



## EnviroMedia 2004 Conference

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### Topic: Media, Advocacy and ethics: Wild Coast N2 case study

Paper summary

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- To interrogate sufficiently the question of media, advocacy and ethics, one needs to also examine the character and shape of media as it manifests itself not just in South Africa but across the globe. Modern media has become a powerful tool for shaping public consciousness, perception and attitudes.
- At its nascent beginnings over two centuries ago, modern media was touted as the arbiter of truth, the guardian of social interests and the defender of common values. Nevertheless, the predominance of market power in today's media environment means the public is no longer a beneficiary of “unfettered information”. Indeed, respected American political analyst and linguist Noam Chomsky makes a compelling argument that modern media promotes state power and other dominant interests in society because:

*"The 'market place of ideas', built during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, effectively disseminates the beliefs and ideas of the upper classes while subverting the ideological and cultural independence of the lower classes. Through the construction of this marketplace, [the dominant groups have] forged firm and enduring links between socioeconomic position and ideological power, permitting upper classes to use each to buttress the other..."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Chomsky, N (1989). Necessary Illusions: Thought control in democratic societies, Pluto Press, London, quoting Benjamin Ginsberg, p7.

- Media ownership and control has translated into a pervasive manipulation of the kind of information that media disseminates. To take South Africa as an example, media is owned and controlled by four (4) key **converged** entities:
  - **Naspers**-(M-Net, Multi-Choice, DStv, Mweb, Beeld, City Press, Rapport, Burgher, Daily Sun, etc.)
  - **Johncom** (Sunday Times, Business Day, Sowetan, Sowetan Sunday World, Exclusive Books, M-Net Super Sport, MTN etc.)
  - **Primedia** (Interests in Highveld Stereo, Radio 702, Cape Talk, iafrica.com, Commuta media) & lastly,
  - **Kagiso Media** (East Coast Radio, Jacaranda FM, & various TV production houses among others)
- It is therefore not difficult to agree with Monbiot's speech yesterday when he talked about media's abiding fraternity with 'the millionaires' and its promotion of state power and other dominant interests in society.
- Our basic problem is that today's corporatised newsroom far from being there to disseminate news and information, strives to "*deliver audiences to advertisers*" as memorably captured by the following quotation from a managing editor of one of the country's leading newspaper stables a few years ago:

*"The Cape Times and the Argus continue to dominate the newspaper market in the Peninsula. This is where the most economically active people in the Western Cape live and these are the people whom we are single-mindedly and successfully delivering to our advertisers."*<sup>3</sup>

- We should not be surprised that given media's preference for markets over public interest matters, the Code of Advertising Practice of the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa calls for a clear distinction between editorial and advertorial content. Actually, the Code demands that advertisements relating to 'controversial subjects or advocacy advertising' "*be readily recognisable as advertisements*" and that they must "*cause no confusion as to the identity or status of advertiser*".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore media is required "*to ensure that anyone who looks at the advertisement is able to see without reading it closely, that it is an advertisement and not editorial matter.*"<sup>5</sup> **(Revise this argument)**
- The Wild Coast N2 case is a very powerful example of modern media's reluctance to perform its supposed role of defender of society's interests or indeed, to question the

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<sup>3</sup> Cape Times, 4/8/95.

<sup>4</sup> Code of Advertising Practice, section I(2.4)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. section IV(1).

very essence of advocating controversial subjects without the benefit of seeking alternative views.

### **Action points**

- Since media repeatedly protests that its existence serves no other function than to protect the public interest, then we ought to take it to task and hold it accountable to those common interests it claims to serve. Advocacy, self-reflection and criticism are essential.
- We also need to give more thought to the newly emerging forms of alternative media such as IndyMedia (Independent Media), and community media.