



# of copper wire and press freedom

David Lush

**W**HEN AFRICAN MEDIA WORKERS penned the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, the politics rather than the practicalities of media freedom were uppermost in their minds. It was, some say, with heady idealism that they enshrined the notion that the "establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development"; an as yet unproved hypothesis which now forms the cornerstone of international media policy in the post New World Information Order era.

However, when the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) was formed in September 1992 to work towards the implementation of the Windhoek Declaration, it became clear that, in southern Africa at least, media freedom and diversity was as much about copper wire and fibre optics as it was about repression, legislation and ownership. The region's dilapidated and expensive postal and telecommunication networks made MISA's task of communicating with, and facilitating communication between, media and media workers in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries a nightmare.

It cost MISA's representative in Angola U\$10 (R35) — a third of an average Angolan editor's monthly salary — to send a one-page fax to MISA headquarters in neighbouring Namibia. It was 330 per cent more expensive for MISA members in Zambia to call MISA HQ as it was for the secretariat to call them. Even so, it still cost MISA HQ the same to phone or fax neighbouring states as it did to call the UK or the USA.

This had major repercussions on MISA's all-important advocacy work. Even when MISA was able to gather adequate information on a violation of media freedom, it took at least two whole days to fax. The information — in the form of a one-page "alert" — to 50 or so media and human rights organisations around the world. The phone bill for faxing out just one alert was in the region of U\$150 (R525), while bad lines often made faxes illegible at the other end. Breaks in transmission made faxing all the more frustrating.

Posting information was similarly migraine-inducing. While MISA's bi-monthly publication, *Free Press*, reached readers in Europe and North America within 10 days of being posted, the same air mail packages took two months or more to arrive at some destinations in the SADC region — sometimes the magazine was never delivered at all! Air mailing one edition of what was then an

eight-page A4 free-sheet cost MISA more than U\$1000 (R3500). (*Free Press* is now a 28-page glossy magazine, which costs more than R5000 per edition to mail out to paying subscribers.)

In short, southern Africa's postal and telecommunication networks are one of the region's most potent forms of censorship. They curtail the right of citizens to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media...regardless of frontiers", as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They also obstruct the "establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press", which the authors of the Windhoek Declaration believed so essential to social and economic development.

So MISA sought alternative means of communicating, and soon found salvation in cyberspace. A trail had already been laid by the Toronto-based International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), a network of media freedom organisations around the world linked by electronic mail (e-mail). MISA joined the IFEX network, and overnight the distribution of media freedom "alerts" was reduced to the sending of a single e-mail message (circulated automatically to the 120 or so media and human rights organisations subscribing to IFEX) at the cost of a 10 second local phone call.

This in turn allowed MISA staff more time and money to research and campaign against media freedom violations, the organisation issuing more than 70 alerts during 1994. Within 12 hours of e-mailing out news that journalist Rabuka Chalatshe had been shot by soldiers during last year's coup in Lesotho, MISA had mobilised funds to pay for surgery which saved Chalatshe's leg, not to mention his career.

Once MISA HQ was on-line, the organisation began providing its members with modems and e-mail software of their own, which enabled MISA's constituents to communicate more efficiently and cost-effectively with the secretariat, and vice-versa.

## FACT FILE

"MISA is a regional network which seeks to foster free, independent and diverse media throughout southern Africa in the service of democracy and development, as envisaged by the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press."

- Launched in September 1992
- Operates in the 11 countries making up the Southern African Development Community (SADC).
- Based in Windhoek, Namibia
- Joined the IFEX network in 1993 to increase international awareness of media freedom violations in southern Africa.
- In 1994, MISA issued via IFEX more than 70 "action alerts" relating to media freedom violations in southern Africa.

## MisaNet

- 20 MISA member organisations linked by e-mail to exchange news and information.
- Daily feed of between 10 and 20 stories.

➤ overleaf

Named the MisaNet, this e-mail network also allowed for the exchange of news stories between MISA members, thus breaking their dependency on the war-and-famine copy of international wire services, and sanitised and censored stories from state-controlled agencies for news about the region. Stories were zapped around the region within hours of newspapers hitting the streets in their respective capitals, while the e-mail edition of *Free Press* was delivered to desk-tops world-wide before the (admittedly-more attractive) hard-copy version had even rolled off the presses in Windhoek.

MISA's news sources were further diversified when features from Inter Press Service's (IPS) Africa bureau were brought onto the MisaNet. Similar joint

ventures with other suppliers of "indigenous" news and information are planned, as is the launch of an on-line archive containing — amongst other things — electronic editions of MISA-member publications from throughout the SADC region. The archive will serve as a research tool for MISA members, most of whom are unable to afford time and resources needed to develop their own in-house libraries. Sitting on the Internet, the MISA archive will also be accessible — at a fee — to anyone else needing information on the region.

Some MISA members have developed their own Internet initiatives. South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* newspaper and *The Post* in Zambia now boast tens of thousands of new readers around the world, their World Wide Web sites

prompting one American computer scientist — bored of the corporate overkill which abounds on the Web — to nominate the papers for an "honesty in cyberspace" award.

The opportunities appear limitless; the distribution of photographs, radio soundbites and video footage via the Internet is already a reality, while advances in information technology (IT) also open the way to cheaper printing, new advertising markets, and the potential for narrowing the information gap which exists between the developed and developing worlds.

But behind the hype, the Internet remains vulnerable to the same abuse — censorship, propaganda, regulation and monopolisation — as are other, more conventional media. For starters, journalists are notoriously technophobic, and many — decision makers in particular — have given MISA's Internet evangelism a wide berth.

Matters have been made worse by the lack of local technicians to train and troubleshoot once modems and software have been installed. One newspaper in Francistown, Botswana accidentally trashed their e-mail software several weeks after it was installed, and the nearest technician was 500km away. They have been off-line ever since.

The Internet might be a very appropriate technology, but it still relies totally on telephone lines, which in southern Africa are controlled largely by state-run monopolies. Private Internet service providers are prohibited from setting-up in Botswana, while Internet nodes in many other countries are housed and run by government-funded institutions, notably universities. As Vineeta Shetty of Communications International points out, Africa has the lowest number of telephone lines per person in the whole world; one line for every 235 people, which is around 120 times less than in more developed countries.

There still abound throughout southern Africa computerless newsrooms where journalists rely more on their feet than on the telephone — let alone the Internet — for researching their stories. Rather than empower smaller media operations, the Internet could create a media elite with the means to swamp their less-wired colleagues and competitors — hardly a recipe for media diversity.

Nonetheless, the Internet does provide the media with a unique opportunity to test and hopefully prove the hypothesis put forward by the authors of the Windhoek Declaration. By using IT to break through the information voids which cocoon SADC countries, the media can — in theory — contribute significantly to the social, economic and political development of the region. Tangible success in this regard will provide journalists with an unassailable argument in favour of governments respecting media freedom and diversity.

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