### **GUEST EDITORIAL**

The Independent Media Diversity Trust was launched in March with a R1-million injection from the Argus, Times Media, Nasionale Pers, M-Net and the mining house, JCI. Here the case is made for further support of the trust, and in particular international backing, in the interests of democracy

F there is one single cause worth international support in South Africa, it is the press here. In particular, I'm talking about the principle of diversity.

The generosity and concern of the interna-

The generosity and concern of the international community in South Africa, via the embassies as well as private citizens and agencies in foreign countries, has ranged from promoting human rights through voter education to small-scale farming and drought relief.

But when revelations show that South Africa rivals any other country for fraud, corruption and mismanagement, there's no doubt that our fundamental problems cannot be resolved by simply throwing resources at the situation.

Finance allocated for drought relief needs to be monitored, scrutinised and publicised to avoid a situation where it flows into private pockets or political patronage.

Funds for education should be deployed on the basis of public debate and consensus about the manifold needs and the most cost-effective options. Who will be a watchdog over all these questions?

Make no mistake, South Africa's key need is the development of a stable and economically-sound polity. To think, however, that there can be successful political or economic development without a free, vibrant and pluralistic press as a precondition, is to turn a blind eye to the realities.

Fortunately, the international community has not been a Cyclops in this regard.

# All this has been money well spent

Alongside powerful diplomatic support for press freedom, many foreign countries have made tangible contributions to policy formulation, to operating costs, and to training for South Africa's press. Here one may single out the European Community, the Nordic countries, Canada and Australia for special thanks.

All this has been money well spent. Without it, there could well have been many more casualties of PW Botha's diktat. Without it, there would not have been the wealth of supremely important information about South Africa that has been made available to the public, and indeed to the world as a whole.

In this regard, small as the weekly independent papers may be, what we have published has had an impact beyond all relation to our circulation.

☐ It was South that first published Mandela's letter

# Suy Berger

from prison to PW Botha proposing the historic compromise that ended the political deadlock of the 1980s.

- Weekly Mail brought to public notice 'Inkathagate' and evidence of a "third force" destabilising political developments.
- Vrye Weekblad exposed the death squad units in the South African defence and police forces.
- New Nation got the story of the military signal that ordered the elimination of eastern Cape leader Matthew Goniwe and his colleagues.
- ☐ Then there has been the less high-profile, but still significant, contributions by magazines like *Die Suid Afrikaan* and *Work in Progress*.

## We believe we are better

All this is not to ignore the role of the mainstream, established newspapers, and their contribution.

The whole spectrum of publications is an asset to this country. I don't want to denigrate the role of the established press even though we in the alternative/independent camp, with classic arrogance, believe we are better.

The point to make is that even if all the alternative publications closed tomorrow, their contribution to making South Africa an open democracy would still have been immense.

Naturally we do not intend to close shop tomorrow. But it is not easy. Just when political pressures on us eased, and time could be devoted to business matters, South Africa has been hit by recession. Across the media industry, advertising and sales are down.

In the eastern Cape, for example, the Afrikaans language newspaper *Oosterlig* closed in April, soon to be followed by *Die Transvaler* on the Reef. The alternative *New African* went the same way.

All alternative publications are striving right now to stabilise their performance, and substantial progress has been made. But because newsprint anywhere gobbles cash, instant viability is impossible. The *Sowetan* and *City Press* took up to 10 years before they began to pay their way.

So what are the prospects in the alternative camp? Who will invest in it, without immediate returns? This depends on the Independent Media Diversity Trust, and the capital and expertise it can mobilise.

Chaired by IDASA's Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, the venture draws from the experience of media subsidy

PLEASE TURN OVER 13

## **GUEST EDITORIAL**

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.

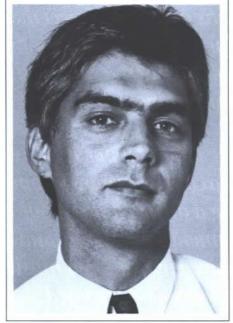
What is not true, however, is the perception that newspapers, in particular the alternative publications, are party political organs.

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 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.