

## How far have we blown in eight years?

The 1991 Windhoek Declaration was hailed as one of the world's most progressive steps towards press freedom.

But to what extent is African media practicing its principles?

**Jeannette Minnie**  
reports...



# the Winds of Windhoek

On May 3, 1991 African journalists and representatives of the world's leading press freedom organisations met in Windhoek, Namibia and declared:

1. *Consistent with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development.*
2. *By an independent press, we mean a press independent of governmental, political or economic control, or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals.*
3. *By a pluralistic press, we mean the end of monopolies of any kind and the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals reflecting the widest possible range of opinion within the community.*

The Windhoek Declaration on "Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press" is an historical document. It arguably contains the most precise and simply formulated definitions on media freedom and pluralism to be found among the plethora of international press freedom declarations.

The Declaration contains many more clauses, but the first three, quoted above, provide the principles for free, independent and pluralistic media in both the public and the private sector.

It was quickly recognised as groundbreaking stuff, and sincere supporters of press freedom as well as those seeking to capitalise from political gain fell over each other with endorsements. The scramble included UNESCO; all the

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member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC); and many more governments in Africa. The enthusiasm didn't stop there. The declaration spawned many copies adapted to the needs of journalists in other regions of the world. Eventually it received the Oscar award of International Instruments when the United Nations proclaimed May 3 as World Press Freedom Day.

An obvious question: Are journalists now conforming to the principles set forth in the Declaration? At the time of its formulation Africa was celebrating the shift from one-party states to multi-party democracies. At that time state-owned media constituted the media monopolies. Privately owned and community-owned media were a rarity in the SADC region (South Africa being the only exception).

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), the flagbearer of the Windhoek Declaration in the SADC region, put its shoulder to the wheel after its formation in 1992 and based its regional working programme on the practical recommendations of the Declaration. Examples include developing cooperation between private African (SADC) newspapers; developing non-governmental codes of ethics for journalists; supporting the creation of regional African press enterprises; monitoring attacks on press freedom; creating a data bank for the independent African press; identifying economic and legal impediments to a free and independent media; and training of journalists and media managers.

On the eve of the millennium, we now have to assess what we have achieved. This will be done at another (hopefully) groundbreaking conference on World Press Freedom Day in Windhoek next year (May 3, 2000). It is not our intention to reflect only on our achievements, but also to

contemplate the dark side of the moon. For instance, we know that little Frankensteins have been born under the guise of so-called 'free and independent' media.

Apparently our training and nurturing of media managers has been so successful that a few media enterprises (admittedly only a handful) are fast approaching the status of monopolies in their respective countries. Should they continue their dramatic increases in fortune they will no doubt be in violation of the second and third clauses of the Windhoek Declaration. So now we have begun the difficult road of telling our members that it is not good to be *too good* at being a media entrepreneur.

This is not an easy message to spread. The overwhelming majority of our members consist of newspapers which survive week by week. They scarcely generate enough income to keep their heads above water. They frequently operate in marginal economies where much of the private sector (not only the public sector) is controlled by the state through ownership of parastatal companies or companies owned by government ministers, their wives and relatives and high-ranking civil servants. These companies are understandably in the habit of denying advertising to our members because they cheekily reserve their constitutional right to freedom of speech.

Trying to preach the dangers of media monopolies in such circumstances is a bit like trying to sell cake to Queen Marie Antoinette. And when a few of them actually make it – and become economically strong enough to really withstand the state – it sounds petty to begrudge them their success. After all, we do encourage self-sufficiency in MISA. It's virtually gospel that every effort has to be made to wean ourselves off donors. How else are we to become proud and independent Africans and masters of our fate?

The essential problem with media monopolies is that they erode diversity and pluralism by publishing one view to a big audience. They fill the space which should be occupied by a number of small media enterprises publishing differing views and news. The lack of differing views and news is a direct threat to the growth of genuine multi-party democracy and the practice of genuine human rights.

But there are also other little Frankensteins out there – media owned privately by political parties or politicians in their personal capacities. Aida Opuka-Mensah, a friend and professional colleague from the Ford Foundation in Lagos and previously the Director of the Panos Institute in Lusaka, told me the following story. As an expert on community radio she once extolled the virtues of this medium to a Member of Parliament in an African country. She explained about community empowerment, media by the people for the people and so on. At the end of her lengthy and inspired talk, the politician said: "My god, I never thought of this. If I had a community radio station I could be an MP for life!"

Malawi is the SADC country most infamous for political ownership of the private media. Hordes of small newspapers were established just before the first multi-party election in 1994 (which removed former President Kamuzu Banda from power). This phenomenon also characterised the country's most recent election. Most of these are privately owned by opposition parties, the state, government ministers or other politicians in their personal capacities. Their only task is to smear the government and rival parties. Ironically, one of the two consistently best papers is owned privately by a government minister; the other is truly owned independently of vested political interests.

As a general rule, sources of information are 'confidential' in Malawi – mainly because their sources are the thumbs of journalists or their proprietors or gossip in the

pub. This is despite any number of workshops in Malawi on ethical codes for journalists over the last few years. Individual journalists, who by virtue of holding down middle-class jobs in a desperately poor country, do not as a rule challenge the instructions of their editors or proprietors. Jobs are hard to find in Malawi.

One of the solutions is to introduce an editorial charter which guarantees the editorial independence of the editor and her staff. On a small newspaper, this is not so easily done. For one thing, sometimes the editor is also the owner or part-owner. Even when this is not the case, the proprietor is an integral part of the daily functioning of a small paper and since she is the person who has invested the cash, she calls the tunes.

Furthermore, on a social level, small numbers of people do not usually relate to each other in terms of formalised agreements. Relationships are based on everyday interaction, and in Africa everyone knows their place. It can be


perilous to step out of it.

There has been remarkable growth in the number of non state-owned media in SADC countries since the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration in 1991. MISA's 1999 Southern African Media Directory contains well over 400 privately owned media listings in 11 countries (excluding ISPs, advertising agencies and printers/publishers). Although statistics are not available, a generous estimate for 1991 would have been less by half, if not more. We have undoubtedly played a significant role in providing moral and material support for this development. The challenge for the new millennium, however, is to foster true professionalism in terms of achieving genuine media independence and pluralism.

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