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This fax six pages including this one

The Shape and Role of the Media in the "new South Africa"

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This conference has demonstrated the considerable interest in the kind of media and how it should conduct itself in the new South Africa that we all have such high hopes for. It is an important subject, but I must confess that the subject itself appears to be much less certain about this.

Of the four major Press groups only the Argus came forward to deal seriously with the issues. There were no representatives of the morning group press conglomerate Times Media, except for workshop participant Brian Pottinger, or the Afrikaans Press groups, Nasionale Pers and Perskor, which suggests that they are satisfied with the state of affairs in the industry or, worse, that they are complacent about its future. And though we are pleased that we had a representative of the SA Broadcasting Corporation present to put forward a view, his insistence that it was not the official view of the corporation but his personal thoughts reflects the secrecy and paranoia that invests the operations and intentions of that vast monopoly.

This is really a matter of great concern. We all have before us the practical example of the government coming to acknowledge that the old South Africa has to go and that a "new SA" has to be created. If most of the newspapers, which are supposed to have their fingers on the pulse of the nation, are oblivious to how this new situation affects them and the demands that are likely to be made upon them -- or, heaven forbid, are uncaring to the extent that they are not interested in hearing what others think or say about these issues, then the public has a real problem and those groups are headed for trouble. On the other hand, of course, they may believe they know it all and can deal with the new situation and the new demands that will be made on them in their own way.

One of the clear lessons drawn from this conference is that the subject is highly complex and that reshaping of the media will be extremely difficult. Much of our thinking has been conditioned by the country's long enslavement to thought constriction through censorship and the many other constraints brought about by compulsion to adhere to doctrine, not least of which has been the requirement to conform to the

dogmas of the liberation movements. There are no easy answers and there has to be a great deal of further thought and discussion before we reach some conclusions about the shape of things to come in the media world.

However, I have no doubt that the ideas that were exchanged at the Media Policy Workshop at Rhodes University a few months ago and those that have been bandied about here have started to break through these barriers and have begun to stimulate this thinking over a much wider area.

We have a long way to go. In terms of Press freedom this country has not yet returned to the basic standards that applied in 1948 when the present government came to power. And it is worth recollecting that in those days the media in this country had much the same degree of freedom as that which existed in Britain then.

Keynote speaker Glen Moss referred to the more than 100 laws which have been used to restrict the Press since then. What I cannot understand is why the government has not begun dismantling them. It has before it the list of media and other laws that the Law Commissioners have proposed should be scrapped or amended to conform to the Bill of Rights which they have drafted. The Media Council's list of recommendations, which I have no doubt, duplicate the Law Commissioners' proposals, have also been handed to the Home Affairs Minister Eugene Louw, but so far nothing has happened.

All we have had has been a promise from President De Klerk to ANC deputy president Nelson Mandela that the government will consider the removal of the legal provisions that on registration newspaper can be required to pay a fee of up to R40 000. I can quite understand that the government does not want to be over-hasty about scrapping some of the laws, but that iniquitous registration fee should go forthwith--and so should the media restrictions in the Police Act and the Prisons Act, which impose onerous conditions on media reports about police and prisons department activities. There are many more that could and should go now, but if the government made a tiny start with those few it would restore some of its fading credibility as a reformist regime.

One of the other problems is the concentration of ownership and the access of people to the media. The concentration of ownership in a few hands is, as Argus chairman Murray Hofmeyr said, not peculiar to South Africa and he has pointed to holdings similar to those of Argus by groups in Canada and Germany. Unravelling this ownership conglomerate is not easy. Anglo American owns something like 72% of Argus and Times-Media but the question is who would it divest to, even if it wanted to?

It would be extremely difficult to find one buyer, let alone the several who would be required to achieve a break-up of the interests--and, having found them, would the situation be improved? Would journalists feel more secure? Would there be any guarantee that the new owners would not sell them off to less attractive buyers? Would the

process that led to the present concentration not repeat itself? Much of the present ownership pattern derives from economic necessity and the striking of deals to enter into joint operations to save costs.

Of course, selling to one buyer would not be a solution, anyway, because it would merely perpetuate the Anglo situation under another name. But who would be prepared to buy? It must be remembered that the one thing newspapers in this country have seldom had to fear was the dawn raid. There are very few commercial concerns with predator instincts in the newspaper market.

There is, of course, always the possibility that a new consortium with a dedication to newspapers could arise and become a powerful, if not politically irresistible, contender for ownership of part of the conglomerate, in which circumstance part of the desired diversity of ownership would be achieved.

But, until that happens, Anglo, Argus and Times Media will have to continue to give considerable thought to this issue. I have noted that the workshop dealing with this problem has taken the enlightened view that it will not be solved by nationalisation, but rather by exploring ways of increasing the number of publications.

When one talks about ownership, no one appears to be overly concerned about the concentration of holdings by the two Afrikaans groups, Nasionale Pers and Perskor-- maybe because the papers are seen to be National Party organs which place them in the same category as Die Patriot and Die Afrikaner with no real dedication to Press freedom.

However, one of the areas of their operations that they should be concerned about is their lucrative government contracts to print telephone directories and other government publications, profitable operations which provide a sound economic base for their less financially certain media operations.

A new government may not be so sanguine about allocating these contracts to the Afrikaans groups and may seek out other production houses and see it as a way to providing an economic base for the establishment of a new form of government-supporting Press.

One suspects that a critical eye will also be directed at the newspapers' interests in M-Net, which is seen in some quarters as an overly large cross-holding in media ownership. With the big groups declaring such handsome profits over the last few years while M-Net was struggling to get into the black, the argument that the service is a necessity to help newspapers make good revenues depreciated by the inroads of the SA Broadcasting Corporation into the advertising market, will be less convincing and a new government may well say that this shareholding should be re-distributed into more deserving hands seeking access to the media.

A lot has been said about subsidies, but without a great deal of substance. There have been frequent references to the Swedish model, which appears to be complicated and which may also suffer from the curse of the control board -- fat salaries, big cars, large expenses -- that Professor Gavin Stewart referred to.

In South Africa, with its propensity to manipulate structures for a particular political benefit, there is also the possibility that a subsidy system would be unashamedly used to further the cause of a particular political party. However, there are some simple forms of subsidy which may reduce the costs of operating media and which are, shall we say, standard and across the board such as occurs in France.

I'm thinking of tax rebates for journalists, reduced telephone and postage charges (such as the now defunct Press collect telegram system) and free air and rail transport (a limited version of this system still operates here). Of course, these come nowhere near meeting the enormous start-up costs of newspapers, but perhaps they could be extended into subsidised newsprint for any paper in its first year or two of existence. All these benefits would be aligned to formal registration (at a nominal fee) for newspapers so no judgmental decisions have to be taken which are always fraught with a degree of political favouritism.

Of course, the problem is who would pay for this--especially if SA Airways is privatised--and perhaps the answer lies in diverting some of the proceeds of arms sales, or placing a tax on arms sales, to cover these costs. One should bear in mind, of course, that these ideas also benefit the rich newspapers which will now become richer. This would, of course, provide these newspapers with the wherewithal to aid the smaller and alternative newspapers as they have promised to do.

But there is a case for an investigation being instituted into possible subsidy forms to aid fledgling newspapers. At the same time there could be an investigation into the production of Kenaf, a fibre which has been converted into newsprint in the United States on a limited experimental scale and which, because of its cheapness and ease of cultivation -- in the arid areas of the karoo -- could, it is contended, reduce the cost of newsprint, which is the single biggest cost factor in newspaper production.

In all these discussions about access to the media little is said about the advertising agencies--except the criticism that they have the power to make or break newspapers and occasionally, it is alleged, use it. But the basis of the agency system is a recipe for the rich to become richer and the poor to stay poor. The payment system favours the market leader. Advertising agencies charge sixteen-and-a-half percent commission on all advertising they place in the media and they are also paid a commission on the costs of producing the advertising material.

Although agencies strenuously deny that any consideration other than the require-

ments of their clients comes into their reckoning, they would be less than human if it escaped their notice that 16 1/2% commission on an advertisement for the Sunday Times brought them a lot more money than 16 1/2% commission for the same advertisement in, say, the Weekly Mail or Vrye Weekblad. And, of course, 16 1/2% on an ad for TV -- plus the commission on the very much higher production costs -- brings in even more.

The agencies and the newspapers argue that this is the fairest and best method of paying agencies for their services, but I believe that there is room for considering other formulas for payment. I should add that the newspaper groups will be the last to advocate this because none of them wishes to upset the agencies and all of them somewhere has a market-leader or two which benefits from the system. The question is simply: If the system was altered would there be a wider spread of the advertising cake and thus more viable newspapers?

One of the speakers lamented that there are almost no black sub-editors which means that ultimate control of what goes into newspapers is in the hands of whites. I agree that this is a serious deficiency and I would encourage every effort to train more black subs. But an even more important consideration in my mind is the lack of black managers in newspapers. Until recently, there was only one black newspaper manager in the country. Now we have black managers at New Nation and Work in Progress. But the reality of the situation is that if a black group wants to start a newspaper it has to turn to white management, marketing, distribution and advertising sales skills to get the business going. So, access to the media for the blacks could mean "on white terms". That's not on.

I noted that one of the speakers criticised the fact that there are only business journalism training courses. I'm not sure to what he was referring. There is a kind of business course at Business Day and, of course, I oversee a course at the Centre for Developing Business at Witwatersrand University. This course, which runs for a year, is funded by the Australian Government and is designed to produce black business journalists and black management trainees.

I believe that this is an important project for two reasons: The redistribution of wealth is going to be the single most important question facing this country and, I believe, that rank and file blacks will understand nothing of what is being said on the subject unless there are black journalists to interpret it for them through their papers. And, of course, the second leg of the scheme is to try to build up a cadre of black business managers so that in the new South Africa blacks will work on publications managed and run by blacks. All this points up the continuous crying need for more training of all kinds for black journalists.

But when one is aware of these deficiencies among blacks--and, of course, we are

aware that this has come about because of apartheid and the lack of education -- it is all the more disappointing that the ANC and other black organisations did not participate more fully in this conference. It is a great pity that we did not hear ANC media chief Pallo Jordan and the PAC's Benny Alexander on the views of their organisations on media questions. Does one place them into the same category as Times Media and the Afrikaans groups or does one view their absence as indicative of low priority interest in the issue of the media?

Whatever the reason, it is to be sadly regretted because if there is to be democracy in SA the new media will be shaped by discussions of this kind. It is noteworthy that the Conservative Party which has no reputation for flexibility of approach or willingness to exchange ideas except on its own terms has by its presence here accepted that it is important for it to make its views on the media known--and to sit down with the other CP while doing so.

Finally, I would like to thank Idasa for making this conference possible. The idea came from several sources at the same time--the SA Union of Journalists put it up as a formal proposal to the Campaign for Open Media, while Laurie Gandar, former editor of the Rand Daily Mail, put the idea to me and later to Harvey Tyson of The Star.

I am grateful to Alex Boraine for agreeing so readily to stage the conference -- we at COM were quick to realise that we did not have the experience or infrastructure, or the money, to run a conference -- and virtually giving us Beverley Haubrich and Liesel Naude to do the massive amount of organisational work. Their was a sterling performance.

Then my thanks to the people on the COM committee who wracked their brains over the subjects and speakers--SAUJ's Ruth Muller, on whom most of the burden fell, the ADJ's Libby Lloyd, Fawo's Michael Markowitz and the representatives of Mwasu.

Also, I join with Idasa in thanking the many participants, especially those who came from across the border and all of you for making this such a worthwhile operation.