

Three steps to sustain MEDIA DIVERSITY

by **JOLYON NUTTALL**

1 STATE AID

Should a portion of the resources allocated through the new Government's reconstruction and development programme (RDP) go to maintaining or initiating media voices at grassroots level?

Traditionally any form of State intervention in the activities of the media is seen, correctly, as an intrusion into their freedom and independence.

Direct financial assistance would also run counter to free market principles which decree the survival only of the fittest.

However, there are many defensible ways in which our new State could contribute.

The mainstream press in South Africa—notably, Argus Newspapers, Nasionale Pers and Times Media Limited—established in 1992 the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT), precisely for the purpose revealed by the trust's name.

There is a firm case, I submit, for a State grant to be managed, monitored and controlled by a professional body like the IMDT.

Similarly, tertiary institutions and registered training organisations offering tuition in media skills should qualify for assistance.

2 NEW NETWORKS

A workshop of community newspapers recently adopted a plan to establish a development news agency (DNA). Under the aegis of the East Cape News Agencies (ECNA), this will have the express purpose of enhancing interaction among participating members and providing skills that will underpin their own plans to survive and grow.

The DNA will:

- like any other news agency (SAPA, Reuter, Associated Press), provide an in-and-out conduit for material emanating from members, editing it to professional and relevant levels where necessary.

- generate its own material for use by members and for sale (along with articles sent in by members) to national media.
- focus on enhancing non-editorial skills among members, so that they become familiar with business planning and the challenges of production, printing and distribution of their publications.

Two full-time positions will be sponsored initially by the IDT until sufficient revenue is generated by the sale of material to cover these costs.

Like a wagon wheel, the DNA is at the hub with material flowing up and down the spokes to the publications contained within the rim.

At the same time, the IMDT is funding a feasibility study into an even more broadly-based development news network (DNN) so that all community and other publications, plus community radio stations, can be drawn in.

DNN would evolve as a clearing house for development information—among the communities, among non-government organisations (NGOs), from national and international development funding agencies, and from government—as well as a communications skills resource at the disposal of community media.

Without trying to stretch the imagery too far, it could be seen as a cluster of wheels (or DNAs) within one large wheel (a DNN).

3 BUSINESS SKILL

Individual publications or radio stations will have to look to their own skills if they are to survive.

Any newspaper must identify the market it wants to serve, indeed to capture, and having done so it must ensure that it forges strong, sustainable links with that market based on relevance, availability and adaptability. The same principles apply, whatever the size of the publication. This is the great leveller among large and small.

I recently spent time with the management and staff of a local newspaper that won recognition for its courage in opposing the apartheid regime. Now it was being asked to stand on its own feet. In many respects, perhaps because of past subsidies, it had lost its way.

It had omitted to focus on its core area, spreading its distribution too wide and too thin. It had no effective business plan. It did not even set itself any revenue or expenditure targets for each issue. Production was haphazard and irregular.

Within the space of a day, I was able to identify with the team four key steps the newspaper should take in order to secure its base, and its direction, again. It was a question of getting back to the fundamentals.

A community newspaper well on its way in terms of fundamentals is the *Toverberg Indaba*, based in Colesberg. Not only has this publication established a foothold in the Colesberg community (where, in recent months, its staffers have frequently helped to bridge the divide between radical and conservative elements), but it has opened up distribution links to 13 other Karoo towns. Down the line are plans to replate pages with local news from these towns. A mini-DNN is underway!

Newspapers big or small stand or fall by the extent to which they adhere to critical ratios: the ratio of editorial to advertising space; the ratio of sales to unsold copies; the ratio of accounts paid to those unpaid; the ratio of advertising revenue to sales revenue.

If these disciplines are applied, then the reward will follow in the form of the ultimate freedom: the freedom of financial viability.

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