

Continued support for the alternative media today is not a partisan political matter. It is a contribution to building a pluralistic press as a powerful democratic institution in this country

systems in the Netherlands and Sweden, though not receiving state funds here in South Africa. The trust will only back alternative media which can prove progress towards commercial viability and which are independent of political parties or companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

As noted, resources put into the alternative media to date represent money well spent. But everyone would agree that the outcome of any assistance should be sustainable development.

If South Africa were already a normal, thriving and stable democracy, it would still be important that publication projects initiated in earlier times be given a reasonable prospect to reach a stage of self-sufficient endurance.

South Africa is, of course, still quite a distance from being a stable democracy. Nonetheless, there is an important argument that some political progress has at least been made and it is now inappropriate for foreign donors to support as controversial an institution as the press in these circumstances.

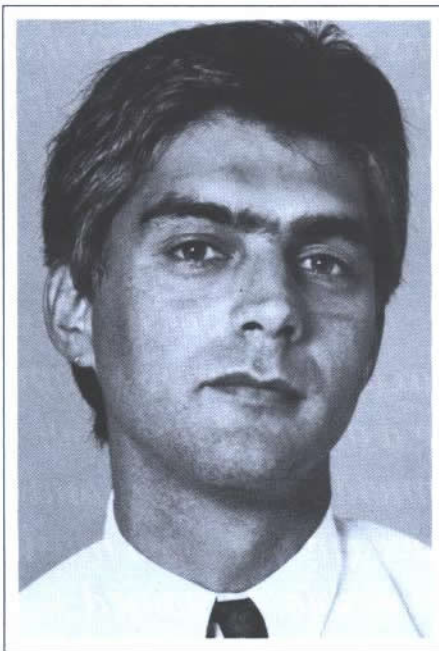
This argument is based on the belief that it is wrong for foreign agencies to play a party political role in a situation where politics are normal or normalising. That is true. What is not true, however, is the perception that newspapers, in particular the alternative publications, are party political organs.

There was a time when there was little perceptible distinction between the demands made by many of the alternative media, and those made by the ANC. What is clear to anyone, however, is that since the ANC and other groups were unbanned, there has been a prominent distinction between the interests of the alternative press and those of that particular political organisation.

This is clear in the editorial products of our publications each week, and I can also vouch that we in the alternative press also experience this directly from the battles that we continuously wage to get the ANC and its supporters to keep their hands off. If more evidence is needed, the fact that the ANC today wishes to start its own publications network, underlines the party-political independence of the alternative media.

What I am arguing therefore is that continued support for the alternative media today is not a partisan political matter. It is a contribution to building a pluralistic press as a powerful democratic institution in this country.

It is not without significance that the most severe



Guy Berger

“
We
need
spotlights.
Now, in this
transitional
period
especially,
but even
beyond,
when we
need many
more than
presently
exist
”

political pressure on the press in recent times has been in parts of the country characterised by a sad lack of media diversity. The *Evening Post* and *Eastern Province Herald* in Port Elizabeth and the *Daily Dispatch* in East London have been boycotted and burnt by radical township activists. In the case of the *Dispatch*, a delivery truck full of newspapers was hi-jacked and burned in the Transkei.

That these media — for several reasons — have reflected the views of whites and catered for a primarily white audience, may well be shortsighted and unfortunate, but it is of course their right. That there have been no alternatives in their region, however, is surely the greatest problem.

Providing people with a choice of media is the surest way of defusing dissatisfaction with any one medium. It would be a sorry situation if other parts of South Africa shared with the eastern Cape and Border, a lack of diversity of publications.

Providing the public with a choice of media is in itself an exercise in demonstrating the right of different viewpoints, products and ultimately political options to exist, and to contest for space in the marketplace. It serves, in this way, as a mechanism of keeping political control out of the

press as a whole, which is essential to the press playing its role in assisting a democracy to function via an informed citizenry.

It is this recognition of the absolutely critical value of media diversity that has won the support of the established newspaper industry for this new trust fund.

There is much talk these days about levelling the playing fields in South Africa. But it is clear that no matter how level a field, the quality of lighting is vital for the game. With skewed lights, or inadequate lighting, players will be contesting in the dark. There will be foul play in the shadows. And, this being South Africa, the referee is also likely to have his pants stolen, several spectators will be mugged and the takings at the gate will certainly go missing.

So, we need spotlights, Now, in this transitional period especially, but even beyond, when we need many more than presently exist.

Today, at the very least, we must preserve those spotlights that presently exist, especially where their power supply is still precarious. ●

GUY BERGER is editor of *South*.