

by Peter du Toit and Asta Rau

Questions of ownership, control and profit distribution are widely used to distinguish between commercial and community media ventures, but an over-reliance on such distinctions may eclipse other important considerations in a way that impacts negatively on media diversity.

This is the central thrust of our findings from an in-depth study of six cases involving small independent South African publications¹.

We suggest that if a definition of “community media” that emphasises commune-style ownership and community control persists, then it is likely that existing and emerging, small, for-profit, independent newspapers in need of substantial donor funding or assistance may fail to attract the support they need.

While there are some avenues available for privately-owned titles to obtain support, funding baskets tend to exclude independent commercial ventures. This is despite the fact that many of these publications are committed to principles that normally define community media.

By juxtaposing a working definition of community media and an in-depth series of case studies, we find that, leaving profit out of the equation, the gaps between community and independent commercial media can be very narrow indeed.

The working definition was formulated by stakeholders, leaders and practitioners participating in a workshop hosted by the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) in 2005.² The case studies were conducted by the Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership (SPI) to uncover examples of key business and editorial strategies emerging newspapers may emulate.³

When commercial can also be community

What follows are three examples of how the small, privately-owned, but community-orientated titles included in the SPI’s study, conform to the defining criteria for community media.

Ownership

In as far as all the owner-managers of the newspapers in the research live in and are part of the communities their publications

serve, they are in accord with the principle (IAJ, 2005) that community media should be characterised by local ownership and control. Ownership can also be more broadly conceptualised with strong interconnections between a sense of owning publications through participation and the actuality of owning publications. When a newspaper is established and run for profit, or perhaps simply as a means of self-employment, it does not mean that community members, readers, advertisers and employees do not experience a sense of ownership in relation to it. Furthermore, the SPI research found a strong correlation between a title’s outreach activities and the community members’ sense of ownership.

Content

IAJ delegates proposed that “community media” incorporates a community journalism approach where content is informed by the needs of the community. In other words, media that gives a voice to communities as opposed to that of authorities. All the newspapers participating in the SPI study conformed to this criterion. Not only did they showcase local issues by inviting and purposefully soliciting stories and opinions from community members,

they also explicitly shared the objective of empowering their readers, and by association their communities, by presenting information and writing articles that are educational and of relevance and value to the specific challenges facing distinct communities.

Promoting democracy and diversity

IAJ delegates concluded that community media should challenge racism, sexism and homophobia and promote diversity in terms of languages and class. All of the titles in the SPI study demonstrated a commitment to counteracting stereotypes and respect for religious and cultural diversity. The study also found evidence of management and staff bridging cultural and racial differences in the workplace and in their communities and of people working together harmoniously to pool different knowledges in ways that transcended racism, sexism and other social divides.

It was clear from the case studies that, while a commitment to reconstruction and social change has informed how these publications do business, these principles are also underpinned by a commercial rationale. The owner-managers shared the view that a community-orientation also makes good business sense.

We found that the principles and practices of small independent newspapers were so similar to those associated with community media that the term *independent community media* could be a more inclusive and fitting way of thinking and speaking about the sector.

Endnotes

1. See the July edition of the journal *Communicatio*, 34 (1) for the academic version of this study.
2. IAJ (Institute for the Advancement of Journalism). 2005. *Better training for community print media*. Johannesburg: IAJ. [September workshop proceedings].
3. Milne, C, A Rau, P du Toit and F Mdlongwa. 2006. *Key editorial and business strategies: A case study of six independent community newspapers*. Grahamstown: Rhodes University, Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership. <http://eprints.ru.ac.za/379/> or <http://spiml.com> (accessed 3 October 2007).