

## A GROWING CLUTCH of community voices

Community papers are crucial to democracy, says **FRANZ KRÜGER**

**T**HE ALTERNATIVE press, those bastions of the struggle, are melting away like snow in the sunshine that seems to be a permanent fixture in the new South Africa. *Vrye Weekblad* paid the supreme sacrifice, and donated Max du Preez to the SABC's *Agenda*. *Work in Progress* closed its doors after around 17 years of publication. Others are ailing, while papers like Durban's *New African* are just a dim memory. Those few that are comparatively healthy are adopting resolutely commercial strategies.

But there's more to the alternative press than the big titles that have grabbed the international headlines with their various exposés. There's also a clutch of community papers scattered around the country. They face very similar problems to the big guns of the sector, most of which can be summarised in one word: money.

These newspapers uniformly work in very unfavourable conditions, most of them far from the resource-rich urban areas. They serve communities whose needs are demonstrably great. They struggled bravely on in the teeth of extensive harassment at the hands of the apartheid state. As a result, they appealed greatly to the romantic instincts which play such a large role in the motivations of international funders.

For years, funders poured money in, and the papers were able to build fairly substantial infrastructures. Hardly ever was the question asked seriously: what's going to happen in the long run?

And then the fashion changed. The new South Africa arrived, apparently robbing the community papers of their purpose. Funders spent millions on gazing at their navels to determine what their new priorities should be. And most came to the conclusion that the anti-apartheid struggle was over, and there was nothing left to protest about. Therefore community papers weren't interesting any more. Money was redirected towards "development projects" – digging wells, building schools, etc. Where support was still available for media, it was earmarked for the new flavour of the month, community radio.

And the community papers were left with their offices, their equipment and their staff, struggling to pay the bills.

Yet surely there is a powerful argument that community papers have a role to play in the new South Africa. Just because Nelson Mandela has been voted into power, it doesn't mean ordinary people have more power in their day-to-day lives. Frail pensioners still struggle to extract their due from unsympathetic



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officials; local power elites remain largely intact. If democracy means people having the power to decide issues that affect them, then it isn't built in a day or even three of voting.

Community papers are essential vehicles for people to voice their opinions, fears and hopes. They are crucial to making democracy real.

Then there's development, which is rightly on top of the national agenda. Of course, you don't need a community paper to build a million houses or a hydro-electric power scheme. But if you want to do so with the agreement, support and participation of the people affected, you need channels of communication. You need to be able to inform them of the plans, and elicit their reactions and ideas. And community papers, close as they are to the grassroots, provide one very good way of doing this.

Of course, having argued that the community papers should survive, it doesn't necessarily follow that they will. The harshness of their environment – the very thing that attracted foreign money in the past – makes it difficult for them to achieve long-term viability.

Port Alfred, a small coastal town halfway between Port Elizabeth and East London, is home to the *Nemato Voice* – the paper of Nelson Mandela Township. Its premises are a stone's throw from the banks of the Kowie River, and above a sport shop. The personality of its founder and editor, Nicolette Tladi, is stamped all over the two spruce rooms that make up the paper's offices. One wall is almost entirely covered with snapshots of her. Another is also covered with snapshots of various community events. The technical infrastructure consists of one PC and printer and one fax machine. The paper is produced monthly by three full-time staff and one part-timer and a clutch of volunteers and freelancers.

Nicolette, who lives in a flat next to her office, has turned down job offers from magazines around the country to stay in Port Alfred. She has no doubt about the importance of papers like her's. "Community papers have a responsibility to their communities, to help with development. Communities should develop themselves, we have to move away from the mentality of getting handed things on a plate. Community papers can do things like show role models, promote literacy." She cites the example of the local powerboat festival, where her paper worked with the organisers to increase the involvement of – and benefit to – the township. She also has no doubt about the major



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difficulty facing her paper: money. Although she's had remarkable success in attracting local advertising, it's still a struggle to make ends meet.

*Nemato Voice* is different in that it was founded when foreign funding was already drying up. Its first edition appeared in May 1993 without any funding. A loan from the SBDC paid for some equipment, staff worked for free and there was just enough advertising to pay the printing bill. Right from the beginning, the need to pay its own way has been high on the paper's agenda.

While there wasn't funding in the beginning, there was support of other kinds. Training and advice came from East Cape News Agencies (Ecna), where Nicolette also got her initial journalism training. Ecna's design unit, The Cutting Edge, did the layout of the paper – giving it a professional look that has helped attract advertising. Later in the year, the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT) clicked in with some funding.

**C**ertainly the IMDT has made community newspapers the major focus of its work in boosting media diversity. It has provided advice and financial support to these projects, but wants to see them stand on their own two feet. Jolyon Nuttall, one of the IMDT's trustees, says: "Even the biggest members of the mainstream press were once small, independent newspapers." He points out that *The Star*, until recently South Africa's largest daily, began life as the *Eastern Star* in Grahamstown round about 1870 as one of a number of tiny but vigorous voices serving the settler community. Says Nuttall: "Its relocation to Johannesburg in 1887 – the year after gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand – saw it catapulted into another highly competitive market where independent newspapers sprang up like mushrooms after rain. It not only survived but has thrived for more than 100 years."

Some of the community newspapers today are investigating ways of deriving additional income from their infrastructure, such as photographic or DTP equipment. But, for most, the more practical route is building advertising income.

Possibly one of the most useful initiatives of the IMDT has been the establishment of Charter Advertising, a small operation dedicated to selling space in community newspapers to national advertisers. This was how national political advertising found its way into the community papers over the election period.



NICOLETTE TLADI

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Another recent development has been a proposal to set up a Development News Agency linked to Ecna. This would exchange news between these papers, send out development stories to the larger media and also feed information to development projects. The Independent Development Trust has undertaken also to sponsor some pages to carry the development news generated in the community papers. This gets the information to readers, and also helps the papers' finances.

There are hopes that the new government will support the community press. Chris Gutuza, of the Western Cape-based Media Training and Development Trust, says: "Foreign taxpayers have been subsidising the community press for so long, isn't it time South African taxpayers did their bit?"

The new Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, Pallo Jordan, has argued for State support for community radio, which should be routed through an independent trust. If the State accepts some responsibility for ensuring diversity of media voices – and of course there are many who would say it should not – then the community papers have as good a claim as anyone else.

But pressure on the state coffers is already substantial. And media organisations' capacity for swallowing millions is well known. So although it would be very nice if there was a state subsidy of some sort, community papers shouldn't count too heavily on it. In any event, the wiser course in the long run is to become completely independent of subsidy. It seems a judicious mix of sponsored pages, local and national advertising and low overheads are the best recipe for survival.

If community papers get the mix right, their future should be bright. Perhaps it's too soon to predict boomtime – they are generally still very fragile. But they do seem to be in better shape than the big alternatives.

As for Nicolette Tladi, she'd like to see *Nemato Voice* grow, in readership and circulation area. She'd like to cover the whole Albany region, and then perhaps the entire Eastern Cape. But above all, she'd like to go weekly.

Perhaps one day *The Star* will face competition from another paper that started life in a small Eastern Cape town.

■ *Franz Krüger is group editor of East Cape News Agencies, which was nominated for the Pringle Award this year.*