



Empowering communities through **EMPOWERED GRASSROOTS MEDIA**

The growth of the independent print media sector in South Africa marks a milestone achievement 20 years into our democracy. With 224 independent publications across the country; it can be argued that the print media sector is working towards media transformation. This article will demonstrate how the independent grassroots press is contributing towards media transformation and diversity. It will highlight the important role the sector is playing in giving previously marginalised citizens a platform to voice their opinions. The media transition illustrated here would not have been possible under the apartheid government. However, there are still existing challenges and possibilities for the grassroots press; these will also be mentioned.

By Bongzi Bozo

20 YEARS OF
DEMOCRACY

Freedom of expression and the right to information was not a basic human right during the apartheid era. South Africa as a democratic state now guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom of speech. This right allows everyone to speak and write openly without any government interference. It also acknowledges that everyone's voice is essential in building a sustainable country.

However, the right to freedom of expression cannot exist without access to information. In order for citizens to voice their concerns and opinions, they need to be informed. All citizens, irrespective of class, race, religion and language have a right to information and should be given a voice.

The print media in South Africa has always been owned by the "Big Four" namely Caxton, Times Media (previously Avusa), Independent Media Group (now Sekunjalo) and Naspers Group. Ownership was in the hands of the elite and thus predominantly represented their interests. This meant that voices portrayed in print media excluded the majority of black South Africans; not all citizens' voices and opinions could be heard. This begs the questions: What is the right to freedom of expression? What is democracy in a state when the majority of South Africans do not have a media that represent them?

According to the Windhoek Declaration endorsed by UNESCO member states in 1994, media diversity and pluralism is a necessity for any democratic state. Independent grassroots publishers have massively contributed in the promotion of media diversity and the transformation of the print media sector.

Independent grassroots press in South Africa

A total of 224 available publications across the country are making a difference in communities. These publications disseminate information which enable citizens to voice their opinions and hold the government to account. They are semi urban or rural publications owned by both white and black citizens who are determined to represent the voices of the people in their communities.

The publications are small commercial newspapers or magazines, community based publications or community of interest publications. For instance, *Thisability Newspaper* is a publication targeting the disabled community. Another example is a publication titled *Muslim Views* which is a "community of interest" newspaper for the Muslim community and distributed

nationally. This is a very successful newspaper that has been in existence for 54 years. It is a monthly publication with a circulation of 35 000 copies.

Inner City Gazette is a small commercial newspaper which serves the community in the Johannesburg city centre. The paper is distributed in places such as Hillbrow, Yeoville, Berea and Braamfontein. These are areas where people, both foreign internationals and South African citizens who come to seek employment in the country's economic hub, will stay. The *Inner City Gazette* was started by a young social activist in his youth:

Moses Moyo volunteered as the chairperson for the Friends of Inner City, an organisation established in 2006 to protect the rights of the owners of sectional title property. He observed service delivery protests while acting at the same time as mediator between government and the community. Moyo realised that the underlining issue that led to the protests was lack of information amongst the citizens. "The protests were the only way that the residents could reach out to local government." Moyo established Inner City Gazette in 2009. "The newspaper was created as a platform to bridge the lack of communication between council and residents," says Moyo. Moyo is not a journalist but an activist and the social activist in him reflects in his newspaper.

Enabling environment post 1994

The Association of Independent Publishers (AIP), established in 2004, has witnessed the growth of the independent print sector over the years. The AIP started with between 90 and 100 publications in 2004. The membership has increased to 224 publications in 2014. This growth in the sector can be seen as a result of openness of the space which encourages citizens to take advantage of opportunities, the untightening of oppression laws, freedom of the press and a growing awareness of the need for media diversity.

More black people have started opening black owned small commercial community newspapers in most rural communities and in communities that have been disadvantaged because of oppression and lack of opportunities. In most cases, these are ordinary people not journalists. They venture into media as entrepreneurs who see a communication gap and recognise the power of having informed citizens. They practise their role of journalism in the communities they live in and operate at a grassroots level. For example, some AIP members operate from a shack in

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One successful story is of a determined and passionate publisher Mashile Phalane. He established a small commercial community newspaper in his hometown, Tzaneen in Limpopo titled The Eye News. Without any funding support, Phalane was determined to make a difference in his community. Each month, he would collect his newspaper from the printers in Johannesburg because adding distribution costs to that of the printers would have been expensive for him. Phalane did not own a car and so he would book two seats in a bus from Johannesburg to Tzaneen, one seat for the copies of his newspaper.

Despite these challenges, he has played a crucial role in his community. He became the “eye” and the “ears” of his community and has exposed corrupt activities in his community. The newspaper has been issued with lawsuits more than once with charges amounting to millions of rands. However, The Eye News is still growing stronger and continues to defend its community against irregularities through its reporting. The publication now gets funding from the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA).

The establishment of the MDDA more than a decade ago has been influential in the growth of the sector. The new dispensation recognised a need for media transformation to enable diversity and pluralism in the country. In their efforts to promote media diversity and pluralism; the government decided to institute a media subsidy scheme. The funding scheme has been institutionalised for small independent community media to promote access to information by marginalised groups and enhanced media diversity (GCIS, 2001:17).

About 50 independent publications affiliated to the AIP were funded through the MDDA scheme on their inception. These are efforts celebrated in the media sector and in any democratic state where press freedom is present.

Media transformation and diversity

The independent grassroots print sector represents the diversity of the sector. It is more diverse in terms of class, gender and ownership than the mainstream print media. A report on the PDMSA Transformation of Print and Digital Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT) confirms that ownership in the grassroots print sector is diverse and transformed. Although, there are some “old white independent publications that have been operating for years, there are many thriving black owned publications” (Report on PDMTTT, 2013: 18).

The AIP master database, developed and maintained over the years, indicates that of the 224 independent grassroots publications available, a 192 of those are black owned. It also shows that 20% of these publications are owned by women.

Media diversity is not only attributed to ownership and the quantity of available material, but also refers to the sector that reflects different cultures, religions, politics, gender, class and languages. 97% of small grassroots press publish in indigenous languages. This ensures that everyone can enjoy their right to freedom of expression and right to information by presenting information and expressing people’s opinions in a language that defines the community a newspaper serves.

Challenges and possibilities

With about 8 million monthly circulation at a very conservative readership of two readers per paper; the grassroots press is doing commendable work in ensuring voices excluded by mainstream media are given a platform. Almost 16 million South Africans regardless of class, religion, race or language are given a right to information. The small commercial community newspapers in different areas allow citizens to voice their concerns and opinions. It is essential in any democratic state for media to work closely with communities to build a sustainable state. However, independent publishers face a number of challenges which become barriers in their ability to provide information to their communities.

Firstly, independent publishers struggle to get advertising. Advertising is an important component for any media company to generate revenue. Without advertising grassroots press are unable to serve their communities. Most advertising still comes from government adverts “if you are lucky”, small businesses such as local butcheries, some retail and spaza shops. However, it is difficult to attract big



Association of Independent Publishers

Ownership Analysis: Independent Grassroots Print Media Sector				
Province	Black	White	%Black	Total
Eastern Cape	19	17	52.8%	36
Northern Cape	2	5	28.6%	7
Free State	13	6	68.4%	19
Mpumalanga	11	8	57.9%	19
Limpopo	11	9	55.0%	20
North West	7	4	63.6%	11
Gauteng	29	13	69.0%	42
Western Cape	6	20	23.1%	26
KZN	31	13	70.5%	44
TOTALS	129	95	57.6%	224

Ownership patterns across provinces in the independent grassroots print media sector.
Source: AIP database analysis

Language	Number of titles
IsiXhosa	30
IsiZulu	26
Setswana	10
Sesotho	8
Xitsonga	8
isiSwati	5
Sepedi	4
Tshivenda	4
IsiNdebele	2
TOTAL	97

The number of publications available for each official language. Source: AIP database analysis

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retail companies to advertise with these publications. Even though the small commercial print media carters for their target market. Organisations such as the AIP have not stopped lobbying and advocating for advertisers to pay attention to this sector. It has been much easier for the AIP to take on government as they have a responsibility to inform all citizens. Most of the government departments are starting to recognise the sector. The 30% government advertising ad-spend to go towards community media will make a difference in the market. The AIP is still struggling to convince big retail companies about the sector.

Secondly, the publications are usually a one-man business with the owner, journalist, sales person and distributor all one in the same person. In most cases, people who venture into publishing are not experienced in the field. Organisations such as the MDDA make it possible for most start-up publications to get off the ground. However, most of them cease to exist once the funding dries out as they discover what it takes to sustain the business. This often leads to some start-ups collapsing after two years on the market. This indicates a greater need for impact monitoring of all MDDA projects. Also, emphasis should be put on proper mentoring for start-ups in order to prepare them to function once the funding has dried out.

The MDDA will be reviewed for the first time in 2014. This will assist in addressing some of the above mentioned challenges. The AIP as an industry and a lobbying body is currently finalising research on “*State support for independent media in other African countries, South America and Scandinavia*” to be published in June. This study will assist by making recommendations in the review of the MDDA.

With the digital revolution in the media environment, digital might be an answer to make sure that there is always a flow of information for grassroots citizens. The AIP is working on a proposal on how the grassroots press can use mobi media to the advantage of their communities and to develop economic sustainability. The organisation is also looking to a media syndication platform which will assist in disseminating information nationally.

Despite the challenges within the media sector, the independent grassroots print media is playing a crucial role in communities. The sector is closer to ensuring that all citizens from different branches in society are represented. This demonstrates a democratic country where diverse voices and opinions are essential in developing the state.

Today, 68-year-old men like my father are able to enjoy the freedom of reading in isiXhosa. A community leader, community builder and an activist who spends his retired time at the offices of the ward council or at the branch office of the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) in Port Elizabeth. He says the paper articulates the daily issues that he deals with in his voluntarily work. Zithethele community newspaper comes in our language which means that even the illiterate can access information. The newspaper comes free of charge and the journalists are accessible to us. “Zithethele, yhani liphepha labantu (is really a publication for the people)”. This demonstrates a media in a democratic society that is working collaboratively with citizens to build a sustainable country.

Twenty years ago this would not have been possible; today the previously marginalised groups can also embrace their right to freedom. They can access information and enjoy the right to freedom of expression by voicing their concerns and thus participating fully in all democratic processes. However, there is still more to be done as Louise Vale, executive director of AIP, would say “each community, each township, each suburb, city and region should be having its own publication.”

With media convergence and with free broadband a possibility in the future, every community might be able to access information. Media convergence also means that anyone can practise journalism; people can rightfully exercise their freedom of expression by publishing online. This can open more platforms for more independent online publications for the grassroots communities.

As described in this paper, the independent grassroots sector has grown massively and is transforming the print media in South Africa. This is only as a result of living in a democratic state and 20 years of press freedom. However, if the Media Appeals Tribunal adopted by the government in 2010 gets passed it may be difficult for independent grassroots press to venture into the market. No-one has answers as to what the Media Appeals Tribunal will mean but it will definitely influence and affect the face of media in South Africa. It remains to be seen whether this influence will work for the good or detriment of the press.

References

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