

# A BEGGAR CANNOT BE INDEPENDENT

*This is the view of **FRED M'MEMBE**, a leading independent Zambian publisher and editor, when surveying the alternative press in South Africa*

**I**N March this year I attended an international conference on Free Expression and Global Media in Washington. At this conference I met participants from Eastern Europe, Latin America and South Africa.

I met Max du Preez from *Vrye Weekblad*, Anton Harber of the *Weekly Mail*, Cyril Madlala of *UmAfrika*, and Rehana Rossouw from *South...* I was very interested to learn about the operations of the South African alternative press because I believed their experiences would benefit the emerging independent press in Zambia.

I learned that, like most emerging independent newspapers in the region, they are a product of the struggle for democracy. I also realised that, with the exception of the *Weekly Mail*, the survival of these newspapers was heavily dependent on the benevolence of external financiers, especially the European Economic Community. They were all very worried about the fate of their publications when the EEC stops funding them at the end of this year.

The problems of the South African alternative press are great because it is not easy to set up the infrastructure of advertising, marketing, circulation, distribution and all of those business-like things that must accompany a privately owned press.

Unlike the mainstream newspapers, these papers were started by journalists and not by businessmen. Max du Preez put it this way: "...I am a professional journalist. I am not a businessman... the point about *Vrye Weekblad* is that we want to inform the people and we want to serve the community and fight for democracy. Now, whether you are a businessman or not, if you are a journalist and you do not believe in these three things, if you do not believe in fundamental human rights, freedom of information and democracy, then you are not in the

same profession as I am..." And Du Preez is not the only one in the alternative press who argues that way.

If the alternative press is to achieve these goals – and most especially the protection of their independence – they must ensure the commercial viability of their newspapers. They must all be fully aware of the commercial consequences of their actions.

Excessive dependence on external financing from whatever quarter, will only help to undermine the independent spirit of some of these newspapers. No matter how noble the causes for which these papers were founded, if they cannot be managed in a business-like manner, they will not remain independent, let alone operational, for long.

The temptation to appease the financiers will grow as it will become increasingly difficult to find willing financiers after the democratisation process has gained ground. The alternative press will be under pressure to harmonise their commitment to independence and financial survival.

It will be a bitter pill to swallow for independent-minded journalists like Max du Preez. But the independence of a newspaper does not solely depend on the state of mind of the individual editor or publisher. The financial environment has a very strong bearing on a newspaper's independence. A beggar cannot be genuinely independent.

We have a classical example in Zambia of how an independent newspaper compromised its political independence under financial difficulties. The *Daily Express*, an independent paper launched in the middle of last year, took a strong stand in the fight for democracy. But when the *Daily Express* realised it was facing serious financial problems, it turned itself completely into a propaganda mouthpiece of the now-ruling Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD)

and started pleading with the MMD for financial rescue by asking it to take over the paper, which at that time had accumulated a considerable amount of debt with the printers.

It requires an efficient system of management to achieve some degree of financial self-sufficiency – a necessity which is clearly lacking in the South African alternative press.

*Weekly Mail* co-editor Anton Harber admitted this managerial deficiency and lack of a serious commercial approach when I met him in Johannesburg recently: "...these are problems of our humble beginnings. We started as a small group of journalists committed to the production of a good alternative newspaper. We had very few management skills and the quality of management was not our priority.

"Our priority was independent and spirited journalism. But we have now realised that we need to manage the paper efficiently and make prudent business decisions if we are to survive and strengthen our political independence."

A number of these papers will not survive beyond this year if their financiers do not inject new funds. The survival of newspapers such as *South*, *UmAfrika* and *Vrye Weekblad* will depend on their ability to find new sources of finance. It will be sad to see these good initiatives die and RIP (with readers hoping that means 'Return If Possible') signs placed on their graves.

Perhaps amalgamations, mergers or joint publishing ventures could increase their chances of survival. Imagine Du Preez's *Vrye Weekblad* being amalgamated or jointly produced with the *Weekly Mail*. Hard decisions will have to be made. ●

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