

Too few own too many newspapers

ANTHONY HEARD argues that the near-monopolies should shed titles (in their own long-term interests) to formerly banned groups

IT IS common cause that the ownership of the media in South Africa is in too few hands. Broadcasting is an effective state monopoly and establishment newspapers are near-monopolies, in private hands.

The situation was created by the grip the white establishment had on the country and its resources. However understandable, it is untenable when one considers the needs of a new, democratic order. It is equally unsatisfactory considering the needs of the run-up period to free and fair elections. Something must be done about it for the short-term, and also for the long-term, if South Africa is to have a healthy media, which means healthy political life.

Indeed, unless something specific is done about the ownership, control and direction of the mainstream media within the next year or so, South Africa will hardly be able to say that the elections it subsequently holds are free. It is a national priority, every bit as important as devising a new constitution and electoral procedures and systems.

Without the opening up of the media, millions will have been denied access, simply because the main broadcasting and print outlets remain in the hands of the old establishment — even if belated steps are taken to embellish boardrooms with black faces, credible or otherwise.

The hostility and rancour that poor media access will generate among now-unbanned militant black groups, whether they are successful in elections or not, presages a bumpy ride ahead for the media. The future prospects will be a sterile choice: bitter opposition by people who feel robbed of victory and who partly blame the media; or, on the other hand, pressure for nationalization or drastic anti-monopoly action by people who have triumphed in elections despite scant support from the media.

Both ways, the role of the media in the vital but delicate job of reconstruction after apartheid will be compromised.

The Afrikaans market is dominated by one powerful, far-sighted and well-

run company (Nasionale Pers), and there is also a lesser group, with vicissitudes (Perskor). Both are in the Nationalist fold, and enjoy all the lucrative business patronage, such as printing contracts (for school books, official publications and journals), that closeness to power brings.

In the English-language establishment press, there is the powerful Argus Holdings and the slimmer Times Media Limited, both of whom are linked by shareholdings and contracts but effectively owned by Anglo American or associated companies like Johannesburg Consolidated Investments. Except for the Natal Witness, of Pietermaritzburg, and arguably the Daily Dispatch, of East London, there is no such animal as an independent daily paper in the country. Even the Dispatch has departed from its

follows day, the ANC will — if it comes to power — be under pressure to break up an unsympathetic press.

Look what happened in Zimbabwe. The press, bludgeoned into a pro-Smith posture, had been under the control of the Argus group, and this situation was intolerable to the new government of Robert Mugabe — and he effectively nationalized it.

In Namibia, the pattern has been different because of a healthier diversity of ownership and the fact that at least one well-known paper, The Namibian, showed sympathy for Sam Nujoma's Swapo before independence, thus striking a blow for future press freedom in general. Moreover, in Namibia a clause in the constitution effectively entrenches free speech. There is justifiable hope that Namibia will continue to have a free and

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Crewe Trust past and has a substantial number of its shares in the hands of one of the major groups, TML.

But what is as worrying as the absence of independent ownership is the fact that major unbanned players in the peace and political process, notably the African National Congress, cannot rely on media support worth speaking of in the establishment press. That should be obvious from perusal of newspaper columns, however much individual editors might sincerely strive for fairness and individual journalists might break ranks with the ruling atmosphere.

Ask the ANC how they feel about coverage of their affairs in the establishment press.

For firm opponents of the ANC, the present situation might seem unexceptionable — in fact, exactly what they want, ideal. But it bodes ill for the future of the media and the country. As night

varied press — despite the inevitability of some merging, even some disappearing, and the possibly ominous advent of a new government paper, ostensibly for developmental and training purposes, which could compete unfairly.

But give me Namibia any day, compared with Zimbabwe.

In South Africa, assuming an all-party conference gets interim or transitional arrangements under way pending elections, if the mass media is firmly in the hands of the "old order" that fact will cause major problems in convincing critics that this country is sincerely democratizing.

What I am suggesting is that this is the time for the established newspaper groups to democratize their operations, to throw open their printing plants, distribution avenues and expertise.

More important, they should consider



divesting themselves of some of their titles, and allow ownership to pass to other interests who will, unashamedly, be more friendly towards once-banned groups.

The Anglo-owned press could take a page from the annals of enlightened self-interest in 44 Main Street, notably the move by the Oppenheimers a generation ago to allow control of General Mining to pass to Nationalist Afrikaners as part of a long-term insurance policy against state nationalization or undue interference in the mining industry.

If the Argus group could so readily agree to sell Ilanga to Chief Buthelezi, why not sell other titles to ANC-orientated interests? The Argus Group, according to Finance Week, recently turned down an ANC approach to buy the Sowetan, now ranked with the Star as the country's biggest daily. Will Argus, on principle, refuse to sell *any* titles to friends of the ANC?

If so, why?

It is, of course, always possible for the ANC and other formerly banned groups to start a daily paper, but party papers generally fail dismally just because they are party papers. And, the sad experience last year of the Weekly Mail's daily effort sent a salutary chill down the spines of would-be newspaper launchers.

The fact remains that it is essential that all the major players in an election be given access to air time and to print space if we are to have a successful transition to a new order. This is, therefore, the time for the monopolies and near-monopolies to start breaking their own hold on the media, in the country's and their own very real long-term interests. This way they will exercise some control over the process.

The SABC — wonders never cease! — seems poised to concede the principle of a truly independent broadcasting authority; shimmering irony after all the years of its being government's Chief Poodle. Someone there has obviously seen the writing on the wall, as power begins to shift.

In the realm of the establishment press, the basis for an arrangement is there. The ANC wants and needs daily newspapers. The newspaper companies want insurance against nationalization or bruising anti-monopoly action.

Newspapers these days tend to share plant and equipment and even advertising and distribution arrangements, with editorial effort separate and competing.

It would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness — the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph.

The "joint operating agreement" principle has gained widespread favour internationally, because of rising costs.

Presses and distribution are neutral factors and can be shared by all. There is no reason why current joint operating agreements should not continue more or less as now, but with ownership of certain titles passing to other hands.

The future media order should be marked by maximum press and broadcasting diversity, and a fair spread of outlets for competing philosophies. It would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness — the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph. ●

From Page Four

Chiluba's victory

three times in the 1st four months to address businessmen and I have found them very eager to invest in many of our projects," Mwaanga said in an interview.

The MMD would have no inhibitions about selling its copper mines back to the Anglo American Corporation, from whom it originally nationalised them, Mwaanga said. The government might retain a small shareholding, but not more than 20 percent.

"We don't mind the South Africans coming in here because we believe South Africa is changing," he added.

This approach, Mwaanga believes, would induce a more sympathetic attitude on the part of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and enable the new government to negotiate a less stringent structural adjustment programme.

Even if it does, the road to recovery will still be tough. Privatising the mines and para-statal companies will inevitably lead to retrenchments.

Any structural adjustment programmes will also demand heavy cuts in the civil service, the merging of government departments and a slashing of the military budget.

It will require the removal of subsidies, including the food subsidies. And the producer price of maize and other staples will have to go up to boost production and cut imports. That means food prices will rocket.

The kwacha currency will have to be further devalued, which will turn inflation into superinflation.

All this is the same kind of painful medicine that Eastern Europe is having to take, but the worst of it is that the Zambian electorate has not been conditioned to expect it.

When I asked the ecstatic voters on election day what they hoped for from a new government, they answered without exception: "Lower food prices and more jobs."

They are going to get the opposite on both counts. How they react, and how Chiluba copes with their reaction, are the key questions that will determine Zambia's future over the next two years.

He is an enigmatic figure: a tiny man, only 1.5m (5 ft) tall, who has spent his life as a trade union leader and is now in league with businessmen leading a free enterprise party.

He is not highly educated. He dropped out of high school and went to work on a sisal plantation in Tanzania, where he was a personnel clerk.

Chiluba is a fluent public speaker who whipped up the crowds more effectively than Kaunda at the election rallies, but with his diminutive stature — emphasised by a penchant for double-breasted suits — and mild manner he does not strike one as a forceful personality.

He is a born-again Christian and, like Kaunda, quotes freely from the Bible and can wax emotional and weep in public. He frequently calls on Zambians to work harder, show greater enterprise and undergo "moral rearmament".

Most of all I worry about the fact that as a trade unionist he will be particularly vulnerable to charges of betrayal as the retrenchments and higher prices begin. Will he have the force of personality to withstand such charges, will he wilt and back away from his stringent programme, or will he be thrown out even more ignominiously than Kaunda was?

But at least Zambians have learned how to dispose of him peacefully if he fails. ●