

Gourmet media

Their readers appreciated them but, chewed up and spat out by the competitive print market, independent publications lacked marketing, business and management skills.

Who really consumed the alternative press?

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and
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IN THE 1990s various independent publications in South Africa — *South African Labour Bulletin*, *Work in Progress*, *Learn and Teach*, *Speak*, *New Ground* and *Challenge* — formed a loose grouping called "the Stable" aimed at co-operating with and supporting each other.

The primary reason for this was the imminent threat of donor agencies withdrawing media funding, and the consequent need to develop strategies to achieve financial self-sufficiency. These publications had small circulations ranging between five and ten thousand. Towards the end of 1993, "the Stable" was formally launched as the Independent Magazine Group (IMG).

But most of the independent publications have since closed, along with many non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Why was there no place for these magazines in the "new South Africa"? Why has there been such a decline in independent print media when independent electronic media is just taking off? Community radio stations are flourishing at present and there are plans afoot for the introduction of community television stations.

While there have been independent, progressive, "alternative" publications throughout the country's history, the 1980s saw an upsurge in this type of print media. It was frequently funded by overseas donors as opposition to the government, including media opposition, intensified.

The publications which comprised the IMG were launched between 1971 and 1991. They can be seen as a more or less organic part of the vibrant civil society which emerged, under repressive conditions, in opposition to apartheid.

Each of the IMG publications had a different focus; labour for the *South African Labour Bulletin*, politics for *Work in Progress*, adult basic education for *Learn and Teach*, women for *Speak*, ecumenism for *Challenge* and environment and development for *New Ground*. However, despite their different foci, they all operated as alternative publications in terms of their independence and their provision of different perspectives from, and different information to, the mainstream media. Their clearly anti-apartheid stance was the defining aspect of their "alternative status": an ironic comment on the mainstream press since their anti-apartheid sentiments made the IMG magazines representative of majority views, if the South African population as a whole is considered.

In the 1990s, with the political changes in the country and the end of apartheid in sight, funders began to withdraw from South Africa and all the alternative publications were faced with an urgent need to become less reliant on funding. The Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) was commissioned to undertake research projects for six of these magazines from mid-1993 to mid-1994.

Readership surveys were conducted for *Speak*, *Work in Progress*, *Challenge* and *New Ground*. *Learn and Teach* and *South African Labour Bulletin* opted for qualitative research; focus groups for the former, interviews for the

latter. As part of an overview, telephone interviews were conducted with certain media contacts and IMG editors.

The project examined the strengths and weaknesses of these magazines, their role and their reader profile. While it is difficult to compare across different methodologies, a number of similar questions were repeated in all the studies.

The main attributes of the IMG magazines, according to readers, were the variety of articles and the relevant, up-to-date, informative nature of these publications. These magazines tended to be used for work and/or study purposes and were frequently viewed as reference sources. Furthermore, publications tended to be circulated among family and friends by readers and reached more people than their official circulation figures suggested. Media contacts and editors noted that the main strengths of the IMG publications were their portrayal of other points of view not covered in the mainstream media, the fact that they provided a voice for ordinary people and that they had a good track record in opposing apartheid.

The only common dislike which emerged in the readership surveys, and indeed one of the few dislikes at all, was that the publications were seen as one-sided eg pro-ANC.

Although not specifically cited as a weakness, readers pointed out a range of distribution problems which affected both purchasers and subscribers. While the majority of readers had not experienced problems, feedback received during the course of the research suggested that:

- subscription lists were frequently out-of-date
- the magazines were often sold out or badly displayed
- the magazines did not arrive at outlets or were not sold near respondents
- the magazines arrived late, irregularly and, sometimes not at all.

According to the media contacts and editors, the weakness of the IMG publications revolved mainly around their funding and the lack of marketing, management and business skills and experience. This was exacerbated by the problem of attracting advertising to publications that had relatively small, low income readerships. Some of the media contacts interviewed suggested that the mindset of the editors and staff of some of the IMG publications may have been problematic in that they had expected to be funded and needed to change to thinking along business and marketing lines.

Another weakness of some of the magazines was a lack of skills as staff were hired for their political knowledge more than their media skills. Magazines also struggled to keep skilled people who were "head-hunted" by the mainstream media. This has been a growing trend with several former editors of IMG magazines switching to the electronic media, for example SAfm.

Examining the readership surveys, it appears that the demographic profiles of *Challenge*, *Work in Progress* and *New Ground* were roughly similar,

From dreamtime to realtime by Sandile Ngidi

Here begins a journey in which I recount my experiences as editor of one of KwaZulu Natal's modest but remarkable experiments in media empowerment. It is a journey of hard work, success and failure, a journey whose potholed road only a few can master.

The year was 1992, about 15 youngsters some white and many black, were discussing the launch of a youth publication "by the youth for the youth".

These youngsters, some from as far afield as Port Shepstone on the Kwazulu Natal south coast, had guts and innocent belief in the logic and the practicalities of the dream.

Former Raven Press illustrator Andy Mason, his partner Belinda Yangou and retrenched factory worker and worker-poet Gladman Ngubo, took the lead. They had started these discussions almost a year before. A dream was unfolding, and towards the end of the same year the pilot edition of *Realtime* was published.

The *New African* was the only newspaper which welcomed the arrival of *Realtime* with caution. Reporter Fraser Mtshali (now *Realtime* acting editor) was enthused by the publication but warned that it was rather too serious for its target readers. Somehow this was a work of art stretched beyond imaginable margins, he charged. Mtshali's feedback was taken seriously when a post-mortem of the pilot edition was done, and was later to influence the presentation of the next edition.

Community artists, black community leaders, white liberals and representatives of non-governmental organisations came to witness the birth of *Realtime*. But one critical sector did not feature in the guest list — advertising agencies and private

sector gurus. In retrospect, getting the latter on board on that particular evening might have helped forge strategic ties for potential future advertising revenue.

Up until I left at the end of July, advertisers had flatly refused buying space with *Realtime*, charging it was too small and irregular. To a degree they were right, we only had a print order of 15 000 units, which of course did not mean we sold all these units.

Distributors pushed us around and became used to being dropped. First it was Natal Newspapers, then an independent Umlazi-based one-man distributor, next Daily Dispatch and later Johannesburg-based Apollo Distributors. We knew the distributors were frustrated by the failure on our part to subscribe to the ABC, and to market *Realtime*, thereby encouraging sales. Our funding did not allow much expenditure on this line item. We were in a vicious cycle, alone and pitted against giants in the industry.

And, contrary to our initial belief that NGOs were going to form the core of our advertising base, events proved us wrong.

Immediately after the launch nothing was in place to position the publication on a strategic marketing footing. At the time, with the exception of Ngubo, no one worked on *Realtime* full-time, though Mason and his staff attended to adhoc demands as and when time allowed.

To make matters worse (despite good intentions), no-one had marketing experience to take *Realtime* forward. Perhaps one demonstration of this inexperience was the noble but flawed youth-driven distribution plan for *Realtime*, which was a dismal failure and an indirect instrument that pruned *Realtime* membership, as some youngsters failed to bring money back after sales.

The plan was grand in a way, youth-driven community organisations and

individual youths, were to be given the publication on consignment as a means of alleviating unemployment and placing ownership of *Realtime* with the youth.

Yet another deficiency and a blow to the publication, was the fact that the first edition came out almost a year after the pilot edition, partly due to the late arrival of subsequent funds and but also our own organisational inefficiency. Moreover, when funding was received at last, *Realtime* published in Zulu and English. Much to our rude awakening (though I was not employed by *Realtime* then), few Zulu-speaking urban black youths bought the Zulu edition. English (it seemed), was a symbol of upward mobility and not Shaka's tongue.

Stock control mechanisms were also either too weak or sometimes not adhered to. The *Realtime* dream was getting its first brushes of challenges that are commonplace in the robust publishing world. But we kept the dream.

Realtime Number 2 was published in the middle of 1993, heralding supposedly, the dawn of a new era. In terms of content and stylistic presentation, the publication added colourful layout and a more refreshing content mix.

Amidst the new mood and greater quest for relevance, this edition also had more participation from the youth. New voices were emerging with their pens, illustrations and photography. That same year I joined *Realtime* as editorial coordinator, and was later promoted editor.

I knew my limitations and the absence of a professional support base as time went on when *Realtime* began to stand on its own, no longer a project under the wings of Mason towards the end of 1993.

My second edition was not a major success technically, but I had tried to enthuse it with soul. Romance,

controversy, advocacy — these features became colourful in their presence. I included award-winning actor Vusi Kunene and Grace Mahlaba doing a deep kiss scene in the controversial docudrama *The Line*. But this was no strategy born out of a belief that once you have chosen erotica, you have suddenly captured human interest. I was trying to ensure that *Realtime* avoided shunning controversy, even if the journalistic mission called for another option. In an article I co-wrote with Nhlanhla Nyide, *The Line* was hailed as "a breath of fresh air", but we objected to its "irresponsible fabrications which undermine the very foundations of nation-building".

I was in search of role models for black youth in particular, and to this end I featured a tribute to Steve Biko, a profile of internationally-acclaimed Soweto choreographer Boyzie Cekwana, and Durban squatter-town conservationist Mike Mkhize. Apart from running a tribute to Robert "Treeman" Mazibuko, a tireless and world-renowned farmer and advocate of organic farming, I also introduced an environmental column in his honour.

Right now, *Realtime* might fold. But if the current management of the publication implements an aggressive and visionary leadership style which rewards creative talent, the publication might not be history, as were remarkable publications of yesteryear: *Learn and Teach* and *New Ground*. The key is to forge ties with like-minded brains in the publishing industry before it is too late.

In the final analysis, *Realtime* management like South Africa's NGOs, have to face the harsh reality that funding is but a passing phase. Financial self-sufficiency liberates.

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with the "average" reader in these surveys being male, white, well educated, aged 30 - 49 years, with a high household income, working full-time, residing in Gauteng, Natal or the Western Cape in a metropolitan area. Somewhat surprisingly, *Speak* readers tended to be male, African, young and working full-time.

It appears that the *South African Labour Bulletin* fits in roughly with the *Challenge*, *Work in Progress* and *New Ground* readers (except they had a slightly older age profile) and *Learn and Teach* fits in roughly with the *Speak* readers (with a slightly younger age profile).

Therefore there appears to be a contradiction. Publications were aimed at the masses, but were not read by them.

Respondents in the readership survey were asked if their respective magazines had a role to play in future. The overwhelming majority felt that their magazines should be society's watchdogs. Media contacts and editors thought that the main role for the alternative press as a whole was to provide media diversity. They were also seen as playing a role in reflecting the lives of ordinary people. Media contacts agreed that they could play a critical, independent watchdog role.

The reasons for closure are many and extend beyond the withdrawal of funding, inexperienced staff, distribution/subscription problems and low readership. In some cases the publications took too long to see the writing on the wall and to make the changes necessary to become self-sufficient. The mainstream media, less restricted in the 1990s, has also increasingly taken over part of the role, function and type of reporting that the

alternative media specialised in. It was also possible that self-sufficiency was an impossible goal. Given the loss of interest by traditional funders, who could fund the independent media? There were moves afoot to support these publications by the mainstream media via the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT), but these did not appear to be sufficient.

Funders who previously supported non-government organisations and are now supporting the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) could have ensured that there were greater links between these sectors. This could have provided an opportunity for the IMG magazines, who were well-positioned in terms of development work, to play a role in the RDP. However, it does not appear as if the alternative press received the anticipated support, or sufficient support to sustain it. Therefore, while the IMG's previous role had become obsolete there could and should have been a place for them in the post-apartheid South Africa.

In conclusion, many strong alternative voices remain and more will probably emerge in other forms. The value they bring to society cannot be measured in financial terms. The closure of the IMG and most of their magazines is very serious for a society so dominated by media monopolies and where civil society is struggling to define its role.

In the process of the democratisation of South Africa the cost of the decline in the alternative media will be borne by all of us.

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