

# The 1990 reforms and the alternative media in South Africa

P Eric Louw and Keyan Tomaselli

*The alternative press, which contributed so much to the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, found itself unprepared for a new role in the freer media environment after the lifting of the State of Emergency in February 1990. P Eric Louw and Keyan Tomaselli report on the financial, organisational and political difficulties now threatening the existence of the alternative press in South Africa.*

President F W de Klerk's Opening Address to Parliament on 2 February 1990 radically transformed South African (SA) politics. The government unbanned the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC), and the SA Communist Party (SACP). It lifted the State of Emergency which had been in place since 1986. The government thus lifted the bulk of media censorship. For the alternative presses, De Klerk's actions should have signalled the beginning of a growth period in a much freer environment. Sadly, however, these presses became victims of a fundamentally altered context for which they were largely ill-prepared.

At the beginning of 1990, the ANC, largely through the work of the United Democratic Front (UDF), had secured the largest constituency in the country, and alternative press support. Thus most analysts predicted that SA's political future would be ANC dominated. Though the National Party (NP) government's public image had dramatically improved both in SA and internationally, this Party had still to shake off the legacy of apartheid. The other players, both within and outside of Parliament, had neither the support nor the power of either the NP or ANC.

During 1990, however, the political landscape was radically transformed by an extraordinary shake-down of the contending parties. By mid-1991, De Klerk's reformed NP was the closest it had ever been to securing a workable formula for entrenching its 'white' constituency in power (albeit in a 'multi-racial' guise). In contrast, the ANC, despite the massive size of its support, had failed to organise either itself or its constituency. By

mid-1991, the alternative press was in serious financial trouble as a result of the withdrawal of subsidies by foreign governments and churches. The NP also proved very skillful in outmanoeuvring the ANC by 'releasing' reform in stages. The political agenda thus remained under the control of the ruling hegemony which drew the liberal English language press

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into its reformist political project. This was compounded by the ANC's inability to effectively mobilise the issues which had driven the UDF to success in the previous decade. This ANC weakness translated into a NP strength.

The 18 months following De Klerk's reform announcement saw the systematic weakening of the positions of both the ANC and its alternative press allies. How to organisationally integrate the ANC, MDM (Mass Democratic Movement) and SACP proved difficult. COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), in particular, began to distance itself from the 'politicians'. Unionists

argued that an independent labour movement would serve its socialist aims more effectively than direct involvement in an ANC-dominated alliance. Further, UDF activists were often excluded from positions reserved for returning exiles in the new ANC structure internal to the country. This proved costly because the former exiles brought with them neither the constituency-building skills nor the internal support so painstakingly developed by UDF organisers between 1983 and 1989. Not surprisingly then, the 1,600 delegates (representing grassroots sentiment) at the ANC's December 1990 Consultative Conference, expressed concern that the existing ANC leadership was 'getting it wrong'.

In the wake of the reforms, the ANC experienced enormous difficulties in developing mechanisms for communicating with, and organising its potential constituency, and for communicating to other constituencies. A number of factors gave rise to this. First, the ANC's constituency and the political structures failed to adjust from a 'liberation struggle' to a new style of politics appropriate to 'normal' and open political interaction. Further, sections of the ANC's constituency appeared to be beyond control. This was not only an ANC problem. Socially psychopathic groups and individuals crossing all races and political positions were bred by a decade of brutal civil war. Black townships, youth in particular, were highly radicalised, alienated from all authority, and prone to extreme elements within the military and police who wanted to sabotage reform, consistently undermined peace talks between the warring factions<sup>(1)</sup>.

A sad reflection on many alternative publications was their failure to critique the ANC's difficulty in adjusting to the post-reform era. Only the social democrat press, *Weekly Mail* and *Vrye Weekblad*, and left wing *Work in Progress*, tried to systematically tackle this

sensitive issue.

Secondly, by losing the 'image game', through a refusal to speak to the political centre through tactical use of appropriate discourse and choice of media, the ANC lost much middle ground support. This support had been forged during the 1980s to a Congress position by UDF activists. The failure of the alternative and left commercial presses like *South* and *New African* to build up a large readership base by 1990 meant that it was unable to assist the ANC to reach an audience of major significance. The readers reached were, in any case, the 'already converted'. But eventually this was the only media the ANC could rely upon. This was because during the first year of its unbanning the Congress alienated whatever support it might have had within the mainstream liberal press through, amongst other things, erratic and often extremely poor press relations. The result was that most South Africans continued to see the world only through the mainstream press and/or state broadcasting reports. To make matters worse, the mainstream press, through domestic and international news agencies, fed stories critical of the ANC to the overseas media. By squandering the image game at home, the ANC also lost credibility in the West. Since the alternative press, in turn, relied on Western funding to operate, the loss of prestige suffered by the Left only served to further curtail survival possibilities.

Thirdly, following the termination of funding by both the Western and Eastern blocs, the ANC experienced enormous problems funding its organisational programmes. This was a serious blow because none of the alternative papers had developed either effective management skills or financial self-sufficiency. All had remained dependent on donor charity through worldwide opposition to apartheid. Further, the Church was also becoming less keen to fund 'alternatives' because it now saw apartheid as a policy of the past. Even the most viable of the alternatives, the *Weekly Mail*, ran into serious trouble because of the ill-fated attempt to launch the *Daily Mail* in mid-1990<sup>(2)</sup>. Only *UmAfrika*, whose financial position had improved dramatically by 1990, and whose *raison d'être* was not solely political, seemed set to survive the epoch of the 80s.

The threat of funding being cut off, plus the government's outmanoeuvring the ANC, produced sufficient demoralisation in 'alternative newsrooms' to cause some attrition in staff. Ultimately, it seems the alternative press was a 1980s phenomenon. It was a

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press born of the popular (UDF) phase of the struggle against apartheid. It served this struggle well, but ironically the success of this struggle brought about a reformed South Africa that no longer appeared to have a place for the alternative press. Its effective time ran from the birth of Cape Town's *Grassroots* in 1980 to De Klerk's February 1990 speech. Once real fundamental reform was set in motion, the *raison d'être* of the alternative press was effectively curtailed. De Klerk's February 1991 Opening Address to

Parliament simply confirmed the fact that the end of an era had been reached. Max du Preez, editor of the *Vrye Weekblad*, summed up the 'demise' of this press genre during an SABC interview dealing with the transformation of *Vrye Weekblad* from an Afrikaans alternative newspaper into a bilingual magazine. He said: 'It is yesterday's cause to be an alternative newspaper'. ■

NOTES

- (1) R E Tomaselli. 'Media Images of South African Violence: South Africa's "Hidden Hand"', *Covert Action* No 36 (1991), 22-26.  
 (2) H Grange, 'Why did the *Daily Mail* fold?' *The Journalist*, (November 1990) pp6-7.

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## Vatican launches information service

The Vatican has launched its own news service, the Vatican Information Service (VIS). Subscribers to VIS can call up information by computer or have it faxed to them. The daily three-page news bulletin is produced in English and Spanish and further translations are planned.

VIS lists the people who have had an audience with the Pope, the names of new bishops, and summaries of papal addresses.

Officially introduced on 25 May 1991, rumours had been circulating about the new service for months.

There is much speculation about why the Vatican has introduced the new service. One reason given is that the Vatican wishes to transmit up to date, reliable information on papal addresses and activities to bishops throughout the world, not only to keep them informed, but to help them react critically and effectively to local press reports on the Vatican. Not every bishop can listen to Radio Vatican

and the *Osservatore Romano* is only delivered days after publication to Mozambique or the Fiji Islands.

VIS comes onto the market at a time when Vatican prelates are becoming increasingly annoyed at the aspects of papal speeches picked up by both the Italian and foreign media.

But however strong their faith and loyalty to the Church, VIS editors have the same problems in seeking objectivity as their colleagues outside the Vatican: they also have to choose what to focus on and how to organise it into a short, comprehensible and correct article.

In end effect, VIS is a Vatican PR mouthpiece and is not likely to replace the work of secular or Church media.

VIS director is Vatican press spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls. The office manager is Italian/Argentinian Pietro Vrunori, who is assisted by two editors: Fernando Monge Sanchez for Spanish and Joan Lewis for English.

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