

AND IN THIS CORNER

Natal University's **ERIC LOUW** comes out fighting in response to a broadside from Reg Lascaris as the war of word over a possible future subsidy system to fund alternative media hots up

REG Lascaris' article, 'A Pox on Your Taxes' (*Review*, June 1991) contains a number of valuable insights concerning potential problems with a media subsidy scheme. Certainly, three potential problem areas with my proposed scheme suggest themselves.

- Firstly, how to ensure that the commissioners on any Media Council represent the full spectrum of opinion in society rather than merely the interests of the Government-of-the-day (or any other interest group, for that matter)?

- Secondly, deciding on the criteria whereby subsidies are offered – i.e. which groups are eligible for a subsidy?

- Thirdly, how to prevent subsidies becoming a gravy-train?

I agree with Mr Lascaris when he rings the alarm bells regarding these issues. Were a subsidy system ever to be instituted I, for one, would hope that people like Mr Lascaris would be consulted for their insights and experience. However, I have difficulty with the dichotomy he sets up of a market-driven media system being good, while a media subsidy system is necessarily bad.

Let me, however, deal with the above three problem areas as a way of illustrating my counter-argument to Reg Lascaris' objections to my views on building a media subsidy system.

Firstly, Mr. Lascaris is seemingly concerned about the prospect of one political party gaining control of a media subsidy system and potentially using it to stifle diversity of opinion in favour of their own centralized 'grand plan'. In this regard, Mr. Lascaris seems to suffer from a common white South African malady called the "Rest-of-Africa" syndrome. To some extent one can understand these fears, especially given the history of



Comrade Mugabe's abuse of the Zimbabwean media (and closer to home, of the National Party's misuse of the SABC).

However, I would argue that South Africa is different from the rest of Africa.

We have a number of key players in this country, each with large constituencies. None of these players is able to wish away or overwhelm the other players. Hence the balance of forces in a one-person-one-vote South Africa would effectively rule out any one sector gaining a monopoly of power. Democracy is not an abstract ideal. Rather, democracy is the outcome of precisely such balances of power where players have to build a social system of working compromises.

My assumption is that the complex balance of forces in South Africa would provide an ideal matrix for a Media Council that no one sector could control. Hence Reg Lascaris' fear that the Media Council would aim to "correct trends" (pg 49, *Review*, June) misses the point of the proposal.

If the Media Council was drawn from the full range of interests in society, it would become impossible for any one

group to (mis)use the system in such a way.

The proposed media subsidy scheme in my *Restructuring the Media* paper specifically drew upon the Dutch "verzuiling" ("pillarization") system because it seemed the best way to utilize the existing balance of forces in our country in such a way as to create a democratically-diverse media BEYOND the control of any ONE vested interest (whether this be the ANC, the NP or mining-capitalism). Yet it is a scheme which recognizes the diversity of interest groups and opinion in our society, and indeed institutionalizes this diversity.

A second problem is devising criteria whereby a subsidy will be payable. Mr Lascaris' point about the difficulty of 'audits'/surveys is correct. However, his view that annual audits would be invalid because of "people being a changeable lot" (pg 50, *Review*, June) is a little extreme. After all, if we apply this sort of logic we will have to do away with elections for Parliaments.

But even if audits are a problem, other criteria for deciding how to pay a subsidy do suggest themselves. What is clear is that there is a need to avoid the development of a bottomless pit into which funds will be endlessly poured.

One way of achieving this is to link the payment of subsidy-payments to some kind of measurement of tangible results. In other words, the medium has to demonstrate that it is attracting an audience/readers.

I have no fixed ideas for running such a reward-system. However, two alternatives have been tried elsewhere. The Swedes link payment to (audited) audience size within quite a complex subsidy formula. Alternatively, the Dutch "verzuiling" approach uses the sales figures for TV/radio guides as a sort of

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(on-going) in-built audit system of the support each sector has. Each sector has its own radio/TV station. The assumption is that if one buys the programme guide for that station, then one supports that position (ie. belongs to that "club").

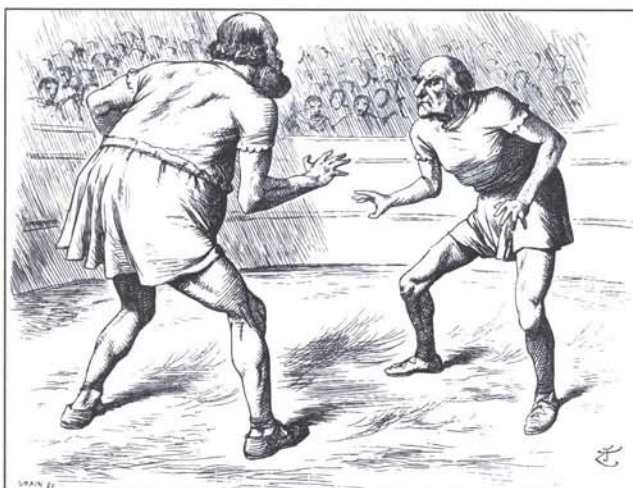
Mr Lascaris' suggestion that my paper proposed only giving media subsidies to political groups (pg 50, *Review*, June) is simply wrong. In my paper (pg 36, *Review*, November) one suggestion was that religious groups would, for example, be eligible for a subsidy. And in other forums/papers I have suggested that civic groups and grassroots media generate a democratic grassroots dialogue and to help counter-balance any trends towards the formation of a comprador or nomenklatura class.

A third area of concern to Reg Lascaris is the development of 'Big-Daddyism' and a related gravy-train for services rendered to the system. In the book Lascaris co-authored with Nick Green, he calls this the "wabenzi" phenomenon, a term derived from the ownership of Mercedes Benz cars. I would agree with Mr Lascaris that this is a phenomenon that our society would be well advised to guard against. However, he has a rather slanted understanding of the operation of "wabenzi".

I take issue with his assumption that this phenomenon only affects 'state-planned' (socialist?) societies. Evidence suggests that there are actually two forms of "wabenzis"; the nomenklatura variety took root in certain state-planned economies, while the comprador-class variety has taken root in certain free-market economies.

Mr Lascaris should take care not to allow free-market tinted glasses to obscure the fact that African societies, which are the darlings of free-market ideologues (such as Kenya, Botswana, Cameroon and Ivory Coast), also have their "wabenzis"/compradors. And in these latter societies the same Big Daddies/"wabenzis" tend to draw their sustenance from both the state and business sectors simultaneously. The free-enterprise variety could be termed "super-wabenzis".

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Reg Lascaris goes on to ask "just how representative are the 'experts' (and)... where is their constituency?" I make no claim to represent anyone. However, perhaps giving the genealogy of my *Restructuring the Media* paper will serve to dispel the notion that it was merely the result of a purely academic exercise (since the latter is something Mr Lascaris seems to object to).

This paper began its life during the dark days of the PW Botha era as an internal UDF discussion document. My intention was to raise for discussion an ALTERNATIVE to the Zimbabwe-route and/or 'nationalization' of the Press. Two years after writing it, I was asked to turn this discussion paper into a presentation for a media workshop at the Department of Journalism & Media Studies at Rhodes University.

The intention of both the UDF and/or Rhodes paper was not to prescribe. Rather it was to generate debate. In this, at least, I have been successful - ideologues of all hues (free marketeers and some far-Leftists) have found fault with my proposal for a mixed economy media model. The less ideologically-bound, however, seem to have found some merit in it.

Mr Lascaris' proposed alternative to a media subsidy system is a "public service" approach for transferring wealth to "worthwhile causes" (pg 50, *Review*, June). This sounds like charity to me.

Mr Lascaris adopts the same liberal-charity approach so characteristic of those sectors controlling societies' wealth.

The liberal solution to the mal-distribution of social resources is to propose charity for the less well off. It is an approach, of course, that leaves the wealthy alone.

More important, it retains the existing power relationships intact and in favour of those owning the wealth because it is they who can decide when to turn the flow of resources on and off. Frankly, Mr Lascaris, I would sooner trust the judgment of a Media Council created by Parliamentary legislation (although independent of the

Government of the day) and drawn from all sections of society, rather than rely on the whims of liberal charity. Hence my proposal for a media subsidy system backed by legislation.

The contents of a market-driven media are inherently skewed in favour of those with disposable income and hence do not serve the full spectrum of interests and views in society. For anyone concerned with creating a media system that facilitates a democratic dialogue in society this is a problem. On these grounds I (and many other South Africans) see a need to reform our press system.

In calling for a reformed media system - which guarantees a diversity of opinion - I was careful NOT to call for the dismantling of the existing market-driven media. Rather I called for the existing market system to be 'tamed' with some of the wealth from the successful market-media to be re-directed into a scheme for overcoming the distortions and skewed information flow caused by market forces.

Free-market ideologues will naturally be offended by this proposal. However, in formulating any 'alternative' to the subsidy scheme, these same free marketeers will have to come up with a far more credible proposal than mere 'charity'.

Reg Lascaris is correct - any scheme to reform our media will have to be grounded in reality. One important reality, Mr Lascaris, is that a large constituency exists in this country which is unhappy with the existing skewed information-flow. ●