadcasting service.

This, however, is precisely what De Klerk's government is seeking to prevent with the current initiative at SABC.

A government-appointed task force, headed by SABC chief Christo Viljoen and with strong representation from the state intelligence community, has for several months been going through the motions of charting the future of broadcasting in southern Africa (see *WIP* 69).

Its conclusions are, however, virtually pre-defined: SABC has begun accepting applications for national and



regional broadcast licenses - 30 have so far been received.

They include M-Net's application for a licence to broadcast news; Bop TV's application to broadcast beyond the bantustan and Soweto; Capital Radio and Radio 702 applications for national FM signals.

These are virtually assured, in line with what is now clearly a government policy of privatising as much of the airwaves as is possible. The possibility also exists that some or all of the existing SABC regional stations such as Radio Highveld, and some of the Radio Bantu stations, will be sold off.

Although Pretoria seems currently set to hold on to its national stations (but with several areas of operation contracted out to private producers), the aim is to hand over to an incoming government a state-owned broadcast system whose audience is drastically reduced from the 14-million currently enjoyed by SABC.

And while this may be diversification of ownership of a type, it is of a very special type: SABC is attempting to concentrate the new licenses among already established media institutions.

None of the political or other organisations which have applied (Inkatha reportedly among them) is being considered, according to broadcast industry sources.

And, they add, SABC has or intends to approach Argus, Nasionale Media (the major pro-government publishers) and other major newspaper corporations to ask that they submit applications.

If the newspaper companies do so, and are granted licences, an incoming democratic government would have to contend with multi-sector media giants whose domestic and international influence would make any state attempt to tamper with their enterprises virtually impossible.

Some pre-emptive discouragement is possible, however: the ANC has already announced that privatisation of state corporations will be reversed if and when De Klerk's government is replaced by one of which the ANC forms part.

On broadcasting, the warning could be expanded to include any new licences granted.

In sharp contrast to the SABC 'keep it out of their hands' initiative, Tyson, now a director of Argus which owns *The Star*, has put forward a proposal for co-operation with 'any major, currently historically disadvantaged interest group ... to launch their own media' which could



***Harvey Tyson: In media terms, his offer appears to be an improved version of what De Klerk offered in national political terms when he offered to negotiate***

substantially ease attempts to redress the imbalance in access to media.

Acknowledging an 'imbalance of resources, of opportunities and of media coverage' and the need to put it right as soon as possible, Tyson told a conference organised by Rhodes University's journalism department: 'I believe the so-called monopolistic press would be more than happy to willingly share a century and a half of effort, talent, sweat, investment and experience to ensure fairness and balance, equal opportunity and diversity of opinion and analysis'.

This sharing, he said would involve offering to historically disadvantaged interest groups all or any of the following:

- full use of the mainstream printing presses at the same rates as the papers now cost out their own printing. This would be a major concession, for the cost of a single newly imported big press is now prohibitive - as much as R100-million for a large colour press with peripherals;
- equal use of all pooled distribution resources, again at the same rates (usually based on circulation) as the existing dailys and weeklys arrange for themselves;
- training facilities for editorial skills, and advice on newspapering techniques. Everything, in fact, except participation in the emerging press' editorial decisions;
- secondment of newspaper managerial

skills;

- circulation expertise and distribution management;
- advertising advice, volunteered free by the agencies;
- Newspaper Press Union membership and its shared facilities;
- Media Council membership.

Tyson stressed that he was speaking in his personal capacity and that his offer was not necessarily formal Argus policy. Since then, however, Tyson has moved on to the Argus board. His general sentiment has, in addition, since been echoed by other Argus executives, and comes after a year-long internal Argus commission 'The Future of Newspapers'.

His proposal is thus one which in all probability carries some weight and is worth considering.

Argus motives are not at issue: arguably, they are attempting to ensure as smooth a possible transformation of the media, and one in which their own structures remain untouched by an incoming government. Considering the sharply contrasting SABC initiative, this is not necessarily something to criticise.

While it would leave the commanding heights of the media in Argus hands it goes a long way to leveling the media playing field, and appears to give any new media initiative - or several for that matter - a reasonable shot at contesting on more-or-less equal terms in the media market place.

**I**n media terms, Tyson's offer appears to be an improved version of what De Klerk offered in national political terms when he offered to negotiate.

One of the problems in responding, however, is the lack of an agreed and comprehensive position from the democratic movement on what it is looking for in a national media.

Until consensus is reached in the democratic movement, it must respond to initiatives such as the Argus' and SABC's on an ad hoc basis. Such responses as there have been so far to SABC have been based either on a more general opposition to state corporation privatisation, or initiated from outside the leading formations of the democratic movement - from the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation and the Campaign for Open Media. The leading formations of the democratic movement have, themselves, initiated nothing.

And until a media summit takes place, they will be without a policy basis from which to do so. \*