



BY CLIVE EMDON

What's up in community media

IN 1995, the community media sector launched an initiative to establish a Media Development Agency which as a statutory body with the support of government and the media

industries, would provide funds, training and capacity-building for a wide range of new media.

The proposal was supported by Comtask, the commission of investigation into government communications, and is supported by the new central government information service. But,

without movement on the ground within the sector and from industry, this initiative will remain stillborn.

Radio

THE Department of Communications and the Kgaso Fund (Broadcasting Fund) have undertaken jointly to fund 18 new community radio stations mainly in rural areas.

This is a R3.13-million part of a R10-million four-year programme

by government to stimulate the growth of community radio stations. With co-funding from the Danish agency Danida through the Kgaso Fund, and other international funders, the programme should extend to R20-million.

It comes at a time when the Independent Broadcasting Agency (IBA) has recorded that it has licensed 100 community radio stations to date and is preparing to license another 200. Only about 40% of these serve black communities. The emphasis of the new funding of stations will be on rural communities that have to date not had access to their own media.

The indications from government are for a progressive inclusive programme of development in the radio sector with a range of partners that will include participation by local communities, the IBA, the Universal Service Agency, private companies, public utilities, local authorities and donor foundations.

The Kgaso Fund has helped kick-start 16 community radio stations.

The main players in the joint-funding of the first phase of its plan are the Department of Communications, and the Kgaso Fund, formed by the national Community Radio Forum (NCRF) and the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT).

Print media

After four years of drought, a Print Development Agency is in the process of being launched by the print industry and the community media sector.

The initiative could provide the start-up funds for new community newspapers and magazines as well as small commercial print media. Among the priorities seen by these parties are the need for collective repro and print facilities, distribution and ad sales.

This support from the industry signals the start of the transformation of a section of the industry. It suggests key players are envisioning the future of print media by taking account of the low literacy rate as well as large numbers of groups who want to start new newspapers and magazines. Not only do they conceive of the potential of vast new markets, but also democratisation through print media.

The community media sector and small black publishers have faced a huge attrition rate over the past few years, with more than 50% of the 20 to 30 community newspapers and magazines going out of business and a similar similar rate of closure of titles in the commercial sector.

This has been largely because of business factors:

- cash flow problems as a result of the set

terms of printing and publishing which dictate money up-front for printing and a three-months wait for advertising revenue;

● lack of easy finance for small black businesses and a drying up of funding for community publishers — historically dependent on foreign funding agencies.

● high costs of repro and printing;

● take-overs by large publishing groups who take minority shares in small publishing ventures when they are cash-strapped and start a short-term partnership which doesn't work out.

Twining, partnerships, on-site training and capacity building, and innovative ideas taken on by the industry could provide the grist for the mill of ideal development.

The initiative comes from the print industry's Print Media Association and the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT), a funding agency for the community media sector, as well as a number of other organisations on both sides:

In the print industry: the Newspaper Association (formerly the Newspaper Press Union) the Community Print Association (formerly the Provincial Press Association) and the Specialist Press Association; the Independent Publishers Association of South Africa, the National Community Media Forum, the South African Student Press Association.

Video and television

OPEN Window Network (OWN), which represents 18 community-based video projects nationally, hosted the international community video movement Videaziamut seminar and general assembly attended in Cape Town in September by 300 delegates

The main developments currently include negotiations with the SABC on a Natural Partnership Project with airtime through windows on national television as well as training and capacity building. Members of OWN will be included in SABC internship training programmes.

OWN is running an outreach programme to provinces where community video and TV hardly exists. A workshop has already been held in the Eastern Cape for community based

organisations in Grahamstown in September in collaboration with the Rhodes Journalism and Media Studies Department. The project is being funded by the Department of Arts and Culture, Science and Technology.

Main funding for running costs of OWN comes from Evangelical Mission Work (Germany).

New policy and advocacy work includes active participation by OWN in the Broadcasting Act process from the Green Paper onwards. A major focus will be on the IBA research on the feasibility of community television.

To date the commercial sector has not provided any funding or training for community television development save for a grant of R10 000 by M-Net in 1997 towards the OWN national AGM.

Student media

THE SA Students Press Union (SASPU), which represents about 60 publications and 12 radio stations nationally, and which is run entirely by students, plans to offer training for student newspapers through Independent Newspapers and Times Media Limited.

This programme will be held in different regions at the main newspaper offices of the two companies. A media research project, run in conjunction with Independent Newspapers, will help identify the areas of need and priorities in training and capacity building.

Currently SASPU is working with the

Department of Health in its Aids Awareness Programme and is involved in the Jubilee 2000 Campaign to cancel out the historic debt of apartheid. SASPU is also planning a campaign with the Print Media Association (the print industry) to promote the reading of newspapers nationally.

Major challenges that face SASPU include the raising of funds for national projects and for financing networking through the head office as well as for the annual week-long Media Mind-Blast training workshop. Despite SASPU being the source of many hundreds of journalists in the media industry, there are as yet no major national funders supporting the organisation.

SASPU spearheaded the process that led to the formation of the National Community Media Forum (NCMF) which in turn provides an umbrella organisation for the sector — print, radio, television and video and student media.

SASPU participated in national workshops designed to interrogate the Broadcasting Bill and made submissions to the Portfolio Committee on Communications in Parliament on the Bill.

SASPU is the student organisation that has participated in the transformation of media from the time of its establishment in 1977 till the present day. This includes the publishing of important alternative press newspapers such as the State of the Nation

and SASPU National as well as its participation in the public process in the formation of the new SABC Board. Its role in freeing the airwaves has been recognised in a citation by Unesco.

In the past year SASPU championed the licensing of the successful youth radio station YFM and is involved in discussions that could lead to the station becoming national.

SASPU's partnership with the media industry should ensure real long-term development of the sector, but such a partnership is still to be defined and developed.

Unless the print industry supports SASPU on an on-going basis, how can the student movement develop with consistent staffing and medium to long-term planning?