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Methodology & Concepts

IN A NUTSHELL

This chapter outlines how information was collected and analysed. Terms are defined and the general scoping of the study to cover market development explained. The market development model adopted has important consequences for printing, distribution, circulation and marketing in the grassroots sector. It is up to the MDDA to decide where to prioritise its support.

The aim was to define problems that could be solved through collective action; by the MDDA; or by means of alliances with other sectors and organisations.

OUR methodology was simply designed to define problems and seek solutions for them. We approached key informants for their insights; drew lessons from case studies; read and analysed articles and documentary evidence about the small print sector; compiled a database of issues; searched the Internet and corresponded with international experts and organisations; and brainstormed the findings. The aim was to define problems that could be solved through collective action; by the MDDA; or by means of alliances with other sectors and organisations. The research ranged over a very wide front and was necessarily eclectic in method. From the start, it was clear that a great deal of research had already been done into the grassroots media here and abroad, and the best thing we could do would be to pull it together and spell out the lessons.

Special aspects

This chapter deals mainly with terms and concepts in the Report but first we draw attention to three special aspects of the research: hard data, model building, and the digital divide.

Hard data

The major pointers in research were drawn from key informants, that is knowledgeable and experienced people, at home and abroad, who told us about the typical or specific problems of grassroots publishing and suggested solutions to them. Of 313 emails sent to publishers & others, 177 were returned with informative replies, amounting to roughly 56%. We analysed the replies into categories and captured the information in an “issues database”. Of the total of 319 entries, 39 were detailed interviews, 42 dealt with case studies, and roughly 50 covered international models or useful examples; the rest were concerned with research tools, data, organisational practices, sector activities, the role of the MDDA, and media industry contacts.

Another database has been developed (though it remains incomplete) containing the fullest list we have been able to obtain of community publications of all types, from grassroots to municipal and corporate commercial newspapers. One of our recommendations is that a self-completion database be placed online for all publishers to enter or check their details, and that it be widely publicised. This is probably the only way that a more complete profile of the whole community print media industry can be obtained.

Model building

Reference was made in the Introduction to our scenarios brainstorming exercise, in which we tried to forecast what might happen to the grassroots press in future and suggest ways to guide the sector towards optimal outcomes. The scenarios led us to model-building. Modelling almost always produced innovative thinking, and we were not disappointed in this case -- but we were left with a sense of how limited the resources of the grassroots sector are, even with the backing of the MDDA.

One of the most challenging ideas in the grassroots sphere is the suggestion that proforma templates could be put together to show publishers, step by step, how to handle critical functions. How-to-do-it tip sheets would set out standard operating procedures for each major function in the business, from getting printer quotes on spec sheets to running a distribution system to undertaking market research. This sort of guidance is necessary and we strongly recommend that a start be made.

Our modelling drew attention to the need to limit template-writing to what is practical. We have not tried to draw up templates ourselves, as the the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) says it is working on the principle of a “newspaper in a box”. Technically, this is an exciting challenge. Elsewhere in the Report, we take up this theme, speculating that a kind of public model “newspaper franchise” could arise, using software platforms and rather like the “wizards” used in simple design programmes. Franchising principles do imply a set format for publication development, though, like retail franchises, the resources of the franchisee and local circumstances may dictate changes to the formula. A newspaper franchise, combining proven systems with mentoring, would be an ideal

Publishing is highly complex, and emergent publishers would benefit from a set of how-to-do-it templates, though these will take time to develop.

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solution for start-ups. It could trade funding for compliance. It would entail disciplined implementation of the templates provided by the MDDA or agents on its behalf. Each franchisee would have to be monitored and progress benchmarked. This would be an enormously ambitious undertaking, requiring highly detailed systems development and business administration to put the tools to good use. It is unlikely to be something that the MDDA itself could undertake.

In any case, it is hard to see how a fully operational newspaper could really come out of a box – there are too many variables, both in the setting up of a publication, and in the unique features of the local communities to be served. The AIP recognises this and has sketched a flexible and modular system on a pick-and-mix basis. We concluded that the most direct approach for now would be to put together working templates on an Internet portal to which publishers and trainers would have ready access. This forms part of our Recommendations on the setting up of an Internet portal for the grassroots, and here we have drawn up a proposed architecture for the portal.

IT an absolute priority

Mention of an Internet portal raises the question whether grassroots publishers and their staffs have access to computers and networks. A limited but fairly representative survey of some 23 publishers conducted by us at the September 2005 MDDA Roundtable on print revealed that only 20% had networks in their offices; a further 55% had computers (of varying quality) and could gain access to the Internet and email via dialups or Internet cafes; but 25% per cent had little or no IT or Internet of their own and were sharing systems with others not on their premises. The reality is that only 1 in 5 publishers could be regarded as fully connected – the rest are in the digital wilderness to a greater or lesser degree. Rural and peri-urban publishers are the most excluded.

This is a fundamentally crippling state of affairs publishers in the modern age. It has to be rectified by all means necessary: by seeking countrywide sponsorship from major corporations or aid organisations for IT hardware and software; by getting the telecoms companies to support network installations at low rates; by providing technical backup and training for users. We are convinced that

lack of connectivity plays a large part in the disadvantaged situation of grassroots publishers and it can only get worse as corporates and local government enter community publishing with the IT resources at their disposal.

Closing the IT gap is an absolute priority for the MDDA and its allies. As some of our key recommendations are for Internet-based services, peer communications, and syndication networks, the lack of connectivity is obviously of major concern. We cannot see a way to attack the systemic problems of the grassroots press without using computers and networking. Disseminating training materials and templates, running management and accounting systems, making up publications and the transfer content to printers, capturing distribution figures and payments, projecting circulation data, and much more, simply cannot be competitively handled without IT. The entire media industry is on the digital highway; the small independent publishers cannot follow a separate path. We make no apology for insisting that the sector needs an Internet portal because, quite frankly, unless networking is in place the grassroots might as well stop trying to do a professional job.

Lack of access to fast and functional IT networks is fundamentally crippling for any publisher in the modern age, so this problem of grassroots exclusion from the digital highway has to be solved, soon.

Conceptual framework

Any methodology must take as its point of departure certain concepts and terminologies that give direction to the inquiry. In this section, therefore, we outline

- how we came to understand the problems
- the concepts that we brought to bear, and
- difficulties of conceptualisation and definition.

Printing, distribution and circulation, and funding are intimately connected in the story of the rise and growth of the grassroots press. It is significant that these four factors are what the MDDA has identified as crisis areas in community publishing today, because with the arrival of democracy in South Africa several of the underpinnings of newspapers representing communities fell away. They included ready access to printing presses, popular demand for mass democratic movement papers, assured circulation and no real need to undertake marketing.

The “community press” consists of at least four types of newspapers and magazines:

- Commercial papers owned by major groups such as Caxtons and Media24;
- Municipal, provincial and central government publications aimed at communities;
- Small independent publishers who are either in business to make a profit or are community-based and driven by social agendas; and
- A range of other players including publications by churches, universities, NGOs in health and agriculture, and even tourism services supporting community newsheets.

Business was never the primary criterion of grassroots survival

Of the four categories, the third group is the most able to speak freely and report from inside sources about community issues: independent publishers are answerable to their readers for honest and outspoken coverage. We call them the “grassroots press”. Although many of them have appeared only since 1994, this sector of the press is arguably one of the oldest in the country. It had its origins in the Church press of mid 19th century, followed by newspapers aimed at the working class as the economy developed. The fact that Christian churches invested in printing presses and had distribution through the faithful encouraged them to start newspapers. Labour unions, later, also had presses or bought time with printing jobbers to publish their own newspapers. Once again, a member network supported distribution.

The current “grassroots” press in South Africa has arisen from the alternative press of the anti-apartheid Struggle era, as well as from new entrepreneurship and independent printing and publishing in cities, towns and rural areas across the country. It

is almost impossible to generalise about the quality, aims and sustainability of these print media, although we do know that number of individual titles runs into many hundreds.

There are successful papers and mere survivors; titles directed at the poor in the townships and others aiming at affluent suburbanites; champions of gender rights and voices of the disabled; papers in vernacular African languages, Afrikaans, and English; Muslim, Christian and Jewish mouthpieces amongst other religious periodicals; reading matter for taxis and malls; youth culture magazines and conventional local records; some with columns filled with vibrant news and views, others crammed with advertising and poor editorial.

The sector displays enormous dynamism, though unfortunately much of it lacks business sense. Those who are sponsored by parent organisations remain fortunate in that they can count on reader loyalty and an existing infrastructure to disseminate their papers. Those born into the new era of marketing-to-survive have no such good fortune and must establish their right to exist through popular editorial, timeous delivery, data proving their reach into the community, and promotions to keep their brand in the eye of the beholders.

In the past, not much advertising was sought or needed for these newspapers. During the anti-apartheid struggle there were many community print media and community news sources, legal or illegal, backed by foreign funding, but when funding dried up in the early 1990s most ceased to exist.

Today, community newspapers are growth segments in the mass media but as the World Association of Newspapers noted in its 2006 report:

Some provinces (such as the Western Cape and Gauteng) are publishing their own local news sheets, which could soon begin to attract advertising revenue away from newspapers.¹

For its part, the AIP has criticised the MDDA and government for backing new “greenfields” publications which it says are

often in direct competition with existing grassroots titles [and] the rise of State-funded publications in already contested markets – both of which often fatally fragment marginal revenue pies.²

Selling advertising is only one of the demands that new publishers must face. Unless they can recreate the wonderful old popular distribution networks based on community enthusiasm – and prove through research that they are reaching the multitude – they will perish.

¹ WAN - World Press Trends 2006, Country report: South Africa. World Association of Newspapers (WAN) published through PMSA. Contact Cathy Pestana, Manager : Industry Affairs

² AIP Census 2006.

Competitive business factors have militated against the success of new black-owned or black-run print media ventures, particularly in a country where there is a combination of low literacy levels and huge distances separating modest populations.

The problems

The problems of this sector have been well documented over the years; the difficulty has been to find viable solutions to them. Despite the attention given to community print media in official pronouncements and mainstream press remarks, change in this sector has been slow. It is not surprising that the MDDA commissioned this study of printing, distribution, circulation and marketing. Problems of a longstanding nature remain unsolved.

In 1998, in a collection of essays on the state of the media, Clive Emdon, then director of the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT) – an industry initiative to assist small media and in this sense a predecessor of the MDDA – argued that

Competitive business factors have militated against new black-owned or black-run print media ventures succeeding, particularly in a country where there is a combination of low literacy levels and huge distances separating modest populations...In addition, press capacity is limited for newcomers because they would face enormous costs to enter the market. Where they have succeeded, advertising revenue has remained low because of their relatively impoverished mass readership.¹

Emdon recommended that in the print field there was a clear need for accessing proper finance to stimulate the growth of new independent community newspapers and magazines. This would involve building capacity for managerial skilling, printing and publishing, marketing and distribution, and would empower the community along with the smaller independent commercial print media. Subsequent commentators have added more detail to the picture but essentially it has remained unchanged.

Definitional issues

What has become clearer is that the very definition of the sector is at issue, since the terms “commercial” and “community” as applied to small media may serve to conceal more than they reveal. Lack of clarity over the meaning of “the Small Commercial and Community Print Media Sector” in SA became a major issue of discussion at the Roundtable on grassroots print media convened by the MDDA in May 2006 to discuss aspects of our preliminary Report. It emerged that the definition of the grassroots prints sector - who comprises it, how they qualify as stakeholders - is contested.

The scoping of this Report was initially dictated by the Terms of Reference (TOR in Appendices) received when the contract was undertaken. The TOR focus mainly on the institutions of the marketplace. At the MDDA Roundtable in May 2006, a second document (“Objectives of Research” in Appendices) was produced from our Service Level Agreement. Although not labelled Terms of Reference, the second document was treated as such by MDDA representatives at the Roundtable. Inevitably, there was confusion; but our approach has been to consider both the TOR and the Objectives together in attempting to draw up the final scoping of this Report. We came to the conclusion that both documents emphasised the market in relation to printing, distribution, circulation, advertising and related issues. Hence, a market development approach has been adopted.

MDDA’s strategy

We have formulated our recommendations in line with the MDDA’s current strategic outlook. The latter was expressed in a strategic plan presented to Parliament in 2006². It showed that since January 2004, the MDDA had given R20,3m support to small media, from public/private sector funding. Of the 97 projects listed, 50 were in print media, of which 24 were classed as “community” and 26 as “commercial” publishers. This high proportion of funded print projects reflects the importance that the MDDA places on community print media. In conjunction with the funding, the MDDA has also funded research such as the current Report dealing with challenges to the print sector.

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The term grassroots press is used – and seems to have been broadly accepted – as the label for newspapers and magazines that are designed and run within local communities and are not owned by mainstream media chains.

Highlighting sector problems, the report to Parliament mentioned high distribution and printing costs; the impact of competition on diversity (it was not specified what this impact is); the need for a database of grassroots publications; the challenge of producing newspapers in indigenous languages; representation of women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly in media; and representation of gay and lesbian issues in the media. The MDDA said it would continue to provide support in the form of grants in response to applications and would seek to build stronger provincial media.

Key concepts

We define three levels at which necessary interventions should take place to improve the chances of publisher success: *micro* (enterprise), *meso* (sector) and *macro* (national and even international) levels. Within these levels, fundamental strategies should include the provision of *infrastructure* (finance, training, technology, and so on), aggregation (combining the strengths of publishers), *synergies* (working with the media industry and other partners), *empowerment* (transformation of the sector through the creation of black businesses), *networking* (human and information technology connections), and *innovation* (new approaches to take advantage of gaps in publishing). All of these concepts have to do with effectively extending support for print media diversity and development.

Terms used

The term *grassroots press* is used – and seems to have been broadly accepted – to describe the newspapers and magazines that are designed to be accessible and relevant to local communities but are not owned by mainstream media chains. We refer to the grassroots press as a *sector* of the media, distinct from, say, the corporate commercial community press sector.

Throughout the report, the terms “community” “-publishing”, “-publisher”, “-publication”, “-newspaper”, “-magazine”, “-print media” and so on refer to the independent small publishers, either profit-seeking or non-profit entities, that make up the sector. The terms “mainstream” and “corpo-

rate” refer to publications owned by major companies. Our discussion of the scope of this sector outlines the difficulties of deciding where the line is to be drawn between “independent” and other community publications such as those managed by NGOs to report on their affairs.

For reasons to be explained, the scope of this Report is confined to “independent” community print media (whether they call themselves commercial or not) which are common carriers of news and views and do not report to a higher body such as an NGO or donor board. This is in line with the conventional definition of mass media as being independent of government, civic organisations, or other interest groups in a plural society. We do not in principle exclude these other media from the ambit of the sector – far from it, but (as explained below) we interpreted our Terms of Reference as not applying to them. We are aware that the definition remains problematic and have recommended that a National Community Publishers Forum (NCPF) should include stakeholders from all parts of the sector. This would facilitate the development of a broad consensual understanding of the composition and role of “community print media”.

The terms “entrepreneurship” and venture, enterprise, business or marketable publication imply a strong orientation towards the market and profit-seeking behaviour. The grassroots sector is not limited to publications of this type, as it can include religious, student, NGO, and other mouthpieces.

Levels of action

Micro-meso-macro links are critical because many crucial problems occur because of a disconnect between policies, regulatory controls, services and people’s lives, particularly poor people and those who are socially excluded. The MDDA and its office bearers need to remain sensitive to these connections while exercising functions at any of the levels.

- Micro level interventions refer to the actions recommended for the individual publication, seen as a venture or enterprise in independent hands.
- Meso level actions encompass the entire the sector of grassroots publishing (and may have spinoffs for community radio), in various regions and throughout the country.

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- Macro level interventions occur in the national and even international context affecting the grassroots press and probably other sectors of the media industry at the same time.

All three levels provide scope for enabling mechanisms to empower publishers and improve their chances of success – not to create a culture of dependency but to stimulate new ideas and dynamic action at the enterprise level.

Maret Development Approach

As explained in our Introduction, we have adopted market development as the only practicable one in current circumstances, but we regard it as contributing to human development, albeit with serious shortcomings. Thus we temper the market approach with the caution that all development efforts by the MDDA and its partners or allies should be made to include those who lie “outside” the formal market. An inclusive approach will draw in those concerned with human values rather than simply wealth creation.

That said, we have to recognise that survivalism is the mode of many community publications in South Africa today. This is especially so of those born in townships and rural areas during the post-apartheid era, when overseas funding has dried up and publishers must make a go of it in the market-place or fold. But it is also the case that even publications which have been around for years, and have a good base of skills, are constantly confronted by survival choices. They have no option but to pursue market strategies.

A strong body of opinion among small independent publishers maintains that the market approach is the only sensible one for the grassroots press in South Africa today. This view was most firmly expressed by Christoff Oosthuyzen, publisher of BigNews for the Business Owner (which has received grant support from the MDDA):

The community enterprise and accountability

IS THERE such a thing as a “community enterprise?” Yes, according to John Pearce in *At the heart of the community economy*¹. Pearce describes community enterprise as a mechanism for undertaking a range of local tasks, mixing the commercial with the social, the profitable with the non-profitable but operating always within the framework of the market and within the parameters of business efficiency.

Pearce’s nomenclature helps to distinguish some essential characteristics of small community-based publishing enterprises as distinct from small commercial publishing enterprises:

Objectives: the primary purpose is to inform, educate and entertain readers in the community by tackling economic, social and environmental issues, as well as arts, culture and sport by publishing newspapers and magazines.

Use of profits: to reinvest in the enterprise and for setting up other community enterprises and projects.

Assets: The assets of an enterprise are owned in trust for the community and may not be realised in any way to make personal financial gain for staff or board members.

Remuneration: Be made to cover the essential costs of running a publication including the cost of production; rent, phones, Internet, electricity; and the salaries/wages of people working on the publication. Also included are the costs of

meetings and transport for Board or management members; the purchase and maintenance of equipment and vehicles; furniture and the purchase of materials.

Accountability: The enterprise is structured to ensure that members of the community which the publication has been established to serve, have a major role in influencing the controlling the affairs of the enterprise. This is done through the establishment of a Board representative of community members and organisations.

The community enterprise concept has been criticised for failing to take account of the real politics of community life in which parties or groups edge out others and take control. Critics also say that community-based organisations will run inefficiently unless business people predominate in management and have the ear of the Board. But a representative Board would include educators, women, youth organisations, NGOs, churches and so on – making it difficult to conduct “business as usual”.

¹ Pearce, John – *At the Heart of the Community Economy: Community Enterprise in a Changing World*.1993. Gulbenkian Foundation, London.

Market mechanisms now largely dictate how publishers approach their work – whether they regard themselves as profit-making or not. But we should not exclude those who lie outside the formal market.

Excuse me if I sound a bit too passionate about these things, but I've been working in the community media sector for ten years and then as an independent small publisher for ten years, while at the same time seeing how small business owners struggle to make their businesses work, with programmes that are suppose to help them keeping on the failure route. I'll hold thumbs for the MMDA to get it right.³

Oosthuyzen explains that what is considered best practice in business development currently is known as the market development approach. "The trick is not to determine too rigidly what you perceive the problems in the market are and set up programmes that distort the market." Accordingly, business interventions by bodies like the MDDA should:

- Be on the non-transactional level,
- Develop & stimulate the market, then exit,
- Assist supply (market research, technical assistance to BDS service providers, product development, information), and
- Assist demand (cluster businesses, linkages with markets, tender & procurement advice & communication).

Research shows that the market development approach has significant backing internationally and in this country. According to a World Bank / International Labour Organisation / German Agency for Technical Cooperation report on "guiding principles for donor intervention"⁴ in the small business sector, the market development approach is based on a private sector-led, market economy framework. This reflects "a fundamental belief in the principles of a market economy, where the State has a role in providing an enabling environment, in correcting or compensating for market failures, and in the provision of public goods, but not in the direct provision of private goods that can be more efficiently provided by the market". It is also assumed that the majority of business enterprises are in private hands. There is an expectation that with appropriate product design, delivery and payment mechanisms, business development services can be provided on a commercial basis even for the lowest-income segment of the entrepreneurial SE sector.

But in a paper responding to the guidelines as applied to local economic development (LED) in South Africa, Doug Hindson and Valerie Vicente-Hindson remark “the most problematic feature of the Guidelines is in defining the (central) state as its driver”⁵. They go on:

This runs against the intentions of the Constitution, and much international experience, where LED is strongly associated with decentralised governance. We argued that if LED is to remain state-driven, it is likely to reproduce many of the past weaknesses, leading to wastage of public resources and frustration in the business sector. We have suggested a different approach which centres on local actors and their resources, working with higher levels of government and the wide range of other external actors that are now playing key roles in LED. These include international donors, non-governmental and community based organisations linked globally and private sector governance organisations. Getting them together, defining their roles in joint development programmes and partnerships is one of the key tasks for LED practitioners in South Africa and elsewhere.

Without getting into details of the debate, suffice to say that the emphasis on local actors is correct and necessary for the small print media in South Africa. Government, the private sector, and external players can and should be drawn into supporting the efforts of the publishers themselves, although the prime responsibility for the success of any enterprise lies with those who set up and run it.

Market and society

Since the fall of apartheid, donor funding and other forms of goodwill support for small publications has shrunk. Market mechanisms now largely dictate how publishers approach their work – whether they regard themselves as profit-making or not. At the May 2006 Roundtable on print media convened by the MDDA to discuss aspects of this Report, so-called “commercial” publishers belonging to the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) argued that most were essentially non-

Government, the private sector, and external players can and should be drawn into supporting the efforts of the sector although the prime responsibility for the success of any enterprise lies with those who set up and run it.

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profit making – at least under current conditions in the print industry. Whether they were labeled “for profit” or “not for profit” the fact was that very few could regard themselves as sustainable profit-making enterprises.

As far as “non-commercial” media are concerned, a study by Trusha Reddy on NGOs and commercialisation in post-apartheid South Africa says “various literatures uncover that commercialisation arose out of a need for NGOs to remain relevant and survive financially in the dynamic post-Apartheid set-up”⁶. Reddy, however, argues that although it was realistic of some NGOs to adopt commercialism,

the findings indicate that commercialization has changed the mindset of the NGOs from being guided by a social mission and set of values to becoming a for-profit entity. As such, they have become contractors to the international system and agenda and consultants by another name. Therefore their status as an NGO is severely compromised. The findings also found that non-commercialised NGOs such as IBR forged on bravely into the post-Apartheid era contributing positively to development and challenging the status quo. However much they suffer from a lack of management skills or resources, their commitment and passion to their cause makes them far more efficient/effective than commercialised NGOs. (From the Abstract)

At the May 2006 Roundtable some participants would definitely have agreed with this position. The market, in their view, cannot be seen as the be-all and end-all of independent publishing in contemporary South Africa: far broader public interest agendas are possible. Print media that do not accept that business methods and income generating activities are strictly necessary for the success of a newspaper or magazine may have other criteria for success – for example, influence on local government policy-making. The viability of a publication may not depend on bank finance or turnover, but may be underwritten by donor funding or community contributions. The market remains impor-

tant for all publications but they do not have to be profit seeking in order to remain relevant to their communities. There is room for further debate - as the “Perspective” box on the previous page suggests.

Scoping the research

In spite of much that has been said and written about it as a South African phenomenon, the nature of the community press is far from clear. Yet it is crucial. This has necessitated a scoping exercise on our part.

Framing the community print media as a sector in its own right is no easy matter. Because of the origins of community publishing in South Africa, from diverse roots in Struggle newspapers, the Alternative Press, religious, labour and other civil society mouthpieces, and fully commercial freesheets, it proved difficult to know how to apply the terms “community” and “commercial”. There was, and is, considerable crossover between activism and entrepreneurship, with the term “community” being adopted by strictly non-commercial organs and moneymaking enterprises alike. Some of our key informants maintained that “independent” (ie non-corporate) newspapers and magazines appearing within a local area were “community” papers whether or not they aimed for profit or were non-profit. Others at the MDDA roundtable and in discussions were dead-set against this blurring of the boundaries.

Market overview

We took our lead from the emphasis placed in the TOR on the context of a market overview and opportunities, urging us to examine the associated advertising trends, opportunities, stakeholder views, competition, and challenges in the marketplace. The TOR made general reference to the need to canvass the views of “key civil society” bodies including the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP), the National Community Radio Forum, and others at the grassroots. We were also advised to seek the views of the GCIS, the Department of Communications, other state agencies and key parastatals, along with the “Big 5” ad agencies and marketing groups, and key civil society

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bodies. Then followed a list of the competition to be assessed, including major commercial arms such as NAB and Ads24. Capro was listed in this context - although we doubt that it is truly “competition” and there is evidence that publishers regard it as complimentary and perhaps one of the best marketing options for the grassroots. Discussions around the TOR led us to believe that the many organisations and interest groups mentioned after the “market overview” were seen as contributing to the overall picture of market conditions and grassroots press viability.

To us, the intention of the TOR were unmistakable – it was to investigate and report on the conditions in the media market as they affected printing, distribution, circulation & marketing of “grassroots” community newspapers and magazines. Research got under way and we prepared a preliminary presentation to the MDDA Roundtable on Print, held in Johannesburg during May 2006. We offered the term “grassroots” publications (and -press, -publishers, -print media etc) as both a descriptor and readily understandable metaphor for the sector. There was no demur on the use of the term, but plenty of disagreement about what the sector actually comprises and what its boundaries are. At this point, two main, contending, schools of thought emerged on what should be the scope of the report and indeed what the landscape of the community press looks like.

Mass media definition

On the one hand was the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) representing several hundred commercial and non-profit newspapers and magazines across the country. Although these publications are not part of the corporate media, they are recognisably members of the “mass media” in a conventional sense. They are common carriers of news and views from the local area that they serve, covering news, crusading on issues, and exposing scandals. They are intended to be open to many points of view and ideally their only real agenda is loyalty to the community.

AIP representatives put the view that those who qualify as independent publishers are editorially independent print media which are not owned by media conglomerates. In principle, this rules out of the “grassroots” all of the Caxtons, Media24, Independent Newspapers and Johnnic titles which are corporate commercial community papers. The term “independent” would also, it might appear, rule

out publications controlled in some way as the mouthpieces of organisations serving non-editorial ends. Publications serving NGOs and civic organizations could be disqualified, but the line is not clear-cut as there are NGO publications belonging to the AIP.

It can be argued that many NGOs and civic organisations operate as independent groups. In rural areas they are likely to be the only organisations that can get it together to publish a newspaper that reflects a local agenda. They often include the articulate members of communities that are activist enough to start a newspaper. Clearly they are at the other end of the spectrum from individual entrepreneurship but still notable as recorders of social reality and passionate about giving voice to communities.

Wider definitions

On the other hand were those who believe the net must be cast far wider. A cluster calling itself the “Red Group” (as distinguished from other colour-coded discussion groups but also, apparently, more left-wing) emerged at the May 2006 Roundtable. They argued for inclusion of thousands of NGOs, CBOs, labour and other civic organisations which in one way or another publish their views in print media. Publications emanating from these bodies are not generally regarded as “mass media” but rather as in-house or subscription-type media that promote the aims of their parent organizations. The news agenda is defined by their mission and they are not common carriers.

There was no-one to argue the case for municipal media (although attempts had been made prior to the Roundtable to bring in representatives). So the question whether official publications also form part of the community press was left unanswered. AIP spokespersons, however, strongly rejected the idea, adding that municipal media in particular were drawing away readers and advertisers that should be going to the independent community publishers.

Thousands of NGOs, CBOs, labour and other civic organisations publish their views in print media which are generally not regarded as ‘mass media’ but rather as in-house or member subscription type media.

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What ties both the narrower and the wider definitions of community publications together, however, is that they inhabit the public sphere. Whether or not they are “mass” or “membership” driven, they contribute to public awareness and debate, and prompt a sense of citizenship.

Huge constituency

We took the criticism of our scoping seriously and investigated further. Civil society is understood here as including voluntary, self-constituted organisations which are largely autonomous from but interacting with the state and bound by a shared set of rules.

Amongst the key civic organisations not mentioned in the TOR was Sanco, SA National Civics Organisation, along with the country’s major labour grouping, Cosatu – nor indeed were any other unions, non-media federations or foundations, churches, and so on. Sanco’s website boasts more than six million members, many of whom are undoubtedly reached by newsletters and other media. It is true that some skepticism has been expressed over Sanco’s claim to size of membership. “As a national body which claims 4300 branches in fifty-six regions and a potential membership of 6.3 million... but does not have the resources to support these broadly contested claims, there is no single portrait of Sanco which can fully represent the diversity, multiplicity and contradictions of the larger organisation and its local branches.”⁷

Whether Sanco’s active membership is really as large as 6 million or not, there is no doubt that it does represent a huge constituency. The figure takes on new importance when compared with a figure we arrived at for the readership market for the grassroots press. Based on the formula, Circulation times estimated Readers Per Copy (C x RPC) we arrived at a total readership of the commercial and non-profit community print media today as being in the region of at least 7 million and perhaps as many as 12 million depending on the RPC estimate.

Obviously there would be an overlap between these readers and Sanco’s members. However, many Sanco members, and those of other civic associations, unions and federations, might be missed by the print media included in the narrower definition of community publications. This is not to

mention the millions of members of religious groupings reached by the mouthpieces of their faiths; and, of course, the residents of municipalities and provinces, the citizens of the whole country, targeted by official newspapers.

The outcome of this review is that “community press” audiences may be expanded by many millions to include virtually everyone in the country! The problem is not so much where to draw the line, as to how to prioritise the MDDA’s support role in relation to the publications that reach this vast reader base. In principle there can be no dispute about the fact that everyone lives in a geographic community, no matter where, and that the publications that reach them are all engaged in some way with the public sphere.

Perhaps a key distinguishing feature (familiar in the broadcasting sphere) is that the local community press is concerned with geographical communities while the civil society mouthpieces express communities of interest around civic freedoms, labour matters, religious faiths, and local government. But two questions arise. Was the MDDA set up to help all of the media falling under these different institutional umbrellas? Or was its ambit circumscribed by its composition, representing mass media in partnership with government?

The question is moot because on the answer could hinge the extent of the MDDA’s interventions in the community print sector and all that this will entail. If thousands of organisations are included in the definition of community print media, this correspondingly means that printing, technology, distribution, market research and advertising in the sector will cover a much broader field. It does not necessarily mean that the MDDA is committed to far higher funding costs. Aggregation between sector members themselves could occur on a massive scale, and synergies between the community press and wider economic interests would have far greater pulling power. The benefits could be considerable, opening up possibilities for shared initiatives such as bulk buying of paper to bring down costs. But are sheer numbers alone all that this is about?

The benefits of a broadly inclusive definition could be considerable: the sector will gain mass, adding weight to shared initiatives such as bulk buying of paper to bring down costs.

Recognise that the distinction between profit-making and non-profit publications is somewhat artificial and that a better characterisation is needed.

Priorities needed

These are not questions we can even begin to resolve, though we have certain suggestions regarding prioritisation. Projects have been guided by the mission spelt out for the MDDA at its launch. Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad was quoted saying that the MDDA's joint funding efforts would benefit not only community media but also the major media groups because it would establish a culture of reading, thus broadening the audience base for the mainstream media. This does not rule out the audiences of civic and other media but it does strongly imply that the focus should in the first place fall on publications that form part of "the media". We take this to include mainstream and alternative print, broadcasting and Internet media operating in the marketplace and surviving on advertising and sales.

Principles

A decision in principle has to be taken by the MDDA whether the organisations and vast constituencies referred to by the "Red Group" do fall under the statutory mandate. If so, this will dramatically widen the perception of the how the community press is recognised, described, supported and researched. Perhaps it will help that this Report, when it goes online, may stimulate debate around the terminologies. The process of review will continue as grassroots publishers and others in the media industry as a whole, make their contributions.

Uncertainty over how to define the "grassroots press" is a product of deep divisions of opinion. Given the nature of the dispute – which partly ideological, having to do with basic ideas about social values, and partly practical, relating to how to finance, manage and run a publication – we do not see it as our role to legislate for the sector by declaring that the market approach is the only viable one. But it is the primary one in current circumstances: there is indeed no alternative.

We propose that the MDDA adopt certain principles in deciding how and where to intervene to achieve the greatest likelihood of success in the sector.

- Recognise that the distinction between profit-making and non-profit publications is somewhat artificial and that a better characterization is needed. Our proposal is that publications should be roughly classified according to where they stand on the curve of development, from start-up to fully sustainable. The following chapter on the S-Curve identifies five phases (start-up, continuing start-up, survivalist, early sustainable and fully sustainable), and suggests how interventions should be undertaken for each phase and prioritised generally. This sidesteps the semantic argument over “commercial” versus “community” ventures and introduces objective measures and procedures to deal with typical problems in each phase.
- Defend and ring-fence the MDDA’s investment of time, mentoring and money in publications which have received its support. It would seem senseless for the MDDA to back the growth and development of smaller publications only to see them snapped up by corporate predators as soon as they show signs of success and sustainability. This issue is taken up in the chapter on Recommendations, since we are concerned here only with matters of definition. A real distinction has to be made between corporate commercial community media (ie suburban and township newspapers owned by the mainstream media) and grassroots publications of all kinds, which are not in the mainstream stables.

The following chapters propose both specific and holistic solutions to common problems.

Conclusion

Our methodology has been designed to find specific, as well as holistic, solutions to the endemic problems affecting the survival chances of grassroots publications. Specifically, Chapters 4 and 5 address Printing, and Distribution, Circulation and Marketing issues. Holistically, Chapter 3 on S-Curves and Chapter 6 on Recommendations address the system-wide issues that need solutions unless grassroots publications are forever to remain Scatterlings of Africa.

It's time for a change of attitude, arising from the realisation that the grassroots press has much to gain from co-operation with bigger players.

Change of attitude

Finally, we would like to make a point about attitudes and constructive communication. We have delayed defining the term co-opetition until now in order to underline what we regard as the need for a fundamental change of heart by parties in the media industry. Resentment and contempt have tended to mar the relationships between big and small media players. Yet we believe that improved communications and a willingness to work together would probably do wonders – not just for the grassroots, but for the major companies too. Obvious benefits are to be gained from joint initiatives in training and staff exchanges, empowerment, and shared commitments to media diversity and development.

Co-opetition

Co-opetition describes cooperative competition. Cartels are a (bad) form of co-opetition, in which competing companies work together to limit competition. Although this is not unknown in the media industry, our meaning is that developed by Adam Brandenburger of the Harvard Business School and Barry Nalebuff of the Yale School of Management⁸. In part using some of the ideas of game theory, they suggest that businesses can gain advantage by means of a judicious mixture of competition and cooperation. Cooperation with suppliers, customers and firms producing complementary or related products can lead to expansion of the market and the formation of new business relationships, perhaps even the creation of new forms of enterprise.

This offers an important dimension to the conceptual framework of our Report. Co-opetition relates to synergies within the media industry, synergies to extract mutual benefits for all players.

Footnotes

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- 2 MDDA Strategic Plan 2006-2009: Presentation to Parliament, March 2006.
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- 5 Hindson, Doug; and Vicente-Hindson, Valerie - Whither LED in South Africa? A Commentary on the Policy Guidelines for Implementing Local Economic Development in South Africa, March 2005. <http://sds.ukzn.ac.za/files/Hindson%20.pdf>
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- 7 Zuern, Elke - Continuity in Contradiction? The Prospects for a National Civic Movement in a Democratic State: SANCO and the ANC in Post-Apartheid South Africa. September 2004. School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- 8 Brandenburger, Adam & Barry Nalebuff - Co-Opetition: A Revolution Mindset That Combines Competition and Cooperation. 1996. Published by Currency. ISBN 0-385-47950-6

Summary

Argument

The chapter lays the foundations for an understanding of how and why the problems of printing, distribution, circulation and marketing cannot be isolated solely at the enterprise level.

History

The grassroots press has emerged from a long history of church and labour publications, and anti-apartheid struggle media. Business criteria have never dominated – leaving this sector with a mixed legacy of great social values but little practical business sense. A new balance has to be struck.

Market enablement

The market development paradigm is appropriate in current circumstances, and it can contribute to human development as well as wealth creation.

Common carriers

The scope of this Report is confined to “independent” community print media (whether they call themselves commercial or not) which are common carriers of news and views and do not report to a higher body such as an NGO or donor organisation.

Civil society mouthpieces

We do not in principle exclude civil society organisation newspapers and magazines from the ambit of the sector – far from it – and have recommended that a National Community Publishers Forum (NCPF) should include stakeholders from all parts of the sector.

Critical mass

If thousands of organisations are included in the definition of community print media, aggregation could occur on a massive scale, and synergies between the community press and wider economic interests would have far greater pulling power.

Recommendations

- Establishing an IT portal for the sector is an absolute priority because the absence of web representation, networking and syndication services is crippling. Critical mass cannot be achieved in the information era without digital channels.
- The “newspaper in a box” is an exciting challenge but we advise that practically, for the time being, template-writing should be limited to the items that can quickly be reduced to standard operating procedures.