

OF PENS AND PLOUGHSHARES

A recent conference dealing with media and development in southern Africa attracted over 200 communicators and students from 13 countries to Grahamstown. Conference organiser **DON PINNOCK** examines the threads

SHARP intakes of breath could be heard from the largely South African audience as the editor of the independent *Weekly Post* in Zambia, Fred M'membe, claimed that majority rule was not necessarily democratic, and that democracy, anyway, guaranteed people nothing.

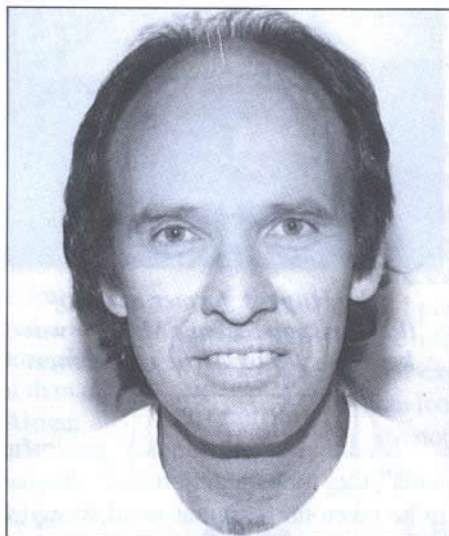
Insights from the front line of African independence clearly offered no comfort for those seeking it in a new South Africa. But by the end of the three-day conference on the future of the media in southern Africa at Rhodes University, the 200 delegates and students had become used to shocks.

By then it seemed quite natural for the editor of *South* and former exile, Guy Berger, to embrace liberal freedoms and warn against a 'responsible' press tied hand and foot to nation-building. Or for the deputy editor of *The Star* and a representative of the biggest press monopoly in Africa, Shaun Johnson, to declare his company ready for penetration by the Left. Or even for Johannes Froneman of Potchefstroom University to wonder whether the Afrikaans press was a phoenix or a lame duck. These, clearly, were unusual times.

But if the South Africans took away anything from this gathering of communicators from 13 countries, it was a knowledge of their relative privilege.

This was brought home to them when the editor-in-chief of *Financial Post* in Malawi, Al Osman, used the microphone to appeal, not for press freedom, but for a rotary press. 'Please', he said, 'has anybody got one to sell?' The only rotary in his country was owned by His Excellency the Life President Kamuzu Banda — not a man known to embrace liberal freedoms.

The conference was an exercise in



Don Pinnock

bringing together, for the first time, journalists from both sides of the Limpopo and getting them to share their ideas about the way forward for their profession.

A paper by Bruce Cohen of *Weekly Mail* chalked the starting line: In South Africa 94% of the daily newspapers are owned by just two press conglomerates. But if you divide the sale of newspapers into the population, the total market penetration of the press is a miniscule 4%. Of these papers, most are aimed at whites but read, predominantly, by blacks.

Not that anybody was denying the importance of newspapers. But as Hendrik Bussiek of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (one of the biggest funders of media in the region) said, "radio is clearly the most important medium of communication in the entire region". And in much of the rest of Africa, as M'membe was to observe, press freedom was an idea still

struggling to be born. "Our first priority", he said, "is simply to survive".

A strong theme of the conference was development, but it was a term with as many definitions as speakers.

Hein Marais of *Work in Progress* insisted that it wasn't simply about housing, roads, wells, literacy and civics, but about enabling people to live up to their potentials, to live their lives extensively. Shaun Johnson wondered if journalists could help to develop a decent, prosperous society without being slavish praise-poets, mean-minded underminers or trivial titillators. And Guy Berger warned that democratic freedoms, including press freedom, had no intrinsic connection to development at all. We should be careful, he said, not to underestimate the pressures and predilections that could lead a democratically-elected government, bent on development, to behave undemocratically.

And old habits often died hard. In Namibia, Gwen Lister of *The Namibian* pointed out, even though press freedom had been accepted in practice and enshrined in the constitution many public officials had yet to come to terms with this.

Graeme Addison, head of journalism at the Natal Technicon, approached the problem from another angle. Development journalism was obviously critical and adversary, but a distinction had to be drawn between 'journalism' and 'media work'. While journalism was associated with the mass media, media work found its place in development organisations. And it was convenient, he said, to draw a distinction between journalism *about* and media work *for* development. Media work varied from the promotion of adult

PLEASE TURN OVER

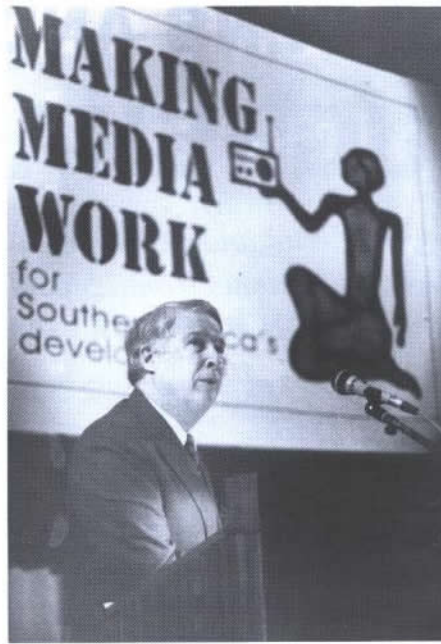
literacy and rural development to building awareness around issues such as feminism, labour rights, ecology, gay rights and national liberation.

"The mix is enough to appall Western traditionalists", he said. "But there is no doubt that activism is widespread throughout the world's media and there is nothing particularly new in this. John Stewart Mill, the icon of Western press liberalism, maintained that politically partisan newspapers and committed journalists were the lifeblood of a free and competitive system".

But were these activist journalists ethical? And, asked Francis Kasoma of the University of Zambia, were they free enough from their master's voice, whoever that master was, to take part in "the second liberation struggle for African democracy" which was sweeping the continent?

The key, he said, was not the desire to do good work, but to be fair. It was not development journalism that was needed but *ethical* journalism. The new journalism of Africa was about "safeguarding people's right to receive and propagate information and opinions through the media of public communication without jeopardising any other equally important rights that all human beings are entitled to".

Libby Lloyd of *Speak* and Susan Holland-Muter of *Agenda* found the problem to be more than ethics. Daily, without much thought, the world was being man-made. Women, unless they undressed, were simply being deemed unnewsworthy:



John Hughes, former editor of the Christian Science Monitor was keynote speaker at the conference.

"Media are enormously powerful tools", they told the conference. "This has to be taken into account in all struggles for equality, self-determination, development and peace. In order to change society and assist in the development of our country and the region, 'man-made' media and 'man-made' development must be challenged and transformed".

The media were reporting political violence, they said. But in South Africa each day more than 1 000 women were raped and hundreds were forced to become refugees from a war waged on them by their male partners. Even in the

independent media, said Lloyd and Holland-Muter, sexist and gender-blind reporting was the order of the day. Half a nation was waiting to tell its story and was being ignored. When *Speak* ran a radio workshop in Khayelitsha the women took to it like ducks to water. "You must teach us", they said, "to get inside that box".

On the final day of the conference, Gill Marcus of the African National Congress called on journalists to help build open media and to give them a backbone that decades of banning, control, manipulation and self-censorship had removed.

"We see great store by vigorous and free media which we hope will flourish in a democratic society", she said.

"A press that has the courage to speak its mind without fear or favour is essential to ensure an informed, vigilant and vocal public, alert to any attempts by any government to succumb to the temptation of abusing its powers.

"Any government that seeks to muzzle, control or constrain media scrutiny is a government that risks evading accountability to the people."

Graeme Addison concluded the conference by issuing a series of challenges:

- To corporate media to stay out of community radio;
- To the alternative press to continue to serve their audiences and not their profits;
- To academics to get off their butts and produce research useful to the media;
- To journalists to not compromise on libertarian ideals;
- To pressure groups to understand that the media are vehicles for pluralism and not there to serve a single sector;
- To trainers of journalists to reorient their teaching content to include issues of gender, development, the environment and race; and
- To Africa Information Afrique, one of the organisers of the conference, to send middle-level sub-editors on study trips around the region to show them that the lands south of the Limpopo are, indeed, part of Africa. ●

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A cautionary tale from Nigeria

THE hard-eyed cynicism with which journalists from independent Africa viewed development was captured in a story told by Professor Onoura Nweneli of Lagos University.

The Minister of Development of some un-named African country was invited to visit his counterpart in an un-named South American country.

The African was clearly impressed with the South American's house.

"How did you organise this?" the guest inquired.

His host led him to a window,

opened the curtain and said, "You see that railway line? Thirty percent."

Two years later the African Minister reciprocated the invitation.

The South American was overawed by his host's palatial home.

"How did you organise this?" he asked.

The African took him to a window and opened the curtain.

"I don't see anything," said his guest.

"That's right," his host replied, "one hundred percent!"