

IT is common cause that the ownership of the media in South Africa is in too few hands. Broadcasting is an effective state monopoly and establishment newspapers are near-monopolies, in private hands. The situation was created in history by the grip the white establishment had on the country and its resources. However understandable, it is untenable when one considers the needs of a new, democratic order in South Africa. It is equally unsatisfactory considering the needs of the run-up period to free and fair elections.

Something must be done about it for the short-term, and also for the long-term, if South Africa is to have a healthy media, which means healthy political life. Indeed, unless something specific is done about the ownership, control and direction of the mainstream media within the next year or so, South Africa will hardly be able to say that the elections it subsequently holds are free. It is a national priority, every bit as important as devising a new constitution and electoral procedures and systems.

Without the opening up of the media, millions of South African will have been denied access, simply because the main broadcasting and print outlets remain in the hands of the old establishment – even if belated steps are taken to embellish boardrooms with black faces, credible or otherwise. The hostility and rancour that poor media access will generate among now-unbanned militant black groups, whether they are successful in elections or not, presages a very bumpy ride ahead for the media. The future prospects will be a sterile choice: bitter opposition by people who feel robbed of victory, and who blame the media; or, on the other hand, pressure for nationalisation or drastic anti-monopoly action by people who have triumphed in elections despite scant support from the media. Both ways, the role of the media in the vital but delicate job of reconstruction after apartheid will be compromised. Things should and can be different.

The mass media is in too few hands

I do not intend to make out the case in detail that the mass media is in too few hands. I am prepared to argue that with anyone at any time. My learned counsel will be stock exchange handbooks, other well-known reference works, newspaper people and personal experience.

The Afrikaans market is dominated by one powerful, far-sighted and well-run company (Nasionale Pers), and there is also a lesser group, with vicissitudes (Perskor). Both are in the Nationalist fold, and enjoy all the lucrative business patronage, such as printing contracts (for school books, official publications and journals), that closeness to power brings – in past years the comfy wallowing-ground of the English-speaking groups.

tony heard

Former Editor of the Cape Times, Tony Heard, argues that it is in the interests of media and of South Africa that all the political players have equal access to media

In the English-language establishment press, there are the very powerful Argus Holdings and the slimmer Times Media Limited, both of whom are linked by shareholdings and contracts but effectively owned by Anglo-American or associated companies like Johannesburg Consolidated Investments. Except for the *Natal Witness* of Maritzburg, and arguably the *Daily Dispatch* of East London, there is no such animal as an independent daily paper in South Africa. Even the *Dispatch* has departed from its Crewe Trust past and has a substantial number of its shares in the hands of one of the major groups, TML.

It bodes ill for the future of media

Allow me one quotation to illuminate my point, from Anton Harber, joint-Editor of the *Weekly Mail*, (May 30 to June 6 issue), in which he refers to the Argus group: "It has come to dominate not just the English-language newspaper business, but also its main rivals (Times Media and Caxtons), the distributing agency (Allied Publishing) and the major printing presses (Johannesburg printers, for example). And Argus – or its sister companies – now has a major hand in the companies that overwhelmingly dominate the book industry (CNA and the Literary Group), the record-industry (Gallo), television (M-Net), radio (702) and the film industry (NuMetro). It also has links, through its sister companies, with a video production studio, a major ink producer, a major paper producer. In most Western countries, such a situation would be unthinkable." Harber's point is telling.

But what is as worrying as the absence of independent ownership is the fact that major unbanned players in the peace and political process, notably the African National Congress, cannot rely on media support worth speaking of in the establishment press. That should be obvious from perusal of newspaper columns, however much individual editors might sincerely strive for fairness and individual journalists might break ranks with the ruling atmosphere. Ask the ANC how they feel about coverage of their affairs in the establishment press. To use a phrase of Ray Swart's in his recent book, *Progressive Odyssey*, the ANC lacks "friendly editors" (page 58). It has no Laurence Gandar of the *Rand Daily Mail* to be buoyingly sympathetic and understanding; or echoes of sympathy which the Progressive Party attracted in Port Elizabeth, East London and Maritzburg. The genus, "friendly editors", means people who are like-minded, even if independently so. There are people who will not "ambush" political friends who share confidences; people who, in broad terms, can be counted on to be well-disposed, within the confines of their commitment to the record and the public good.

PLEASE TURN OVER

For firm opponents of the ANC, the present situation might seem unexceptionable – in fact, exactly what they want, ideal. But it bodes ill for the future of the media and South Africa. As night follows day, the ANC will – if it comes to power – be under pressure to break up an unsympathetic press.

Look what happened in Zimbabwe. The press, bludgeoned into a pro-Smith posture, had been under the control of the Argus group, and this situation was intolerable to the new government of Robert Mugabe – and he effectively nationalised it. In Namibia, the pattern has been different because of a healthier diversity of ownership and the fact that at least one well-known paper, *The Namibian*, showed sympathy for Sam Nujoma's Swapo before independence, thus striking a blow for future press freedom in general. Moreover, in Namibia a clause in the constitution effectively entrenches free speech. There is justifiable hope that Namibia will continue to have a free and varied press – despite the inevitability of some merging, even some disappearing, and the possibly ominous advent of a new government paper, ostensibly for developmental and training purposes, which could compete unfairly. But give me Namibia any day, compared with Zimbabwe.

In South Africa, assuming an all-party conference gets interim or transitional arrangements under way pending elections, if the mass media is firmly in the hands of the "old order" that fact will cause major problems in convincing critics that this country is sincerely democratising.

Throw open the facilities

What I am suggesting is that this is the time for the established newspaper groups to democratise their operations, to throw open their printing plants, distribution avenues and expertise. More important, they should consider divesting themselves of some of their titles, and allow ownership to pass to other interests who will, unashamedly, be more friendly towards once-banned groups. The Anglo-owned Press could take a page from the annals of enlightened self-interest in 44 Main Street (*the Johannesburg headquarters of the Anglo-American Corporation*), notably the move by the Oppenheimers a generation ago to allow control of General Mining to pass to Nationalist Afrikaners as part of a long-term insurance policy against state nationalisation or undue interference in the mining industry, despite the huffing and puffing of transient ministers like Dr Carel de Wet.

If the Argus group could so readily agree to sell *Ilanga* to Chief Buthelezi, why not sell other titles to ANC-orientated interests? The Argus group, according to *Finance Week*, recently turned down an ANC approach to buy *The Sowetan*, now ranked with the *Star* as the country's biggest daily. Will Argus, on

“
It is, of course, always possible for the ANC and other formerly banned groups to start a daily paper, but party papers generally fail dismally just because they are party papers... The sad experience of the Weekly Mail's daily effort sent a salutary chill down the spines of would-be newspaper launchers
 ”

principle, refuse to sell ANY titles to friends of the ANC? If so, to whom? And, for that matter, why should the government have given four newspaper groups an exclusive licence to mint money by sharing out the M-Net spoils to them *ab initio* – what about other interests who might have a case to put? Is it healthy for the near-monopoly establishment press to have such profitable influence in the electronic media, something which could hardly happen even in the free-market USA?

It is, of course, always possible for the ANC and other formerly banned groups to start a daily paper, but party papers generally fail dismally just because they are party papers; and, as former *Cape Times* managing director Guy Cronwright used to say about starting dailies, it could prove cheaper and more hopeful to drill for oil.

The sad experience last year of the *Weekly Mail's* daily effort sent a salutary chill down the spines of would-be newspaper launchers. It takes a Daedalus of great resourcefulness to extricate himself from the Labyrinth of a failed daily paper and to fly to safety.

A task group is needed for the press

The fact remains that it is essential that all the major players in an election be given access to air time and to print space if we are to have a successful transition to a new order. There is therefore the time for the monopolies and near-monopolies to start breaking their own hold on the media, in the country's and their own very real long-term interests. This way they will exercise some control over the process.

The SABC – wonders never cease! – seems poised to concede the principle of a truly independent broadcasting authority; shimmering irony after all the years of its being government's Chief Poodle. Someone there has obviously seen the writing on the wall, as power begins to shift in SA. But, even if done with the wrong motives, a placing of control of the SABC in independent hands will be a major step forward – though it must be noted that the task group that led to this recommendation was heavily representative of the old order in South Africa.

In a truly changing order, there must be access to all and sundry to air their views, not only in the expensive medium of TV but in the dirt-cheap medium of radio which is so important in South Africa because of high illiteracy rates, multiplicity of languages and remoteness of regions.

What about the press? I suggest that a properly representative task group is urgently needed here, to study the problem in much the same way as broadcasting was studied – and as successive Royal Commissions have done in Britain. Newspapers, though private concerns which should stay private, are firmly

PLEASE TURN OVER ←

in the public domain, and there is every justification to have their structures, ownership and direction inquired into publicly – as long as this is not part of a government or special-interest vendetta and there is no resulting state interference in the realm of the media. Let there be light, not control. And let a task group report in six months, unlike the ponderous, state-run Press Commission which took 12 years. Will someone take the initiative?

When I suggest there is no significant media support for militant black groups, people will say: what about the alternative press? The alternative newspapers are performing a most valuable function, and managing even in these days of diminishing public protest to expose government and other abuse – recent examples being 'Inkathagate', death squads, etc. But their combined weekly circulations do not even match the daily circulation of the Johannesburg *Star*, as Allister Sparks recently reminded the *WeeklyMail* Bookweek in Cape Town. And, with world and European attention turned to the basket-case which was the Soviet Union (now battening down for a bleak winter), there is no disposition to ladle millions into the South African alternative press.

The basis for an arrangement is there

As part of the underpinning of free and fair elections, the alternatives need to be strongly supported from within South Africa, notably by the institutional giants which can afford the benefits of public-interest advertising and, with the flick of a corporate 'pinkie' (*smallest finger*), can rescue ailing alternative newspapers. The money spent will be both investment and assurance.

In the realm of the establishment press, the basis for an arrangement is there. The ANC wants and needs a daily press; the newspaper companies want insurance against nationalisation or bruising anti-monopoly action.

Newspapers these days tend to share plant and equipment and even advertising and distribution arrangements, with editorial effort separate and competing. Though in some ways regrettable, the "joint operating agreement" principle has gained widespread favour internationally, because of rising costs. Presses and distribution are neutral factors and can be shared by all. There is no reason why current joint operating agreements should not continue more or less as now, but with ownership of certain titles passing to other hands.

I know that some newspaper chiefs see little future for general daily papers, and are concentrating on building up their specialist publications. Good luck to them. They might well be happy, at a price, to divest themselves of some general dailies, to the local communities where they belong and/or to organisations

“
In South Africa it would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness – the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph. Dangerous bitterness which could fuel the violent enthusiasms of fringe elements who indulge in bover-boy attacks on journalists and their craft
”

openly committed to alternative political directions. In addition, there is no reason why those who own the scarce and expensive printing plant should not make it available, at similar prices as are charged in joint operating agreements to close associates, to virtually anyone who wishes to put a view.

The same applies to distribution. Getting a bright idea is totally free; putting it into shape on a computer screen and stripping it up in sticky-backed paper on a light table is cheap; securing advertising can be tricky; but what can be prohibitively expensive is the paraphernalia of printing and distribution which can stymie the cause of media diversity.

The future South African media order should be marked by maximum press and broadcasting diversity, and a fair spread of outlets for competing philosophies. This country's democratic veneer is too thin to risk a future in which, like Britain's Labour Party, one major player has virtually no press.

Labour survives this (though only just) because British society has its own established democratic culture, checks and balances, alert pressure groups, a tradition of giving opponents a chance, etc. South Africa currently has no public opinion worth speaking of. We have been bullied for too long by "those who know best and who shall be obeyed". Here it would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness – the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph. Dangerous bitterness which could fuel the violent enthusiasms of fringe elements – the Clockwork Orange brigade – who indulge in bover-boy attacks on journalists and their craft.

Is there someone out there listening?

To sum up, a new media order requires:

1. A broadcasting policy for TV and radio – incidentally, designed by a task group inclusive of all parties to the South African negotiations and not just hand-picked by government – which will guarantee air access to all significant political parties and interests.
 2. An enlightened reconstruction of the established newspapers, to ensure that near-monopoly is broken, preferably at the initiative of the groups themselves – to put it bluntly, to give other major interests like the ANC a "piece of the action".
 3. Strong support among institutional advertisers and other influential interests for the struggling alternative newspapers, so that – unlike the *Rand Daily Mail* in the turmoil of 1985 – they will not fade from the scene just when most needed. The investment is small when compared with the returns to be reaped in a peaceful and prosperous South Africa.
 4. Entrenched free expression in a new constitution, to foster the environment for a healthy media.
- Is there someone out there listening? ●