

“The alternative press is running out of causes. Worse, it is running out of money. If it does not change direction radically, it will be dead in a year”

THE ALTERNATIVES

Redefining the editorial role

BY IRWIN MANOIM

THE alternative press will soon die. It will not be the glorious death we always expected, the brave battle to the last against the forces of darkness. No, it will die quietly, strangled by the very people who created it.

The alternative press was the child of the Emergency. In the bleakest days of censorship and repression, it dared to bring news from the battlefronts, news of a kind not found in more prudent publications.

For people who no longer trusted what they were reading or hearing, the alternative newspapers provided a valuable barometer of detentions, mysterious murders of activists, shopfloor struggles and covert movements of restricted organisations.

But reporting of this kind required a willingness to play at various hazardous games. The obvious one was political catch with the security forces. But perhaps a more expensive game, in the long term, was financial insecurity.

Newspapers which got into trouble with the authorities could not expect to arouse the enthusiasm of cautious investors. Nor could they expect much corporate advertising – it was a rare business executive indeed who was willing to be seen in the company of undesirables.

So the alternative press stayed small and under-resourced, pushed along by the toils of willing slaves. And to pay the printers, there were hand-outs from anti-apartheid funding agencies.

Sales were seldom a source of revenue, for the alternative press was not designed to be popular. It was meant to bring bad tidings, and it did so with some efficiency, offering dedicated readers a weekly litany of gloom and horror. Less resolute readers who wanted

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light relief – or just some variety – had to look elsewhere.

As long as the Emergency lasted, that hardly seemed to matter. The alternative press battled on, getting in and out of trouble, winning awards and the admiration of anti-apartheid groups, who willingly footed the growing bill.

But the Emergency did not last, and today the costs are beginning to mount. The alternative press is running out of causes. Worse, it is running out of money. If it does not change direction radically, it will be dead in a year.

Walk into your local CNA, and you can pick up a copy of the *Star* or *Beeld* or even *Volksblad* and read editorials urging talks between a newly-legitimate ANC and the government. It's not that long ago that three alternative newspapers were suspended for urging much the same thing.

The world has turned full circle. But what reader cares for sentiment? Why read *New Nation* or the *Weekly Mail* or *South*, when *Beeld* or the *Star* or *Volksblad* now offer something that sounds vaguely similar...and a lot more besides?

That's the first cost: the alternative press may have ceased to appear unique.

The second cost is financial. There was a time when alternative newspapers had only to cry help and help arrived. *Vrye Weekblad's* editor, Max Du Preez walked into a media function 18 months ago and loudly announced that if he could not raise the money there and then, his paper would close. The party was forgotten as the entire diplomatic corps gravitated to his end of the room, cheque books unsheathed.

Today, that magic has faded. If Du Preez, despite his considerable flair for self-promotion, were to try

PLEASE TURN OVER

the same today, hardly a tear would be shed. Funding newspapers has ceased to be a political priority.

The main supporter of anti-apartheid organisations, the European Community, channels up to R90-million a year through the local Kagiso Trust. Last year the trust's executive director, Achmat Dangor, announced that the trust had changed its focus and would gradually phase out groups engaged in political protest rather than development or education. This group included five newspapers: *New Nation*, *Umfrika*, *South*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *New African*.

Other organisations are following the Kagiso lead. The editor of *South*, Moëgsien Williams, recently returned from a trip to that cornucopia of anti-apartheid funding, Sweden. He found the funders still sympathetic, but the clear message was: "You guys had better shift to a position of self-sufficiency...soon."

New Nation's Zwelakhe Sisulu asked the funders to phase their withdrawal over three years to give the paper a chance. But they gave him only 18 months. "It was clear they wanted out," he says.

Which, as some editors agree, is not necessarily a bad thing in the new South Africa. One of the downsides of the funding syndrome is that it led to what Williams calls a "begging-bowl mentality".

The success of funded organisations is measured in political, not economic terms. An organisation will continue to receive funding if it does just enough to make the good guys like it and the bad guys hate it.

No-one looks too closely at how well the money is managed and spent. Losses are expected and largely tolerated as long as staffs are small and salaries meagre.

The result, for much of the alternative press, has been administrative inertia. The Left's suspicion of capitalism has tended to result in disapproval of all capitalism's procedures. So no managerial culture has been built up, indeed, some publications ran for years without managers.

Mark Beare, a rare phenomenon in the alternative press in that he actually trained for a business, rather than a sociology degree, was recently appointed manager of *Vrye Weekblad*.

Explaining why he could not tell me how much money his publication lost or how much it needed to survive, he noted that he had arrived to discover almost no management files. "Only now am I slowly beginning to work out who we owe money to. That doesn't make me much happier, but at least I know where we are."

What makes the economic woes even more frightening is that sales are not particularly buoyant. Most alternative newspapers have no audited figures and the sales they claim vary, depending upon whether the audience is a policeman (in which case the figures are reduced) or an advertising agency (in which case

they are inflated).

For years the only audited paper was the *Weekly Mail*, which survived a humiliating first audited figure of 5 000 sales and slowly crawled to within spitting distance of *Business Day* with 30 000, only to fall back again after a price increase last year.

Far and away the biggest alternative newspaper is *New Nation*, which sits rock-steady at 70 000, regardless of the front page lead or the state of the nation. That's an impressive figure until one looks at the sales of rival commercial publications: *City Press* sells almost double at 135 000 a week, and *The Sowetan* sells 185 000 daily.

Down in Cape Town, *South* is aimed at the Cape Flats market niche left by the defunct *Cape Herald*, which in its heyday sold 90 000. *South's* sales drift between 12 000 and 15 000. Which is not much, but it's double the sales of *Vrye Weekblad*.

This, then, is the gloomy state of the alternative press today. Fortunately, one major victory is already won. All the alternative editors are aware of their plight and realise that the old order must die quickly so that a new one can replace it.

The first change has been the small matter of a name. There's not an alternative editor in the country these days who'll not bite your head off if you breathe that word "alternative". The favoured label of the early eighties is very much in disfavour today, for its undertones of "marginal" and "far-out".

The official label is "independent", as spelt out on the *New Nation* masthead: "South Africa's biggest independent newspaper". So from here on, I'll use that word "independent" too, to identify a different kind of newspaper.

Down in Cape Town, *South* has been undergoing major renovations, to culminate in a fresh identity sometime in June.

I asked editor Moëgsien Williams what the new aims were. "To produce a newspaper of quality...that is also entertaining," he said.

Entertaining? That's not a word that's been in alternative editors' vocabularies. Two years ago, Williams might have said something like: "To produce a progressive newspaper that fights for a non-racial, democratic South Africa".

He explains: "When we launched *South* in 1987, we thought we could come out with a very political paper and sell it. Much later, we realised this was a mistake and that we can't reach a mass market.

"Now we aim to produce a quality regional paper for the Cape Flats, a niche product aimed at a select group of serious readers, with an optimum readership of about 20 000 to 30 000."

South has discovered the hard way that mass sales can be expensive to a newspaper with low advertising revenues. If a publication is to reach the masses, it must

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price itself cheaply – so cheaply that it makes a loss on each copy. Then, the more it sells, the more it loses.

South has just raised its price from 50c to 80c, and despite taking a knock to sales, will raise it to R1,50 by 1993. That may not even be high enough.

The most expensive independent newspaper is the *Weekly Mail*, which at R2,20 makes a small margin on each copy sold. Unlike the other weeklies, the *Weekly Mail* is run by a private company, not a charitable trust, and it cannot receive welfare funding, other than for its training project.

The *Weekly Mail* is drip-fed its money by private investors who – as last year's abortive *Daily Mail* project revealed – are quick to pull the plug when they feel losses are escalating. To hold losses down, the paper is obliged to hoist the selling price high – too high to attract a mass readership.

There was a time when this strategy was derided on the Left as "elitist". Now, changes are that others will do the same. *Vrye Weekblad* has changed out of all recognition, into a magazine aimed at a *Weekly Mail*-type audience, with cover stories on such soft non-political topics as graffiti, nudity and horror movies.

It's too early to tell whether sales have improved, but Mark Beare says the response from advertising agencies has been good. That gets to the nub of the matter: specialisation is designed to attract the agencies, for they alone can save the independent press.

Weekly Mail advertising director, Marilyn Kirkwood, who has beaten a lonely path to advertising agency offices for almost six years, remarks that these days she regularly discovers that she has arrived in the footsteps of *Vrye Weekblad*'s Max Du Preez or *New Nation*'s Zwalakhe Sisulu.

The independent press has discovered the advertising agencies. But do the agencies care? As Mark Beare puts it: "You can tell them about the enormous influence the papers have had on opinion makers. You can say that FW reads the paper. And they'll say, 'So what? How many BMWs can he buy?'"

When in trouble, you turn to the experts...even though they all work for the mainstream. *New Nation* has signed up the Argus group's marketing think-tank, the Newspaper Marketing Bureau. The bureau is headed by Caxton co-founder, Noel Coburn, who has been doing *New Nation* presentations to advertising agencies around the country.

"We've been winning a lot of understanding, a lot of sympathy," says Sisulu. "But after a couple of weeks, it dries up. The biggest stumbling block is our political tone."

"Media planners don't say so explicitly, they say, 'Our clients might feel uncomfortable in your environment', but we all know what they mean."

Some of the better-off independent newspapers

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4,6-million
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don't need much more advertising to pull through. The *Weekly Mail* makes over R50 000 in a good week. Its problem now is to do the same every week. *South* has to increase from R14 000 to R17 000 in the next year. *Lenasia's Indicator*, which has more advertising than any other independent paper, is a short step from break-even.

But South Africa is heading ever-deeper into this bottomless recession, and even the biggest mainstream papers are expecting to lose advertising revenue this year, not gain it.

Zwalakhe Sisulu is gloomy about the prospects for *New Nation*: "We're talking about white-controlled companies advertising through white-controlled agencies. They're not interested in putting much revenue into the black press."

So where then can the alternative press turn. The ANC, Perhaps? Sisulu dismisses this. "We spoke to political organisations about a subsidy system for the alternative press. But it's clear that political groupings do not see the alternative press as an urgent national priority."

Mark Beare points out that print is a dying medium in the Third World, and that radio, now that it is being deregulated, may be the route to take.

Radio discriminates against no-one, no matter how poorly educated they may be. Even the most impoverished shack owns a transistor, which can be listened to on dark, electricity-less nights.

Cosatu is so convinced of the value of radio that it has already applied for an FM licence. And it is negotiating with SABC for a half-hour weekly union slot, aimed at the SABC's 4,6-million African listeners.

Another option may be to diversify. Newspapers of conscience have never made money anywhere in the world. Where they continue to survive, it is because they are propped up by more lucrative enterprises. The *Rand Daily Mail*'s costly conscience was bank-rolled for years by the *Sunday Times*.

Both the *Weekly Mail* and *Vrye Weekblad* are exploring new publishing ventures, books and periodicals, in the business and entertainment fields. The *Indicator* and *South* run typesetting services. *Learn & Teach* publishes educational books.

Whether any of these ideas bear fruit remains to be seen. The most important thing is that there are new ideas and real ferment in the alternative press.

"The old days of the activist journalist are over," says Moegsien Williams. "There's a new professionalism today."

The old "struggle" mentality is dead. But the new independent press has a long, hard battle ahead. ●

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