

THE POST-1990 DEMISE OF THE ALTERNATIVE PRESS

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree
It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation, in this dissertation from
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, Lukas Opatrny studies the reasons for and implications of the demise of the South African alternative press, from the 1980s, after the end of apartheid. The concept of this press carried important democratic values, which contributed to media diversity, but when the 1990s ushered in the democratic era, these 'alternative' ideals were lost along with the whole alternative press sector. It was a clash between the commercial and ideological interests of the alternative newspapers that triggered their downfall. None, except for the *Mail & Guardian*, prepared sufficiently for the new democratic environment with regards to the commercial imperatives of the media market, nor with regards to their ideological complacency. This ideology was suited for the authoritarian regime of apartheid but failed to readjust and maintain the underlying concept of 'alternative' during democracy, while achieving self-sustainability.

A close analysis of demise of *Grassroots* and the survival of the *Weekly Mail*/*Mail & Guardian* forms the basis of this study and serves to illuminate the conditions prevalent amongst the other alternative publications, which are examined more briefly. A number of data, which study the alternative press throughout its history, constitute important references of this thesis. These are complemented by first-hand interviews with former practitioners on alternative newspapers who give substance to the methodology with their opinions and analysis, from hindsight, relating to their experiences at *Grassroots* or *Weekly Mail*. Empirical research is supported by media related theories of political economy and ideology. Interviews with scholars concerned with similar disciplines, correspondence with funding organisations and investigations into some of the newspapers' archival materials has further helped to identify the reasons behind the demise of the alternative press and from these, the author,

insinuates and analyses the implications which the demise has had for the post-1990 South African media landscape.

It is concluded that in order for an independent medium, such as an alternative newspaper, to survive among the numerous challenges of a modern, capitalist and democratic media environment, it needs to find a compromise between its specific agenda and its commercial operatives. The key is to remain 'alternative' not only to the mainstream media but also to the thinking of the prevalent hegemonic structures and hold them accountable, while at the same time achieve self-sustainability through advertising. The importance for the existence of such progressive media is that they play vital roles in a country's media diversity and thereby strengthen the country's democracy. Despite its demise, the experience of the alternative sector remains an important learning asset, for the relevant agents of today, in creating contemporary media diversity.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Audit Bureau of Circulation
AGM	Annual General Meeting
ANC	African National Congress
BC	Black Consciousness
BNU	Bantu News Agency
CAHAC	Cape Areas Housing Action Committee
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DA	Democratic Alliance
DNG	Durban Newspaper Group
GCIS	Government Communication and Information System
HSRC	Human Science Research Council
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Authority
ICASA	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
ICCO	Interchurch Organisation for Christian Communication
IMDT	Independent Media Diversity Trust
IMG	Independent Magazine Group
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
KZA	Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika
LSM	Living Standard Measures
MDDA	Media Diversity and Development Trust
MDM	Mass Democratic Movement
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NP	National Party
NPU	Newspaper Press Union
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
PDU	Print Development Unit
<i>RDM</i>	<i>Rand Daily Mail</i>
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
RSA	Repressive State Apparatus
SAAN	South African Associated Newspapers
SABC	South African Broadcasting Authority
SACBC	South African Catholic Bishops Conference
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADF	South African Defence Force
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission
<i>SALB</i>	<i>South African Labour Bulletin</i>
SASO	South African Student Organisation
SASPU	South African Student Press Union
SATRA	South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority
SWAPO	South-West Africa People Organisation
UBJ	Union of Black Journalists
UDF	United Democratic Front
UWC	University of Western Cape
WACC	World Association for Christian Communication
WASA	Writers' Association of South Africa

LIST OF INTERVIEWS:

Adhikari, M. Interview with the author on 6 October 2006. Cape Town.

Fisher, R. Interview with the author on 30 August 2005. Cape Town.

Fisher, R. Interview with the author on 10 March 2006. Cape Town.

Heard, A. Interview with the author on 26 August 2005. Cape Town.

Jaffer, M. Interview with the author on 16 March 2006. Cape Town.

Johnson, S. Interview with the author on 2 May 2006. Cape Town.

Manuel, F. Interview with the author on 25 March 2006. Cape Town.

Seria, R. Interview with the author on 26 April 2006. Cape Town.

Whitfield, C. Interview with the author on 14 September 2005. Cape Town.

THE POST-1990 DEMISE OF THE ALTERNATIVE PRESS

INTRODUCTION

The alternative press in South Africa used to be regarded as one of the most vibrant and influential developments in South African media during the 1980s but it hasn't survived the country's transition to democracy. Dating back, according to Les Switzer (1997), to the literature of the mission press of the 1830s, going through various stages and developing within the context of general resistance, the alternative press often reflected the developments of opposition political movements against a background of conflict in the country. It reached its climax during the 1980s with the United Democratic Front (UDF) phase of resistance against apartheid and played an important role during this period by fueling mobilisation and mass participation at grassroots levels in the democratic struggle.

After the government's unbanning of the ANC (African National Congress) and other reform initiatives in 1990, which eventually led to much anticipated democracy, the position of the alternative press deteriorated. The new South Africa no longer appeared to have space for the alternative press. A new era of democracy, which was often used as a metaphor for 'new beginnings', ironically brought an end to a segment of the media that played an important part in the struggle. Ultimately, it seems that the alternative press was a 1980s phenomenon, claim Tomaselli and Louw, and Max du Preez summed up the demise of this press when he said: "It is yesterday's cause to be an alternative newspaper". (in Tomaselli and Louw, 1991c: 226). The post-1990 decline of the 'alternative' concept of the alternative press itself meant that South Africa had endangered a vital aspect of democracy, which calls for a healthy media environment with a diversity of voices.

The issues surrounding the South African alternative press have received considerable attention in past and recent years from both South African and international scholars. Les Switzer has traced resistance media back to their roots in the black press of the 1830s and with the aid of other authors closely studied the progressive history of the protest press until

the nineties in a series of publications (see Switzer and Switzer, 1979; Switzer, 1997; Switzer and Adhikari, 2000). Former journalists and activists on alternative newspapers have also contributed to past studies of the genre. These include Guy Berger, Anton Harber, Irwin Manoim, Shaun Johnson and Max du Preez among others (see Berger, 2000; Manoim, 1996; Johnson, 1991; Du Preez, 2003). Significant scholarly attention has been given to the alternative press by Keyan Tomaselli and P. Eric Louw in their book *The Alternative Press in South Africa* (1991) where the two, along with Don Pinnock, Llewellyn Raubenheimer, Siza Ntshakala and others, further investigate the alternative press during various periods and from different perspectives. Some of the authors categorise the alternative press into different groups according to their distinctive characteristics, while others divide them into various time periods.

What has largely been missing from these studies, however, is a substantial analysis of the post-1990 period when most alternative newspapers closed down. This thesis will thus attempt to utilise these past studies of the alternative press, which have traced the history of the newspapers, critically assessed their functions and placed them into the context of South Africa's political background, and identify reasons and implications behind the demise of the alternative press during democracy. The elaborate study of Ineke van Kessel about *Grassroots* will be one of the very important references (Kessel, 2000a). Analysing the post-1990 developments of the alternative press, with respect to its historical background and role during apartheid, and identifying the agendas that the alternative press has set in the past, I will seek to arrive at a conclusion that will suggest an understanding of how the changing social, political and economic environment has come to determine the contemporary alternative press scenario. It appears that the concept of the alternative press became detrimental to its own cause when the shift from restriction to freedom came, but a number of reasons initiated this demise: funding, changes in political and legal environments, shifts in mainstream media and changes in the South African public sphere being the most prominent. By first closely assessing such points, this thesis will then, with hindsight, critically engage with the implications the post-1990 case of the alternative press has had for the South African media.

THE BACKGROUND

In order to provide a context for the dynamics that have taken place on the alternative front in the post-1990 era, it is important to outline some historical background. The forerunner to the

resistance press can be traced back to the 1830s phase of the black missionary press (Switzer, 1997: 3). With the beginning of the European mission enterprise in South Africa, black literacy began to emerge slowly during the early years of the 1800s and Christianity started becoming internalised in the values of African readers. "The influence of the missions on black journalism cannot be overemphasized. Not only were they the suppliers of the skills and technical tools of journalism, but under their influence black progress was defined in terms of the assimilation of Western 'civilisation'. The first newspapers written by and aimed at blacks generally reflected this conception" (Johnson 1991a: 15-16). These newspapers were independent but largely traditionalist in conforming to the beliefs of the mission-educated elite. At a later stage, during the 1880s, Johnson identifies the 'Elitist Press' where the Christianised and Westernised black elite realised that 'mission overlordship' was not necessarily in their best interests and they sought to be more critical of religious as well as colonial control. Switzer calls this period the 'independent protest press' with a primarily black petty bourgeoisie that started publications independent of European mission control (1997: 1). Some contradictions existed between the traditional values of Africans and missionary education from white colonists but this period, nonetheless, initiated the collective consciousness that developed into the long-term black ideological response to oppression. *Izwi la Bantu*, a significant newspaper that was involved in the formation of the South African Native Congress (forerunner to the ANC), emerged during this era. Financial problems of black-owned publishing ventures, however, started casting doubts over this sector during the beginning of the twentieth century. The ruling authorities also saw the growing militancy that came with the formation of the ANC and its mouthpiece newspaper *Abantu-Batho* (1912), as well as emerging workers' unions, as a threat to their power. Furthermore, white entrepreneurs sought to utilise the growing consumer spending potential of the black market. These three elements, claims Tim Couzens, initiated the end of what has been called the 'golden age of publishing in South Africa' (in Johnson, 1991a: 17, 20).

Switzer claims that in the 1930s, an 'early resistance press' (first phase of the alternative press according to Johnson (1991a)) emerged, "which gradually embraced a popular, nonracial and more militant alliance of left-wing working- and middle class interests" (1997: 3), but at the same time a major intervention by white capital into black press introduced the establishment of the Bantu Press. This third phase of the black press, where B C Paver (central figure in the formation of Bantu Press) recognised the profit-potential of publishing for the black populace with their increasing urbanisation and literacy rates, was, according to Couzens, a crucial

turning point in black press history: “The establishment of *Bantu World* in 1932 spearheaded the shift from a local to a mass black press, as well as a redefinition of the role and strategy of that press. The history of *Bantu World* is central to a full understanding of the ambiguities of the black press” (Johnson, 1991a: 21).

This politically conservative, white-controlled Bantu Press sought to exploit the emerging commercial opportunities by seeking out new markets of black readership to secure mass circulation and win advertising revenue. Since the primary motive of mass-produced newspapers aimed at black readers was profit, a new controlling factor emerged – that of white capital over black editorial staff: “It took the form of economic pressure (the purpose being to sell the most copies possible, resulting in a lowest common denominator-type journalism), or tacit political pressure (the enforcement of a ‘sane’ – in whiter terms – interpretation of black organisation and resistance)” (Johnson, 1991a: 22). *Bantu World* became *World* in 1955 and its circulation went from 11 000 in 1959 to 90 000 in 1968, reaching 145 000 in 1976 a year before it was banned (Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1987: 47). Bantu Press (becoming Bantu News agency in 1938) was controlled from 1933 to 1952 by the then largest press group in South Africa, the Argus Printing and Publishing Company (which in turn was controlled by mining corporations). The BNA later gave rise to the first South African monopoly of the black press with *World*’s masthead announcing that it was “Our Own, Our Only Newspaper” (Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1987: 47). “The sale and circulation of 90.8% of black newspapers and magazines was dominated by a single company, the BNA, which exercised such tight control over national distribution that potential competition was effectively shut-out” (Manoim cited in Hadland, 1991: 16). The editorial content of a newspaper like *World* was, however, more concerned with crime, sex and violence than politics on the premise, of white proprietors, that black readers weren’t interested in politics.

After the banning of *World*, *Post* became the new most widely read and influential black-orientated publication in South Africa and was later replaced by the *Sowetan*. Despite regular government control and bannings, Switzer argues that the white-owned black newspapers of this era were subject to white editorial policies and thus could never serve as organs of fundamental political protest and organisation (1997: 34). They were the alternative “to the shared white supremacist politics of the mainstream,” (Berger, 2000: 80) but not in the same vein as the alternative press of the 1980s, which, Berger claims, “saw itself as the new dominant press in waiting” (2000: 80). Njabulo Ndebele said: “The strategy of this [black]

press is to make feeble attacks on apartheid as an indication that it is on their side” (cited in Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1987: 52). The establishment of the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ) in 1973 called for a more committed stance against apartheid among the black press and signs of this new attitude emerged at, for instance, *World* after the 1976 Soweto riots. Black papers at the time started setting the agenda because they were the only ones who could send their journalists into the crossfire of the townships. Black editors claimed that their attitude of co-operation changed to uncompromising rejection of the institutions of apartheid and in many cases, circulation was on the increase, but in actual fact, any content deemed to lead to general discontent was unacceptable. The Tomasellis argue that the papers recorded day-to-day happenings rather than putting forward a radical point of view. Furthermore, many were still subject to gatekeeping by white managers (1987: 54). Black journalists had hardly any influence on the policy of the paper. The Tomasellis also claimed that “while most [journalists] sympathised with Africanist ideals ... they also reflected the burden of a generation that had grown up under apartheid, internalised its values and sought security in its benefits ... (T)he newspapers serving black readers that do survive are all firmly under the control of white-owned companies and are, if only from a purely economic point of view, unlikely to espouse a radical discourse” (1987: 55-56).

With its dominant interests in profit, the black press did not, therefore, represent a strong opposing voice to the established order but an alternative press ran parallel to this mainstream black press. Johnson lists four considerations that define a publication as ‘alternative’: (i) it is ‘non-commercial’, meaning the profit motive is not in its primary interest; (ii) its main objective is to serve as an ‘advocacy journal’, fulfilling a role within the resistance in South Africa; (iii) it seeks to fill the gap left in coverage by the mainstream media, which it sees as not fulfilling the needs, nor reflecting the aspirations of the majority of South Africans; (iv) it is aimed at an audience of which a significant portion is black (1991a: 24). Johnson then divides the tradition of this alternative press into the three following time periods.

During the first phase of the alternative press (1930-1960), the ANC attempted to adopt a more militant policy. The period was an important time in resistance publishing and it gave rise to liberal newspapers like *Inkundla ya Bantu* with its sympathetic coverage of the ANC. “*Inkundla* can be seen as a ‘transition’ journal in that it represented the best elements of the liberal voice of the early independent black publications; as well as containing germs of a new ‘advocacy’ journalism, which was to become a hallmark of the alternative press” (Johnson,

1991a: 25). It was a newspaper that initiated the effective motives of the alternative press, which reached their height during the 1980s – rejecting the traditional ‘Western’ standards of objective journalism and the role of the press as a neutral mirror of events, and instead promoting the cause and interests of the black majority. “As the editor put it in 1941, ‘The African National Congress is the mouthpiece of the African public of the Union of South Africa. It stands for racial unity and mutual helpfulness and for the improvement of the African people politically, economically, socially, educationally and industrially ... *Inkundla ya Bantu* is in agreement with this policy’” (in Switzer, 1997: 216). Africanism and Marxism began emerging as important themes, which rejected the notion of a liberal press – pointing out the restrictive tendencies that marked its independence and rather opted for tactics of direct advocacy.

Publications carrying such ideals included *Lodestar* (1949) and *The Africanist* (1953) which represented the stance of the ANC Youth League, while the *African Lodestar* promoted the interests of the future Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). *Inkululeko* (previously known as the *SA Worker/Umsebenzi*) was the official organ of the South African Communist Party (SACP) but a more important communist-orientated publication was *The Guardian* (1937). Its political journalism was of great inspiration to the left-wing press that emerged in the 1980s (Pinnock, 1997: 328). Changing names of publications that were harassed or banned by the government was a way of exploiting legal loop-holes and the newspaper was known as *New Age* from 1954 to 1962, and *Spark* from 1962 to 1963 (constantly reappearing to maintain its cause). According to Switzer, it “redefined the concept of an opposition press for mainstream opposition newspapers like the *Rand Daily Mail* in the next generation. The *Guardian* also provided a new set of journalistic standards for the resistance press – a role model for those who continue the struggle in the final decades of the apartheid era” (1997: 299). Other publications included, for instance, *Fighting Talk* (1942-1963), which campaigned for soldiers’ rights, but although the 1950s did present signs of organised grassroots counter-hegemony, the use of mass media during this period was still limited. “Anti-apartheid communication overwhelmingly occurred through word-of-mouth, small groups, or mass rallies” (Louw, 1991a: 1). The support of the ANC began to decline as the state clamped down on resistance movements between 1960 and 1963, resulting in the banning of the ANC and PAC. This triggered political apathy in the country and many alternative publications were forced to close down, effectively ending the first era of the alternative press. Resistance was grounded until the late 1960s and the rise of Black Consciousness.

The second phase of the alternative press (late 1960s-end 1970s) and a new phase in the history of the anti-apartheid movement saw the rise of Black Consciousness (BC) whose origins “lay in the political vacuum created in the mid-1960s after main opposition groups had been banned and armed resistance crushed by the state” (Switzer, 2000: 14). The main cause of the movement was transforming consciousness, overcoming fear, and building racial pride primarily among urbanised black petit bourgeois intellectuals (Mzamane and Howarth, 2000: 176). “This was the period of accumulating intellectual resources for resistance as well as developing theoretical and journalistic skills. Out of it emerged an indigenous theory of (black) resistance, a form of accumulation of ‘cadres and theory’” (Louw, 1991a: 2). Some scholars have noted that the BC movement allowed black people to enjoy the illusion of freedom but in actual fact provided few means to challenge the system significantly. Heribert Adam noted about this ‘psychological liberation’ that as spiritual freedom, it was viewed as being able to achieve the desired state, but because of continued (actual) subjugation, it was not real liberation from material and spiritual bondage (in Mzamane and Howarth, 2000: 210). Racial exclusivism was also a contentious issue but the movement did, nonetheless, serve as a catalyst for the re-emergence of new alternative publications.

Among the most prominent and powerful in effect was the *SASO Newsletter*, an official organ of the South African Student’s Organisation. “The *Newsletter* was aggressive, bringing racial issues to the foreground of the black political agenda and set the trend for similar publications such as *Black Review*” (Wigston, 2001: 54) and *Black Viewpoint*. *Review* was edited by one of BC’s most prominent activists Steve Biko and the *UBJ Bulletin*, an official organ of the Union of Black Journalists, was banned after only two issues but was widely regarded as representative of the BC at its peak (Johnson, 1991a: 29). These non-commercial and independent publications undoubtedly played their part in the BC movement challenging the intellectual and moral hegemony of apartheid and stirring nationwide protests, which peaked with the 1976 Soweto riots, but after these incidents, the government adopted strict policies, banning numerous organisations, individuals and publications. The movement “laid the foundation for the cultural and political regeneration of the African community after Sharpeville that would help to transform the liberation struggle outside as well as inside South Africa.” (Mzamane and Howarth, 2000: 210). But the success of BC in re-awakening the spirit of mass protest came to a decline when the movement was banned in 1977 and a vacuum in resistance soon appeared once again. “The BC response had been different to that

of the pre-1960 internal resistance movements, and in fact clashed in many respects with the ideologies and strategies of the Congress movement in exile ... It had, however, kept the tradition of alternative publishing alive, and it was this continuity which laid the foundations for the third, most sophisticated-phase of the alternative press, which began to unfold in the 1980s” (Johnson, 1991a: 29).

As the African population became increasingly urbanised, literate and affluent, the third and most significant phase of the alternative press of the 1980s was characterised by a bottom-up style of resistance where mass participation of public at grassroots levels mobilised people to protest. “In the wake of the Soweto ‘mobilisation’ of mass participation, the populist style of BC was challenged by the de-facto embryonic emergence of non-intellectual communication at community level” (Louw, 1991a: 2). This re-activated grassroots participation in resistance at community level and was more successful than the Black Consciousness movement, which was, according to Louw, “primarily characterised by a top-down approach to resistance, where intellectuals became leaders” (in Wigston, 2001: 52). “While the BC resistance of the 1970s was largely youth and intelligentsia driven, communities more broadly spearheaded the 1980s” (Berger, 2000: 76).

A popular approach overtook a populist approach and the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF), in 1983, “played a decisive role in rejuvenating internal resistance and raised the consciousness of the ANC inside South Africa anew... As Murphy Morobe put it, the UDF ‘managed to get people to stand up and fight for their rights without any fear and to actually challenge authority’” (Gumede, 2005: 28, 29). And so it was out of this scenario that the most effective phase of the alternative press arose and helped deal apartheid the final blow. The 1980s saw the alternative press operate within the government’s reform initiatives known as the ‘Total Strategy’ where the authorities attempted to restructure relationships “between and within classes, between classes and State and within State itself. Its aim, as portrayed by its formulators, is to defend ‘South Africa’ from outside attack (especially that of ‘Marxism’) and to ensure the survival of the ‘free enterprise’ system and the ‘nation’” (Glen Moss in Johnson, 1991a: 29). Developments throughout this rich history of South African press all contributed to the formation and shape of alternative publications of the 1980s with the Cape community newspaper *Grassroots*, launched in 1980, pioneering the way for others to follow.

“The struggle against apartheid has been one of the great social movements of the past two decades, and like most social movements it had its press” (Berger, 2000: 73). Eric Louw identified three areas, which the third phase of resistance had mastered, setting a backdrop for the final and most prominent period of the alternative newspapers: “The urban environment and its technocratic possibilities; the means of mobilising and democratically organising mass urban-based resistance; a method of activating and ‘institutionalising’ resistance at the community level and linking the resulting structures – through mass media technology – into a resistance network” (1991a: 2). Along with Keyan Tomaselli, Eric Louw divides the alternative press (or what they term the left-wing press) of this period into three categories: progressive alternative press; left-commercial press; and social-democrat independent press (1991a: 7-13).

The progressive alternative press was “the expression of community struggles, themselves located in the ‘national democratic struggle’” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991a: 8). Newspapers included in this group, such as *Grassroots* and *Saamstaan* were closely linked to organisations like the UDF and often collaborated with the communities which they addressed in producing the newspaper itself. They challenged conventional journalism practices and the notion of objectivity in order to serve the purpose of popular (bottom-up) resistance. “These media workers considered themselves as community organisers first and media workers second” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991a: 9). Focusing more on ‘issues’ than ‘news’, these newspapers were non-profit and had to rely on subsidies and grants from churches, trade unions, embassies and overseas foundations.

The left-commercial press was formed as a result of a growing demand for coverage of left-wing issues after 1983 (the year of the formation of the UDF). “The result was Johannesburg’s *New Nation* in 1986, Cape Town’s *South* in 1987, and Durban’s *New African* in 1989” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991a: 9). These newspapers were somewhere in-between the capitalist and the progressive alternative press. They received overseas funding but also made attempts at self-sufficiency through selling advertisements and they often focused more on issues that dominated the general news rather than the everyday community topics. But they also rejected liberal journalistic practices in favour of advocacy and contextualised writing, they often supported socialist principles, were democratically (as opposed to hierarchically) organised and espoused a national democratic inclusivist approach which aimed to help build a non-sectarian and nonracial South African nationalism (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991a: 10-11).

The social-democrat independent press was different from the other two groups as it strived to maintain independence from a specific political movement, even though it supported a general democratic regime. It adhered to more balanced journalistic practices and sought to achieve independence from the financial control of capitalist interests. In essence, however, the objective was similar to the other two groups as it also strived to provide an alternative to the content of the established mainstream press. These newspapers included the *Weekly Mail*, *Vrye Weekblad* and the magazine *Die Suid-Afrikaan*. “*Weekly Mail* differed significantly in political alignment and in journalistic practices from the progressive papers... *Weekly Mail* pioneered South Africa’s first-ever commercially viable leftist-press” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991a: 12-13). Unlike the progressive papers, which grew out of initiatives of the oppressed communities themselves, the *Weekly Mail* was formed by journalists from the mainstream *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Express* which both closed down. A business plan, focus on advertising and a marketing campaign eventually enabled the *Weekly Mail* to become financially sustainable and carry the perspectives of an alternative newspaper into the future. Known today as the *Mail & Guardian*, the *Weekly Mail* is the only alternative newspaper that survived until the present.

As Guy Berger suggests, however, “these changing classifications are related less to the real changes in publications than to the artificiality of imposing a taxonomy on a situation where distinctions were a matter of changing emphasis” (2000: 80). Berger goes further to argue that what was more important than the differences that separated them was the characteristics the alternative newspapers had in common – “a place in the social movement against apartheid. Differences existed, but these were related to status and age of publication, egos and personalities, regional rivalries, competition for funding, audience differentiation or simple competition rather than being a conscious part of one or other sub-grouping along the lines of the categories used by Louw and Tomaselli” (Berger, 2000: 80).

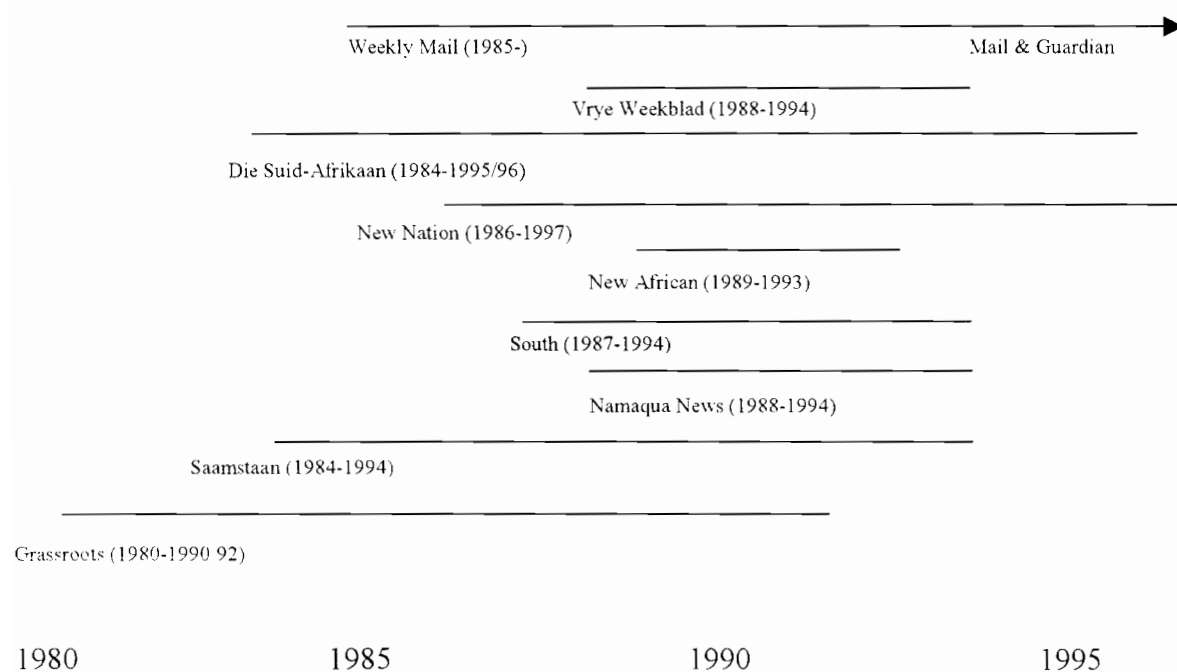
Writing in 1987, Anthony Heard suggested there were as many as 200 alternative papers ... “But given the fluid character of this sector of the press, that number was constantly changing. Nor is the exact number really important. Far more significant is their character and their impact. Regarding their diversity, Leila Patel said: ‘These publications are aimed at different audiences, fulfilling different roles and meeting different needs. Some are literary and cultural; others theoretical and analytical; there is the student press, community press, trade

union newsletters and more recently, publications of political organisations” (cited in Jackson, 1993: 48). The list is long but this thesis cannot do justice to all the alternative print media lost after 1990. Among magazines, for instance, that encountered mostly funding related problems were the rural based *LINK*, the literacy magazine *Learn and Teach*, the political journal *Work in Progress* and the socialist and feminist publication *Speak*, founded in the Durban area during the eighties. The liberal journal *Frontline*, founded by Denis Beckett in 1980, closed in 1990 because, as Beckett claims, he was: “tired of being broke ... plus apartheid was ending anyway” (E-mail correspondence, 10. 11. 2006). Other publications that closed down with approaching democracy include the teenage magazine *Upbeat*, the journals *Transformation* and *Agenda*, the Indian newspaper *Indicator*, the socialist journal *New Era*, the student publications *SASPU National*, *SASPU Focus* and others. Some notable exceptions of alternative media that survived into the postapartheid era are the fortnightly Islamic community newspaper *Al-Qalam* which has existed since 1971 purely on advertising and no external funding or the Durban-based Zulu-language newspaper *Um-Afrika* which was relaunched in 2003 as a niche title aimed at the top end of the black market. To keep this thesis clear and coherent, however, I will only focus on some of the most noteworthy alternative newspapers (and one magazine) that have emerged during the eighties and have been lost after 1990, which fall neatly into Tomaselli’s and Louw’s categorisation and provide adequate foundations for understanding the entire alternative sector in South Africa and its demise (see Table I.).

In this thesis I will assess the demise of the alternative press in view of specific media related theories, especially while looking more closely at two specific publications – *Grassroots* and *Weekly Mail*. In comparing the two newspapers, it will be crucial to consider their common elements, functions and motives as well as their differences. Tomaselli’s and Louw’s classification referring to type as well as Switzer’s and Johnson’s categorisation relating to time, will serve as relevant reference points in providing analyses of the overall post-1990 context. To assess the context of the ‘fall’ of alternative newspapers and to identify the scope of this thesis clearly, it is also important to recognise the ‘rise’ of these publications. Progressive alternative newspapers *Grassroots* and *Saamstaan* initiated the most effective phase of the alternative press during the 1980s, soon followed by the social-democrat publications *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and *Weekly Mail*. Left-commercial papers such as *New Nation* and *South* appeared in the latter part of the eighties, followed by the Afrikaans *Vrye Weekblad* and *Namaqua News*. *New African* even appeared as late as 1989. *Grassroots*, the paper that

pioneered this rise of the last period of the alternative press, however, was also the first to feel the impact of a new era and ceased publication in 1990, closing down in 1992. It was soon followed by the likes of *New African*, *South*, *Namaqua News*, *Saamstaan* and the *Vrye Weekblad*, dying just on the brink of democracy. *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and *New Nation* continued publication until the second half of the nineties but eventually also closed down in the new democratic times. For some, it was just before the first South African democratic elections, for others it was just after, but all alternative newspapers, with the exception of the *Mail & Guardian*, failed to survive past the nineties.

Table I. Rise and fall of the last period of the alternative press



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Several theoretical perspectives suggest ways of assessing the relationships between the media and the broader socio-political and economic structures of society. From the late 1960s and 1970s, liberal-pluralist and Marxist approaches have essentially represented two main areas of media theory. Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott contend that both these approaches “are informed by theoretical conceptions of society and of the role of the media within it, even if these conceptions are more explicitly and self-consciously theorized in the Marxist tradition. Moreover ... the empirical findings of the two traditions are not so far opposed as is usually supposed; both argue about the nature and degree of power that can be attributed to the media, albeit that they express this in different terms” (Curran et al, 1982: 7). As these writers claim, media studies have developed on a significant scale since the early twentieth century beliefs that media were “a powerful and persuasive influence ... [which have] brainwashed people during World War I and engineered the rise of fascism in Europe between the wars” (Curran et al, 1982: 11). This conventional belief in the power of the media was dismissed after World War II with empirical evidence claiming that audiences are active rather than passive and understand the media’s communicated messages selectively. “People, it was argued, manipulated – rather than were manipulated by – the mass media” (Curran et al, 1982: 12). This analysis of media effects was mainly utilised by liberal theoreticians when assessing the persuasive extent of media.

Marxist scholars have, however, dismissed these liberal views of mass communication based mainly on empirical research as lacking important theoretical substance: “The media, they argued, were ideological agencies that played a central role in maintaining class domination” (Curran et al, 1982: 13). But in actual fact, the liberal tradition of empirical research is not completely free of theoretical models and at the same time, Marxist critiques often consider empirical information. The two opposed schools of thought have changed with time and with recent developments in media theory they are not necessarily mutually exclusive in terms of their understanding of mass communication research. Both theoretical approaches advocate a variety of fields (that offer related as well as contradictory views of the media) and particularly in the Marxist arena, these can be identified within three main perspectives: The Structuralist approach, the Culturalist approach and the approach of Political economy. The structuralist studies of media include several diverse approaches such as Roland Barthes’

semiotics. Lacan's reworking of psychoanalysis or Saussurean linguistics (Curran et al, 1982: 23) These are closely linked to analyses of representations in different texts. What will be of more significance for this thesis, however, is the notion of ideology, which is inherent in this structuralist approach as expressing the themes and representations through which people relate to the real world (Curran et al, 1982: 24).

Several prominent critical theories of ideology have emerged from various Marxist theorists. One is Marx's realist theory of ideology where Marx suggested that ideology was false consciousness produced by a ruling minority in order to dominate the majority of the people in society by explaining that the existing relations of domination were the natural order of things. Marx's view, however, is often regarded as simplistic in suggesting that only economic and material interests influence a person's ideology and fails to acknowledge people's personal and individual experiences and how these experiences influence their views of the world (Sonderling, 2001: 316). A neo-Marxist critical theory of ideology thus saw Louis Althusser revise Marx's ideas and move away from Marx's 'economic determinism'. Althusser suggested that ideology was produced by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which include family, school, church, politics, language and mass media. Through their messages, these apparatuses prepare people to accept their society as it is. Unlike Marx's view, "for Althusser, ideology is 'lived' and so, as far as the individual experiences it, it is real. This reality which each person lives is an image of society which gives him or her an identity and a place in that society" (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, 1987a: 7). But people are not simply subjects of mindless compliance and the Tomasellis and Muller also point out the weaknesses of Althusser's account, such as his tendency towards functionalism and abstraction (Tomaselli et al, 1987a: 8-9).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is an important element of ideology when determining the nature of a relationship between the established order and social representations of the press. "Hegemony is the way the powerful ruling class in a society can maintain domination without the need to use force to subordinate the less powerful people in society" (Sonderling, 2001: 319). "In South Africa the hegemonic principle is, or has been, 'racial capitalism' – in other words, capitalist relations overlaid by economic and political apartheid" (Tomaselli et al, 1987a: 15-16). Drawing on the ideas of Gramsci suggests that society is not a unified collection of people that accept one particular ideology but is more dynamic and characterised by many conflicting ideologies rather than a single ideology. This view of ideology

identifying media as sites of struggle between competing ideas and beliefs and between rival ideologies is the most appropriate for this thesis.

Culture, however, is central to any discussion of ideology as ideology is important to culture. Culturalist studies of media are thus closely related to some concepts of structuralism like semiotics or language. Thompson claims the numerous texts that people are surrounded by on a daily basis, including the media, become part of their collective consciousness and their common experiences, ultimately contributing to the evolution of their culture(s) (in Lemon, 2001: 355). Furthermore, “ideology refers to the assumptions according to which individuals, groups or societies conceptualise the values and beliefs that express their culture” (Dupre cited in Lemon, 2001: 369). Cultural studies is not a single field of thought but it is rather adapted and formed in the society in which it is practised. Cultural practices are often regarded as a struggle for meaning and with this struggle being an ideological one, Stuart Hall claims that “cultural studies is fundamentally concerned with the problem of contradictory and competing ideologies within society” (Lemon, 2001: 373).

“Representations are always ideological”, claim the Tomasellis and Muller (1987a: 17) but while occasionally attempting to combine the culturalist and structuralist views when emphasising the history and the actual means and conditions of production (Tomaselli et al, 1987a: 13) of the alternative press, this thesis will not examine the newspapers’ contents in terms of language or its semiotic values. The consideration of the sets of meanings implicit in newspapers’ contents will only marginally refer to the broader spectrum of ideology and culture in this thesis. Adrian Hadland suggests that in studying the language of the press, ideology and culture are in themselves subject to debate and controversy. “Is one to assess language,” Hadland asks, “merely as a basis for communication and the transference of information, or does it possess a subliminal, symbolic quality to be used or abused on a larger scale of social and political life?” (1991: 1). Hall argues that all forms of expression offer a variety of meanings, it just depends on the preferred reading of the recipient and tactics in ‘decoding’ specifically ‘encoded’ messages (Hall in Lemon, 2001: 376).

Ideology is nonetheless strongly linked to language and through newspapers certain texts become powerful means of communication and manipulation of the public. “Every government considers the mass media as important means for manipulating the ideas and opinions of the people” (Sonderling, 2001: 312). The apartheid years in South Africa were

characterised by the spreading of the dominant ideology through certain media while other media attempted to oppose such discriminatory views and sought to challenge the state apparatus through counter-hegemonic messages. “Governments believe that through the communication of ideology by the mass media people will be convinced that they must accept and do what they are told to do” (Sonderling, 2001: 312). The alternative press originated out of this scenario and attempted to challenge the dominant ideology with an ideology of the masses which had evolved for 150 years, with the various stages of resistance press in South Africa, into many diverse voices. A number of historical developments gave rise to specific forms of resistance during different periods and the last stage of the alternative press was largely a result of resistance culminating in protest of the apartheid government’s reform initiatives. The alternative press of the 1980s thus helped invoke the majority’s counter-hegemonic tendencies that developed in the past, but also communicated newfound structures, meanings and tactics that were to characterise anti-apartheid ideology during this period.

The third approach to media theory is political economy, which attempts to assess the power of the media in terms of their position within the wider economic and political context. “This well-established tradition in media research ... has heavily criticised structuralist accounts of the media for their over-concentration on ideological elements” (Curran et al, 1982: 25). It will be, therefore, important for this thesis to analyse first the economic relations in which the alternative press operated and then study the ways in which it produced specific ideological discourses and not the other way around. Because media are increasingly practised as businesses with the emphasis on profit, and are practised less as the production of culture with the emphasis on meaning and quality (Fourie, 2001: 105); to understand the demise of the alternative press, it is important to understand the media as businesses. Hall suggests, however, that the advocates of political economy “conceive the economic level as not only a necessary but a sufficient explanation of cultural and ideological effects” (in Curran et al, 1982: 26). While realising the importance of media ownership and monopolisation of the culture industry, this thesis will at the same time also attempt to point out the impact and effectiveness of ideology and not identify it purely as ‘false consciousness’ in the interests of a class which controls the media.

“Ideology is not a system of ideas imposed from outside. Rather, it is an interlinked ensemble of social, political and economic structures which permeate our everyday experiences” (Tomaselli et al, 1987b: 22). The dominant ideology of apartheid was a racial classification of

society, from which ensued specific social, political and economic dynamics. The alternative press of the 1980s challenged the ideology of apartheid with a counter-hegemonic ideology, which was spurred by general resistance at grassroots levels. The Tomasellis and Muller claim that “the construction of particular ideological discourses is the outcome of struggles at particular historical moments” (1987a: 11). The main objective of the alternative press was to challenge the dominant discourse and remain independent of subjective political and commercial interests. The media environment of the early nineties, however, saw a strong shift from providing a service to the public to selling a product. In the capitalist context of today’s media, media products are sold in order to make profits and profits can be made by reaching the largest or most affluent audiences possible thereby securing advertising income. The demise of the alternative press thus came as a result of broader trends in the economy. These trends are closely related to capitalism, which is in turn closely related to the development of democracy (Fourie, 2001: 118) and the alternative press wasn’t geared for either. It was a clash between ideological and commercial interests of the newspapers that triggered the demise of many alternative newspapers.

Relying on foreign funding was a fundamental weakness and economic survival of the alternative press became very difficult when it was withdrawn after the 1994 elections. The alternative papers struggled to secure resources and attract advertising. Competition against the mainstream counterparts thus became extremely challenging, especially with the weak management practices prevailing on most alternative newspapers. Attracting and nurturing quality journalistic staff was also a problem due to scarce resources. The alternative press, claims Berger, intended to become the new mainstream after the struggle was won (2000: 88-89), but it failed to capitalise on such visions. There were several other reasons, however, why the alternative press declined after the establishment of the very democratic regime it supported. In the new media environment, the mainstream press was no longer constrained by legal curbs and the news of the struggle lost its exclusivity: “the great divide between good and bad narrowed” (Berger, 2000: 89). Many of the good journalists that came out of the alternative press went over to the more prosperous mainstream. The demand for weekly newspapers decreased during the early nineties and daily news coverage was needed. The alternative press of the 1980s initially grew out of a community’s need for a means of communication and was mainly aimed at black and coloured readers but its low circulation suggested the role to politicise and educate in many cases failed to address the intended readership. Moreover, after the 1994 elections, the public grew weary of reading about

political news and sought out more entertainment and 'lighter' content in newspapers. This 'transition fatigue' impacted on a whole range of media after 1990, as they were caught unprepared and found it challenging to adjust to the new dynamics of a democratic environment.

The new political environment shifted the partisanship of the alternative press from being a watchdog towards a scenario where the *status quo* was not a clear enemy. The decline of the alternative press stemmed from the perceived decline of the 'alternative purpose' of providing explicit or implicit political, social and economic alternatives to the established order.

Alternative newspapers were previously characterised by a high level of commitment towards a common interest. It was almost a culture with its own norms and an utter conviction of the rightness of its cause (Jackson, 1993: 64). By refusing to be neutral, the alternative press prided itself in the conscious and unapologetic practice of advocacy journalism. But after democracy, this role ceased to exist; the newspapers struggled to adapt and critically engage with the system they previously supported. Becoming party papers that support the new government would have undermined the underlying concept of being 'alternative'. The new era called for nuanced coverage but the alternative press failed to fill the new gap created by the shift from confrontation to reconstruction. Failing to adapt to the decline in general mobilisation and with no support from the new South African government that would accommodate alternative newspapers, the days of the alternative press were numbered. As Tomaselli and Louw suggested, "Once a real reform of apartheid was set in motion, the *raison d'être* of the alternative press was effectively ended. De Klerk's February 1991 Opening Address to Parliament simply confirmed the fact that the end of an era had been reached" (1991c, 225-6).

During apartheid the alternative press claimed suspicion and sometimes even hostility towards the capitalist interests that were embraced by the mainstream press (Jackson, 1993: 53). The mainstream press was characterised by the important connection between its commercial orientation and its editorial content. The alternative press, however, saw these economic interests, which were often tied to monopolistic control by private enterprise, as detrimental to the mainstream coverage of crucial political issues. The underlying position of the theory of political economy is that the economic and political control of the media determines the content and thus the ideological power of the media. Murdock and Golding claim (in Fourie, 2001: 122) that the media and the way media markets operate is part of the capitalist

economic system with close links to the political system in the country. This means that the primary interest of media owners “is to uphold the principles of a capitalist mode of production in order to guarantee profit” (ibid: 122). A newspaper driven by motives other than profitability cannot survive in such an environment and its closure weakens media diversity. The ideological interests of the alternative press, which were founded on political values (giving the ‘voice to the voiceless’) were bound for failure in an environment dominated by interests driven by the market, as “the voices that survive will largely belong to those least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Conversely, those most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicise their dissent or opposition because they cannot command resources needed for effective communication to a broad audience.” (Murdock and Golding in Fourie, 2001: 123).

None of the alternative newspapers were built as business ventures but as responses to communication needs of the public and grew with the struggle to a point where new possibilities seemed to exist. “Surely there was a role for their publications in the new South African society. But, trapped in a crisis, the alternative publishers had difficulty identifying this role” (Cloete, 2000: 65-66). The alternative press played an important role in South Africa’s history but in order for it to survive, develop and maintain a relevant cause, various elements would have needed adjustment. The situation is more complex due to the fact that many above mentioned characteristics of the alternative press, which have caused its downfall, were particularly those crucial aspects that made the publications so effective in their era. It is important, therefore, to see the alternative press in the light of its place in the political economy of South African media, while also keeping in consideration the ideological and cultural circumstances that surrounded the alternative press. As Don Pinnock suggests, “the media are more than merely business enterprises. They are purveyors of culture” (1991: 136). With its advocacy orientated content, the alternative press effectively remained opposed to the hegemonic bloc during the 1980s but in the economic and political context of democracy, its ideological and cultural messages became marginalised before losing its voice altogether.

Chapter 1 will closely study two alternative publications – *Grassroots* and the *Weekly Mail* – comparing and contrasting their differences and commonalities and assessing their roles in the overall environment of South African media. Chapter 2 will explore the reasons behind the decline of these two newspapers within the theory of political economy and explain why one

has survived the transition to democracy, while the other has failed. Chapter 3 examines the demise of *Grassroots* and survival of the *Weekly Mail* with regards to the theory of ideology. This methodology will then suggest a formula that will be applied to the general fate of other alternative newspapers after 1990 in chapter 4. Chapter 5 will, with reasons and implications behind the demise of the alternative press identified, assess the present day scenario of South African media diversity.

THE TERM 'ALTERNATIVE'

Clarifying the use of the term 'alternative' is crucial, however, before embarking on this thesis. Many scholars have found the term 'alternative' when referring to this specific press, problematic. Former editor of the *Weekly Mail*, Anton Harber claimed that the term "suggests that we're fringe" (Jackson, 1993: 48). Instead of being marginal, Harber argued that alternative newspapers constituted common views of a majority of South Africans – unlike the mainstream media which were the real 'fringe' (Tomaselli, 1991: 157). "It's a phrase used by the state to isolate us," claimed Harber, and judging from the government's tendencies in the late 1980s to single out alternative papers for attack, grouping them together as witting or unwitting collaborators with the ANC, Harber's fear was well founded (Jackson, 1993: 49).

Neither did the term 'alternative' suggest that these papers were some kind of deviation from the norm. They rather sought to fill in the gaps left by the mainstream press. "The 'alternative' label implies that these papers did not provide 'standard' or 'normal' journalism and that the mainstream press alone defined what good journalism in South Africa ought to be. Alternative papers strongly rejected both implications" (Jackson, 1993: 49). It is important to understand the alternative press as based outside the mainstream field where the market determines what is published. Alternative publishing is always defined in relation to mainstream publishing (Cloete, 2000: 44). Alternative papers offered a different perspective, a new editorial outlook and strategy, and this was key to their characteristic identity. Being an alternative newspaper thus meant being alternative in terms of attitude and policy as well as subject matter covered. Providing an alternative to the mainstream press was the primary initiative of the alternative press but this logically implied providing an alternative to the political thinking of the apartheid government since many mainstream papers 'toed the line' of the apartheid hegemony or provided little criticism. Keyan Tomaselli points out that it is crucial to distinguish the term 'alternative press' from a white-owned press aimed at black

readers and offers Michael Traber's more specific definition: "alternative journalism implies a reversal of the news values of conventional journalism but published alongside news in commercial newspapers and magazines... 'alternative (grassroots) media' [on the other hand] aims less at communication than at social and political action" (Tomaselli, 1991: 157-8). Tomaselli and Louw refer to these 'alternative (grassroots) media' as the 'progressive alternative press' identified above.

Max du Preez preferred the term 'independent' press, while Patrick van Rensburg called it the 'democratic media' since it was representative of the politics of the majority (Berger, 2000: 88). Shaun Johnson defined the term 'alternative publication' as follows:

"In essence the requirements are that an alternative publication must have claim to independence, in the sense that it is not directly or indirectly controlled by ruling vested interest groups such as the state or the commercial monopoly press groups in South Africa. Secondly, it must have as its central purpose the provision of some kind of alternative: political, social, economic, cultural or ideological to the South African status quo" (Johnson, 1991a: 21)

Louw, however, found limitations to this definition, claiming that it could just as well include a neo-fascist paper like *Die Stem* along with 'alternative publications' Johnson sought to identify. Louw therefore rather chose the term 'left-wing' press in order to narrow it down to media that were part of the South African leftist (counter-hegemonic) alliance (Louw, 1991b: 1). This left-wing press Tomaselli and Louw divided into the three categories identified above.

Despite the usefulness and accuracy of some of these terms, this thesis will remain faithful to the term 'alternative press' due to its wide acceptability and established usage. "Usage has accorded the term a permanence even among those who regard it as having serious weaknesses" (Jackson, 1993: 50). Changing terminology at this stage would bring confusion instead of clarity. In line with Berger's use of the term 'alternative press', this thesis will use it "to refer to publications embodying journalism which were pitted in direct opposition to racism in South African society, including opposition to racist publications. This journalism is seen as irrespective of the race of its authors or of its audience. The 'alternative press' in this

definition is thus not the same as the black press (whether the latter is defined in terms of owners, editorial control or audiences)” (Berger, 2000: 73).

CHAPTER 1

Grassroots and Weekly Mail: Case Studies

GRASSROOTS (1980-1990)

Grassroots started as an experimental project in community publishing in early 1980 and soon “defined a direct role for itself in the ongoing process of political resistance” (Johnson, 1991b: 191). A result of the revival of popular protest and emergence of new community, youth and other civic organisations, *Grassroots* was a pioneering development in the progressive alternative sphere of local community newspapers. It aimed to challenge the prevailing coverage of white-controlled commercial mainstream newspapers with mass grassroots attitudes of self-learning and self-activation. Ineke van Kessel, who published an extensive study on *Grassroots* in 2000 and remains an important authority on the subject claims that: “While communication between mainstream newspapers and their publics is largely a one-way street, community newspapers aspired to interact with their readership and to help shape, rather than only report, events” (2000: 283b). The rationale behind *Grassroots* was not of profit but of political organisation among the disenfranchised. “*Grassroots* intended to organise, agitate and provide propaganda. Its mission was larger than reporting, even making, the news – it aimed to make history” (Berger, 2000: 77). In order to identify the role of *Grassroots* within the alternative press and the reasons for its demise, it is important to consider this case study not as an isolated phenomenon but rather place it within the social, political and economic environment from which the newspaper emerged (Johnson, 1991b: 191).

The first plans to launch a community newspaper in the Western Cape came in 1976, a month before the June uprising, from the Writers Association of South Africa (WASA), the successor of the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ). Government’s repressive legislation, at the time, allowed for the launch to take place only in 1980. Louw points out, however, that the link of *Grassroots* to UBJ suggests the newspaper’s roots reach back to the 1970s because that’s when the UBJ was formalised and BC ideology was first institutionalised within the

media world. “The UBJ represents the renaissance of the resistance to apartheid amongst media workers” (Louw: 1991a. 4). BC thinking played only a small role in *Grassroots* after the movement itself ceased to exist and it was the shift from the BC principles (of UBJ/WASA) towards the nonracialism of the UDF and the re-emerging ANC tradition that made the popular communication of *Grassroots* more characteristic of the organisation of the ‘voiceless’. “The key thing about the organisations from which *Grassroots* emerged was that, unlike the BC movement of the 1970s, these organisations were driven by nonracialism,” says former *Grassroots* activist Ryland Fisher (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

The majority of activists involved in *Grassroots* were coloured and became disenchanted with the Black Consciousness form of resistance, as it faded after state repression in the late - 1970s. They, consequently, started adopting more leftist Charterist and Trotskyite tendencies in the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s. Trotsky’s thinking (he was an advocate of orthodox Marxism and believed in ‘permanent revolution’ in the name of the suppressed masses) (Woodfin and Zarate, 2004: 21) opposed the multi-class values of the ANC’s Freedom Charter (1955), but injected the Charter’s rallying call for equal rights for all national groups with a Marxist doctrine. These texts helped activists draw links to the series of strikes and boycotts in the Western Cape and inspired them to establish a medium that would channel these struggles into progressive voices of anti-apartheid advocacy. “Through activist networks, popular versions of Marxist and Leninist texts filtered first into the trade union movement and next into the newly emerging community organisations, youth movements and social service organisations ... (P)roducing a newspaper was not seen as a goal in itself but as a means to an end” (Kessel, 2000b: 284, 289). Lenin introduced the idea of a newspaper as an organising tool in his book *What Is To Be Done?*, where he called for revolutionary organisation and guidance. “A newspaper was needed to give direction to the waves of protest and to give meaning to the struggles of the people ... A newspaper was needed as a catalyst to link local organisations to the common cause – a revolutionary vanguard to direct workers and infuse them with a socialist consciousness” (Kessel, 2000b: 289). *Grassroots* was a local newspaper, not a national newspaper, but it was based on many of these principles that Marxism instituted.

Western Cape activists Johnny Issel and Rashid Seria consulted dozens of organisations in the region before launching the first edition of *Grassroots*. These civic associations, social service agencies, youth movements and community organisations served as sources of encouragement

for the *Grassroots* founders, all calling in unity for a newsletter that would speak to the masses of South Africa's marginalised populace. Attempting to fill the vacuum in coverage left by the English and Afrikaans presses in South Africa and trying to act as a catalyst in initiating and developing community organisations, the first edition of *Grassroots* explained its mission under the headline: "A paper for you that fills the void" (*Grassroots*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1980):

This newsletter has been born out of the tremendous need for a communications medium for community organisations in the Western Cape. Civil and community news are increasingly being kept out of major newspapers ... we know that these newspapers have never really shown an interest or concern for civic and community matters, especially in areas where the disenfranchised live. When civic and community news items are highlighted, these are in most cases restricted to separate 'extra' editions. Even then preference is shown for sensational news or the activities of ethnic bodies working within separate development institutions ... we, therefore, believe that a vacuum exists in the publication of community news and hope that *Grassroots* will to a certain extent fill the void....

It was through organisation that *Grassroots* aimed to change the conditions in which people lived. The newspaper called for unity and action through organisation, which would help the public to gain the power to challenge and overcome oppression. "*Grassroots*' contents were geared towards fomenting dissatisfactions with apartheid living conditions, popularising community organisations and leaders, and mobilising readers into supporting campaigns. Its structure served to provide a central coordinating and networking organisational function for different organisations in different constituencies such as council tenants, school students, unions and campaign groups" (Berger, 2000: 77). This atmosphere of organisation aimed to involve large active participation of people in issues of daily concern such as wages, rent, housing, services and so on, and this organisation later culminated in the formation of the UDF in 1983. *Grassroots* thus initiated important changes and responded through community involvement to developments in the Western Cape of the 1980s, opening new possibilities to mass participation in an organised form of struggle.

Fulfilling the progressive alternative role

A popular democratic structure of 'workerism-populism' emerged, in the late seventies and early eighties, from an alliance between the organised coloured working class and progressive petit bourgeois elements, claims Louw. "Such an alliance necessitated the working out of mechanisms for the democratic regulation of differing interests" (1991a: 3). The alliance needed a vehicle for communication between the leadership and the massive constituency that was mobilised and organised. Louw claims that it was therefore "a political form that impacted directly on the resistance media that emerged in this area – hence this phase saw the emergence of dialogical/democratic media practices in the form of a progressive-alternative press" (Louw, 1991a: 3). *Grassroots* was the key publication in this progressive alternative genre, initiating a new shift in resistance from a top-down style of populist organisation to a more popular democratic approach.

Communication flow was very important to the democratic principles of *Grassroots*. Top-down communication is inherently undemocratic and Louw claims the mainstream media in South Africa used to operate such uni-directional communication structures. "In this way these media have served the interests of the minority (white) ruling class, and have in no way facilitated democratic debate in South Africa" (Louw, 1991a: 4). Louw further argues that an interactive 'dialogical' approach, which complements popular political practice, is important to facilitate a bottom-up empowering of the community. "In the dialogical approach the community can articulate its own interests in a democratic debate" (Louw, 1991a: 4). In top-down communication, the flow of information is essentially one-way, leaving no space for the basic democratic principle of debate to take place. "The top-down approach envisages a passive community, waiting for leader or 'experts' to expound on what is best ... This is an inherently undemocratic view of both community organisation and communication" (Louw, 1991a: 6). By excluding the views of large communities, this mainstream communication did little to challenge the racial capitalism of apartheid, but instead motivated the progressive alternative *Grassroots* to cling to partisanship and not present itself as a neutral mirror of events. Representatives of the community provided story ideas about their areas of concern at regular news-gathering meetings. Here input was assessed and if seen as potential stories by the permanent *Grassroots* staff, these were then assigned by the staff to be written by the participants and members of that very community. The stories were then submitted for approval, discussed, re-evaluated and sometimes re-written but "the community would see it

through until the production phase,” says Fisher. “Up to that point, the community had the final say” (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

Whereas the mainstream press was seen, by the alternative press, as the upholder of the established order, justifying and defending the state and the interests of media owners, *Grassroots* regarded itself as tool for political and social change, “consolidating the newspaper as a genuinely community-based ‘grassroots’ project” (Johnson, 1991b: 192). “*Grassroots* developed from a premise that community issues were central to its raison d’être. The idea was to provide a platform through which the community could talk to itself” (Louw, 1991a: 8). The newspaper dealt mainly with ‘bread and butter’ issues during the early 1980s, giving coverage to material concerns facing people at local level. Instead of national and international politics, it strived to represent the everyday struggles of ordinary people and articulate the views and aspirations of “the oppressed and the exploited people of this country ... those who cannot speak through newspapers, TV, radio and magazines of the bosses and the government” (*Grassroots*, vol. 5 No. 7 1984). The newspaper’s bold headlines reflected prominent community concerns: “We’ve had enough ... and this is what we are doing about it” exclaimed a story about Lotus River, Grassy Park and Belhar residents taking mass action against proposed increases in rates and rents (April, 1980). “Our children need schools” was a story that brought forward the plight of new Mitchell’s Plain residents who found no place for their children in schools in the area (Vol. 2 No. 7 October 1981). “We can’t pay higher bus fares” reported on resident and trade union representatives responding to bus fare increases by City Tramways (Vol. 3 No. 6 August 1982). *Grassroots* editions were full of similar headlines and corresponding stories that sought to drive home anti-apartheid sentiments: “They’ll starve us to death”, “Our eyes have been opened”, “Apartheid is a heresy”, “Free Mandela”, “Boycott helps us win”, “We will not be silenced” and so on. As Berger noted “although *Grassroots* reflected the times, its intent was to hasten the events in history” (2000: 76).

Such issues were stepping stones in the struggle against government oppression. By building confidence in organisation among the Cape’s coloured community *Grassroots* could in the long-term initiate aims at challenging the state itself. Guy Berger calls it the ‘two-stage’ theory: “People were organised on ‘first-level’ issues such as rent, bus fares, housing, street lights, legal rights, non-racial sport; that is basic community issues and problems. This was for a reason of security as much as strategy. Having achieved a certain success, these issues

could then be taken up at a 'second level', meaning that they could be linked together into a single political thread which highlighted, and targeted, what was seen as the cause of oppression and exploitation – the apartheid State and big business" (Berger, 2000: 77). "We always tried to make the connection but we made it very subtly," comments Fisher. "With the formation of the UDF, we made the connection a lot more pronounced" (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). The *Grassroots* staff did not see themselves primarily as journalists but rather as community organisers with an unashamedly propagandist mission (Kessel, 2000a: 239). They were motivated by an initiative for change and agitation rather than remaining neutral and objective observers of events. "I saw myself as a broader political activist, not just a journalist," claims former *Grassroots* organiser Jaffer. "I was part of the struggle, the activist for change" (Interview, 16. 3. 2006).

An editorial board was set up to act as a board of trustees in the early stages of the newspaper. This board included a number of different personalities, such as the future UWC rector and ANC member Jakes Gerwel; Reverend Moses Moletsane; attorney Essa Moosa; former executive of the UBJ James Matthews; journalist Rashid Seria; UWC chaplain Allan Boesak; journalist and secretary of the WASA executive Moegsien Williams and others (Kessel, 2000b: 336-7). When the paper was up and running, this board was replaced by the General Body, which was a decision-making body of *Grassroots* that set out the major policy at annual meetings. It comprised local community groups, women's organisations, trade unions and so on. These member organisations determined policy and took part in making the newspaper. A network of activists, that formed the core staff at *Grassroots*, supervised the running of the newspaper. Intellectual involvement was democratically espoused giving crucial attention to the community the newspaper aimed to serve and in turn, make this community identify with the paper's contents thus encouraging mass involvement. There weren't any titles suggesting professional superiority, but Kessel claims this model of direct democracy was not as much an efficient principle behind a newspaper as it was an important learning experience for many. "At *Grassroots*, people learned how to run a democratic organization, how to put up your hand if you wanted to speak, how to chair a meeting. Without *Grassroots*, there would not have been such a wide range of organisations" (Kessel, 2000b: 294).

A range of tasks – deciding the content, organisation, production, fund-raising, training people in media skills and distribution of *Grassroots* – was designed to involve the

participation of as many people as possible. “We had this idea of an egalitarian society.” says Jaffer “Today I would be called the ‘editor’, but at *Grassroots* I was simply an ‘organiser” (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). Mansoor Jaffer joined *Grassroots* full-time in 1983 and became its main organiser (‘editor’) in 1985, until he left in 1988. Despite the democratic production cycle, stemming from the canvassing of support amongst community organisations within the Western Cape, Jaffer played a key role in deciding what stories ultimately made it into the paper during times of heightened state repression in the mid-eighties (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). Mass participation was always encouraged at *Grassroots* but professional involvement remained essential. “There were no bylines, that was *Grassroots* policy,” says Fisher, who parted with a R1400 monthly salary at the *Cape Herald* to work full-time as a news and production organiser at *Grassroots* from 1984-87 for R450 a month (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

Finances had always been a problem at *Grassroots* but since the paper did not aim to make profit but rather strived to ‘organise and mobilise’, *Grassroots*’ socialist agenda largely overshadowed the need for a prospective financial strategy. Distribution was limited to community participation and the lengthy production cycle allowed for *Grassroots* to appear at five-week intervals, usually amounting to ten or eleven issues a year. One of the founders of *Grassroots*, Rashid Seria, who later became the paper’s secretary and treasurer, admits that although these popular democratic structures were important in voicing community concerns, they did not alter the fact that *Grassroots* could not become self-sufficient without funding (Interview, 26. 4. 2006). Organisational involvement in producing and distributing the paper also declined as a result of police harassment during the state of emergency in the mid-1980s and the position of *Grassroots* became seriously compromised. Moreover, one issue of *Grassroots* every five weeks couldn’t capture the daily tensions that dominated the eighties. One of the paper’s last organisers, Fahdiel Manuel, who remained with *Grassroots* until its closure in 1992, claims that a loss of direction was felt among core *Grassroots* staff during the latter part of the 1980s as a result of weaker civic structures and a decline in community involvement (Interview, 25. 3. 2006). *Grassroots* meetings became underground operations and the paper was distributed for free under the state of emergency because salesmen faced an increasing danger of prosecution. Financial self-sufficiency became a very remote ideal. *Grassroots* did not have audited ABC’s and advertising was marginal for a publication that addressed the working class. The majority of the paper’s finances came from overseas donor organisations as part of an anti-apartheid cause but this funding was unlikely to last beyond the end of apartheid (see chapter 2). A new era seemed inevitable during the late 1980s, as

apartheid structures weakened but *Grassroots* failed to implement a more practical production cycle, that would reduce the activism of popular participation with regards to the importance of a sound financial strategy aimed at sustainability.

The question of coverage

The message of socialism was central to *Grassroots*. It stressed the importance of organisation, where masses should stand together to achieve common goals. Linking this organisation to the wider scheme of liberation politics ensued from the *Grassroots* formula as a natural process of mass participation in resistance. The newspaper's democratic principles were instrumental to its effectiveness but the joint efforts for a common good became impossible to split from attempts to drive home political messages. "You can't really divorce the politics from the community," claims Fisher. "If there was a problem, it was a political problem" (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). Some have criticised *Grassroots* for promoting community organisations as a goal in itself, thus focusing on local struggles and elevating them to economic struggles, whereby the political consciousness remained ignored. John Orford claims, however, that links between local problems, apartheid and the national struggle were effectively drawn; even though they were often implicit rather than explicit. For example articles about high prices for public transport were linked to the larger scheme of apartheid, which was linked to capitalism (Orford, 1990: 44). Mobilising people around everyday grievances was fairly easy and through these issues, a larger scheme of apartheid injustices was revealed to the public.

Coverage being dedicated to organisational stories, which focused on a particular issue in a community, like a formation of a civic body, resulted in journalism that preferred open advocacy to Western standards of reportage. Neutrality was avoided and ... "The link between local and national struggles was frequently emphasised: 'Our local rent, electricity and factory floor struggles must not be an end in themselves. We must link our local problems with the oppression and exploitation of our people in this country and the struggle for change'" (Kathy Lowe in Kessel, 2000b: 291-2). Objectivity gave way to a Marxist ideology where the subordinated public was urged to rebel against minority domination. But Kessel notes that the difficulty for this newspaper, though it ensured wide participation, was the considerable degree of uniformity in terms of content. "'Our stories follow the same formula,' noted the news-gathering committee in 1982: 'a victory through community action is usually the thrust

of the story ... we do not address ourselves to problems experienced and mistakes made by organisations. Instead we glorify their actions” (*Grassroots* news-gathering committee cited in Kessel, 2000b: 300). The General Body intended to shift the content to be more educative and critical in order to stimulate debate and move away from the overemphasis on victory. But this never happened because the alternative press aimed to represent a ‘unity of the oppressed’ while striving to exist in contrast to the mainstream and its perceived failure to critically engage with relevant news of the struggle. “In common with many other alternative newspapers, *Grassroots* did not develop an editorial formula to deal with conflicts and crises *within* progressive organisations” (Kessel, 2000b: 301).

The coverage of *Grassroots* began focusing much more strongly on political issues after 1983, when the UDF was formed. The most fundamental reason for the formation of the UDF was that Botha’s reforms threatened the basis for Charterist mobilisation, which was to characterise the following decade until the early nineties. The newspaper now identified local issues as direct consequences of apartheid rule and called for political action. Berger claims that by organising a network of civic structures, *Grassroots* played an important role in the formation of the UDF: “Perhaps the most valuable aspect of these [community] papers was their contribution to building a coalition of some 400 community, sporting, civic and other organisations into a congress-aligned, anti-apartheid force called the United Democratic Front (UDF) in August 1983. With this step, grassroots opposition to apartheid moved strongly into ‘second-level’ mode” (2000: 79). The launch of the UDF opened new possibilities for *Grassroots* but also brought with it new challenges. “Some said the paper needed to take on a more political stand that was more in line with the UDF ... It resolved to be ‘more educative’ but remain a ‘mass-based popular newspaper which is the product of mass work’ ... In a sense, however, political conditions overtook this debate [because] those organisations that constituted *Grassroots* were by and large creating or becoming members of the UDF ... so in a sense, the move towards supporting the UDF was an organic development related to the base of *Grassroots*” (Orford, 1990: 32-33).

During the mid-1980s, *Grassroots* remained community based but shifted a lot of its coverage towards projecting and popularising the UDF. It also started carrying more stories about national and international political struggles (e.g. SWAPO movement in Namibia). “When the UDF came onto the scene, we were confronted by taking our coverage towards a more political direction, which we profusely debated but eventually decided that we needed to

reflect the times.” comments Fisher (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). Jaffer, on the other hand, claims: “It wasn’t necessarily deliberate to shift the paper to become more political, it was just a result of the way things unfolded in the 1980s” (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). Kessel claims that by adopting a more outspoken political profile, *Grassroots* attempted to shift the issue-oriented formula towards being in touch with the now more politicised mood of ‘the People’ (2000a: 241). But the majority of readers remained interested in issues such as rent and electricity, not national politics. They were concerned about issues taking place on the doorstep of their communities, not in parliament. Moving its coverage strongly into ‘second-level’ mode, *Grassroots* began presenting politics in ways its coloured audience could not relate to easily. As the newspaper became more overtly political and militant, it began losing touch with its traditional readership among the coloured, working class constituency. In fact, after 1985, *Grassroots* gradually became the mouthpiece for the UDF. “From 1985 the UDF leadership began to exercise direct control over editorial policy” (Kessel, 2000b: 308). This seemed like a natural development since *Grassroots* played an important part in the formation of the UDF. Community issues took a back seat as alternative media began playing an increasingly important role in the struggle for political power. “With hindsight, however, several *Grassroots* activists identified this takeover by national politics as the fatal moment in the development of the community newspaper. As popular mobilisation escalated into a state of insurrection, *Grassroots* became increasingly irrelevant ... it was far too ‘political’ for the taste of the average Coloured reader” (Kessel, 2000b: 308).

Alienating readers

Through community involvement, *Grassroots* created a network of activists that in the mid-1980s helped UDF promote the concept of ‘People’s Power’, also part of the strategies of the ANC in exile, as the embodiment of democracy. Township revolts across the country in 1985 and 1986 prompted the government to impose a state of emergency and “the ambition of media activists was no longer limited to providing an alternative worldview to the prevailing orthodoxy in the mainstream press. They were now going to supplant these bastions of the old order and establish a new hegemony. By now, *Grassroots* made it quite clear that this promised land could only materialise in a socialist order” (Kessel, 2000b: 312). Popular participation, rather than pluralism, was meant to be key in bringing about democratic principles. But a limited leftist perspective left insufficient space for the variety of ideological claims that existed among the population. The community struggles became threatened by

narrow-minded revolutionary tendencies. “Activists tended to mistake activists’ consciousness for popular consciousness” (Kessel, 2000b: 313) and from the mid-1980s, *Grassroots* was being produced by staff members without the involvement of organisations (Kessel, 2000a: 269).

During the early days of *Grassroots*, the paper’s messages were generally characterised by support of the broad anti-apartheid movement rather than a specific party but as politicisation heightened in the mid-1980s, the ANC became very prominent in the coverage of *Grassroots* and militancy had taken over the struggle. This alienated voices in the community who sympathised with other views or whose concerns remained around housing, jobs and transportation rather than the Freedom Charter and Marxism. The ANC has historically been weak in the Western Cape and by popularising the party, *Grassroots* lost touch with the Cape’s conservative coloured constituency. Ryland Fisher later reflected that the activist frame of mind became remote from the popular mood among ordinary coloured people: “That heavy high profile political stuff put many people off. It became more an activist paper than a community paper ... You have to keep in mind the character of the western Cape; you have to start from people’s consciousness. Activists assumed that ordinary people supported the ANC, violence, non-racialism and all that” (in Kessel, 2000b: 315).

The coloured activists at *Grassroots* increasingly sought to identify with the Africans in the liberation struggle. “We were coloureds but we referred to ourselves as black,” says Fisher (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). Nonracialism and a Marxist doctrine were important aspects of the counter-hegemonic attitude of left-wing structures but their avoidance of issues of identity and ethnicity caused *Grassroots* to bundle together diverse communities of its target audience behind the ‘oppressed and exploited majority’ label. *Grassroots* activists hoped that coloureds and Africans would find solidarity through class related issues to establish a mass culture of confrontation against repression. “Africans and coloureds would find common ground if they identified with their position as workers. However, building alliances across racial divides proved difficult. *Grassroots* was not successful in trying to bridge the gap between coloureds and Africans” (Kessel, 2000a: 226). Raising political awareness among the Western Cape’s racially and ideologically divided groups was challenging because the class struggle could not be separated from racial conflict. Acting in accordance with the Charterist tradition of nonracialism, *Grassroots* would not criticise different groups in the struggle through race or ethnicity and so the gap that appeared among the oppressed majority was expressed in class

terms. The nonracialist approach of *Grassroots* therefore overlooked serious divisions between different groups in the Cape and ultimately implied “the premise that racial conflict was merely a convenient camouflage for the real divide in South Africa: the class struggle” (Kessel, 2000a: 226).

“Thus a problem endemic to resistance in South Africa was played out at the level of the alternative press: how to achieve unity amongst the oppressed, and thereby increase the strength of the movement toward change ... Although a philosophy of non-racialism was vociferously espoused and practiced, it [*Grassroots*] faced prejudice and fear entrenched through decades of rule by coercion and division” (Johnson, 1991b: 204). This was further complicated by the reality that many *Grassroots* activists refused to take account of the popular culture of their coloured readership. “Many at the time would have been adamant that there was no such thing as Coloured identity ... In this respect, *Grassroots* mirrored the UDF Western Cape at large: it offered a political home for Coloured people but at the price of denying or effacing their cultural baggage” (Kessel, 2000b: 309). *Grassroots* adopted a one-dimensional view of people and politics, built on an ideal of socialist transformation through Marxist ideology. It encouraged nonracialism but placed interests of a revolution before the importance of the working class people’s differences. “People were important only insofar as they were useful to this process [socialist transformation of South Africa],” said Jonathan de Vries, publicity secretary on the UDF’s regional executive in the Western Cape, in 1991 ... De Vries regretted that the UDF and *Grassroots* had not tapped the creativity of ordinary people but had rather sought to mould them into a unitary culture that would facilitate the imposition of a new hegemony ... “the liberation culture was an African culture ... There was no incorporation of Coloured identity in the UDF. That could not even be discussed” (De Vries cited in Kessel, 2000b: 309-310). There was no mention of the divide between coloureds and Africans in *Grassroots* ... “The constant drumming on the theme of nonracialism certainly had its virtues, for it instilled nonracialism as the accepted norm. But some ideologues were such eager consumers of this particular piece of propaganda that they failed to acknowledge the considerable gap between norm and practice” (Kessel, 2000a: 235).

At the level of content, the nonracialism of *Grassroots*, according to John Orford, meant the use of nonracial pictures, interviews and stories to project both the African leadership and a coloured working class leadership. “At another level, however, building non-racialism meant building unity in action. In this area *Grassroots* faced a number of problems ... There was

little tradition of unity or united action between coloured and African areas ... this meant *Grassroots* faced a serious problem of having limited access to African townships” (Orford, 1990: 65). Coloured activists did not understand community organisation in African townships well enough and distribution of the newspaper itself in townships was very poor (less than 10 percent of the total distribution). The civic organisations in coloured areas were key to the role of *Grassroots* and enabled the newspaper to reach the communities and participate in discussions about local issues. The same scheme was not in place in African township areas. As a result, *Grassroots* constantly battled with the perception by Africans that it was a ‘coloured’ paper. According to former *Grassroots* organiser Leila Patel: “It was a lack of our contact networks, the lack of organisation in the early years in the townships which made it difficult, and then later on the organisation did emerge and we did have relationships with people but there was an uneven development in organisation” (in Orford, 1990: 65).

Kessel points out, that another part of the problem was that some African activists and organisations did not consider the media a priority and rather relied on word of mouth to organise meetings, boycotts or demonstrations, therefore, in places, undermining the nature of the agenda *Grassroots* was attempting to espouse. “Township activists did not believe that the newspaper was of much benefit to them.” But at the same time, as *Grassroots* lost touch with much of its coloured constituency because of increasing political and militant overtone, “in Coloured areas, *Grassroots* came to be seen as an ‘African newspaper’” (Kessel, 2000b: 307-8). *Grassroots* therefore became increasingly isolated as it wasn’t gaining readership among blacks, who weren’t adequately reached by the newspaper, despite its nonracial beliefs, and at the same time, *Grassroots* was losing appeal among the coloureds (often with strong religious convictions) because of its increased militant perspective of the struggle during heightened political tension. “Those of us who were involved in the struggle had moved ahead without taking our communities with us,” says Fisher. “We had become black but the communities remained coloured” (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

Language was another problem. Until 1983, *Grassroots* was written exclusively in English, as the activists believed it was the unifying language of the struggle. The language of the coloured working class, however, was Afrikaans. Xhosa and Afrikaans speakers thus had reason to feel alienated. The newspaper hardly intended to discriminate against other languages and it did begin carrying stories in Xhosa and Afrikaans from mid-1983 but,

according to Kessel, this did little to solve the language problem: “With assistance from *Grassroots*, some African UDF activists produced a newsletter in Xhosa, but this irregular publication, *Township News*, did not have much impact ... The newspaper’s rural editions were largely published in Afrikaans, as was *Saamstaan*, a community newspaper in Outshoorn ... [and] the fact that some of the titles of the resistance press opted for the use of Afrikaans, usually branded as ‘the language of the oppressor,’ was symbolic” (2000b: 309). The new ‘multi-lingual’ approach did win *Grassroots* credit for showing respect for different languages but it could never become effective in uniting its intended mass readership ... “accommodating diversity [in language] could not be reconciled with the overriding concern for unity [of communities]” (Kessel, 2000a: 246). According to Patel, *Grassroots* was aware of the problem of struggles being waged in separate group areas and needed to draw the links between struggles in coloured and African areas and with the struggle for national liberation in order to overcome divisions: “yes, we were aware of it, we were struggling with it in the kind of content in the paper, around questions of language, linkage, etc., of common campaigns” (cited in Orford, 1990: 68). *Grassroots* was therefore not an effective organising tool across the racial divide. “To be effective as an organising tool, a newspaper needs to address a more or less homogenous constituency” (Kessel, 2000b: 322).

Despite its weaknesses it is clear that *Grassroots* made significant contributions to the shaping of developments in the Western Cape through organisation and community involvement. In its early years it gave a ‘voice to the voiceless’ and managed to pioneer the most effective era of the South African alternative press of the 1980s, making a far greater impact than its highest claimed circulation of 32 000 would suggest (Jaffer interview 16. 3. 2006; Switzer, 2000: 46-47 (citing table by Tomaselli)). It managed to agitate and coordinate community unity, giving the community a sense of ownership over the project and allowing for a process of development of skills and organisation associated with it. Often harassed by police office raids, detention of its staff and other intimidation, *Grassroots* avoided decisive state prosecution except for the three months in 1989, when it was forced to close down by government restrictions. It served as a broad forum for many emerging organisations. Through popular participation *Grassroots* promoted community and political awareness in parts of the complex Cape constituency. It trained activists and developed skills of new media workers. Moving away from the methods of the mainstream press, it served as a model for other alternative community media projects such as *The Eye*, *Speak*, *Ukusa*, *Learning Roots*, *New Era* or *Umthonyama* and initiated its rural version *Saamstaan*. Despite promoting

internal democracy through community involvement, the newspaper did not, however, manage to develop a formula that would allow it to survive in the new conditions of a post-1990 South Africa. Having to rely on overseas funding, *Grassroots* never became a financially self-sustainable publication and its strategy of organisation eventually faded in the ideologically fragmented Western Cape. The diverse ‘community of the oppressed’ was not addressed as an audience in its own unique terms and nor did a nonracial approach unite South Africa’s marginalised majority into one homogenous constituency that could be further strengthened in organisation through *Grassroots* advocacy. Chapters 2 and 3 will examine the demise of *Grassroots* in more detail with regards to finances and ideology respectively.

WEEKLY MAIL (1985-)

Grassroots and *Weekly Mail* both fulfilled a small but not insignificant role of the alternative press in helping South Africa reach democracy but the *Weekly Mail* falls into the category of the ‘social-democrat press’ and in the form of the *Mail & Guardian*, it remains the only surviving alternative newspaper from the eighties. The *Weekly Mail* was established in 1985 by journalists from the controversially closed mainstream newspapers *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Express*, Anton Harber and Irwin Manoim. As unemployed journalists, they decided to use their severance pay to found a newspaper that would carry further forward the anti-apartheid ideals of the *RDM*. “The legacy of Laurence Gandar, the best-known editor of the *RDM*, was one of dissenting liberalism and crusading social project” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 459). Disputes still surround the political and commercial reasons behind the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* as it was strange that such a critical and outspoken newspaper survived years of political harassment only to break down under corporate battles between its owner SAAN (South African Associated Newspapers) and the Argus company.

“Of all the English-language newspapers, the *Rand Daily Mail* had the strongest reputation as a liberal ‘mouthpiece’” (Tomaselli, Tomaselli, 1987: 79). Anthony Heard, former *Cape Times* editor, notes in retrospect: “During the state of emergency, we [*Cape Times* and *Rand Daily Mail*] contributed substantially to making whites understand what blacks were thinking and vice versa – creating a bridge. The closing of the *Rand Daily Mail* was a disaster because a bridge was taken away” (Interview 26.8.2005). The *RDM* proprietors claimed the newspaper had been losing money for some years. The black readership of the *RDM*, however, was

growing and outnumbering the white readership, but the advertisers weren't prepared to adjust their marketing strategy with regards to class rather than race. The *RDM* did not commercially utilise the potential of growing literacy and levels of income among the black population but neither did it significantly tap into the affluent white market. Koos Roelofse, in evaluating the racist discourse of the South African advertising industry argued that the "*Mail* had two markets and dominated neither ... it had positioned itself in a no-man's land between a sophisticated white market and a developing black one" (cited in Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1987: 82). It was therefore declared that the *RDM* closed for financial reasons but circumstances also suggest that there were severe governmental pressures on the proprietors and the newspaper may have more likely closed for political reasons. The *RDM* closed down on 30 April 1985 but many of its traditions were soon to be revived by the *Weekly Mail* – its first copy appearing on 14 June 1985.

Fulfilling the independent social-democrat role

Falling into the category of alternative newspapers, which Louw and Tomaselli called the 'independent social-democrat press', *Weekly Mail* was generally supportive of the politics of the left but remained independent of any specific political movement. Unlike *Grassroots*, the *Weekly Mail*'s emphasis in content was further removed from the grassroots movements and community organisations but in common with the general genre of all alternative newspapers, it sought to address the growing resistance to apartheid. Anti-apartheid attitudes became widespread among the public in the mid-eighties as a consequence of Botha's reforms and attempts of the tri-cameral parliament to co-opt coloured people and Indians into an alliance against Africans. The alternative newspapers all played instrumental roles in enhancing general anti-governmental sentiments among the South African society. Advocacy was an influential element but it took on various characteristics in the different publications. "It [*Weekly Mail*] provided a platform for the expression of 'leftist' anti-apartheid messages, but adhered to 'objective' journalistic practices of the libertarian genre" (Louw, 1991b: 2-3).

Objectivity is a disputable term but the *Weekly Mail* did, nonetheless, gain reputation for its fairness in upholding the notion of debate and remaining critical not only of the apartheid government but also attempting to point out mistakes made by leftist movements. It set itself to be a commercially sustainable weekly newspaper with relevant content that would sell mainly to the left-wing intelligentsia. "Some of those involved in the establishment of the

Weekly Mail were liberals, others socialists, but their general perspective may be described as social-democratic. They believed there was a scope for a newspaper that provided a wider range of reporting than was to be found in the mainstream commercial press, which reported relatively little news from the African community” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 461). In contrast to the regional characteristics of *Grassroots*, the *Weekly Mail* was a national newspaper and its journalists therefore covered different issues than those of community newspapers, sometimes more boldly attacking the politics of apartheid along with its negative social, economic and other implications.

The *Weekly Mail* sought to address the gap in the market left by not only the mainstream but also the alternative press, calling for a progressive-minded newspaper with strong opinions. It contained mainly political news but also had a significant arts section. “A prominent feature was the ‘Apartheid Barometer’ which gave information about people detained and books banned. The *Weekly Mail* became in a minor way a newspaper of record” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 462). Being founded by journalists from outspoken mainstream papers, the *Weekly Mail* was in many ways ahead of its time with its style of reporting on the authoritarianism of apartheid and leftist confrontation with the government. But as part of the social-democrat press, the *Weekly Mail* was different from progressive alternative newspapers like *Grassroots* and left-commercial newspapers like *New Nation* in the sense that it was never explicitly partisan in attempt to mobilise leftist forces. Eric Louw claims that the independent social-democrat press “has adopted something of a hybrid of the ‘conventional’ libertarian media practices and of progressive alternative media practices ... The other left-wing presses were the outgrowth of initiatives of the suppressed subaltern groups themselves. The same is not true of the *Weekly Mail*” (1991b: 3, 20). Louw summarises the characteristics of the journalistic practices of independent social-democrat press as follows:

Something of a ‘intellectualised’ re-reading of the South African situation with an anti-apartheid ‘liberatory’ intent and falling outside the accepted journalistic practices of the South African guild press but never as partisan or rhetorical as the practices of other leftist media were. Never ‘organically’ linked to community and worker groups in the same way as the progressive alternative press has been and often using a ‘legalistic strategy’. As Anton Harber said: ‘we were journalists acting as lawyers. We studied statutes; we spent a great deal of time with lawyers ... we carved out a whole

niche for ourselves simply by re-interpreting the law in an aggressive and pro-active way' (Louw, 1991b: 3).

Aiming for independence

The *Weekly Mail* often stressed its editorial independence, never implying any organic links to political movements like the UDF in the same way progressive alternative newspapers like *Grassroots* did but it was often in contact with leftist counter-hegemonic movements, including the ANC, regarding the newspaper's agenda. The *Weekly Mail* thus hardly operated in isolation from the resistance movements but neither was it a mouthpiece. The *Weekly Mail* rather attempted to strike a balance in coverage and aimed at 'fairness' with a style of journalism that inevitably produced tension among the governing bodies as well as leftist groups. But internal criticism of the left-wing was seen as healthy, claims Louw (1991b: 21). During the 1980s some left-wing activists called for the *Weekly Mail* to be made 'accountable' to UDF structures. "That the *Weekly Mail* successfully resisted these pressures during the counter hegemony phase has created a tradition of independent leftist journalism" (Louw, 1991b: 21). It was important that the *Weekly Mail* blended libertarian and leftist principles in its journalism rather than maintaining a style of self-affirmation. Manoim described *Weekly Mail*'s contents as concentrating on "critical independent analysis, rather than pursuing a particular line" (1996: 5).

Describing the aims of The *Weekly Mail*, during 1989, co-editor Anton Harber said he strives to produce: "a good quality newspaper based upon good writing, accuracy and in-depth analytical reporting, but with an explanatory approach in which the context to the story is always given. He said: 'What we have always refused to do is to feed a line to our readers'" (cited in Louw, 1991b: 22). A lot of *Weekly Mail*'s contents consisted of quality journalism sometimes inspired by the British newspaper, the *Guardian*. Stories often resembled in-depth feature writing rather than the everyday news reports characteristic of the daily press. It's evident from its coverage that the *Weekly Mail* supported the interests of the liberation movement, giving it attention even during times when it was illegal to write about or quote any such organisation. "Really the main thing that held everybody together on the paper was not that they were members of the ANC or PAC but they were all in the anti-apartheid struggle one way or another," says former *Weekly Mail* journalist Shaun Johnson (Interview, 2. 5. 2006). It could be said the *Weekly Mail* was a pioneer in giving coverage to the activities

of the ANC, although Anthony Heard, editor of the mainstream *Cape Times*, was the first to publish a lengthy interview with 'listed' ANC president Oliver Tambo in November 1985.

Maintaining its degree of independence, the *Weekly Mail* attempted to adopt a dialogical (democratic) approach where management and policy decisions were to be taken away from the newspaper's non-staff investors, thereby preventing the editorial from being controlled by capitalist interests. "However, this same press has operated within the 'logic' of South Africa's capitalist economic system in so far as they operate as registered capitalist enterprises, and, to a considerable extent, apply 'marketing' practices. *Weekly Mail* is owned by WM Publications: a co-operative of journalists (who founded and work on it) and local investors" (Louw, 1991b: 3). Maintaining commercial elements and accepting the implications that go with it was an inevitable development that enabled the *Weekly Mail* to carry out its alternative mission of social consciousness. Capitalist forces are difficult to avoid entirely in a capitalist economic system; it's just a question of how an enterprise adjusts to these forces and to what extent the process compromises its values and mission. *Grassroots* almost totally ignored economic elements in its strategy, focusing primarily on agitation through partisanship, whereas the *Weekly Mail*, with a more professional understanding of the industry by Harber and Manoim who had experience from the mainstream, more cautiously considered the different essentials that allow a newspaper to function effectively and long-term in a challenging environment.

Securing advertising was crucial for the newspaper's survival but it was not always easy. Many considered the *Weekly Mail* to be a 'subversive' newspaper and advertising agencies were reluctant to place their clients' adverts with it. Paradoxically, the profile of *The Weekly Mail*'s readership profile was of a kind that should have attracted advertisers: "In 1989: 77% of their readers were executives or professionals; 67% had a university degree; 34% had a post-graduate qualification; 43% had a household income of over R6000 per month, 21% had a single income of over R6000 per month. It is a market-niche that the Guild Press ignored, which left a space for *The Weekly Mail* to fill" (Louw, 1991b: 24). Unlike other alternative newspapers, *The Weekly Mail* also acquired an ABC certificate in order to further increase its chances of attracting advertising but for a long time still struggled to secure revenue from these strategies. "There was an understanding that if this paper is going to last, you needed to put in advertising," says Johnson. "But frankly, none of us knew a damn thing about advertising, we were all just totally focused on the politics of what we were doing"

(Interview, 2. 5. 2006). Despite this claim, a business manager was hired from the start of the *Weekly Mail* to stave off bankruptcy.

As the newspaper gained a reputation, advertising increased. “In 1990 *The Weekly Mail* attracted enough advertising to achieve a 30%-70% (advertisement-copy) ratio” (Louw, 1991b: 23). This was a success since most publications rely at least on 50 percent advertising. *Weekly Mail* remained financially viable with 30 percent and less dependent on advertising. By paying more attention to the importance of advertising and marketing, the *Weekly Mail* was more likely than other alternative newspapers to achieve sustainability. It avoided foreign funding from donor agencies and church subsidies, because securing finances through advertising was a lesser compromise to independence and future viability than funding from overseas groups would be. “Some outside funding has found its way into WM Publications. However, this funding has not been used for direct running costs, but for the training of new journalists” (Louw, 1991b: 23). Other funding revenues, for instance, consisted of support from the British *Guardian*, which was later instrumental to *Weekly Mail*'s survival as the *Mail & Guardian*. But these were finances from the British media sector that helped keep the *Weekly Mail* afloat rather than funding from foreign NGOs. Louw claims that it was this ‘independent’ approach to journalism that attracted a readership that appreciated attempts of the media to distance itself from the control of capital, such as Anglo-American, which dominated parts of the English mainstream, and at the same time avoid toeing a specific political line. “This readership would often respond negatively to the more openly partisan ‘advocacy’ (‘rhetorical’) approach of the progressive alternative press” (Louw, 1991b: 3).

WM Publications was registered as a commercial company but it was still influenced to an extent by leftist principles. Those who owned shares in WM Publications but had not worked on the *Weekly Mail* as journalists had no voting rights over policy decisions. Owners of capital thus had no control over editorial matters. *Weekly Mail* journalists themselves, however, received ‘voting shares’ in order to maintain control over editorial policy. The longer members of staff served on the *Weekly Mail*, the more shares they obtained and the larger influence they had over policy control. “In this way decision-making is democratised and given to the workers themselves on the *Weekly Mail*” (Louw, 1991b: 21). Louw further argued that the internal structure of the newspaper was also characterised by a hybrid of leftist and libertarian practices. Managerial and editorial functions were strictly separated in line with libertarian principles but full democratic participation was expected from all editorial

staff “Internally the company was structured as non-hierarchically as possible” (1991b: 21). Functions such as editor or business manager were separated but all staff were paid the same salary (in accordance to their length of service at the newspaper) and they were all part of a democratically-structured policy forming process. “The staffers (there were 32 in 1989) also have two representatives on the Board of Directors. Any member of staff can raise an item for discussion at Board level” (Louw, 1991b: 21). It was a very different operating system from the mainstream, combining well the practices of an alternative medium with the market’s prerequisites and positioning these practices strategically within the conditions in a way that ensured effectiveness of an independent social-democrat publication.

Challenging the established order

Dedicated staff was crucial to the establishment of alternative newspapers and *Weekly Mail* was a prime example but readership support was also important in starting up the newspaper, with a substantial number of people (mostly prominent liberal figures) subscribing to buy R1000 shares in the paper. They were being persuaded by letters asking to support “a venture to keep alive vigorous, independent journalism” (Manoim, 1996: 4). “Those people obviously understood that they were never going to see their money again but it was enough to get to paper going,” explains Johnson (Interview, 2. 5. 2006). Founders Harber and Manoim then worked round the clock to keep the newspaper coming out every week and surrounded themselves with similarly enthusiastic colleagues. Harber later remembered the challenging days: “... smart, clued-in young people were those looking for interesting and creative ways to survive on the fringes of apartheid society. And they were welcome at the *Weekly Mail*. The paper could not be bigger or better than its mainstream rivals, so it had to be different. And this meant that we sought out people who wrote or drew exceptionally, who did things that the mainstream could not or would not do, and who were ready to share the risks with us ... I think it was about attitude rather than age or skill” (Harber, A. 2005. Available: <http://www.mg.co.za/articledirect.aspx?articleid=257465&area=%2Fanniversary%2F>, 5 December 2005). Co-editor Irwin Manoim further elaborated on the working conditions: “For the first few years, there were two categories of job on the *Weekly Mail*: part-time and full-time. Part-timers were people who were allowed to go home at night. Full-timers worked round the clock. There were no lunch breaks, supper was supplied by the restaurant downstairs and weekends were ruled out. Most people were paid the standard salary: R1 500. Others worked without pay” (Manoim, 1996: 24).

Circulation of the *Weekly Mail* was usually around 20 000 (Switzer, 2000: 46-7 (citing table by Tomaselli)) but the newspaper was regularly challenged by restrictions imposed by the state of emergency. During the latter part of the 1980s it often attempted to resist these regulations and, using legal advice, pushed these to the limit. “A major aim of those who imposed successive states of emergency was to control the flow of information at its source: the authorities hoped to write the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) out of current news coverage and out of the experience of ordinary South Africans” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 464). Authorities, through these restrictions, tried to maintain the public’s apathy and keep information about township ‘unrest’ out of the conscience of local as well as international communities. A majority of the mainstream press, in the face of repercussions did little to challenge the authorities and so the *Weekly Mail* had a very important area to exploit. “A co-editor of the *Weekly Mail*, in fact, commented that ‘the State of Emergency gave us our journalistic gap’” (Louw, 1991b: 22). Filling the need of people for information helped the newspaper attract an affluent and educated readership and although this group of readers was fairly small and mainly white, it was reading stories that the mainstream would not cover. Manoim claimed that “these people can be reached most effectively through a publication that is as different from the norm as they are themselves. And they are particularly loyal readers, for any newspaper aimed at them is more than just reading matter, it is a symbol of themselves” (*Weekly Mail*, June 6-12, 1986). “An early readership survey revealed that the newspaper was bought mainly by ‘slumpies’ (slightly left, upwardly mobile professionals). Unhappy with the establishment press, and rejecting what they saw on state-controlled television, these readers were prepared to read heavy doses of political reportage, much of which told of the most appalling incidents and events” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 474).

The front-page story in the first issue of the *Weekly Mail* in June 1985 was about South African security forces attempting to destabilise Mozambique through covert operations with Renamo. There were also stories about deaths in detention, a bus boycott or unrests in townships. A majority of this kind of coverage was still ignored by mainstream newspapers and the *Weekly Mail* therefore tried to update readers who were left in the dark about such developments. “*Weekly Mail*’s pages, for example, carried news and photographs of the mayhem in Duduza township following the funeral of four student activists killed by heavily disguised police, and it was the first to write about suspected apartheid collaborators who were killed by ‘necklacing’. The newspaper was bold enough to suggest police involvement

in the rigging of hand grenades that blew up eight young activists in the murder of Matthew Goniwe of Cradock and three other prominent Eastern Cape activists” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 463; *Weekly Mail*, 5, 12 and 19 July 1985). Some specific issues seldom covered by the mainstream were given attention by the *Weekly Mail*. These included news about trade unions, extraparliamentary organisations or nonracial sports. Merrett and Saunders point out that the *Weekly Mail* reacted in two defiant ways to the emergency regulations: “Firstly, the newspaper sought to portray them for what they were ... Second, the newspaper succeeded to some extent in getting around even the most severe of the emergency regulations” (2000: 465). Despite its vigorous efforts, the government could not silence all the opposing and independent alternative voices and this helped the *Weekly Mail* acquire a reputation, which meant that the newspaper was by no means a fringe (as the term ‘alternative’ suggested and government assumed) but a force to be reckoned with by the mainstream press. “The *Weekly Mail* became very important,” says Johnson. “Nelson Mandela will tell you that it was widely read on Robben Island. It was not the perfect paper, but it was doing things nobody else was doing” (Interview, 2. 5. 2006).

As in the case of *Grassroots*, *Weekly Mail*’s influence went beyond the actual readership (and low circulation) and even some English mainstream newspapers took inspiration from *Weekly Mail*’s agenda. The reason for this was that the *Weekly Mail*, unlike most of the mainstream press, represented views that were closer to the majority of South African populace. The alternative press in general kept the mainstream on its toes but Louw claims that the *Weekly Mail*’s positioning ‘between’ the practices of the ‘comrade’ press and the liberal mainstream press caused the mainstream to feel less threatened by the *Weekly Mail* than by other left-wing papers. For this reason the *Weekly Mail* often set news agendas that were being adopted by the mainstream during the late-1980s. “Anton Harber, and the *Star*’s editor, Richard Steyn have pointed out that the gap between the guild and left-wing presses narrowed in the three years prior to 1989. This had occurred on both sides. On the one hand, mainstream press had been forced to take note of left-wing news they had previously ignored. On the other hand, the left-wing press had to take note of ‘commercial’ considerations and be responsive to readers (by, for example, covering entertainment and sports)” (Louw, 1991b: 24).

One of the most notorious editions of the *Weekly Mail* came out on 20 June 1986 with more than half of the pages containing blackout text and empty white spaces. The front page read: “Our lawyers tell us we can say almost nothing critical about the Emergency. But we’ll try.”

A box at the bottom of the page stated: “Restricted: Reports on these pages have been censored to comply with Emergency regulations” (*Weekly Mail*, 20-26 June 1986). Political comments inside the newspaper were blacked out and so was a list of detainees. “The *Weekly Mail*’s actions dramatically made the point that the emergency regulations were extremely harsh. But soon the *Weekly Mail*’s lawyers were advising that not as much material need be censored, and the editors decided to test the emergency regulations to the limit” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 468). Soon the newspaper began again publishing names and information about detainees across the country.

When restrictions became tighter and punishments for media indiscipline harsher, the journalists looked for loopholes in the regulations. “While the ambiguities in the regulations encouraged further self-censorship, they also allowed creative interpretation. *Weekly Mail* readers could sometimes read between the lines for the coded meanings of reports” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 469). Later, even the blank spaces became forbidden but some issues went as far as mocking the authorities and refused to cease undermining the government’s rationale for censorship. A good example is December 12 1986, where the front page read: “The Emergency made simple. Should you intend discussing any of the following topics: security force action, boycotts, the treatment of detainees, the release of any detainees, ‘people’s courts’, street committees simply phone these numbers to ask for permission: ...” (*Weekly Mail*, 12-19 December 1986). What followed was a list of government officials with their contact numbers; at the top of the list was PW Botha. The newspaper was thus treading a careful line within the law to survive and despite continuous authoritarian threats drew attention to censorship and other injustices in relentlessly provocative ways. It covered many serious issues but through certain columns, illustrations or at times even the general articles, it occasionally managed to articulate a sense of humor and light-heartedness – an important way of relating a publication to the readers and something a newspaper like *Grassroots* seldom did.

In the 6 June 1986 edition, the *Weekly Mail* became the first newspaper in several decades to publish a photo of Nelson Mandela. It was taken twenty-two years earlier and it was made legal for publication by the Department of Prisons. All other representations of Mandela remained illegal. The *Weekly Mail* was often threatened with closure during the emergency regulation but it managed to successfully lobby for support from embassies of the US, UK and some countries of the EU. The newspaper soon gained international recognition and

closing it would only worsen the government's image internationally. The paper, nonetheless, was closed for one month in November 1988 by the government after publishing a critical article about Magnus Malan, Minister of Defense. It was particularly the British commissioner to South Africa who ensured the newspaper's suspension was short-lived (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 472). Intimidation continued on a regular basis and was characterised by confiscated copies, threats of court action and so on, but this "suggested that it was the newspaper, not particular reports, that was the target – another case of the messenger being attacked because of the message" (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 472-3).

The *Weekly Mail* was also a pioneer of desktop publishing in South Africa. Although the newspaper was founded on a shoestring budget, its journalists believed that it was perfect timing for such a project to start reporting on news about blacks, labour issues and the ANC. "They tried to develop operations that were superior to the community level: professional layout mattered in these newspapers, as did journalistic quality" (Berger, 2000: 88). New technologies of the Information Age were adapted in order to save costs and produce a newspaper that had a 'dissident' agenda. Louw claims, that part of the reason why the *Weekly Mail* survived on a low advertising ratio was because its desktop publishing system made it possible to run the newspaper at one-third of the cost of a normal press operation (1991b: 23). "Two Apple Macintoshes and a laser printer – arriving just in time for the first edition – made the new newspaper possible by saving time and labour and thereby reducing costs" (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 460). An initial problem was finding a sympathetic printing press, as not many presses wanted to print what might be seen as a subversive newspaper but that was solved when the owners of the *Springs Advertiser* newspaper became *Weekly Mail*'s first printing company. One of the founding editors, Irwin Manoim remembered the days: "It dawned on me that if a laser printer could produce text that looked 'printed' it might eliminate the need for typesetting equipment, darkrooms, chemicals and skilled technicians. It might make it possible for people with almost no money to produce a newspaper" (Manoim, I. 2005. http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257526&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005). The labour intensive newspaper production process was transformed into the computerised form of desktop publishing and soon other left-commercial newspapers adopted similar technologies with the help of Manoim and developed important networks of the alternative press, significantly increasing its effectiveness. "The way in which *The Weekly Mail* creatively used so-called First World information technology for an African struggle is

perhaps an important legacy for Leftists in other African situations to emulate” (Louw, 1991b: 24).

The testing times of the nineties

In 1990, *The Weekly Mail*'s circulation had risen to 30 000 and as a result of an increased demand on daily doses of news, the newspaper attempted to reposition itself as a daily. *Daily Mail* was launched with great expectations, acquiring a distinct style as well as quality journalists but too much competition on the daily market prevented it from succeeding and it closed after three months. “The advent of the *Daily Mail*, which coincided with a move to new premises and the acquisition of new equipment along with new staff, signaled the decline of the egalitarianism and highmindedness that was still evident at the *Weekly Mail*” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 477). Shaun Johnson further notes in retrospect: “We didn't raise enough money for a daily but we went at it anyway. We failed and it was painful. The idea was absolutely right but the time was absolutely wrong” (Interview, 2. 5. 2006). The failure thrust the newspaper into a large financial debt with Caxtons, which had printed both the *Daily Mail* and *The Weekly Mail*. In order to still survive in its weekly format, it needed to adjust. “The *Weekly Mail* had been losing money for some years, and in order to survive it had to take on more of the characteristics of a mainstream commercial newspaper. *Weekly Mail* editors were less prepared to take risks, and the newspaper itself was less prepared to challenge the authorities in the postapartheid era” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 477).

It continued, still in its traditional style of reporting, giving important coverage to the transition process of the early-1990s but a new media environment was emerging as a result of political changes. *Weekly Mail*'s long-term existence was in question and to avoid the fate of other alternative publications, that did not survive the country's transition to democracy, it had to re-evaluate its position. For most of its existence, the newspaper had been collaborating with the British daily the *Guardian* in financial and editorial matters and after its international edition became distributed within the *Weekly Mail*, from 1992, the two financially integrated in one newspaper. It was this monetary lifeline for the *Weekly Mail* that saved it from closure. The *Weekly Mail* was renamed the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* and later shortened to the *Mail and Guardian*. The newspaper was bought over by Zimbabwean Trevor Ncube in 2002 and unlike any other alternative newspaper of the eighties, the *Mail & Guardian* continues to be published today, remaining true to its core values and reaching its first operating profit in

2004 (Smith, September 2005: 17-19). Harber described it as: “still an outspoken, stimulating, thinking-person’s newspaper” (in van Noort, 2005. Available: http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257590&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005).

“*Weekly Mail* became South Africa’s first-ever commercially viable leftist-press” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991c: 225). It stayed true to democratic values, clashing with authorities and deligitimising the system of apartheid in the past, while at the same time protecting its editorial and financial independence despite its social-democrat approach. It maintained the relevance of its values and mission in the new democratic dispensation: ... “a stance that would lead the newspaper to distance itself from aspects of ANC policy in postapartheid South Africa” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 480). An important voice during apartheid, however, *The Weekly Mail* also played a crucial role in demystifying the ANC to white readers. Its strategies with regards to content and policies concerning editorial independence and financial management have successfully steered the newspaper through the restrictive days of apartheid as well as the new challenges brought about by a democratic environment. It has had to reach compromises but it still exists and keeps pushing boundaries as is in line with its tradition. About today’s *Mail & Guardian* Anton Harber noted: “The *M&G* started without any financial help. It had to mature into a self-sustaining product, and it did. But there is always a fine balance to be found between the demands of journalism and the demands of newspaper economics” (in van Noort, 2005. Available: http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257590&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005). The reasons behind the post-1990 survival of *The Weekly Mail*/*Mail & Guardian* will be explored in more financial detail in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

Grassroots and Weekly Mail: The post-1990 developments

FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

As suggested earlier, the alternative press cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon but rather as a part of specific social, political and economic realms from which it emerged. Alternative newspapers – in line with the claims of many journalists on alternative newspapers and with Johnson’s definition of the alternative press – were to fill the gap in coverage left by the mainstream media. Dismissing mainstream press as ‘pandering’ to the established order, alternative newspapers were set to counter what Herman and Chomsky call the “systematic propaganda” of the mainstream; its accountability to state bureaucracy, its self-censorship and control by monopolies, which made a large number of mainstream newspapers serve the ends of the dominant elite (1988: 1). Although Herman’s and Chomsky’s ‘Propaganda Model’ has been criticised for overall generalisation (Klaehn, 2005: 143-4), their argument about media serving political ends by marginalising dissent, patterning news choices and allowing the government to get its messages out to the public (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 2) provides a relevant commentary on South Africa’s media dispensation of the eighties. The South African mainstream press of the 1980s was by no means uniform but many mainstream newspapers emerged from Herman and Chomsky’s perspective claiming they interpreted news ‘objectively’ on the basis of professional news values but in truth, this information was passed through what Herman and Chomsky call ‘filters’ established by the dominant elites to allow for the publishing of only what they saw as appropriate. Such filters, for instance, included government supplying newspapers with inaccurate accounts of clashes between the police and township residents, misinformation about the number of detainees or wrong numbers of casualties of day-to-day violence. But many mainstream news workers saw these bureaucratic accounts as credible and so they presented them as authorised facts. Alternative publications therefore emerged to rectify such affairs but by not sufficiently considering the economic imperatives that came with entering the media market, they encountered serious financial difficulties and struggled to survive.

When Curran and Seaton did an analysis of the UK media and the emergence of a radical British press in the first half of the nineteenth century, their study suggested the same conditions that could be applied to the rise and fall of the alternative press in South Africa. Emerging in the 1980s, the alternative press was effective in reinforcing class-consciousness and fostering an alternative value system and framework for looking at the world. It was seen as a major threat by the elites because it “promoted a greater collective confidence by repeatedly emphasising the potential power of working people to effect social change through the force of ‘combination’ and organised action” (Curran and Seaton in Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 3). Legal restrictions in the form of coercive media curbs, especially during the states of emergency, made the existence of alternative newspapers more difficult and the claims of a British MP from the nineteenth century can also be applied in this context when he asserted that “working class newspapers inflame passions of workers and awaken their selfishness, contrasting their current condition with what they contend to be their future condition – a condition incompatible with human nature, and those immutable laws which Providence has established for the regulation of civil society” (ibid, 1988: 3). Legal action alone, however, would never bring down the alternative sector; what really spelled trouble for this leftist press was the market. Competition, high costs and the monopolisation of media ownership into profit-seeking ventures were the main factors in enforcing commercially related, capitalist adversities onto the alternative press.

Political economy is an integral part of explaining capitalism and also becomes instrumental to the analysis of the financial circumstances of the alternative press. The critique of political economy is largely founded on the work of Marx, but also includes a wide range of democratic, communal and socialist thinking (Mosco, 1996: 11). According to the Marxist theory, the working class becomes oppressed by individuals who own the means of production and whose main aim is to generate profit. By having the financial means to own and manage media, these individuals can then determine the content and ideological power of the media therefore influencing the thinking of the people. According to Fred Inglis the media adheres to four features of the capitalist mode of production, which largely determine what people read in the newspapers or acquire from other media: mass production and distribution of commodities; capital-intensive technology; managerial organisation of highly specialised divisions of labour; and cost-effectivity as a criterion of success, i.e. the maximisation of profit (1990: 114). The institutions least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth

and power are most likely to survive in this environment, while the most critical voices are limited in their efforts to challenge this establishment because of insufficient access to capital to reach large audiences: “All this results in the consolidation of groups already established in the main mass-media markets and the exclusion of those groups that lack the capital base required for successful entry” (Murdock and Golding in Fourie, 2001: 123). Alternative newspapers attempted to counter-balance this market reality with their plurality of opposing voices during the eighties, but with their strong socialist agenda, they were incapable of achieving self-sufficiency by accommodating commercial imperatives on a consistent long-term basis.

Funding and the struggle for self-sufficiency

All *Grassroots* activists interviewed for this thesis confirmed that *Grassroots* was never meant to make profits but was to be a tool of social change. From its inception, *Grassroots* rejected policies that would make it a business venture with an interest in financial turnover and rather focused on its motives of social organisation. *Grassroots* received some subsidies from local church funds but it had to rely mainly on overseas organisations for the bulk of the funding that was required for the running of such a venture. Not only were there far greater resources available abroad but domestic South African funders of alternative newspapers were threatened with government retribution. Financial donations to alternative newspapers became a regular part of anti-apartheid funding channeled by NGOs to South Africa and the most prominent donor to *Grassroots* was a funding organisation run by the protestant churches in Holland called the Interchurch Organisation for development Co-operation (ICCO). Others included the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) based in London, a Catholic funding organisation called Cebemo, a Dutch international development agency Novib, an Oxford committee for famine and relief Oxfam, as well as some other smaller groups. Holland had one of the biggest anti-apartheid movements during the eighties and the most consistent funding for the alternative press came from this part of the world. But the fight against apartheid was a global concern and organisations from Scandinavia or the United Kingdom were also strongly involved in funding newspapers with an anti-apartheid cause.

“The funding organisations were very supportive of our struggle,” says Mansoor Jaffer.

“There was a common cause that was shared between the funders and ourselves” (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). It was a scheme that worked well considering the times – a non-profit

community newspaper acting as an agent for social change with attention solely dedicated to its editorial mission and hardly giving consideration to its commercial operatives. But it was precisely this immediate focus on the paper's anti-apartheid mission and the reliance on foreign donors for its financial independence that proved to be shortsighted. The funding was not always systematic and sometimes came in at irregular intervals but Cebemo granted *Grassroots* approximately R61 000 for start up funds in 1989 and continued annually donating around R7 500 during the early eighties. WACC contributed about \$4 500 annually in the same period. ICCO, however, became the most loyal funder of *Grassroots*, supporting it throughout its ten-year existence and granting it anything between R40 000 and R70 000 annually. In 1985, for example, ICCO contributed R62 858 (ICCO correspondence, 5. 6. 1985). "By 1985, ICCO had become the only foreign sponsor. The annual costs of the *Grassroots* newsletter amounted to about R100 000 of which two-thirds came from ICCO and one-third was earned by *Grassroots*. As repression mounted after 1985, the newspaper's survival became a goal in itself; a beacon of hope signaling that resistance could not be smothered altogether. ICCO then felt obliged to maintain the financial lifeline, and questions about the long-term viability of *Grassroots* became of secondary importance. The fact that *Grassroots* still managed to continue publication was considered as a moral boost for the besieged anti-apartheid organisations" (Kessel, 2000a: 249). When this prime source of funding for alternative newspapers dried up, however, it played a key role in bringing *Grassroots* to its death in 1990.

Having such a loyal funder in ICCO who pulled the newspaper through an entire decade became almost unhealthy, said Rehana Rossouw, a former *Grassroots* volunteer worker: "We became dependent, taking funds for granted. Before, we used to do our own fund-raising for *Grassroots*. We had a big annual fair where all kinds of organisations could have activities" (cited in Kessel, 2000b: 317). Harry Derksen, ICCO policy director, admits the external funding sometimes came too easily to South African anti-apartheid organisations encouraging a 'culture of expectancy' and a climate of poor discipline and lack of accountability concerning resources: "Sometimes we felt a certain 'awareness of victimisation' on the side of South African activists which made them think they were entitled to support from our side" (E-mail correspondence, 17. 10. 2006). Most donor organisations prevented the activists from overindulging in funds by requesting detailed figures of income and expenditure before they considered further grants. *Grassroots* seldom met the targets of its budget but treasurer Rashid

Seria and later Mansoor Jaffer, did regularly present financial reports to ICCO to maintain the newspaper's funding lifeline.

Complaints about the general culture of anti-apartheid funding came from the former director of the Kagiso Trust, responsible for administering the bulk of the funding, Achmat Dangor, who said that funds for projects sometimes corrupted organisations and the more resources were available, the more they were requested and the more people became dependent on them to the exclusion of using other indigenous resources: "You can't have funding and not have corruption" Dangor said (*South*, 14-20 March 1991). Rossouw added that funds for anti-apartheid projects were generally available on request and given to people who wrote the best proposals, not those meeting the needs of their communities (*South*, 14-20 March 1991). Derksen claims, however, that ICCO was never careless in its distribution of grants: "We did fund [alternative newspapers] on the basis of a business plan including targets for the number of papers sold, financial forecasts and so on ... From the side of ICCO, we paid a lot of attention on how the paper was run as a business" (E-mail correspondence, 17. 10. 2006). ICCO received finances for its activities from the Dutch and European governments and it was therefore accountable to politicians and society for the way in which these monies were spent.

Apart from financial accountability, to ensure funding continued, it was important that alternative newspapers maintained their anti-apartheid cause and when they received banning threats from government, that was proof of a job well-done, claims Denis Beckett (E-mail correspondence, 10. 11. 2006). There are no reports of donors making specific editorial demands, although Eric Louw noted that funding opposition papers and causes in South Africa remained popular for some governments, which were "increasingly concerned with gaining a toe-hold into what they see as potentially the future hegemony in South Africa". The extraparliamentary movement (or what he termed 'the South African counter hegemony') became especially skilled in the 1980s at attracting these external funds (in Jackson, 1993: 60). Rehana Rossouw also suggested in 1991 that overseas "funding represents an important mechanism for governments to 'buy' influence and favour among strategically important groups in South Africa" (*South*, 7-13 March 1991). Mansoor Jaffer, however, rejects such assumptions with regards to *Grassroots*, claiming: "There was always an issue of politics in funding but we experienced no such impacts on the independence of our work. It wasn't like they said: 'If you don't do a, b and c, we'll cut off your funding.' Their only pre-condition

would be that we run our finances properly and we did that. But they didn't compromise our editorial work in any way" (Interview, 16. 3. 2006).

Although funding from the ICCO continued for such a long time, it was still clear that funding for alternative newspapers was unlikely to last forever and replace the need of *Grassroots* of seeking self-sustainability. "Either the donors themselves could stop giving or the government could intervene at a moment's notice" (Jackson, 1993: 60). Seeking financial autonomy thus should not have been a choice but a foreseeable necessity for ensuring long-term survival. Some journalists expressed concerns about funding, claiming: "We continue to be dependent upon external funding for these newspapers at peril both to our more narrow objectives as journalists as well as our broader national democratic objectives" (cited in Jackson, 1993: 61). The primary interest of church based organisations such as the ICCO was in challenging the morality of apartheid's social discrimination (see chapter 4) and giving a voice to the voiceless – these were therefore the main objectives they expected *Grassroots* to achieve. ICCO was also in contact with the ANC before it provided funding for *Grassroots* in 1980. "In 1980 ICCO learned that the ANC backed the promotion of an aboveground, radical press inside South Africa ... Thus, unknown to most people involved in the *Grassroots* project, the ANC had encouraged ICCO to adopt the newspaper project from the beginning" (Kessel, 2000a: 248).

The ANC was a source of inspiration for *Grassroots* as the party's slogans figured more and more prominently in the paper from the mid-eighties onwards. "Many of us who went into *Grassroots* felt part of the ANC ... There were not formal links, but we saw ourselves as fulfilling ANC objectives" (Issel cited in Kessel, 2000a: 239). A number of UDF members, who later became members of the ANC (e.g. Trevor Manuel), were involved in *Grassroots* and through such political activism, the newspaper voiced important leftist messages to the South African public. Fahdiel Manuel claims, however, that during the last years of the paper's existence, the problem was that control of *Grassroots* was no longer in the hands of the community. "We had become a prisoner of the activists," he says. "Basically, we were producing papers because the funders wanted to see a paper being produced" (cited in Kessel, 2000b: 317). But the democratic principles of community participation on which the paper was built were no longer so sound. Funders supported the struggle on the basis of morality rather than Marxism but with developments from the mid to late-eighties, financial support allowed for anti-apartheid politics to outmuscle the community-orientated issues on the

ground. “Around 1990, we had less of direct community participation in the newspaper,” says Fahdiel Manuel (Interview, 25. 3. 2006). Some communities were alienated by politics, many civics were near collapse, while other organisations were moving closer to the UDF and ANC, which was soon going to form a new government, but there was no longer a focus on direct involvement of community structures in *Grassroots*. Funders wanted to see a total abolishment of apartheid, says Derksen (E-mail correspondence, 17. 10. 2006) and when politicisation heightened from the mid-eighties, the subsidised activism left ordinary communities of *Grassroots* readers and participants behind in the process of this ‘counter-hegemonic mobilisation’. “While pre-1990 there was a focus on community organisations within *Grassroots*, post-1990 people had to start preparing to govern and that put a whole new dynamic onto the situation,” adds Jaffer (Interview, 16. 3. 2006).

After 1990, when democracy was becoming a realistic term in South Africa, the donor organisations began withdrawing their funding for alternative newspapers, many claiming that there was no longer a need for such advocacy orientated publications. This is often called a ‘funding crisis’ within the South African NGO sector and Terence Smith explains in his thesis that, prior to 1994, almost all foreign aid to South Africa was channeled to civil society organisations, including the alternative press, to support the anti-apartheid movement. The late-1980s and early 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of anti-apartheid NGOs. It was estimated, claims Smith, that by 1990, there were some 20 000 developmental NGOs in the country and Rossouw estimated that around R500 million in overseas funds was pumped into anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa during that year (*South*, 7-13 March 1991). After the country’s first democratic elections in 1994, however, with international donors having a legitimate responsibility to support the new democratic state as it faced the enormous task of reconstruction and development, large proportions of official aid budgets were redirected towards government, with less money being available for NGOs. It has become a common complaint from within the sector that this shift in donor support caused the collapse of many NGOs after 1994 (Smith, 2001: 3). Many of the overseas donors of the alternative press were part of the South African/Namibian association founded in 1986 in Brussels to coordinate, stimulate and monitor development projects in South Africa but it was dissolved after 1994. The South African Kagiso Trust founded in 1986 by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) also faced challenges after 1994 when funding from international donors was less freely available and alternative funding through the state proved largely ineffective.

The end of the Cold War saw many European countries shifting their attention away from Africa and some donors moved their investments to other problem areas (e.g. Bosnia) while others claimed that it was time South Africa started funding its own projects. Despite the fact that ownership and other economic structures in media remained largely unchanged after the end of apartheid, some donors claimed that foreign countries could not be seen as partisan once the ANC and other organisations were unbanned and democracy brought about a politically balanced environment. The negotiations period was marked by many complex developments and the outside world at times remained uninformed about some of the areas that needed addressing and support. This inevitably had an impact on the various anti-apartheid publications as “Western governments and agencies withdrew their funding from the alternative press. For the progressive alternative and left-commercial presses this was a serious blow because none – barring perhaps the *Weekly Mail* which hoped to attain viability by 1992 – came close to financial self-sufficiency. All had learned to rely on donor charity because of world-wide opposition to apartheid” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991c: 224).

Smith claims, however, that rather than a ‘crisis’ seeing the developmental efforts in South Africa collapsing altogether, the donors changed their funding priorities because, prior to 1994, most donor funding to NGOs was based primarily on solidarity with, and support for, anti-apartheid struggles and the broader social movements against the state. Since 1994, however, with the goal of political liberation having been achieved in the country, the previously ‘shotgun’ approach of most donors to supporting NGOs was replaced by more strategic interventions around specific objectives. As the director of a democracy education NGO remarked: ‘in the past as long as you could portray yourself as anti-establishment, you could get funds’ (Smith, 2001: 6). The role of NGOs during apartheid was mainly political, organising people around the struggle and serving as conduits, claims Smith, for foreign aid to support banned political movements. But this overtly political role, which was seen as more important during apartheid than accountability and effectiveness, needed to find new relevance after 1990. “The challenge for all NGOs has been to find a new role and legitimacy in this new context. NGOs have had to make the transition from ‘liberation organisations to developmental agencies’ and move from ‘resistance to reconstruction’. For most NGOs, the eradication of poverty and inequality has become their *raison d’être* in the post apartheid period” (Smith, 2001: 9). The funding priorities of organisations therefore shifted away from the alternative press to other areas that needed attention in the new environment. This is not to

say that alternative newspapers became less relevant or outlived their function, but they needed to adjust and find new sources of income since issues like alleviating poverty received more direct streams of revenue in line with the launch of various new developmental initiatives, which didn't include alternative media among the priorities. "Most foreign funding was channeled to 'fashionable' causes, such as AIDS, which gets a sympathetic ear in Western countries" (Gumede, 2005: 286).

There were offers from donor agencies after 1990 to fund the training of alternative press journalists instead of financing the running costs of newspapers but as *Vrye Weekblad* journalist Elsabe Wessels noted: "Without the newspaper there will be no training schemes" (cited in Berger, 2000: 92). Demoralisation of staff on alternative newspapers came as a result of funding drying up claim Tomaselli and Louw, and this process was further "assisted by Western agencies offering alternative journalists bursaries to study overseas as part of their 'development' packages" (1991c: 225). External funding thus became useful towards a short-term purpose of challenging a political order and initiating organisation but it would not become the solution for the newspapers' long-term sustainability. The reliance on foreign funding suggested only a short-term existence of the alternative press with no inclination of donors to maintain its underlying agenda beyond apartheid. "After 1994, the situation changed and newspapers needed to survive on business conditions ... and work in a pro-active way ... it was no longer enough to be simply 'against' apartheid", says Derksen (E-mail correspondence, 17. 10. 2006). This does not mean that because the alternative press did not survive during democracy, the money and time spent on those publications was wasted; without them there may have not been democracy but to survive in the media market for an extended period of time, a sustainable publication seeks its own positive prospects by nurturing an audience and driving itself towards substantial circulation to ensure self-sufficiency. *Grassroots* did not achieve that.

Grassroots produced relevant news for working class communities of the Western Cape but it was news seen as totally irrelevant by commercial mainstream media who aimed to cater to the needs of advertisers and produce content appropriate to the presumed buying power of more affluent audiences. *Grassroots* activists claimed before the launch that they expected the newspaper to become financially self-sufficient after one year by raising money from advertising and subscriptions from sympathetic individuals and organisations. "The *Grassroots* initiators expected to raise half the newspaper's total costs from its own income"

(Kessel, 2000a: 248). The other half was to be raised from funding, but “by 1982, there was no more mention that *Grassroots* could shortly stand on its own feet ... In 1982, 30 percent of the costs were covered by advertising revenues. But businessmen saw advertising in *Grassroots* as a donation to the cause rather than as a commercial investment” (Kessel, 2000a: 249). According to Mansoor Jaffer, circulation grew from an initial 5 000 to 20 000 in 1982 but that was still not sufficient enough to raise revenue that would put the newspaper onto its own feet and make it autonomous (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). During the fiscal year of 1981/82, *Grassroots* budgeted for an income of R23 520 from advertising but the actual advertising revenue came to R14 202 (Treasurer’s report, 4. 4. 1982). The situation of *Grassroots* did not improve in following years and the newspaper never raised enough advertising to make it a significant and consistent source of income.

Advertising from big businesses would not go down well with the radically socialist activism of the paper but on the other hand, a newspaper that spoke to working class communities was not an attractive advertising medium for companies that sought a consumer potential from readers. “*Grassroots* accepted advertising provided that the product or sponsoring company was not seen to be in conflict with the ideological position of the newspaper” (Tomaselli, 1991: 165). Companies with capitalist records, exploiting workers and serving the larger interests of the apartheid economy and politics were seen as unacceptable to *Grassroots*. “All content of news items and adverts should only promote business and other organisations that are acceptable to the community ... Our news and advertisement content should only promote the organisational activities of democratic bodies controlled by the community” (*Grassroots*, March 1982). The income from sales was also marginal, amounting to several hundred rand a month and sales money wasn’t properly collected so the newspaper usually only received between 50 and 70 percent of its expected sales returns (Badat’s *Grassroots* assessment, 1984). The price of the newspaper had to be low in order to remain affordable to its target readers who had very little income. With a low price, *Grassroots* claimed it was set to reach the largest constituency of working class readers possible in attempt to spread specific messages, rather than secure significant revenue from sales. *Grassroots* price started off at 5 cents in 1980 but after two months, it increased to 10 cents due to escalating printing costs. After consulting member organisations, the price increased to 15 cents in May 1982 and grew to 20 cents in 1984 with paper and printing costs still rising. Mainstream newspapers could be priced well below production costs because they attracted advertising but *Grassroots* had little advertising and selling copies for half the amount of its production costs only added to its

difficulties. During the state of emergency in 1985, the paper was even given out for free and, with a few exceptions of issues still costing 20 cents, it remained to be distributed for free until 1990.

Herman and Chomsky detract from the importance of sales and circulation, claiming that “with advertising the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The *advertisers’* choices influence media prosperity and survival” (1988: 14). The market is more accommodating to papers which enjoy the benefit of advertising and the “mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per se; it is affluent audiences that spark advertisers’ interest today ... The idea that the drive for large audiences makes the mass media ‘democratic’ thus suffers from the initial weakness that its political analogue is a voting system weighted by income” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 16). Furthermore, alternative newspapers suffered from the political discrimination of advertisers who were reluctant to jeopardise their position by patronising ideological enemies of the state. *Grassroots* was constantly running at a loss and with an anti-capitalist policy, low circulation and a working class readership, the market odds were stacked against it. The market was critical in the demise of *Grassroots* and allowed it to exist only on the periphery of commercial imperatives, never making it part of the mainstream. When considered in relation to Herman’s and Chomsky’s ‘systematic propaganda’ model of the mainstream media which suggests that the mainstream’s highly political dichotomisation in news coverage is based on serviceability to important power interests (1988: 35), the alternative press has struggled to survive precisely because it aimed to give news independently of these mainstream structures.

Aiming for sustainability

Trying to maintain a more elaborate business plan has helped the *Weekly Mail* survive and continue in existence from the mid-nineties as the *Mail & Guardian*. The *Weekly Mail* was not a community paper but a more commercially based social-democrat independent paper, operating within the alternative space. “They were doing what we probably should have done in *Grassroots*,” says Fisher. “They were run as a commercial operation but with a social conscience. *Grassroots*, on the other hand was run strictly as a social conscience operation with no concern for commercial imperatives” (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). As a weekly newspaper, the *Weekly Mail* aimed at mainly left-wing politically conscious, middle class intellectuals and pioneering a strenuous production process ensuing from the paper’s

shoestring budget inception, it recognised the significance of acquiring funds from advertising. Its liberal voice went hand in hand with the paper's counter-hegemonic coverage and its clarity won it substantial recognition especially among the academic community. Although remaining financially viable was important, profit was however not the sole aim. According to Harber, the purpose of profit was to make the newspaper stronger and better: "It had to be different from the mainstream media or there was no point to its existence, and this meant that we had to challenge the status quo and break the rules" (in van Noort, 2005. http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257590&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005).

The *Weekly Mail* struggled to obtain advertising in the first years of its existence and because of the negative perceptions of alternative newspapers among advertisers, it began researching its reader profile and obtained an ABC certificate. The newspaper sold on average 20 000 copies (Switzer, 2000: 46-47 (citing table by Tomaselli)) but even when advertising agencies had all the information they needed and saw that the *Weekly Mail* addressed relatively affluent readers, they were still reluctant to do business with a publication they saw as 'politically incorrect', since it called, for instance, for the unbanning of the ANC (Honikman, 2005. Available: http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257532&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005). "The obstacles were massive, starting with the price of paper and printing, and extending to the commissions taken by distributors and retailers ... The alternative weeklies had an extremely low advertising content, and not even registration with the Audit Bureau of Circulation by the *Weekly Mail* raised advert revenues significantly" (Berger, 2000: 92). Anton Harber noted how advertisers were reluctant to advertise in his paper, but not in a specialised business magazine *Finance Week*, which had a circulation half that size (Jackson, 1993: 61). Convincing book publishers to advertise through book reviews, or NGOs to place recruitment ads for concerned professionals that appeared in the *Weekly Mail* letters section as well as academic recruitment advertising were some of the paper's first advertising successes. Soon after gaining more publicity and persuasive negotiating, advertisements for Barclays Bank, BP, Swissair, Checkers, Toyota and Shell began appearing in the *Weekly Mail*, creating a fundamental base, crucial for a newspaper to become viable. The left's negative perceptions that accompanied advertising with big business went aside, editorial independence was critical and the aim became to see the *Weekly Mail* through as a long-term project. "Every commercial newspaper requires revenue to survive. But a newspaper, which solicits advertising, is no longer beholden solely to its readers. It took many

years, and many tears, before détente was reached between the *Weekly Mail* and the advertising establishment” (Manoim, 1996: 41).

Producing a weekly newspaper would be impossible according to the *Grassroots* formula of democratic committee meetings where a range of organisation and community members act as joint editor. Instead of serving the local struggles of a community, *Weekly Mail* sought to publish a cross section of views, while maintaining a principled editorial line, which was to uphold the notion of debate. “There was opposition to this approach, however, by those who rejected anything that seemed to compromise with the apartheid government. A debate arose over whether the newspaper should continue to accept the Shell company’s human rights advertisements, which *New Nation* refused to carry on the grounds that Shell was breaching the sanctions campaign” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000: 474). (When international sanctions became a part of the global fight against apartheid in the second half of the eighties, Shell claimed in its adverts in *Weekly Mail* that it ‘supports a free press’. But according to *New Nation*, the company gave respectability to a sanctions-busting enterprise.) Such a compromise had to be seen in the context of the newspaper’s well-being and financial survival. Irwin Manoim put the dilemma as follows: “What was the morality of running advertisements from arms manufacturer Denel when the newspaper itself disapproved of the arms trade? What was the morality of running an advertisement for *Playboy* when editors professed a commitment to non-sexism? ... The paper’s position is that it will publish advertisements that promote ideas – or products – we disapprove of, on the grounds that our readers are adult enough to discriminate for themselves. We draw the line at advertisements that cross the line between the contentious and the offensive” (1996: 45).

Weekly Mail’s tight management and efforts to attract advertising eventually made it a sustainable publication but after 1990 a new political dispensation called for more extensive and regular daily news coverage. A weekly was unlikely to generate enough revenue to survive, whereas a daily could generate revenue five days a week without increasing the costs five times. The mainstream market, however, proved too strong to penetrate and when Mandela was released from prison in February 1990, the *Daily Mail* launched in June, at the same time when Argus launched a morning edition of the *Star* ... “We were beaten before we’d begun” (Manoim, 1996: 128). An attempt of the *Weekly Mail* to reposition itself as a daily newspaper thus failed among the competition of the mainstream market and owing large debt to its printers Caxtons (which formed a joint venture with Argus), the *Daily Mail* died

after 44 daily issues on 4 September 1990. The *Daily Mail* was modeled on the news production tactics of the government supportive *Citizen* but it was soon realised that a newspaper with an alternative background cannot just work off news from news agencies: it needed to offer some thought and analysis. A new corporate structure that had to be put in place at the daily also made an end to the egalitarianism of the *Weekly Mail* and the staff became ridden with factional rivalries (Manoim, 1996: 136). Moreover, most of the '*Mail*'s' established readership was still white and "after 1990 South Africa did not magically transform ... instead the violence became evident at plain sight [due to lifted restrictions in coverage of the mainstream] and whites became frightened and resistant to change – not a good time for a new daily" (ibid: 128).

Adjusting to new times

A long-term loss of control to Argus was eventually averted by paying back the debt but the *Weekly Mail* continued to run at a loss throughout the year 1991. As a result of this near-bankruptcy Harber claimed the *Weekly Mail* had to "shift from its 'cheeky and combative approach' to a 'more reasoned and constructive tone'" (cited in Tomaselli and Louw, 1991c: 225). Public interest was changing and the demand for weekly coverage was diminishing; the weeklies had to take on a new role to maintain their selling point. "Part of the pressure to don different roles came from finances" (Berger, 2000: 9). The *Weekly Mail* thus improved its sports and business sections and introduced supplements on advertising-driven topics like computing. With other alternative newspapers slowly dying off one by one, as the previously 'alternative' coverage became the mainstream norm, the *Weekly Mail*, despite its fairly low circulation in comparison to the mainstream, persevered and tried to react accordingly with the new market dispensation. "The problems of the alternative press lay not primarily in their pitch to their changing audiences, as difficult as that was. The overwhelming handicap, arguably, was insufficient capital to effectively compete against the cartels in the mainstream market place through aggressive promotion, distribution and pricing strategies. As Randall (1993: 643) remarks, the global problem for alternative publishing has been that 'in "normal" times, as popular mobilisation subsides, the tyranny of the market may replace or supplement governmental pressures'" (Berger, 2000: 92).

With a financial crisis looming for alternative newspapers, since foreign funding (the main source of finances for most) was drying up, in 1991 *Weekly Mail* along with alternative

newspapers *South*, *Vrye Weekblad*, *New Nation*, *New African* joined the Conference of Independent Newspaper Editors to change their bleak future. “Working with alternative magazines led in turn by *Die Suid Afrikaan*, the newspapers opened negotiations with the mainstream press in search of a mode of survival” (Berger, 2000: 93). The establishment of the Independent Media Diversity Trust (IMDT) with a cash grant from the established press promised a brighter future and in 1992 the alternative publications joined the Newspaper Press Union (NPU). “The European Union was persuaded to make a final donation of R5 million (to *New Nation* and *Vrye Weekblad*) and to channel it via the IMDT” (Berger, 2000: 93). But the funds were not sufficient and with weak financial management on these alternative newspapers, none were equipped to survive the crisis (see chapter 4). Except for the *Weekly Mail*, they all eventually closed down.

This financial crisis, however, did not spare the *Weekly Mail* and every issue in the early nineties was losing money. Many doubted it could survive much longer: “After six years of struggle against the forces of political darkness, it seemed likely that the *Weekly Mail* would die not with a bang but a whimper, just another failed company in time of recession” (Manoim, 1996: 185). The financial plight of the *Weekly Mail* called for solutions and after running the British newspaper’s *Guardian* insert for some time, the *Weekly Mail* and the *Guardian* integrated with the latter taking on board the *Weekly Mail*’s losses previously sustained in order to overcome its hurdles and survive as a commercial publication. “Markwick [managing director of the *Guardian* in London] boldly proclaimed the death of the ‘alternative press’: The *Weekly Mail*, in its partnership with the *Guardian*, would henceforth be a mainstream newspaper” (Manoim, 1996: 189). But financial stability was still not secure when circulation marginally improved and the newspaper changed its name to the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*. In fact, the paper continued losing money especially when the South African public became less interested in politics after the 1994 elections and a remarkable improvement in coverage by the state broadcaster SABC caused the circulation of all newspapers, countrywide to fall. “We had banked on good sales during the honeymoon period after the April 1994 elections, but the opposite happened. People were tired of politics. They no longer wanted to read newspapers. They wanted to escape reality. For the next six months, sales stagnated, enough to ensure that even with improved advertising figures, the break-even point remained elusive” (Manoim, 1996: 193).

A business strategy needed to be established, which would save costs on distribution, raise more advertising and put into place a conventional hierarchal structure instead of the 'committee approach' where it was difficult to assign responsibilities. Manoim described the need to adjust: "We had struck out on our own ten years ago because we did not want to answer to anyone else. This meant that we had created a paper with a voice very different from that of the large newspaper companies. Would handing over the newspaper to the *Guardian* mean the end of this? ... The paper has always lost money and survived on charity and good fortune. Both were likely to run dry shortly, in which case the paper would finally fold. The only solution was to restructure the company along conventional lines and run it like any other business" (Manoim, 1996: 194). In 1995, the *Guardian* took over a 70 percent share in the company and a new business approach saw a rise in advertising and a potential for one of apartheid's most outspoken alternative newspapers to continue publishing during democracy.

The newspaper was bought as the *Mail & Guardian* in 2002 from the majority shareholder *Guardian* by Zimbabwean newspaper owner Trevor Ncube with the prospect of clearing its large accumulated debt and moving it towards break-even point. A sharp growth in advertising from about R15-million in 2002 to close to R40-million in 2004 has helped the newspaper to its first small operating profit at the end of the 2004 financial year (Forrest, D. 2005. Available: http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=257533&area=/insight/insight_birthday/, 5 December 2005). "If we pride editorial independence we need a solid financial position. We are not an NGO, we are a business, we need to watch the bottom line," said Ncube (in Smith, 2005: 17-19). The *Weekly Mail* has had to adjust to new times, changing names and ownership hands more than once and, as founding editor Anton Harber has claimed, changing as a newspaper. Compromises were made and the newspaper has acquired some commercial elements that had not been associated with alternative newspapers in the past but they have helped the newspaper in overcoming the challenging economic circumstances it encountered after 1990 and by gradually building a sound business strategy, the newspaper has never had to surrender its alternative roots.

As noted earlier, media today are increasingly concerned with profit rather than meaning and quality and in order to survive in the post-1990 era, alternative newspapers would have had to adjust their ideological convictions to find a meaningful place in the modern mass media market and acquire appropriate management and production strategies. In order to remain

'alternative', however, the challenge would be not to produce content that is seen more as a product than a service, addressing audiences solely in search for advertising revenues. Media competition has increased substantially since the nineties (especially with the rise of the internet) and "'older' media had to adapt by creating new needs, offering new and unique content and new formats in order to survive and attract new markets" (Fourie, 2001: 110). A challenge posed to alternative newspapers in adjusting to the new era, and one taken up successfully by the *Mail & Guardian* not only in print but also online by creating a successful internet news site and on television by developing a series titled 'Ordinary People' (sold to SABC), would be to remain 'an alternative' and not become totally submissive to the needs of the mainstream. Adopting post-1990 traits of the media market could compromise values of media diversity with content that is audience centered instead of quality centered and becomes a consumer product with limited value.

"Ideology and the accumulation of profit do not always coincide" (Inglis, 1990: 121) but in a democratic environment there is no less need for the alternative voice than there is in a restricted environment. Upon achieving democracy, South Africa lost a press that emerged from a pro-democratic movement and alternative newspapers did not become dominant media institutions in the democratic era. The withdrawal of foreign funding, the lack of support from the new government and the decline in political mobilisation and weak management practices (Berger, 2000: 95) were responsible for leaving the alternative press compromised in the new democratic dispensation. The capitalist mode of production in a democratic environment became a challenging environment for the alternative media, driven by motives rather than profitability, to operate in. Capitalism existed during apartheid too, but it is more closely related to the development of democracy, and without a sound and self-sustainable footing, the 'voice of the voiceless' became seriously compromised in an environment where the principles of the capitalist mode of production are upheld to generate profit.

Grassroots suspended its publication in August 1990 and a feasibility study suggested there was a potential market for the newspaper as a free sheet focusing on community issues and run on advertising revenue. Advertisers showed an interest, provided the new *Grassroots* would not be overly political and would have a regular cycle of publication (*Grassroots* Annual General Meeting, 19. 10. 1991). But Manuel claims that there were disagreements between the activists, some unwilling to adjust to the new commercial requisites of the post-1990 era. "A lot of people still felt that the principles, such as non-profit and nonracialism,

that the newspaper was set up on should remain,” says Manuel. “But I was for a change which would let the ideals of the paper remain the same. Funding sources were drying up and we needed to become profitable. My idea was to make profit and then put it back into the community organisations but there was confusion and a lack of understanding of how a newspaper could survive under the new conditions. So I think it was trapped in the times. The coverage of *Grassroots* was excellent but the business part was non-existent. That valuable content should have been turned into a commercial venture” (Interview, 25. 3. 2006).

Trying to re-launch this newspaper that was geared for serving the struggle as a commercial free sheet thus never became successful and neither did the proposed rationalisation of *Grassroots* operations with *South*. “Going commercial and relying on professionalism was indeed a far cry from *Grassroots*’ original mission which called for it to be eventually taken over by the community organisations” (Kessel, 2000b: 318). The community newspapers of today produced by mainstream press companies, on the other hand, are more commercially based and their main objective is to make money. “Today, there is no shortage of what are called ‘community newspapers’ – the commercially produced, for profit, weekly wad of paper that is left on the stoep or in the postbox, whose content is difficult to describe, is of parochial and fleeting interest, and is eminently forgettable by bedtime, and which serves really as a medium for big and small advertising. *Grassroots* was a community newspaper of a quite different kind” (Badat, 2004: 2).

Foreign funding certainly helped *Grassroots* survive the challenging ten years of its existence but it also meant that the newspaper didn’t account for the significant attention that needs to be given to business matters and plans concerning fund raising or securing advertising. *Grassroots* could not survive just by supporting the direction of a mass social movement and aiding it with its cause; the community paper’s lack of business initiative let it succumb to the harsh realities of the media market. “Started and run by journalists, rather than by businesspeople, the publications’ financial aspect was a fatally neglected component of the operation” (Berger, 2000: 88). This was not a good long-term strategy for a newspaper despite being effective in the context of the 1980s. Ryland Fisher notes in retrospect: “It was completely different times. You need to understand *Grassroots* in the context of the struggle. We were young, idealistic and we were dedicated to the struggle against apartheid. We knew we had lots of friends in the European countries that would support us and give us money to make this kind of thing happen. That drove us. During the eighties there was a need for us to

be propagandistic, opposed to the apartheid government and promoting the organisations within the communities. But it's very difficult to use today's standards to judge a paper like *Grassroots* that was produced in the eighties ... If I had to restart *Grassroots* today, the profit motive would be one of the key motives even though the social motive would also be strong. Today I realise that you can't run anything without making money" (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

Mansoor Jaffer agrees that *Grassroots* adopted a very good strategy for the times of apartheid when fighting a system in an attempt to help end it, but it wasn't a strategy that could be effective beyond that era: "You need to prepare for these papers to be part of civil society and that wasn't done because maybe people didn't think that long-term ... I suppose that if we had decided before its closure to commercialise it more and get ways of generating income, maybe we could have developed it for a community market as a niche paper. We should have adapted it and kept it going but it would be a very different publication. It wouldn't be *Grassroots* at all, it would have to be a totally different concept adjusted to the new times" (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). These claims imply that Johnson's definition of the alternative press regarding it as 'non-commercial' with the profit motive not in its primary interest would have to be reformulated for the post-1990 scenario, but on the other hand, making such publications 'sustainable' rather than 'profitable' should suffice.

Rashid Seria says "the most important thing is understanding the market and launching a newspaper for that specific market of readers" (Interview, 26. 4. 2006). He claims there is still a market for alternative newspapers but it has changed and needs to be identified again in the context of the new times. The clash between the ideology of alternative newspapers and their ability to reach a favourable position in the market was a problem, especially due to the reluctance of wary advertisers to be associated with the political stance of the alternative press and its readership's class structures being difficult to overcome. "In addition, the alternative press operated in an extremely tight market, not made any easier by these papers' newness on the scene. Another consideration was that the alternative papers may not have been the dazzling media opportunity that their editors liked to believe. Except for the *New Nation*, the papers typically had low circulations that were among fairly specialised readerships ... The inertia of advertisers who favoured their traditional media channels aggravated the problem, as did the generally more modest, less sophisticated advertising sales forces available to the alternative press" (Jackson, 1993: 61). The *Weekly Mail* was the only alternative newspaper to survive long-term because it identified a need to integrate its operation within a newly formed

dispensation and adjusted its relevance. It reached a compromise between ideology and economy.

CHAPTER 3

Grassroots and Weekly Mail: The post-1990 developments (part II.)

IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The previous chapter considered the alternative newspapers *Grassroots* and *Weekly Mail* from the view of political economy. The economic context, indeed, is crucial for any analysis of the press but claims that media are determined by the material basis of production should not be seen in isolation from particular ideologies that form part of such relations. Murdock and Golding argue that economic forces are not the only factors shaping cultural production nor are they the most significant. Controls and constraints imposed by the state and the political sphere or the significance of the inertia exerted by dominant cultural codes and traditions also need consideration. Hence, they fully endorse Stuart's Hall post-Marxist position that "the level of economic determination is the necessary but not sufficient condition for an adequate analysis" (Golding and Murdock, 1979: 198). On the economic level of analysis, the press's relations to monopoly capital and to the capitalist state need to be considered but ideology and culture are also very important in media production. Neither political economy nor ideology can remain autonomous and they have related dynamics and characteristics when it comes to the study of media. In view of ideology, this chapter will consider how *Grassroots* failed to adjust to reach sustainability and fill a meaningful role in the new emerging media environment of a democratic South Africa, while the *Weekly Mail* survived.

Grassroots within the context of hegemony

Adopting the Marxist thinking of Trotsky and Lenin, *Grassroots* aimed to involve the masses – organise, mobilise and educate them. "Inspiration came from Latin America, Britain, and pre-revolutionary Russia. The much vaunted slogan POEM – Popularise, Organise, Educate and Mobilise – was an acronym derived from Latin America; it stood for methods of 'comunicacion popular' that were developed for rural areas and city slums" (Kessel, 2000a: 236). In line with Marxist ideology, the newspaper assumed the inability of the working class to recognise the true conditions of its existence, thereby needing a medium to fulfil the role of

revolutionary organisation and guidance. Set up as an advocacy publication, *Grassroots* evolved through Marxist ideology which Fred Inglis calls the theory of partisan interests: “the view that the ruling class favours best those ideas which preserve its own property and power by persuading everybody else that things are just fine as they are, and that the ideas, values and frame of mind which suit them so well, suit everybody else at the same time” (Inglis, 1990: 78).

Grassroots was thus set up with an ambition to counter what Marx termed ‘false consciousness’ upheld by a large part of the mainstream press in order to maintain the beliefs and values of the dominant class in society, what Lenin would call the ‘bourgeoisie’. As adopted by *Grassroots*, Marxism saw ideology as a product of class. Racial realities were not totally ignored by the newspaper but the dominant discourse revolved around the roles which classes fulfil in the capitalist and apartheid structures. The subordinate classes were to build their social consciousness through *Grassroots* and this would help them constitute a revolutionary class in line with Marx’s claims that “the proletariat will inevitably emerge as the harbinger of a new era” (cited in Thompson, 1990: 40). According to Marxist ideology, the mainstream press was an important vehicle in delivering a false picture of the minority ruling class to the majority of the public and presenting it as the natural order of things. Capitalism was seen as the divisive agent and mainstream newspapers were to divert attention from its exploitative nature. *Grassroots* therefore attempted to point out these links between the ruling class and capitalist interests, and provide a regular dose of principled counter-propaganda and agitation.

Marxist ideology and its notion of ‘false consciousness’ has, however, received considerable criticism from scholars who claim that a social position within economic relations cannot be the sole determinant of ideology. For Marx, “ideology (is) always determined by the material and economic conditions and it always (is) a distortion of reality” (Sonderling, 2001: 315). It is not only material concerns that influence a person’s ideology. Other issues, such as personal experience, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, age, nationality and so on also affect one’s view of the world. Although there often exists a single, dominant ideology in a society (such as the racial capitalism of apartheid), one needs to consider a number of counter-ideologies, especially in capitalist conditions, where competition is of primary importance (Williams, 2003: 147). As the Tomasellis and Muller claim, “different ideologies not only co-exist, compete and clash, but also overlap, affect and contaminate one another” (1987a: 10). A

more appropriate basis for an analysis of the alternative press of apartheid thus lies in Gramsci's theory about 'hegemony' where people are not passive recipients of the dominant class ideology. According to Gramsci, ideology is not something injected into passive subjects who simply live out the ideas and beliefs assigned to them. Ideology is a debate and struggle between dominant and subordinate groups in society (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, 1987a: 16).

"The concept of hegemony provides a tool with which to theorise the integration of diverse ideological and cultural strains, and to see the results of breaks and crises within the dominant consensus of society" (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, 1987a: 19). It was a 'crisis of hegemony' in Gramscian terms, during the eighties, which explained the alternative press defying the state control of media and the state's manipulation of the mainstream and alternative newspapers in attempt to marginalise counter-hegemonic voices. By identifying the media as a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate views (Williams, 2003: 150), Gramsci's account of ideology is more pluralistic than that of Marx, acknowledging the space for an alternative voice that questions and resists the equilibrium of the dominant institutions, attempting to produce opposing views to challenge the general consensus of the mainstream. Apartheid was presented as the natural order by sections of the mainstream media but in line with Gramsci's thinking, this hegemony was constantly fought over and either maintained or undermined; media thus became sites of struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas. "Hegemony is a constant struggle against a multitude of resistance to ideological domination, and any balance of forces that it achieves is always precarious, always in need of re-achievement" (Fiske in Lemon, 2001: 374). When consent for apartheid reforms was won by the government from its supporters (such as the Indian and coloured members of the tricameral parliament) or from mainstream Afrikaans newspapers, another group challenged such consent (such as the activists on alternative newspapers).

South African society has never been a unified collection of people that accepted one particular ideology but instead it is dynamic and characterised by many conflicting ideologies (Sonderling, 2001: 319). When pro-revolutionary thinking in the anti-apartheid struggle gave rise to Marxism and township revolts, the apartheid government became aware that the people in society are not merely passive recipients of apartheid ideology and established reform strategies during the 1980s in an attempt to win legitimacy and maintain the equilibrium of the existing configurations. Ironically, however, Botha's attempts at ending Verwoerdian

apartheid through his reforms did not create a consociational democracy but rather produced the most violent and brutal period of apartheid (Louw, 2004: 74). Lacking legitimacy among the majority of South Africa's population, apartheid structures became threatened by nationwide uprisings and the state had to resort to the use of force (what Althusser calls 'repressive state apparatuses' – military and police) to discipline the resisting masses to accept the governing will. In addition, a number of restrictive laws were imposed on the media in attempt to control, restrict and suppress the flow of information and any alternative viewpoints which the government regarded dangerous and depraving. "The legislation which affects the mass media is meant to protect and consolidate the system of apartheid and white rule as a whole" (Chimutengwende, 1978: 57). Apartheid can thus be seen, in line with Gramsci's argument, as an organic ideology, constructed from elements of the beliefs of religious 'chosenness' and racial exclusivity, "creating a bulwark against the infiltration (and/or imperialism) of people of another civilization" (Louw, 2004: 42). The South African Defence Force during apartheid, for example, was not meant to be seen as protecting the interests of the powerful groups in maintaining their *status quo* but as protecting the whole society from the perceived threat of external forces like Soviet communism.

Conflict more than consensus impacted on social relations of the eighties as the alternative press emerged to create disharmony, but the alternative papers made mass communication more diverse and effective, rather than rendering it dysfunctional. The South African government, however, despite being in a serious political crisis during the mid-1980s, retained a dominant position to propagate its ideas and hegemony still operated within the confines of inequality in the distribution of economic and political power (Williams, 2003: 151). "Consent nevertheless is a more effective means of controlling society in the long run than coercion" (Williams, 2003: 150) and the apartheid government alternated between co-option and coercion, in an attempt to try and balance force with consent (Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1987: 102). The injustices of apartheid were often being made more 'palatable' to the white minority by attempting reforms, while the protests of the black majority were violently coerced. According to Gramsci, a dominant group needs to work continuously to gain acceptance of its ideology from society and upon achieving hegemony it "suggests that subordinate groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so ... but because they have reason of their own" (Strinati in Williams, 2003: 150).

Thompson argues that the production and reception of symbolic forms are processes that take place within structural social contexts. “These contexts are spatially and temporally specific: they involve particular *spatio-temporal settings*, and these settings are partially constitutive of the action and interaction which take place within them” (Thompson, 1990: 146). Specific ideological conditions were evident in among the constituencies of the Western Cape, for instance, which formed the basis for communities that created *Grassroots*. A majority of the coloured population belonged to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which was closely affiliated to the governing National Party and provided some ideological legitimation for apartheid policies: ... “apartheid ideology in South Africa justified the domination of the majority of the black people by a powerful white minority as a natural social order that was created by gods” (Sonderling, 2001: 315). Afrikaans was the primary language for many coloureds and they were therefore orientated toward Afrikaner culture, claims Kessel. Moreover, coloureds suffered from discriminating legislation but they were not as severely restricted as Africans. The compliance with white rule therefore held the promise of social upliftment for coloureds, while identifying with the cause of African liberation promised severe repression and an uncertain future (Kessel, 2000a: 228).

As suggested in chapter 1, it is therefore important to stress that the diverse ideologies of South Africa’s majority were not limited only to the ‘oppressed’ or ‘working class’ label. People forming South Africa’s majority had multiple identities among which religion and language, for example, played important parts: Christianity and Islam were contrasting religious beliefs that separated the Cape coloureds and the interests of a Muslim teacher were not necessarily the same as the interests of a Christian factory worker. Their individual values, beliefs and ideas could not be assumed compatible even if they stood on the same side of the barricades as the ‘marginalised majority’. Other interests characterised, for instance, women groups, some of which pushed for issues such as rape, use of contraceptives or maternity leave to be addressed. Rural folk were concerned with issues of land, while some student groups pressed for matters of equal and accessible education to be resolved. People were not therefore involved in the counter-hegemonic struggle only in terms of class but their capacity as parents and youth, men and women, modernisers and traditionalists, urban and rural residents, Christians and Muslims, and people with other beliefs, ideologies and experiences – too diverse, claims Kessel, for the paradigm of ‘oppressed majority’ to contain. “Forging a ‘community of the oppressed’ proved an unrealistic ambition for a community paper” (Kessel, 2000a: 286, 305).

The diversity of the dominated constituencies of the South African society was thus difficult to unite by *Grassroots* through its ideology of a workerist discourse under a nonracial alliance because various other ideals remained inherent in that society. In addition, a nonracial ideology often denied differences between the dominated racial groups and set the racial struggle on the ‘back foot’, making it often less relevant than the terms that defined ownership and material conditions among communities. “Adopting a working-class approach in order to find common ground in a racially divided environment proved no solution, as the Western Cape’s working class was itself highly segmented” (Kessel, 2000a: 229). Strained relations between coloureds and blacks were obscured because nonracialism did not permit conflicts to be expressed in racial terms. It was therefore mainly the debate between workerism (emphasising class) and populism (emphasising race) that weakened the ‘popular democratic’ motives behind an alternative newspaper like *Grassroots*. Although the vibrant civil society of social movements and community organisations, which formed a large part of *Grassroots*, shared the general perspectives of the popular-democratic struggle, tensions emerged among them. Was the struggle a site for national and racial liberation or for socialist transformation? Socialism was always the underlying theme behind the alternative press of the 1980s and the character of *Grassroots* was implicitly anti-capitalist in that it sought to empower the poor and marginalised against local, national and global elites, but when looking at the overall context of the eighties, the “key strategic question was whether the anti-apartheid struggle should take on an overtly anti-capitalist character (led by the trade union movement and/or a workers party), or whether the focus should be on white domination as a unifying element” (Pillay, 1994: 7).

In general, the workerists such as Leila Patel, who was a sociologist with a background in theoretical Marxism (Kessel, 2000a: 238) called for the anti-capitalist nature of the struggle, while the populists like Ryland Fisher or Rashid Seria emphasised the anti-apartheid nature of the struggle. Fisher claims that, although many *Grassroots* activists were schooled in Marxism and grew up with the political thinking of Lenin and Marx, they needed to realise that in South Africa the struggle had to be about race more than class (Interview, 10. 3. 2006). Seria supported the values of the New Unity Movement (Interview, 26. 4. 2006), which had a tradition in Trotskyite socialism but it was opposed to the multiracial concept of the Freedom Charter and the multiclass nature of the UDF. Saleem Badat acknowledges that *Grassroots* was a “melting pot of activists with diverse political schooling – some activists were

sometime Unity Movement, others were sometime Black Consciousness and yet others were groomed directly into the revitalised post-1976 African National Congress” (2004: 6) Mansoor Jaffer admits, however, that the populist discourse was secondary and the overwhelming ideology at *Grassroots* was indeed Marxism: “Our intention of an egalitarian, grassroots society was along the lines that were intended by Marxism” (Interview, 16. 3. 2006).

Debate, however, was seen as divisive from the mid-eighties onwards by the *Grassroots* activists who upheld a nonracial and workerist approach, and such attitudes blocked the progress of a popular-democratic struggle towards accommodating a diverse society. Debate would not have conformed to the Leninist recipe for the use of media, claims Kessel: “In ‘What Is to Be Done?’ Lenin fulminated against the freedom to criticise, which he felt permitted unprincipled opportunists without a coherent theory to undermine the strength of socialism with their eclecticism. Once the ultimate truth had been established, there was no more need for discussion” (2000a: 246). The utopian calls for people’s power and praising the socialist models of other countries was effective in the initial stages of popular mobilisation but lost long-term effectiveness as class lines to a large extent coincided with racial differences and couldn’t obscure the fact that many coloured working-class families in the Mitchell’s Plain were hiring domestics from Khayelitsha (Kessel, 2000a: 285).

Both racial and class interests were involved in creating apartheid but *Grassroots* failed to combine these competing ideologies meaningfully to become more effective as popular-democratic rhetoric. The migrant labour system, formed by big mining companies, was one of the most destructive aspects of South Africa’s racial politics and Louw claims that a mutual but non-essential relationship existed between race and class. In effect, the struggle in South Africa being aimed at ‘racial capitalism’ rather than purely against ‘white domination’ was an attempt to unite in challenging white rule *and* capitalist exploitation (Louw, 2004: ix). Rather than nonracialism denying coloured identity at *Grassroots*, and a primary emphasis on workerism leading the agenda, a careful consideration of both spheres of the struggle would have harnessed their different elements and utilised them for the common cause of a social democracy. Instead, the Marxism of activists left communities feeling estranged from politics that put the emphasis far beyond ordinary, everyday concerns.

During the early eighties, there was a common interest between activists and communities through popular participation but this weakened as politics increasingly came to the fore from 1983 onwards. *Grassroots* attempted to make the readers aware that it was primarily state and capital which were closely intertwined in their joint efforts to instill a false consciousness in the people and as the paper came under the influence of the UDF, it did not give coverage to organisations outside the Congress fold. By the mid-1980s, the *Grassroots* chair admitted the newspaper wasn't serving as a platform for anti-apartheid resistance in a broader sense: "It was always the policy of Grassroots Publications to serve as a broad forum – to give expression to the progressive political views prevailing in the oppressed community. It is clear that this policy was not implemented in practice' ... With 'unity of the oppressed' under Charterist direction as the overriding concern, there was little room for divergent views in the counter-hegemonic project" (Kessel, 2000a: 257). The Freedom Charter and Marxism became the dominant forces behind *Grassroots* ideology and important values, like religion, which formed a large part of the Cape's communities' identity, were largely omitted or only confined to rural constituencies with publications like *Saamstaan*. It was only the dismantling of the UDF during the early 1990s that brought back a coloured identity, which rejected nonracialism and took the form of the Western Cape coloured constituency voting mainly for the Nationalists in the 1994 elections.

This gap between *Grassroots* activists and the communities widened in the late-eighties when *Grassroots* increasingly became a platform for educated youth activists who contested the conservatism of their elders, claims Kessel: "The paper represented the newfound identity of students and graduates who asserted their place among the forces of change ... They used class consciousness, as a rhetorical facade for youth protest against prevailing patterns of authority ... [This youth was] lacking strategy and leadership and [was] unable to link up with the elders. Generational consciousness became a much stronger motivation than any sense of continuity with past resistance" (2000a: 226, 286, 291). Pre-occupied with their own political grievances, the radically inclined, young Marxists overlooked the sentiments of a largely conservative, generally less educated, church-going constituency of the Western Cape. The newspaper was seen by its activists as the voice of 80 percent of the silent majority (Kessel, 2000a: 256) but it lost much of its credibility when it became a platform for militant youth. Not surprisingly then, most Dutch Christian funders, such as the WACC, no longer funded the newspaper during the latter part of the eighties. *Grassroots* was still nowhere near fulfilling the WACC's criteria for funding in moving towards self-reliance, but it also obscured

Christian values and lost commitment to developing two-way communication, as required by WACC guidelines for project development and grant applications.

Grassroots thus faced problems of funding which was redirected to the government, but it also began facing ideological difficulties as to how it could meaningfully fill the vacuum in oppositional activism of the early nineties. The newspaper was losing touch with social movements that formed an important part of the *Grassroots* agenda (e.g. CAHAC – Cape Areas Housing Action Committee) in the years of its inception and these organisations in turn began to face difficult circumstances during the early nineties in view of the new emerging dispensation. The UDF was to be dissolved and the social movements no longer had a strong ally in a community newspaper and faced the prospects of being absorbed into the post-apartheid government thus leaving opponents of government without a ‘voice’. “Social movements it seems, are searching for a formula that will allow them to participate fully in the developmental decision-making process, while at the same time maintain and develop their grassroots social movement character. Their decision in this regard may determine whether they are in fact seeds of a new democratic order, or mere bubbles that have emerged during a period of crisis, which will burst once the crisis subsides” (Pillay, 1994: 16).

The AGM in July 1990 declared that *Grassroots* should focus on rebuilding the structures of civil society: “While at national level, developments are occurring apace, at a local level, people’s experience of social and economic deprivation persists. The challenge of this period is to ensure that political change is accompanied by a thorough process of social transformation which empowers people on all levels of society.” But while some staff members (e.g. Fahdiel Manuel) believed in a new operation that would be more appropriate in the democratic times, others were more reluctant to adjust. “Why should we change now, just because the people in Russia are changing?” asked an organiser (Kessel, 2000a: 281). The once innovative way of producing a newspaper had to shift, giving way to commercial and professional factors and accounting for new realities characteristic of the social structures of democracy. A community-focused, commercial freesheet would mean a strong focus on advertising and that would bring sustainability to the fore. But the nostalgia of some activists for the heady days of the struggle remained unresolved and blocked new initiatives of adapting to market forces (Kessel, 2000a: 281). Economic conditions of production had a significant impact on the demise of *Grassroots* in 1990 but the lack of debate between the many underlying cultures and ideologies characterising social relations and ensuing from an

array of values, beliefs and ideas acquired by society had equal importance. These diverse ideological positions among society led to contests over social and cultural meanings but these meanings kept changing during the eighties and more so in view of approaching democracy. As new agendas in media content and consumption began emerging as a result of a new political dispensation of the nineties, *Grassroots* and other alternative newspapers fell short of reacting effectively to these newly established sets of meaning. “The hegemony of the text is never total but must constantly struggle to impose itself against the diversity of meanings that recipients will produce” (Lemon, 2001: 376). The alternative agenda was limited by time and ideological complacency and to retain purpose it needed to adjust.

Seeking new space

Thompson identifies three areas that are distinctive in any given society and the demise of the alternative press could be seen in view of these main factors: economic conditions of production; the legal and political superstructure; and the ideological forms of consciousness (1990: 30). Chimutengwende extends these thoughts in pointing to the factors that determine the role of the media and how far they can be used as instruments for oppression or liberation: “The nature of the socio-economic system within which the media must operate; government legislation and its implementation and the power of mass communication in general and how human beings are changed or influenced as individuals or as a community” (1978: 12). The collapse of the alternative press is thus not only associated with financial difficulties but also the general changes in the political, media and legal environments of South Africa. Democracy – the environment alternative newspapers so convincingly sought for South Africa to reach – developed a capitalist rather than a socialist nature and ultimately triggered the demise of the alternative press.

Before the nineties, apartheid legislation clearly demarcated an area of ideological discourse that was considered acceptable by the state. This legislation was meant to prevent the media from exposing the public to radical counter-ideologies as such counter-hegemonic tendencies were considered a threat by the state to the established order. Mainstream media like the SABC were meant to ‘demonise’ the ANC. The Afrikaans mainstream press houses Perskor and Nasionale Pers also fell under the influence of the National Party and offered similar ideological discourse. The mainstream English press largely fell under the SAAN and Argus groupings, which were mainly controlled by Anglo American and because mining business

interests were often dependable on compliance with government, Alan Morris claims. the ideology of the English press was within the allowed area of ideological discourse of being loyal to the white parliament and the rule of law (1975: 64). Parts of the English press, however, were critical of the ruling political ideology of apartheid, despite the Tomasellis and Muller claiming “that even allowable dissent operates within the larger structure of exploitation. Freedom of oppression is not rendered meaningless. But that freedom has to be set in the real economic and political context of these societies” (1987b: 33). The English mainstream was not uniform in its coverage of the eighties and liberal newspapers like the *Cape Times* made regular attacks on the Botha government. As mentioned earlier, the paper’s editor Anthony Heard even took the bold step of publishing a lengthy interview with banned ANC leader Oliver Tambo in 1985.

The ruling apartheid minority was aware that a strong counter-ideology could bring down the prevailing power structure and property relations and so the government’s control of the media was strong and overwhelming in places but not total. “What freedom there is, exists in spite of, not because of, the government,” said Anthony Heard (cited in Jackson, 1993: 11). Counter-ideologies, in various degrees of protest kept emerging with powerful mobilising ideologies (in the form of resistance newspapers), threatening the ruling regime and its treatment of the majority as the ‘other’. Former *Weekly Mail* co-editor Anton Harber pointed out about the eighties: “The confusion between Acts and emergency regulations, and between central State bodies, State officials and the courts, created a surprising degree of space for newspapers with the will to publish and be damned. The survival of a chirpy weekly press seems to have borne this out” (cited in Pinnock, 1991: 152). As a new form of cultural revolution developed among the country’s majority, agendas of alternative and mainstream newspapers became the sites of ideological struggles between counter-hegemonic and hegemonic interests. But the English mainstream coverage served the hegemonic interest less and less as the political crisis and the weaknesses in the social concept of apartheid became increasingly exposed on all fronts. Signs of this shifting emphasis were already evident after the formation of the UDF as some mainstream papers like *Cape Argus* or *Cape Times*, claims Jeremy Seekings, started giving the movement generous coverage (2000b: 230).

Pinnock claims that not only English, but also some Afrikaans mainstream newspapers changed as a result of the political atmosphere of the mid-1980s. “Confronted by the sudden legitimization of extra-parliamentary politics ... and the clamour of political alternatives from

the most sedimented layers of society, some English and Afrikaans newspapers began to sense the failure of the State's ideological hegemony. Journalists found themselves caught between newspaper managements moving (and being moved by the State) to the right, and daily events around them moving to the left" (1991: 148). Later, speaking about the post-1990 mainstream Afrikaans press, Max du Preez exclaimed: "A new generation of progressive young editors have taken over at *Rapport*, *Beeld* and *Die Burger* and dragged these publications into the New South Africa. They have become professional, modern newspapers in tune with the new society, and the differences between them and the *Vrye Weekblad* of today wouldn't have been that big" (du Preez, 2003: 211).

During the early eighties, however, the alternative press emerged from an environment where media diversity was very limited. Set up as the first alternative newspaper of the eighties, *Grassroots* was meant to give readers a choice. As an alternative to the mainstream, *Grassroots*' role was to give the public information that was independent of monopolised ownership and that defied the coercive media laws imposed by the state. But this enemy that was the apartheid ideology during the eighties became much less evident after the first democratic elections. When the ideology of apartheid eventually shifted to the ideology of democracy *Grassroots* struggled to adjust to the new hegemonic dispensation in repositioning its mission from a 'paper that fills the void' during apartheid to one that does the same in democracy. Media curbs and restrictions were lifted after 1990 and a new space unfolded offering both mainstream and alternative newspapers a free environment to operate in and utilise. The coverage of the struggle was no longer an exclusive news item characteristic only of papers operating on the periphery of the law and taking chances. Alternative papers with an established counter-hegemonic ideology, however, weren't geared for a post-apartheid environment where the previously marginalised voice became the mainstream. Remaining true to the alternative concept meant undertaking extremely complex adjustments, which could undermine the position alternatives stood for before democracy while making it difficult to find a relevant, new agenda.

Being alternative during apartheid meant not only a different attitude and policy from the general mainstream press but also different newspaper content. This perspective based outside the mainstream field where the hegemony largely determined what was published, however, became much more challenging to fulfil when the restrictive structures of apartheid collapsed. Johnson listed advocacy objectives that served to fulfil a role within the resistance of South

Africa as one of the four considerations that define an alternative publication (see chapter 1). The context for such a definition changed with the new democratic dispensation but to retain the underlying concept of 'alternative', the newspapers still needed to hold even a democratically elected hegemony accountable. Challenging the 'ruling ideas' of the dominant ideology of apartheid during the 1980s, the alternative press attempted to do so by giving space in coverage to the leftist ideologies outside the mainstream dominant ideology. But when these previously dominated ideologies took over the governing agenda, the alternative newspapers reacted inadequately from supporting a counter-ideology of opposition and change to holding this newly found hegemony accountable. This hegemonic ideology in South African society during the eighties served as a relevant focus for the cause of alternative newspapers but after 1990 this focus needed to readjust towards a new hegemonic ideology while fulfilling the same underlying cause.

The Western Cape was part of unexpected political adjustments during the 1994 elections as the National Party, much condemned among *Grassroots* and UDF activists, won by a significant margin ahead of the ANC. Conflicting political agendas were rife in the Western Cape in the late-1980s and *Grassroots* failed to report on the significant changes around the end of the UDF and return of the ANC from exile. The ANC grappled with constituency building in certain areas, painstakingly developed by the UDF between 1983 and 1989. As a result, claim Tomaselli and Louw, "a sad reflection on many alternative press publications was their lack of reportage on the failure of the Congress [ANC] to organisationally adjust to the post-Reform era" (1991c: 223). The complex negotiations between the ANC and the National Party during the early nineties also called for detailed coverage, from day to day and this was precisely what the resourceful mainstream was equipped for while the financially deprived alternative lagged behind. The *Weekly Mail* identified this need for daily news in a new unfolding political environment by launching the *Daily Mail* but it lacked the resources to compete with the likes of the *The Star* or *Argus* who improved their coverage significantly. "This [mainstream] sector of the press began informing its readers about black politics ... The alternative press no longer had exclusive occupation of its traditional news arena" (Berger, 2000: 89). What used to be the coverage of the alternative became the mainstream norm and alternative newspapers, most offering weekly news, ended up competing against each other instead of implementing a change.

A lack of self-criticism and a tendency to praise the positives but not criticise the negatives about the liberation movement, meant that *Grassroots* failed to foresee the requirements of an alternative publication in the new environment and elaborate on its role as an advocacy journal in a way that would be appropriate to the imminent changes in South Africa. The working class struggle remained relevant but the context of this struggle had changed: racial discrimination also did not disappear overnight and differences still needed to be seen critically in the new dispensation. With the ANC losing the 1994 election in the Western Cape, skepticism about the new government was still evident among the Western Cape communities previously represented by *Grassroots* and a newspaper was needed to voice these concerns. Democracy and its new government were by no means faultless and it was therefore the role of alternative newspapers to take the bold step and maintain their critical agenda, albeit in a different context. An appropriate discourse that applied the ideals of the struggle to a democratic era to serve the genuine ideological values of democracy was missing.

It was no longer a critical – almost to a point of hostility – counter-hegemonic ideology that needed to be communicated, but rather a more politically and socially open-minded agenda. As Stuart Hall claims, ideologies depend on the balance of forces in a particular historical conjuncture (1982: 70). Despite the fact that the liberation movement and its cause was one of the primary reasons for the establishment of an alternative newspaper like *Grassroots* in the first place, providing meaningful criticism of the liberation movement was in line with a democratic media environment and required quality journalism injected with impartiality, analysis and balanced coverage. Journalists on alternative newspapers used to refuse consciously to accept the consensual discourse of the eighties and thereby situated themselves and the agendas of their newspapers outside the governing hegemony. Many of these journalists left the alternative arena for better salaries of the more viable mainstream after 1990, leaving the alternatives unattended. Some of these names, for instance, included *New Nation* editor Zwelakhe Sisulu going to the SABC, *Vrye Weekblad*'s Max du Preez and Jacques Pauw also moving into television, *South* editor Moegsien Williams becoming editor of the *Cape Times* and many others heading in different directions. Shaun Johnson was a journalist who left the *Weekly Mail* in the early nineties for the mainstream *The Star*, being invited by the editor on the premise that the mainstream papers now needed the skills, knowledge, contacts and experiences of alternative journalists: “We [journalists on alternative

newspapers] understood this new country and knew important people like Nelson Mandela or Thabo Mbeki” (Interview, 2. 5. 2006).

These journalists had experience of providing an alternative view during apartheid but this valuable experience and contacts from the alternative press were not always effectively utilised for the mainstream in order to provide critical and elaborate coverage of the liberation structures that these journalists previously supported; nor could they (as part of mainstream) criticise capitalism and the established business structures of the media market. Ryland Fisher, for instance, became the editor of the mainstream *Cape Times* during the late nineties (after the newspaper was bought by the Independent Newspapers Group in 1994, which endorsed the ANC in the 1999 elections) and almost led it to closure after he shifted the newspaper from its established tradition of aiming for the upper LSM readership, to aiming for the coloured constituencies of the Western Cape. He brought the circulation down to 48 000 (Opatrny, 2005: 40-41). “When I became [*Cape Times*] editor, I inevitably brought with me political and social baggage. I wanted to produce a paper that will make me feel comfortable and when we do that we want to choose a certain political and social agenda for that paper and within these realms we claim to be objective ... But you can't be objective. You can try and be fair but not objective. Objectivity is a myth,” says Fisher (Interviews, 30. 8. 2005 and 10. 3. 2006).

With substantial resources, the mainstream press could cover the complex negotiations between the ANC and NP during the early nineties, thereby preparing the readers for a new era, but an alternative perspective reformulated appropriately for the new times was still needed to maintain a healthy diversity of media. Skills nurtured by the history of the resistance press thus needed to transform into an agenda that would become a relevant alternative voice in a new context of democracy. Adopting commercial imperatives would have been critical to make the alternative press more viable, attracting quality journalists and remaining an effective medium that is a product of progressive thinking. Berger claims, however, that the alternative newspapers followed the mainstream more than attempting to compete as an alternative voice. “The Alternatives had hoped to become the new mainstream, instead they now found themselves copying the mainstream in many respects – bringing in business sections, expanded arts sections, etc..... They did not take over the mainstream, as much as take over some of its characteristics for their own use. The more this happened, the less they were really different, really alternative” (Berger, 2000: 90).

The new media landscape was uncompromising towards alternative newspapers and a lack of initiative in seeking a new counter-ideological agenda proved short-sighted and ultimately fatal to the cause of the alternative press. As the ANC took power after 1994, it had done so through legitimately winning the vote of the majority of South Africans and many alternative media took a supportive stance, no longer fulfilling their role as ‘voices of protest’. “We thought we were now in a new South Africa and everything was going to be hunky dory from then onwards,” says Fisher. “We didn’t realise that the struggle [for the values of democracy] would continue and the struggle still continues to this day. The media landscape always needed and still needs publications like *Grassroots*. At the time, we just didn’t see the end of *Grassroots* as a serious failure, it didn’t seem a significant loss if it didn’t carry on” (Interview, 10. 3. 2006).

The *Weekly Mail*, on the other hand, was a pioneer among alternative newspapers in adopting the crucial element of media diversity by maintaining an alternative agenda when it, for instance, exposed the issue of Winnie Mandela being linked to the murder of 14-year-old activist Stompie Mokhetsi. The reluctance of other alternative newspapers to adopt this new-born criticism and their past tendencies towards advocacy during apartheid implied self-censorship during democracy, which ran contrary to their underlying purpose. Adopting the values of a post-1990 counter-ideology proved difficult for alternative newspapers that promoted the ANC and its allies (especially the UDF, SACP and COSATU) more directly during the eighties. “This coincided with the fact that those who took the initiative to set up alternative publications came from the (non-racial) Congress tradition, and found a sympathetic funding community whose perceptions were shaped by the ANC’s effective international work, as well as the fact that the Congress position became overwhelmingly dominant during the 1980s” (Pillay, 1992: 2). Emerging from a revolutionary perspective during the early nineties, the ANC and its alliance partners regarded criticism as a privilege of the ‘revolutionary elite’ which was to be conducted within highly restricted circles, not spilling over to a broader audience (despite Nelson Mandela calling for a critical press that the ANC would need as a mirror through which it could see its mistakes) (ibid: 1).

Some newspapers, like *New Nation*, intended to become mouthpiece publications of the ANC, but partly due to weak ANC organisation, this never occurred (Berger, 2000: 91) and despite *New Nation*’s large readership base (60 000 claimed circulation according to Switzer, 2000:

46-47 (citing table by Tomaselli), the newspaper's politics still alienated advertisers. Supporting an established political order was not true to the concept behind the alternative press and in order to survive in the new South African environment the alternative newspapers had to recreate a new space that could be utilised for their cause. By accommodating a climate of competing rather than conforming political perspectives, the alternative newspapers should have striven for fair and balanced journalism that would empower the public with knowledge, a crucial aspect of democracy. That way the alternative agenda would have remained valid in the post-1990 environment, countering such general claims as made by Thompson that "the mass of the population has become a managed resource which is effectively excluded from public discussion and decision-making processes, and from which leaders and parties occasionally seek to elicit, with the aid of media techniques, sufficient assent to legitimate their political programmes and compromises" (1990: 113). Alternative viewpoints would enrich the population's right to the public domain and as Pillay further states, knowledge does not have a 'left' or 'right', 'black' or 'white' tag to it. Knowledge is knowledge and the public needs to be informed accurately if it is to take part in shaping the country's future (Pillay, 1992: 3).

The function of the press in the post-liberation context remained in question for a long time as many publications were uncertain whether to be nonpartisan and adversarial or rather become 'responsible' and aid in development and nation building. The new government called for a collaborative press, which would assist in reconstruction and nation building and wouldn't criticise and disparage governmental efforts. The then Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki stated that an anti-system attitude was no longer appropriate and the media could best serve the country by practising "responsible journalism rather than adversarial journalism" (cited in Horwitz, 2001: 290). "The culture of intense partisanship and secrecy that is necessary to sustain a liberation movement under armed attack makes it difficult to support the principle of a nonpartisan, adversarial press after the revolutionary struggle is over" (Horwitz, 2001: 283). An adversarial role of the press was seen by many in the new dispensation as contrary to the developmental goals of the post-revolutionary government, which expected the press to participate in the transformation. "Social reconstruction, economic development and political changes would entail enormous shifts in both large policy matters and in the everyday understandings and expectations of the people on the ground. And government officials were concerned that this information and the government's intentions were not getting out to the public" (Horwitz, 2001: 285).

Pillay claims, however, that since the unbanning of the ANC and SACP, there has been a slow acceptance by other alternative media that 'independence' means asserting the right to publish what you see fit, and not publishing what you feel is unworthy of publication. "If the ANC is seen as our best hope for democracy, then a sycophantic press will undermine the ANC's ability to act democratically. If the ANC is only criticised from the right, then it will often ignore that criticism with the (often justified) view that it is ill-informed, or vindictive criticism. But criticism from the left, especially from publications which share the ANC's fundamental principles (of non-racialism, social justice etc.) has a qualitatively different value and impact. It is usually criticism inspired by the desire to build a culture of democracy, which at present means, amongst other things, strengthening the ANC as a democratic organisation" (Pillay, 1992: 3-4). Formally developing in line with the liberation movement, the alternative press would have been in an ideal position after 1994 to hold the new ruling party accountable for issues such as corruption, service delivery or accountability to civil society, and further stimulate progressive thinking. The lack of apartheid baggage would now have been a major asset for the alternative press in criticising the abandonment of leftist liberation ideals by an ANC that often places the globalisation demands of today ahead of the wishes of its own constituency.

Former *Cape Times* editor Chris Whitfield notes: "After 1994 the pressure on us was to be 'sweetheart' journalists but it's difficult to find a balance. I get letters from Tony Leon describing me as a 'vandal of objectivity' and at the same time people from the provincial government refer to me as a DA editor. During apartheid journalists used to actively attack the government but now we have to do things differently" (Interview, 14. 9. 2005). Different times therefore call for different coverage and in the new South African environment, this coverage needed to be more nuanced in order to contribute meaningfully to society. An adversary agenda remains important but so does the support of national unity, therefore calling for criticism that is constructive even if it is divisive. Tensions between the press and the government (whatever its make-up) are proof of a healthy media environment where this adversarial role is the result of the watchdog role of the press in a democracy and part of its responsibility to the readers. Finding a meaningful space within this new ideological dispensation was the ultimate challenge posed to the alternative sector. "A newspaper needs to evolve with time and the country's politics," adds Whitfield. "Society changes with politics and inevitably the readers also change, so a newspaper needs to follow these trends and adjust" (Interview, 14. 6. 2005).

As pointed out in the previous chapters, 'transition fatigue' was an important change among newspaper readers that contributed to the demise of the alternative press after 1990. The negotiations between the ANC and the NP government during the early nineties required elaborate daily coverage, therefore compromising the concept of weekly news of the alternative papers. The early nineties were the historical peak of political tension dating back centuries; detailed coverage was obligatory. But after the 1994 elections the general public grew weary of political coverage and turned its attention to more entertaining modes of the media. M-Net, Ster Kinekor or the National Lottery were just some of the new factors on the market that offered a much welcomed relief to the audiences from the politically overwrought coverage in the media during the past decade. The circulation of newspapers countrywide went plummeting in the late nineties and although many tried to reposition themselves to accommodate the readers' hunger for more entertainment and 'leisure' reading, electronic media took over a significant bulk of advertising. Since the premise on which alternative newspapers were built was ultimately political, their agendas would have to change substantially in order to meet the audience needs during the nineties to survive. "As politics receded as a common unifying factor, so cultural differences came to the fore. Thus, with the depoliticising of South African sports, public interest returned to the specifics of the game. But what game? Africans in the Western Cape were highly supportive of boxing; coloureds cared for cricket" (Berger, 2000: 91).

Mixing popular content with political content to accommodate the diverse interests of South African audiences was not easy as the demise of *South* proved in 1994 (see chapter 4) and the history of the white-owned black mass circulation press suggested a few decades earlier. Cost-cutting in view of the falling circulation thrust the whole South African newspaper sector into difficult times during the late nineties; certainly not convenient days for the dated strategies of the alternative newspapers. Sensation and sleaze in fact later emerged as more popular than politics and newspapers like the *Daily Sun* (which launched in July 2002) started accumulating record circulations, threatening the foundation of English and Afrikaans newspapers with histories dating back many decades. As a result of increasing commercialisation and tendencies towards mass-circulation during the late nineties, the content of many newspapers became depoliticised, sensationalised and personalised with the aim of increasing sales. The political and media environments became more complex with apartheid barriers falling away and new issues such as economic empowerment or affirmative

action also began emerging. Calls for affirmative action, eradication of racism or changes in media ownership articulated a new social order and promoted a new South African nationalism (Oosthuizen, 2001b: 178). The context for the reception and appropriation of the mediated messages had changed and a new multilingual and multiracial society came to the fore as apartheid was dismantled in South Africa and this society sought expression for its many different cultures. Instead of grasping this as an opportunity to elaborate on their ideological strategies, the alternative newspapers grappled with a new media environment that needed to accommodate the constituencies' newfound values.

With alternative newspapers gradually falling away during the nineties, the South African democracy was losing a crucial part of the concept of an opposing voice. Despite serious financial difficulties, nearly leading to bankruptcy, the *Weekly Mail* remained the only sustainable newspaper that could carry the alternative values further into the future. The newspaper had to shift its emphasis in coverage but it (along with *Vrye Weekblad*, *SALB* or *Work in Progress*) remained a part of the last few alternative voices in criticising the ANC and the wrongdoings within its ranks, during the early to late nineties. As the *Mail & Guardian*, it also became a target of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in 1999 for alleged violations of the fundamental rights of black people. "It was particularly felt that the *Mail & Guardian*, in its anti-corruption investigations, unfairly targeted black professionals" (Wigston, 2001: 70). This inquiry by the SAHRC into the racism of the media showed how, in adjusting to the new environment, it remained a challenge to retain an alternative agenda. Democracy became a dispensation where the struggle for meaning was more elaborate than the one during apartheid. Acting as a critical watchdog, the alternative press would have had to articulate a diversity of opinions, enriching the sphere of public discourse and debate but also critically exposing the activities and principles of those in power. Only by maintaining a distance from the institutions of state and government, can media institutions comment critically on the exercise of institutionalised political power (Thompson, 1990: 261).

After 1994, the *Weekly Mail* avoided tipping the scale the other way and 'toeing the line' of the liberation movement. It survived because it found a place within an agenda of a critical and independent newspaper that holds the government accountable for its actions and sees to debate and difference being institutionalised. Shifting with times, introducing new supplements and linking up with the British *Guardian*, the *Weekly Mail* blended quality

journalism as well as watchdog reporting while maintaining a distance from the mainstream. The demand for left-of-centre weeklies diminished but the *Weekly Mail* survived in an environment dominated by the powerful mainstream while not abandoning its reputation of refusing to be 'politically correct' and at the same time being reasonably quick to tailor to the changing public interest. The key to the survival of the *Weekly Mail*, claims Johnson, was to understand what was happening in the mainstream press: "The mainstream press started going through a very big change, very quickly and was very powerful. It is to great credit of the *Weekly Mail – Mail & Guardian* that it found a way through" (Interview, 2. 5. 2006).

It has been more than 20 years since the *Weekly Mail* was established and its role as an alternative newspaper can still be seen in relation to bigger mainstream papers like *The Star* or *Cape Argus*, but the political sense of the term 'alternative' has changed, claims Shaun Johnson. "The old definitions have fallen away. The alternative papers were all about the struggle against apartheid and once apartheid ended, all the definitions changed. The *Weekly Mail* has been going for a very long time; it's an established, institutionalised paper that fulfils a very unique role. It can't be called 'alternative' anymore. These days I would talk about more of a specific niche where the newspaper has found its space as the choice for intellectuals, academics, NGOs and so on" (Interview, 2. 5. 2006). As opposed to the other alternative newspapers, the *raison d'être* of the *Weekly Mail* has therefore become more integrated into the economic, political and social circumstances of a democratic South Africa where the newspaper's agenda has found a meaningful place within the environment's relevant dynamics.

As Berger claims: "A publication cannot survive as an anachronism ... there are usually some embers that need fanning" (2000: 1999). Cultural and ideological thinking that applied to the context of countering the hegemony of apartheid, however, was not adopted by other alternative newspapers for the new times, ultimately contributing to the post-1990 demise of the alternative sector. The alternative role was still needed in South African media after 1990, albeit in an altered form, to facilitate new possibilities of offering oppositional or negotiated readings of the new society. A modern agenda tailored to the previous values of alternative newspapers would have enabled individuals to create their own meanings within and against the ones provided by the new hegemonic structures. Remaining alternative would not have the same implications as during apartheid but it would suggest fulfilling oppositional, but also meaningful and pluralistic roles in relation to the mainstream media as well as a democratic

government. The *Weekly Mail* found this space but a failure of *Grassroots* to adjust led it to closure, leaving the South African media environment poorer by its demise.

CHAPTER 4

The Total Overview of the post-1990 Alternative Press Sector

Along with *Grassroots*, most other alternative newspapers were lost in the post-1990 democratic environment. Various experiences characterised their existence throughout the eighties but all ultimately set their agenda in opposition to the ideology of apartheid, attempting to stimulate a counter-hegemonic discourse that would help bring about a democratic order and a meaningful dispensation for the oppressed majority. Finding this specific role during the eighties was crucial to their existence but none found a relevant strategy, similar to that of the *Weekly Mail*, to continue fulfilling an 'alternative' role during democracy. A lack of funds was a primary factor in their struggle to survive in view of the change from apartheid to democracy but this reality was linked to the larger scheme of political changes, legal freedom and changes in the media environment.

Some have argued that there was no longer a need for alternative newspapers in the new South Africa. Online journalist Paul Pereira, for instance, said the alternative press was dull and ideologically rigid, with little regard for truth and objectivity and its demise was no great loss: "[Alternative publications] ... trotted out the points of view of the 'people's war', rubbished the idea of peaceful change or dialogue with the minority regime, promoted uncritically the findings of so-called independent research bodies that backed the ANC claims, and ruthlessly stigmatized opponents of the mass democratic movement ... the alternative press had to rely on subsidies from Scandinavian and other foreign sources. They had to answer to no one there, became more and more removed from reality, and met oblivion" (Pereira, P. 1997. Available: <http://www.sairr.org.za/publications/pub/fof/1997q4/press.htm>, 15 June 2006). Such claims are not totally unfounded because most alternative newspapers, as demonstrated in the case of *Grassroots*, failed to adapt their ideological and commercial positions to the new times, but their progressive intentions and attitudes and their role in media diversity were undisputed. They weren't established to become primary examples of a flawless medium but to fill a space and promote a certain cause. To fulfil that role, entirely balanced coverage was impossible and advocacy was a

means to an end. “Journalists like Akhalwaya and du Preez also contended that they are at least aware of their biases and values and that openly proclaiming them was a marked improvement over the supposedly neutral but equally ideologically committed mainstream press” (Jackson, 1993: 57). It was after democracy that this role of the alternative press needed to be refined, re-evaluated and repositioned to accommodate a fresh and meaningful role within the challenges of the new environment. A novel critical and constructive agenda was needed along with elaborate commercial strategies to ensure sufficiency. A failure to take on the new modes of thinking associated with such developments saw the alternative sector losing its long tradition of ‘opposition’ and the unique selling point that was ‘the alternative’. The South African media remains poorer without such efforts. This chapter looks more closely at some other alternative newspapers that have been lost since 1990.

Vrye Weekblad (1988-1994)

Vrye Weekblad was established in November 1988, in the aftermath of the repressive states of emergency of the mid-eighties. With the mainstream Afrikaans press and the SABC still largely uncritical of the NP government, *verligte* [enlightened] thinking from liberal Afrikaans circles began initiating a resistance press of their own. The perception of Afrikaans South Africans was being spoiled by the image of the apartheid government ... “Many Afrikaner readers, especially among the generation born after 1948 were sceptical of the established press as a vehicle for changing the belief system generated by apartheid. They wanted an Afrikaans newspaper independent of the National Party’s shackles. The birth of the *Vrye Weekblad* answered their prayers” (Claassen, 2000: 406). The newspaper’s founder, Max du Preez, started the *Vrye Weekblad* as a result of his disillusionment from working at the Afrikaans mainstream newspapers *Die Burger* and later *Beeld*, where he claimed to experience the “corruption of the NP up close” (ibid: 422). He consequently moved to the English mainstream but neither *Financial Mail*, nor the *Sunday Times* or even *Business Day* offered him relief from restricted journalistic practices and self-censorship. A new form of an independent social-democrat publication was thus to arise: “... before the launch of the *Vrye Weekblad*, du Preez said it would be the first fully Afrikaans newspaper committed to a ‘non-racial, democratic, united South Africa’ ... The new newspaper ... will have the side-effect of changing the image of Afrikaans as the ‘language of the oppressor’” (ibid: 423). About a claim to independence in the first edition du Preez later explained: “Our only loyalty was to the people of South Africa. That was why we could supply citizens with information they

could trust, and for Afrikaans-speakers that had become a rare commodity” (du Preez, 2003: 177)

Distributed nationally, *Vrye Weekblad* introduced a language that was closer to the spoken Afrikaans word rather than the usual, formal written style. Unlike the more community focused Afrikaans alternatives like *Saamstaan* or *Namaqua Nuus*, *Vrye Weekblad* was more concerned with hard news in its coverage and later became renowned for its abrasive stance towards the prevailing hegemony. “We wanted a kick-ass publication that would show apartheid and all its practices for what they really were; that would stimulate a new progressive Afrikaans culture. Afrikaners had had enough sugar coating” (du Preez, 2003: 172). This style linked the newspaper closely to the *Weekly Mail*, both falling into the independent social-democrat category of alternative newspapers. A rebellious Afrikaans newspaper, however, did not escape harsh disciplinary intimidation by the ruling minority government, taking mainly the form of longstanding and costly legal battles. In terms of the Internal Security Act, *Vrye Weekblad* was required by the justice minister to pay a registration fee of R30 000. Soon, attempts of P.W. Botha and Pik Botha to sue the newspaper for R100 000 for libel initiated a series of legal actions of the government against *Vrye Weekblad*, representing what du Preez referred to as government-sponsored ‘low-intensity war’ against the alternative press (Claassen, 2000: 428). When du Preez was sentenced to six months in prison in June 1989, for quoting Joe Slovo, the banned secretary-general of the SACP, the reputation of *Vrye Weekblad* was already notorious for criticising the National Party government. The newspaper was setting the agenda of some other alternative newspapers with important stories like the politically motivated death squads in the South African security police or right-wing terrorism. “If *Vrye Weekblad* is remembered for one edition, it would be the 17 November 1989 exclusive – five pages of reports on security police death squads” (Claassen, 2000: 429). It often competed with the *Weekly Mail* to expose the latest twists in these breaking stories revealing apartheid scandals but it also became critical of the ANC, reporting on abuse within its own ranks (Berger, 2000: 90).

This line that the *Vrye Weekblad* treaded around the government-imposed legal restrictions, however, eventually proved fatal to the newspaper. When it exposed allegations that the head of the police’s forensic unit, General Lothar Neethling, poisoned two ANC suspects, subsequent legal repercussions cost the paper over R1,5 million (Berger, 2000: 85), eventually leading to its closure. Although support from the public could have enabled the newspaper to

continue, du Preez decided it was time to go: “We could have carried on for a few more months and burnt up some more money. But when we discussed it, I thought about the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. They didn’t know when to go. We don’t want to make the same mistake” (cited in Claassen, 2000: 432). In his memories as ‘renegade reporter’ du Preez further remembered: “I saw no other way than to close the publication’s doors. It was a few months to South Africa’s first democratic elections, and foreign funding for newspapers was something of the past. Quite rightly so, I thought. But very little had changed in the advertising market – and I had no indication that we would attract more revenue that way ... I suppose if we could have found a way around bankruptcy, we might have survived. But it would have meant slashing our tiny editorial budget to such an extent that we would not have been proud of the product” (du Preez, 2003: 210). As with other alternative newspapers from the eighties, money was always the problem in *Vrye Weekblad*’s existence and ultimately a key factor in its demise. It previously received money from the Canadian embassy to buy computers; the Dutch anti-apartheid NGO Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika (KZA) and Scandinavian governments also gave *Vrye Weekblad* money for the training of new journalists, but the newspaper used a lot of it to pay for distribution and printing.

Du Preez claims, however, that NGOs and Western governments could not give the newspaper money for operating costs ... “But it was easy to lobby for money around freedom of expression issues ... Thanks to the good people of Canada, Sweden and Holland, and NGOs and press lobby groups all over the world, we could pay the phalanx of lawyers and expensive advocates who kept us from being closed down and me as editor from going to jail” (du Preez, 2003: 184). With an average weekly circulation of about only 10 000 (and 20 000 during the police squad expositions) (Claassen, 2000: 434), however, the newspaper struggled to cover its costs through sales and never managed to secure enough advertising to become self-sufficient. The help of foreign donors from the European Union, Canada or the International Federation of Journalists was useful to cover the paper’s vast legal costs but such aid remained of short-term effectiveness only. Furthermore, conservative circles and the government were suspicious of the influence of foreign powers that supplied *Vrye Weekblad* with finances. The newspaper itself strongly rejected such assumptions: “*Vrye Weekblad* is the property of the journalists working for it. It was founded with much idealism and the minimum of capital and still is anything but financially strong ... We treat donors in the same way as advertisers: no matter how big their assistance is, there never can be any question of influence on the editorial policy of the paper” (cited in Claassen, 2000: 433).

One of *Vrye Weekblad*'s journalists Jacques Pauw wrote: "I will always remember *Vrye Weekblad* for exactly that which eventually caused its downfall: we never listened to anyone. Not to the advertisers. Not to the market. Not to other media bosses. Not to any politician. Not to the law or the courts or the police or the Attorney-General. I am proud of that" (cited in du Preez, 2003: 211). In *Vrye Weekblad*'s last edition, du Preez attached his pride to the way the newspaper contributed to media diversity and meaningfulness of the alternative sector with the use of language: "If there is one thing we're proud of, it is the favour we did to the Afrikaans language by de-stigmatising it, but also making it looser and more sexy." Max du Preez later further exclaimed about *Vrye Weekblad*'s use of language: "I didn't make a conscious decision before the launch of *Vrye Weekblad* to promote the use of 'liberated' Afrikaans. It started happening organically; it was the natural, creative way to write" (du Preez, 2003: 205). Without this meaningful agenda, however, a vacuum remained in the post-1990 Afrikaans sector of the media and the alternative Afrikaans voice became somewhat unflatteringly associated with right-wing Afrikaans papers. "Viewing democratic South Africa as a new cause of resistance, *Die Afrikaaner*, *Patriot*, *Boerant*, and their allies seemed likely to survive into the twenty-first century" (Claassen, 2000: 447).

The newly established Independent Media Diversity Trust supplied *Vrye Weekblad* with financial aid during the early nineties but it wasn't a sufficient amount to pull it through towards a long-term future. Negotiations to combine *Vrye Weekblad* with Afrikaans alternative magazines operating at a loss, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and *Insig* also broke down due to the demands of the latter's owner Nasionale Pers. But despite its healthy style of journalism and innovative use of language, *Vrye Weekblad* was mostly read by a white audience, most having a university education (du Preez in Claassen, 2000: 436), and the paper therefore failed to broaden its base and reach a wider constituency. It opened up new domains for Afrikaans media, however, providing a counter-hegemonic, anti-apartheid Afrikaans agenda as well as a potentially relevant discourse in view of the newly emerging dispensation. But funds remained a problem in the new media environment of South Africa and brought *Vrye Weekblad* to its end on 2 February 1994, just several weeks before the country's first democratic elections.

***Saamstaan* (1984-1994)**

Saamstaan was an Afrikaans newspaper that focused on working class and rural community issues, as it was an initiative set up by *Grassroots* in Swellendam and later moved to Oudtshoorn. Mansoor Jaffer came from *Grassroots* to establish *Saamstaan* and reproduce the 'People's Paper' model for this new conservative environment where repression was harsher than in Cape Town (Interview, 16. 3. 2006). Falling into the same newspaper category as *Grassroots* – progressive alternative – it was 'organically linked' to community workers or groups and was more partisan in its news than the other types of alternative publications (Claassen, 2000: 442), but it dealt with issues in the community rather than politics.

Established in February/March 1984, as a bi-monthly (from December 1984 it became a monthly), *Saamstaan* aimed to give a voice to the predominantly coloured groups in towns like Mossel Bay, George, Beaufort West, Oudtshoorn and other Western Cape areas that joined ranks with Africans in reaction of protest towards the introduction of the tricameral parliament in 1983. '*Laat ons saam staan*' (Let us stand together) became their rallying cry, which was carried over into the name of their newspaper (ibid: 442). The paper was seen as fairly militant due to its links with the activism of *Grassroots* but local leadership in this area was mainly provided by church people and Kessel claims that, rather than politics, "religious arguments and dignitaries were seen by the secular Marxists of *Grassroots* as most suited to mobilize the not-so-sophisticated colored people in the rural areas" (2000a: 245).

The newspaper was distributed for free throughout most of its existence (the initial cost was 10 cents) and during the mid-eighties it boasted a circulation between 60 000 – 80 000 (Claassen, 2000: 443). Its partisanship, however, also drew the attention of the security police and *Saamstaan*'s offices as well as journalists were often victims of violent attacks, legal threats and other types of intimidation. *Saamstaan* outlived the closure of its mother publication *Grassroots* but its reliance on funds from Dutch group Cebemo and the Swedish Afrika Gruppe weakened the newspaper's prospects in the more challenging post-1990 environment for community media. Significant funds were used in a meaningful way for the training of journalists at community newspapers like *Saamstaan* but circumstances surrounding this rural project made it difficult to advocate the popular participation production strategies of a progressive alternative newspaper similar to *Grassroots*: "Because of the vast distances separating *Saamstaan* committees, an Annual General Meeting (AGM) replaced the monthly meetings of the *Grassroots* General Body. *Saamstaan* thus functioned

without a strong hands-on democratic forum to oversee its operations. This located policy making almost entirely with the executive” (Louw, 1991c: 207).

As the cause of the struggle faded among many alternative newspapers after 1990, *Saamstaan* still covered the 1994 elections but the newspaper did not adapt to the commercial conditions of a democratic environment by securing sustainable advertising revenue. Its activist agenda and mobilising strategies changed and former *Saamstaan* editor-organiser Derick Jackson said: “We wanted to target Coloureds by informing them of their rights” (cited in Claassen, 2000: 445). But surviving without external aid was impossible: “After 1990 the cause of the struggle faded and donor money started drying up” (Jackson in Claassen, 2000: 445).

Attempting to adjust to the new ideological circumstances after 1990 but lacking in commercial sustainability like its intellectual predecessor *Grassroots*, *Saamstaan* closed down in December 1994.

***Namaqua Nuus* (1988-1994)**

Namaqua Nuus was an Afrikaans monthly community newspaper established for the rural areas in the Northern Cape – Namaqualand. As a free sheet with a monthly run of around 30 000 copies, it was distributed from Clanwilliam to the Orange River, and from Hondeklip Bay on the West Coast to Pofadder in the northwestern Cape (Claassen, 2000: 445). Initially a project of the Afrikaans alternative magazine *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, *Namaqua Nuus* was established after successful fund raising from the Swiss embassy but it soon produced efforts towards sustainability as it carried a classified section and some advertising from local businesses: “Advertising content varied from 15 to 30 percent of total news and advertising copy” (Claassen, 2000: 445). *Namaqua Nuus* concentrated more on news about schools, crime and community affairs but its advertising never reached a sustainable level and the newspaper still had to rely on funding from the US Agency of International Development, the Swiss Development Corporation, the Swedish Afrika Gruppe, the Dutch Cebemo and other foreign donors.

Chris Gutuza, who was involved in the establishment of *Namaqua Nuus* said: “We wanted to become independent, especially after 1990 when donor fatigue set in, but could not succeed” (cited in Claassen, 2000: 446). The newspaper attracted less attention from the coercive authorities since it was characterised by less militant practices than other community focused

alternative newspapers of the late eighties, and its less ideologically rigid subject matter of community news it covered also equipped it for a smoother transition in strategy after 1990. But it was ultimately again the characteristic financial difficulties that ensued from the low circulation of alternative newspapers and the lack of advertising as well as a lack of managerial and marketing skills which could adapt the publications to the market that saw *Namaqua Nuus* close down in October 1994.

***Die Suid-Afrikaan* (1984-1995/96)**

Die Suid-Afrikaan belongs to the genre of alternative magazines but it still, nonetheless, deserves some brief attention when looking at the demise of the Afrikaans sector of the alternative press. Its first issue carried a masthead: “’n *Self-standige meningsblad*” (an independent opinion magazine). “*Die Suid-Afrikaan*, published in magazine format, would focus on the politics, the economy, and the intellectual life of South Africa. The editorial of the first edition clearly emphasized the publication’s independence” (Claassen, 2000: 411). Similar in its agenda to the *Vrye Weekblad*, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* also published contentious stories and regularly confronted the apartheid government, although du Preez claims it was a quarterly journal of opinion and analysis with a rather academic approach: “*Die Suid-Afrikaan* has good manners, *Vrye Weekblad* doesn’t” (du Preez, 2003: 175). It was not different from other alternative publications in that it struggled to secure funds from subscriptions and advertising. It was largely the magazine’s coverage of the Dakar talks of the ANC that secured *Die Suid-Afrikaan* funds from the German government the German daily *Die Zeit*. When Antjie Krog assumed a full-time journalist position on the magazine, she was optimistic that advertising was on the rise and would help keep the publication afloat: “Because foreign donations have dried up for all the independent magazines, they can only exist if they get enough advertisers” (cited in Claassen, 2000: 417). This, however, later proved to be a false hope, as revenue from advertising could not become sustainable despite the content of the magazine shifting with the times and the introduction of a special-focus edition with articles about black business or affirmative action after 1990.

The magazine survived until after the 1994 elections but as it approached the audience’s ‘transition fatigue’ of the mid-nineties, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* was accused by readers of carrying too many serious articles. The then publisher and managing editor, André du Toit reacted as follows, neatly summing up the case of many alternative publications in South Africa: “The

hard truth is that publications of intellectual and cultural quality, with an independent and critical impact, have always struggled in the South African environment ... Anti-intellectualism is a deep-rooted South African tradition. Today it is not necessarily theological and church dogmas that are enforced, but the dogma of the free market philosophy: especially in the press a short-sighted chase after profits becomes the rule” (quoted in Claassen, 2000: 419). *Die Suid-Afrikaan* was instrumental along with *Vrye Weekblad* in stimulating pluralistic debate among Afrikaner readers, thus playing a big part in reducing the stigmas attached to the Afrikaans language and stereotypes imposed on Afrikaans speakers. This discourse remained relevant after 1990 and *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, along with some other alternative publications, opened negotiations with the mainstream press in search of a mode of survival and in attempt to rationalise advertising, circulation and administration (Berger, 2000: 95). But these plans did not materialise and neither did financial aid from the IMDT help *Die Suid-Afrikaan* in remaining viable among the influential mainstream. The magazine had its last issue published in December 1995/January 1996.

South (1987-1994)

South was a part of the left-commercial press, a weekly newspaper established in the Western Cape to counter what it called the conservatism of the English press and its shrinking social responsibility in insufficient coverage of the crisis facing South African society during the eighties (*South*, 18 February 1988). Popular protest was on the rise since the establishment of the UDF in 1983 and mass resistance took over from localised, fragmented forms of protest. The five-week production cycle of *Grassroots* made it miss much of the intensive civil disturbances and all the anti-apartheid news generated by the political tensions of the mid-eighties as it could not cope with the pace of events and so a gap opened up in the Western Cape for a weekly left-commercial publication. It would complement rather than compete with *Grassroots* with its attention focused primarily on news. A hybrid between progressive alternative and social-democrat genres, *South* was started up by frustrated former mainstream journalists Rashid Seria and Moegsien Williams, who were also previously involved with *Grassroots* but left when they noticed the space in the market for *South* as unrest increased in the mid-eighties. Activist Allan Boesak then obtained R450 000 in start up funds for the project from ICCO (Adhikari, 2000: 332-333). A public company, South Press Services Limited, was constituted for operating the newspaper and its majority shares were placed in the Ukwaziswa Trust, which consisted of prominent political and community leaders (Berger,

South Memorandum: 4 September 1993). “The trust was set up not only to administer the funding of the newspaper and to demonstrate to donors that *South* had solid political backing, but also give the democratic movement a stake in the project and to make the newspaper accountable to the community, albeit symbolically” (Adhikari, 2000: 333). Advertising was meant to be an important part of *South*’s viability, while printing and distribution was contracted by the Argus company because the newspaper could not afford to establish its own network.

First appearing in 1987, *South* acknowledged its objective in line with other alternative newspapers, as giving voice to the oppressed and exploited interests of working class people and to opposition groups, as well as challenging the monopolistic control of South African media. It declared itself free from interests of financial manipulation but Adhikari claims it was effectively a mouthpiece of the UDF and thus firmly within the camp of the ANC. “Both the board of South Press Services, Ltd., and the Ukwaziswa Trust consisted of UDF stalwarts and the political philosophy of the newspaper was openly ‘Charterist’. Moegsien Williams makes it clear he was under no illusion ‘the raison d’être of *South* was to promote the ANC in the western Cape” (Adhikari, 2000: 336). But the author’s further claims suggest that the newspaper was only partisan to the extent of promoting the broader anti-apartheid movement, avoiding a formal relationship with the UDF. In fact, on a number of occasions, tensions emerged between the UDF and *South* about the movement’s coverage. In the minutes of *South*’s meeting from the 1 October 1987, Seria describes how *South* came under pressure from the UDF regarding a critical article about Brenda Fassie and the movement: “Mr. Seria told Mr. W. Hofmeyer of the UDF that *South* is independent and will maintain that.” Although it did also take risks through its counter-hegemonic coverage, there were times, however, admits Seria when *South* was forced to exercise self-censorship to avoid infringement of the law (Interview, 26. 4. 2006).

The biggest problem that *South* was faced with was the position of the paper within the market and the paper’s position politically. “Seria and Williams thought of themselves as ‘populists’ because they wanted to use popular content to reach as extensive a readership as possible. Besides making business sense this would allow them to communicate their political message widely and help to mobilise the masses against apartheid” (Adhikari, 2000: 339). But it proved difficult to find an appropriate balance between political and popular content. Becoming more popular would mean gaining much needed sales but losing the readership of

activists and organisations and betraying some of their expectations of the role of *South*. “A political paper will have less of a circulation than a popular paper”, stated Seria in *South*’s meeting minutes from 30 July 1987. “A survey conducted in 1987 confirmed that the newspaper’s projected working-class constituency preferred popular fare to political content. Editorial staff continuously grappled with the thankless task of developing a content mix that would fulfill their professional ideals, satisfy the expectations of the activist community, and appeal to the newspaper’s working-class target market” (Adhikari, 2000: 341). Advertising was important to *South*’s future sustainability but that could only be secured with substantial sales and these sales could most likely be secured through popular content. Sales slumped, however, from the initial 15 000 to 7 000 (*South* meeting minutes, 30. 7. 1987) plus the paper’s policy was to give preference in advertising to small black business rather than major national retail chains. In the 1986 feasibility report, however, Seria stated that it would be unrealistic to rule out major retail and national advertisers (e.g. Shell) and this partially apolitical advertising policy, claims Louw, signaled a shift towards pragmatic thinking amongst leftist media activists (1991b: 18).

The newspaper was aware that self-sufficiency was a problem from its inception, plus it received inadequate printing and distribution services from the Argus company, which had little interest in the left-wing press. If *South* had to rely mainly on political content, it would not free itself from the dependence on foreign funding which always had to be considered only as a temporary financial solution. But it continued, nonetheless, to reflect the need of political organisation within the democratic movement. In seeking to provide direction and critical consciousness in its political analysis, *South* tried to fulfil an educational role that would educate the community about its political perception (*South* meeting minutes, 30. 7. 1987). *South* was, however, faced with an identity crisis throughout its existence, as Seria wryly commented about the results of a readership survey: “Some want it to be a propaganda sheet, others want it to be a *Grassroots*-type tool; others want it to be another serious political magazine; still others want it to be a *Cape Herald*-type sex-and-crime sheet” (*South* annual report, 1987). Some activists called for politics to be the main agenda, while others asked for popular content to capture as many readers as possible to whom a vision of a nonracial democracy could be communicated.

Seria summed up the dilemma in the paper’s annual report: Popular and political content cannot be effectively mixed to the satisfaction of political activists who influence community

opinion. The paper found it increasingly difficult to tone down its political content in a situation where political events were, in fact, propelling the paper to take a much stronger stand (*South* annual report, 1988). Western Cape politics were not as great a newspaper seller, as the founders of *South* expected and they struggled to find a balance between reporting on events in the Western Cape, meeting the demands of the readers, yet avoiding pandering to them. The majority of *South*'s targeted readership, for instance in Mitchell's Plain, weren't interested in the UDF or Charterism as much as the newspaper would have liked to believe. But shifting towards a more commercial approach, Louw points out, also threatened to demoralise staff because the sense of 'organic connectedness' of a media activist to a wider community was lost. "Instead of being a media activist one became a media worker. Such people felt intuitively they were no longer helping to build a public sphere in the way progressive alternative activists were ... Many felt that if they were going to work on a commercial newspaper then they might as well go where they could earn the highest possible salary" (Louw, 1991b: 19).

In the initial motivations for the establishment of an independent paper Seria claimed: "Among academics, professionals, business people, students and so on, there has always been a demand to be kept informed about socio-political and economic issues in this country" (Feasibility report, April 1986). But "in his first annual report, a sobered Seria admitted that he had overestimated the demand for a left-wing political newspaper in the western Cape" (Adhikari, 2000: 347). In the feasibility report of April 1986, Seria also indicated: "The group very strongly endorses the principles of sound management and acknowledges that without substantial sales, the paper would be a failure both economically and ideologically. It appreciates the need to negotiate contracts with major advertisers and endorses the value of recruiting dynamic advertising representatives able to obtain such contracts." But securing advertising became more difficult than anticipated, especially given the fact that *South* did not register with the Audit Bureau of Circulation and, in addition, black businesses seldom saw newspapers as attractive media for advertising; more so considering *South*'s radical stance, which was losing relevance in the post-1990 South Africa. "The management of *South* realized that if the newspaper was to survive, it would have to shift with the times and reposition itself in the media market. *South* needed the change from being an organ of struggle, dependent on donor money and justifying its existence on moral and political grounds, to a commercially viable concern. As the prospects for democracy improved, it became obvious that *South* could no longer be driven mainly by an anti-apartheid agenda ...

Thus *South* embarked on a series of changes in the early 1990s to broaden its appeal – culminating in a revamped newspaper in February 1992 that bore the slogan ‘News for new times’ to signal its fresh outlook” (Adhikari, 2000: 355) and a shift from the previous motto: ‘You have a right to know’.

South’s layout changed, more international news was brought in, as well as classifieds and crossword puzzles and an entertainment insert *Southside*, which it hoped would attract younger readers. Circulation, however, still remained low and losses escalated to more than R50 000 a month (Adhikari, 2000: 356). Furthermore as the politics of the early nineties entailed ANC and NP negotiations, the reader interest shifted from the Western Cape to other areas of the country, like the violence in Natal. This inability to move away from localised news saw *South* losing out to other weeklies such as the *Weekly Mail*. The ANC became an ‘international story’ and the exclusivity of alternative newspapers as the ‘voice of democratic movement’ diminished, claims Adhikari (2000: 357). *South* also published critical stories pointing to the ANC, which resulted in a sour relationship between the two, and the newspaper consequently explaining its new agenda: “The management of *South* finally conceded that there was no longer a real market for a left-wing political newspaper in the western Cape. It was decided to reposition *South* as a popular, commercial newspaper and shed its image as an ‘ANC rag’” (Adhikari, 2000: 359). Mixing more popular with post-1990 political content, however, brought little success and the paper continued to lose money despite entering a contract with Nasionale Pers in 1993 for its printing and distribution. Furthermore, the editor (who later became the paper’s business manager) Guy Berger exclaimed in a meeting during the early nineties that *South* did not manage to distance itself from the ANC for long and soon (late 1992) “slipped back into struggle mode,” with content becoming too predictable and not meeting the requirements of coloured readership (Meeting minutes, 1994; date unspecified).

To gain some commercial viability, the newspaper’s board launched a free sheet called *Southeaster* in 1994, which “was meant to subsidise the political and ideological project of *South* and also campaign for the ANC in the upcoming elections” (Adhikari, 2000: 361). But a free sheet entirely funded on advertising and supplying community news free of charge not only further reduced the incentive for potential readers to buy *South* but also reduced *South*’s ability to attract advertising. “With their high circulation and wide distribution, these free sheets provided advertisers targeting lower-income households with an advertising medium

that *South* could not match” (Adhikari, 2000: 362). Ultimately, *South* was becoming less and less viable, while *Southeaster* was potentially profitable attracting substantial advertising (to the extent that it seriously threatened the free-sheet operation of the *Argus*) and claiming an initial circulation of 100 000, later expanding to 150 000 (Adhikari, 2000: 362). *Southeaster* achieved what *South* had been attempting for so long – to appeal to the working class, but it was expensive to run the two publications simultaneously and advertising revenue remained insufficient to break even. *Southeaster* thus never became the financial salvation of *South* like it was hoped. “The company had also assumed that R150 000 from the Independent Media Diversity Trust would be paid to *South* in the latter half of 1994, but management realized only in November that the money had already been paid to *South* and most of it had already been spent on *Southeaster*” (Adhikari, 2000: 363). Bad financial management and the departure of Guy Berger from the position of business manager thus saw South Press Services heading into liquidation as both *South* and *Southeaster* could not be nurtured to profitability.

South's last issue was published on 22 December 1994 and with the ANC in government, many of its previous board members believed *South* had served the purpose it was designed for. It ceased publication, however, long before it could reach its potential. The newspaper upheld nonracialism as its cornerstone value throughout its existence but it consciously targeted the coloured working-class communities, despite the fact that they seldom saw buying a newspaper as an important priority. Rather than being read by the coloured working-class, *South* was read by the middle-classes and liberal intelligentsia who did not constitute a large enough market to make the newspaper financially viable. Adhikari claims that the reading culture among the Cape's coloured community was very low as a result of poor education and since the mid-1970s television became the preferred choice of news and entertainment for the working classes (Interview, 6. 10. 2006). Adhikari further argues that the coloured working class was not apolitical but it was politicised in a way that *South* was not able to tap into and when space for a coloured working class newspaper later appeared, it was demonstrated by the success of the tabloid newspapers emerging after 2000: “[*South* activists] did not succeed in servicing their target market because their primary aim was political and the way they presented politics was not a way the coloured working classes could relate to easily” (Interview, 6. 10. 2006).

South was not a tabloid but a political newspaper and on a similar note to *Grassroots*, *South* failed to recognise that working-class coloureds did not necessarily conform to the radical

politics of the UDF or ANC, nor did it realise in time the growing antagonism between coloureds and blacks during the early nineties. “This became evident when the majority of working-class Coloureds flocked to the National Party banner in the April 1994 elections” (Adhikari, 2000: 367). As in the case of *Grassroots*, the nonracial approach of *South* could not overcome ingrained racial antipathies among the oppressed through simple denial. Williams said it would have been much more productive to have faced up to the reality of racism within the coloured community than to have swept it under the carpet as *South*, and the democratic movement as a whole, did in the 1980s (Adhikari, 2000: 352). As discussed earlier in this thesis, nonracialism denied a number of identities among the Western Cape communities and Berger claims that it was a growing trend of conservatism and anti-Africanism in sections of the coloured community that made the running of a resolutely nonracial newspaper difficult (Berger, 2000: 91). The coloured and African audiences became increasingly divided during the early nineties and *South*'s nonracial façade did not bring unity as blacks also rarely read *South* because it was seen as a coloured newspaper even in the townships where interest in politics was high and the support for the UDF reached 80 percent (Louw, 1991b: 19).

Like other alternative newspapers, *South* failed to create a space for itself outside of the anti-apartheid struggle during the nineties (Adhikari, 2000: 369). Moegsien Williams, in fact, referred to the newspaper as being ‘schizophrenic’. “And indeed, it was engaged in a continuous juggling act – to balance the demands of the marketplace with that of the political arena; to reconcile a studied nonracism while targeting a Coloured readership; to square the reality of its middle-class readership with the unrequited desire to attract working-class patronage” (Adhikari, 2000: 369). With hindsight, *Southeaster* was a strategic error, since a lack of resources prevented the publication from achieving profitability (although it did suggest the strategies and target markets that are being utilised by the tabloids of today, i.e. cheap with popular content means hundreds of thousands in circulation). Berger noted that *Southeaster* contributed to the ultimate death of *South* in a letter to the paper's main funder ICCO: “I don't think that anyone had any idea at the time, just how the child would grow to drain, and ultimately consume, the parent ... We took far too long to realise that after 1990 we were much too far ahead of Western Cape communities who did not like a nonracial and political newspaper. *Southeaster* overcame this problem, but we lacked sufficient capital in this last stretch, and lacked sufficient management skills” (Correspondence with funders, 12 January 1995). *South*'s attempt to reposition itself in the post-1990 environment was a valid

initiative nonetheless, but the newspaper's failure to survive was ultimately brought about by its lack of expertise in financial management and by its inability to secure a sustainable position after 1990 through finding a balanced niche between popular and political content.

New Nation (1986-1997)

The South African Catholic Church was being put under pressure from other independent African churches, during the early eighties, to shed its 'white colonial' image and its response was an establishment of a national Catholic newspaper under the auspices of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) that would cover issues related to the church and spiritual matters, social reform, home and family, church and state, and issues related to the socioeconomic environment (Tomaselli, 2000: 379). The resolution called for the creation of a 'national Catholic' newspaper designed to "reflect and enter into the life, struggles, needs and burning aspirations of the majority of South Africa's people" (*New Nation*, 16-29 January 1986). *New Nation* was launched as a fortnightly and from 1987 became a weekly priced at 27 cents. The newspaper emerged to fill a specific vacuum in the arena of alternative publishing during the mid-eighties, as a mass based national newspaper that would link regional issues with national issues and develop the national character of the struggle through particular experiences of the oppressed majorities. It targeted Christian and a largely working-class readership nationally rather than regionally like some other newspapers from the left-commercial press (*South, New African*) did (Tomaselli, 2000: 381-382).

The South African Council of Churches hoped that the paper's message would be a true reflection of the name – 'New Nation'. The newspaper explained part of its agenda in its first issue: "The *New Nation* is a Catholic paper. Sometimes the 'catholic', although it means universal, can designate things that are narrow and sectarian. This is not the intention of the *New Nation*. It wants to be Catholic in the true sense of the term; finding inspiration in the true God brought to us by the world 'incarnate' and communicated with the love and warmth of the spirit; mediated through the church the universal sacrament of salvation and concerned with all that touches the lives of people. The lives of people are strongly touched by political realities in South Africa and so the *New Nation* will have much to say about them" (*New Nation*, 16-29 January 1986). Largely aligned with the ANC, *New Nation* adhered to principles of nonracialism in its coverage, mainly focusing on the activities of COSATU, UDF and the church, ignoring the BC organisations or the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC),

which was more a domain of mass base black newspapers like *Sowetan*. “There’s only one political organisation which is growing, and that’s the non-racial, democratic movement. And it’s growing throughout South Africa, as well as in the Bantustans” (*New Nation* editor Zwelakhe Sisulu cited in Tomaselli, 2000: 387).

Although the apartheid government accused the SACBC of serving the interests of communist imperialism after it gave funds to the frequently banned *New Nation* (Tomaselli, 2000: 396-397), Catholic funding for *New Nation* and other members of the alternative press was based on challenging the moral grounds of apartheid rather than on directly promoting the specifics of the leftist and Marxist leanings of such newspapers. ICCO policy director Harry Derksen says the funders supported the South African Churches “in their fight against apartheid and in favour of ‘one-man-one-vote’ ... not hoping for any kind of reform of apartheid but only believing in the total abolishment of apartheid” (E-mail correspondence, 17. 10. 2006). Apartheid’s right-wing leaders often justified the system itself through religious values but progressive thinking among Catholics identified apartheid’s human rights abuses as ultimately contradictory to the true ideals of the church. Support from local and overseas church organisations for *New Nation* and other alternative newspapers was thus primarily an impetus promoting the questioning of the morality of social discrimination. The political impact of such support increased as the struggle intensified during the late-eighties but providing help in overcoming the unfair and intolerant nature of apartheid remained the underlying concern these funders hoped to achieve.

New Nation had one of the highest estimated circulations among alternative newspapers – 66 000 and a total readership of 260 000, with most readers being African (76,6 percent), supporting the Charterist position, but also earning less than R500 a month and therefore attracting little interest from advertisers (Tomaselli, 2000: 383). This shows that substantial circulation does not automatically bring in generous advertising and that the readers’ LSMs play an important role in a publication’s ability to attract advertising revenue (see chapter 2). As a part of the left-commercial press supporting a socialist economic perspective, *New Nation* needed to give considerable attention to advertising since dependence on funding from the SACBC seemed a short-term solution, vulnerable to funding cuts (Tomaselli, 2000: 382). In line with its strategy of supporting only Catholic values, however, the newspaper gave advertising space only to clients that fulfilled these values and rejected the advertising of, for

instance, Shell which was believed to be supporting the apartheid state, despite the company's human rights media campaigns.

New Nation served a plurality of social and cultural interests which united under a specific political agenda – a nonracial, nonsexist, one-person-one-vote constitutional democracy, and the newspaper's staff opposed the capitalist impetus of colonialism by calling for a socialist economy aimed at increasing the wealth of all its members (Tomaselli, 2000: 398). This mandate of reflecting the struggles, needs and burning aspirations of South Africa's working-class people, however, limited the type of advertising the newspaper could accept, claims Tomaselli. Unlike the *Sowetan*, which targeted specifically urban-based, relatively affluent African readers, *New Nation* struggled to secure advertising with its 'serious' content and working class readership. The result was that *New Nation* did not carry enough consumer advertising to be commercially viable but a high ratio of political content meant that the paper carried a lot of political advertising (these were 'nonconsumer' advertisements which included adverts reacting to government policy, adverts calling for the release of political prisoners, adverts popularising organisations and so on) (Tomaselli, 2000: 389), which further alienated advertisers: The newspaper's editor Zwelakhe Sisulu spent nearly two years in detention and "advertisers were intimidated by state agencies and warned against 'sponsoring a newspaper promoting revolution'" (Tomaselli, 2000: 396).

After failing in its intent of converting into an ANC daily, *New Nation* toned down its socialist content when it was bought by the mainstream *Sowetan* in 1995. It began running softer stories and introduced a business page but this did nothing to soften its financial plight (Tomaselli, 2000: 398). The newspaper lost the support of its former allies as well as the ANC and failed to hold onto its high readership figures (primarily because of the improvement in coverage of the mainstream as well as the post-1994 'transition fatigue'), therefore also losing whatever partial and potential interest of advertisers the new era may have promised. The final edition of *New Nation* appeared on 30 May 1997, once again proving that an alternative publication that relies on outside funding to support its agenda of countering the commercialism of market-orientated newspapers like the *Sowetan* cannot survive without integrating itself within the conditions of the given market. The newspaper, like other alternative newspapers, failed to secure sufficient consumer advertising and become commercially viable – the primary factor that contributed to its post-1990 demise.

By paying insufficient attention to administrative and financial matters, claims Tomaselli, progressive journalists undermined the viability of their own, unique and painfully fought for editorial concerns. “The success of the *Sowetan* and the demise of the *New Nation* both spring from their respective capacities to apply management practices adequate to their financial objectives. The *Sowetan* managed its affairs by submitting to the demands of whatever market player obtained the greatest return for its investment. *New Nation* was never in a position to survive under such an arrangement” (Tomaselli, 2000: 398). Donations channeled via the IMDT helped *New Nation* stay on for some time longer but it did not improve the traditionally weak market position of the newspaper. In view of the plight of *South*, *New Nation* and *New African*, Louw argued that the left-commercial genre failed to develop the strong points of either the progressive alternative press or the mainstream press: “On the one hand, it does not have ‘community-connectedness’ of a *Grassroots*-type ‘public sphere’; and on the other hand, it cannot compete with the efficiency of the guild press’ resources and newsgathering capacity. Rather, the left-commercial genre inherits the weaknesses of both genres, without the strengths” (Louw, 1991b: 18).

***New African* (1989-1993)**

The planning for the establishment of the *New African* had been taking place since 1985 but it was only launched during the late eighties. It was the only weekly alternative newspaper based in Durban and it came about as a result of the failure of the Durban dailies to report adequately about the developments in the area, like the rise of Inkatha which was growing its own media network by taking over a Zulu-language bi-weekly *Ilanga* from the Argus group and extending its own positive coverage in the mainstream press. The *New African* was therefore established as an initiative of Durban-based MDM-supportive journalists who sought to counter the alliance between Inkatha, its leader Buthelezi and the Natal English language business elite, claim Ntshakala and Emdon (1991: 212). “Those setting up the project [*New African*] believed there was a need to open up a media debate on the perceived alliance between the State and sections of Inkatha; an alliance that many believed had the objective of curtailing left-wing opposition from black urban communities in Natal ... The Durban Guild dailies and the SABC’s projection of Buthelezi as a moderate leader and their demonisation of the UDF vis-à-vis Inkatha, required an alternative media to balance news coverage in the region” (Ntshakala and Emdon, 1991: 213). An added incentive was that even

other alternative papers based in Johannesburg, like *Weekly Mail* and *New Nation* failed to cover events in the Durban area adequately

Preceding the establishment of the *New African*, however, was the Concord News Agency which existed from 1986-1989, supplying mainly alternative newspapers like *South* and *New Nation* but also international media with news from the Natal region that the general mainstream press ignored. When the Durban Newspaper Group (DNG) finally launched *New African*, the newspaper was meant to have no hierarchy but this soon proved an unrealistic strategy. Seniority, different salaries and other discrepancies among the newspaper's staff soon led to anomalies that threw the democratic principles of *New African* out of the window. "The left-commercial press generally had experienced difficulties in matching the expectation for 'democracy' with the reality of running a newsroom" (Ntshakala and Emdon, 1991: 218). Internal squabbles aside, however, *New African* never really found its way into the alternative arena as a notable resistance paper as it failed to deliver on its promised agenda. Initially intending to serve the community, it failed to address issues facing the rural areas and the community organisations which the newspaper claimed it was accountable to, were seldom consulted (Ntshakala and Emdon, 1991: 220). These two authors further claim that contrary to the publicly-stated *New African* policy of independence, the paper was popularly labeled as 'The African National Congress leaflet'. Critics argued that the paper was never neutral, non-partisan and non-sexist, nor a paper 'for the people', as it claimed. Lacking a distributor, it didn't reach rural areas, thus frustrating its stated aim of reaching the masses. "The paper was thus in danger of producing 'mass media' for selected urban elites" (ibid: 220).

The *New African* relied on foreign funding for more than 90 percent of its costs and covered only some four percent of its costs from advertising and three percent from sales (ibid: 220). This meant that financial and business mismanagement prevented the project from reaching its expectations. "*The New African* demonstrated that collectivism when not guided by sound administrative principles is bound to run into difficulties, which was also the experience of *South* in Cape Town" (ibid: 220). As funding withdrew after the 1990 De Klerk reforms, *The New African* attempted to re-evaluate its position to become viable but this move came too late. "Always the least resourced of the papers, operating with a lower skills base and situated in the most dangerous region of South Africa, the paper was unable to find a way out" (Berger, 2000: 93). It closed in 1993, only four years after its first issue came out.

A failure to readjust

As argued in this thesis, alternative publications in South Africa had difficulty in surviving in the market independently of any form of support because such publishing depends on the belief that the market cannot be allowed to determine what is communicated (Cloete, 2000: 43). Alternative newspapers were upholding specific ideologies and carried out a particular role in the South African media but this role called for change after 1994 of disseminating 'alternative' ideas and values that gave way to new growth and innovation, developing new perspectives and ideals within the new hegemony, feeding what Cloete (2000: 48) calls an "ideology of renewal". When South Africa achieved democracy in 1994, the alternative media lost their sense of ideological security as well as their funding sources and found themselves in an abandoned position as the society assumed complacency. Although some alternative publication identified specific target markets and opportunities for their agendas, their chronic under-capitalisation was bound to make their survival difficult, especially in view of a 180-degree hegemonic turnaround where an environment of oppression became an environment of freedom.

The *Mail & Guardian* remains the only former alternative newspaper that had entered the twenty-first century, but this was made possible only through significant changes in ownership, from South African hands to the UK and recently to Zimbabwe. Linking up with the UK-based *Guardian* meant an editorial compromise for the weaker party but that eventually proved a better solution than simply closing down and thereby reducing South Africa's media diversity. The alternative publications discussed in this thesis opened up political debate during apartheid, and all had a potential role beyond the struggle. But this meant surrendering some of their previous principles and identifying new horizons that offered still largely unknown agendas, even in view of the hindering under-capitalisation, changing markets, loss of staff or withdrawal of funding. Business elements and etiquette could have been appropriated by the alternative press but as the then ANC public secretary Trevor Manuel said: "Too many of us involved in the evergrowing industry called the alternative sector have the attitude that whatever is efficient is associated with management and therefore is associated with capitalism and should be thrown out the window" (*South*, March 14-20 1991). A shift towards a more viable commercial approach would have created a better platform for quality management skills, which in turn could have improved commitment to sustain what many saw as a lost cause. This shift towards self-sustainability,

however, was only possible along with an appropriate shift in the papers' ideological strategies, which previously rejected or deterred advertising.

Some alternative publications instead began to mimic the mainstream without realising what that meant for their mission, but going back to the "garage publishing roots" was also an unrealistic option given the disintegration of civil society in the mid-1990s (Cloete, 2000: 66), which came about as a result of the migration of activists into government and the shift of international donor funding to state institutions. The alternative publications needed to put the agenda of the struggle into perspective and become more mature and sophisticated after 1990, aiming at a more 'complete' identity, while also developing better management and publishing skills. Jackson claims that one of the great weaknesses of the alternative press paradoxically stemmed from one of its largest strengths – the depth of their commitment to a particular political perspective. This narrowed their journalistic vision in exactly the same way as it did in the mainstream press of the eighties. "Like the mainstream press, whose failings they sought to redress, the alternative press also viewed life narrowly, presenting their own partial and one-sided view of reality" (Jackson, 1993: 68).

A solution therefore possibly lay in a compromise not only commercially but also ideologically, where a narrow propagandist and limited vision could be meaningfully transformed into more elaborate content that marries politics with other issues of culture or education. "The influences to politicise creative work were strong in the period and the argument about commitment versus quality continued throughout the 70s and 80s ... The failure to develop publishing management with a clear vision accounts to some extent for the failure to come to grips with the strategic implications of growth for the alternative publications ... alternative media had to find an aesthetic that went beyond apartheid, and they were not ready to do this" (Cloete, 2000: 68-69). The space for the alternative has shrunk considerably after 1990 but it remains that the previous commitment of alternative newspapers to the struggle created a cultural and intellectual asset that could have been further utilised and developed during democracy. Progressive thinking of the eighties needed to acquire a new meaningful outlook after 1990 to fulfil the continuous need for an alternative position. An alternative agenda exists beyond the notion of revolution. It just needs reevaluation and modification that will present it with a novel cause. It would not have been as radical as during apartheid but it is ultimately the nature of the alternative press to function in order to maintain a media environment healthy. Whether this role would have been

developmental, oppositional, socialist, educational or other, the alternative press should have maintained its cause during democracy while adjusting its commercial strategies to become sustainable and less vulnerable to the affects of the new environment.

Although the mainstream press had resources and a favourable position in the market to adjust its agenda after 1990, it did not become the alternative, but it did take on some of the latter's characteristics because the aim of democracy was achieved and alternatives were slow to react to become more relevant for the new era. "Mainstream publishing cannot perform the same role as alternative publishing, so the latter's place is assured unless society becomes complacent and abandons its concern for innovation and renewal" (Cloete, 2000: 44).

Contentment with democracy was evident among funders who were the main influence keeping the alternative press alive during the eighties, and since the mainstream press never had any such dependence on donor finances, it was better equipped to revise its role after 1990 and render the alternative press seemingly unnecessary. History, however, still has a great relevance to the present and the influence and legacy of South Africa's resistance press remains indisputable. Some say it was preaching mostly to the converted but by its very existence, production of staff and contribution to media diversity, the alternative press has directly helped to shape the post-apartheid South African media landscape. "Their inspiration of generations of activists, and their encouragement of new generations of media people, was undeniable" (Berger, 2000a: xii). Overestimating the journalistic and political influence of these publications can be misleading, as the combined circulation of the *Indicator*, *New Nation*, *Saamstaan*, *South*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *Weekly Mail* was less than 200 000 in 1992, while the average daily circulation of the then largest daily in the country, the *Sowetan*, was 208 591 (Jackson, 1993: 68) but by bringing its own emphases and perspectives, the alternative press filled an important niche in South Africa's information network. "They have drawn attention to the fact that left-wing news exists. The degree to which the guild press has begun (since the late 1980s) to cover leftist news is, in part, attributable to the fact that the left-commercial and social-democrat presses have put this sort of news onto the wider social agenda" (Louw, 1991b: 20). The very success of the distinctive 'alternative' features rendered them seemingly redundant after 1990, as they were no longer considered unique, but alternative newspapers remain an important part of South Africa's history and especially its transformation.

CHAPTER 5

The post-1990 Response Towards Media Diversity

The IMDT (Independent Media Diversity Trust) was set up between alternative publishers and editors and the mainstream Argus group in 1992, as an initiative to try and salvage the alternative press from a funding crisis. The Trust was meant to provide funding which would buy time needed for alternative newspapers to become financially sustainable based on sales and advertising but ... “(l)ittle consideration was given to what this meant for the nature of the publications. The IMDT developed a much broader focus and, in the end, the initial R14 m funding from the European Union was split into three. The biggest slice, R5 million, aimed at delaying the closure of the *New Nation* and *Vrye Weekblad* for a time; while just under R2 million was used to found the IMG [Independent Magazine Group – aimed at salvaging the alternative magazine publishers], R3 million went to the emerging community press sector and around R1 million reached the emerging community radio sector” (Cloete, 2000: 66). By incorporating several alternative publications under the umbrella of the IMDT, it was hoped that core costs would be saved and resources of the more secure publications would help to bolster the ones struggling to survive. But the chronic under-capitalisation of the alternative press was too overwhelming to be eliminated by a temporary financial injection and by attempts to push the papers into the ‘deep end’ of the commercial market. The IMDT’s own funds soon dried up as the trust failed and closed down in 1998. “There seems to have been a major underestimation of what an organisational transformation of this kind involved. It meant bringing together a number of disparate entities with varying cultures and levels of efficiency and organisational structures at a time when they were facing both sectoral and individual crises” (Cloete, 2000: 67).

Eric Louw noted that “transferring leftist counter-hegemonic experience into the construction of a participative-democratic hegemony will presumably be fraught with difficulties” (1993: 242) but efforts to incorporate some of the legacies of the alternative press into the new South African media fabric were reflected in the post-1990 progressive media policies. The policy formulation of apartheid brought media under stringent control as the government

implemented 120 laws to restrict media and freedom of expression and association (Louw, 1993). Bannings of alternative publications, during the late eighties, ranging from one to three months as well as the severe control of electronic media were all a consequence of the NP government's tactic that oscillated between co-option and coercion. "In broad terms, the divisions in society and the domination of the majority by the minority were also reflected in policy formulation. Such policy included stipulations that restricted the media" (Oosthuizen, 2001b: 168). The existence of the alternative publications, operating on the periphery of these laws, fulfilled an important role in media diversity during apartheid but new progressive media policies were formulated after 1990, through a social-democrat approach of the new government, to ensure this legacy of pluralism develops into a more extensive South African media diversity in line with Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

In June 1991, the old Internal Security Act (no. 74 of 1982) was repealed and replaced with the Internal Security and Intimidation Act (no. 138 of 1991), which enhanced the free flow of information considerably because publications were no longer restricted from quoting specific persons. In its draft Media Charter from 1991, the ANC aspired to contribute to a democratic process with a free flow of information and a culture of open debate, where media infrastructures are accessible to people at grassroots and communities can speak for themselves (Louw, 1993: 257). "The document drew heavily on earlier conference debates and highlighted issues like the equitable distribution of media resources, diversity, access, skills, ownership and affirmative action" (Hadland and Thorne, 2004: 28). An independent and pluralistic media environment, which reflects the widest possible range of opinions was vital for the development of democracy and many of these progressive policies and other proposals and debates were encapsulated in the legislation of the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority), established in March 1994. It stated, among other things, that media should serve the needs of the public, and disadvantaged groups should not be denied access to the media (Louw, 1993: 230). In 2000, the IBA merged with the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA) into ICASA (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa). Paradoxically, calls from the ANC camp to use media for 'nation-building' programmes did not, in essence, correspond to some of these pluralistic initiatives, but summarising the new government's progressive view of the media

was a document entitled 'A Democratic Information Programme', which became a blueprint for media policy in the post-1990 era and an important part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (Hadland and Thorne, 2004: 31).

A very important development in post-1990 media policy framework, with regards to filling the gap in media diversity left by the demise of the alternative press, came in 1996 when the Task Group on Government Communication (Comtask) recommended the creation of the GCIS (Government Communication and Information System). The GCIS later became instrumental to the country's media development and diversity, launching a draft paper in 2000. It accorded with a call in the Reconstruction and Development Programme for government to "encourage the development of all tiers of media – public, community and private" in order to guarantee "active exchange of information and opinion among all members of society" (Presentation by GCIS about the establishment of the MDDA, 2001). Before the establishment of the Media Diversity and Development Trust (MDDA), however, a Print Development Unit (PDU) was established in 2000 to assist the emerging sector of local print media. The PDU was formed by five mainstream media companies: Johnnic Publishing, Caxton, Media 24, New Africa Publications and Independent Newspapers but lasted only three years, never fulfilling its development aims. The Unit's central notion that community newspapers should adopt a market-orientated approach to attract advertisers and gain sustainability by addressing the emerging black middle class failed to consider the poor and marginalised communities, which should be the more essential target market in the sphere of community media. "Clearly, the profit oriented, market driven model has its limitations when it comes to promoting a truly equitable and diverse media landscape" (Hadland and Thorne, 2004: 58).

The development of South Africa's media diversity regained momentum with schemes to promote a vibrant small media sector through the establishment of the MDDA in 2002 by an Act of Parliament (Act 14 of 2002). As a statutory body, it is funded by the government and the private media sector (including Johnnic, Caxton, Media 24 and Independent Newspapers), avoiding the experience of the IMDT, which relied solely on voluntary contributions from donors and the media industry, eventually rendering it financially unstable. A coherent and coordinated form of this mixed assistance for the MDDA from the different tiers is crucial for the fulfilment of its aims to develop community media and small commercial media, enabling the "historically disadvantaged communities not adequately served by the media to gain

access to the media” (www.mdda.org.za, 30. 7. 2006). The agency’s initiatives are unlikely to take over the role of the alternative press but they signify hope to ensure the ‘voices of the voiceless’ are heard, seen and read nonetheless. In addition, the support of the mainstream media to the MDDA suggests that these sectors are not totally insensitive to the promotion of diversity in the media market. The approach of the MDDA is such that it doesn’t see the viability of media as determined by the LSM status of its audience and its ability to attract advertising. It is more focused on the right of all South Africans to participate fully in their country’s democracy – a right that can only be realised with access to diverse information (MDDA presentation to parliament, 2004).

A catalyst in bringing about changes in South Africa’s media diversity, the MDDA does not interfere with content of any media it supports. Its primary purpose is to help create an environment that will allow the media to develop and meet the diverse needs and aspirations of all South Africans. Still in the early stages of its existence, it is difficult to make conclusive judgments about the MDDA’s effectiveness but in May 2006 the total number of projects supported by the MDDA stood at 102 (Available: <http://www.mdda.org.za/main.asp?include=docs/pr/2006/pr0525.html>, 30. 7. 2006). Some of MDDA’s achievements to date include that from 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005, MDDA approved R8,7m in support to 51 different media projects covering all provinces and from 1 April 2005 pledged support of R8,4m in support of an additional 30 media projects (MDDA Annual Report, 28 September 2005). Although the MDDA’s resources from the government and private media total around R17-million a year until 2009, its operations remain independent from these institutions despite receiving their capital. The financial contributions from the different tiers give them a joint say on how the agency is operationalised.

Experience in Europe shows that at times markets need a catalyst like the MDDA to promote conditions for wider media consumption and participation by marginalised sectors and interests (Presentation by GCIS about the establishment of the MDDA, 2001) and established media houses, marketers and advertisers benefit from an expanding readership and listenership and a larger pool of media practitioners. The average grant from the MDDA per project amounts to roughly R200 000 but as the demise of the alternative press suggests, sustaining a media product under the present market structure remains a challenge. Self-sustainability is crucial to the security of a medium and positive policy stipulations, such as the ones founding the MDDA, are important to promote media diversity and pluralism within

the realities and constraints of the South African media market. Similar to the alternative press in the early nineties, the small media sector of today remains wedged between the demands of the market and the conditions within the grassroots constituencies. Adrian Hadland and Karen Thorne claim that for a community medium to become totally financially self-sustainable is almost impossible as it needs to combine the economic as well as the social aspects, and also “appropriate technology, management skills, human resource development, sector co-ordination, policy integration and globalisation to name a few, plague planners as much as they constrain media organisations themselves” (Hadland and Thorne, 2004: 1). The GCIS noted that market forces alone could not ensure sufficient diversity and the challenge therefore is to be viable while at the same time remaining true to the principles on which the small media sector is built and not contradict these by adopting a purely market-driven approach. Community and independent media in a democratic society, claim Hadland and Thorne, need “to deepen their role. In reality, many community and independent media organisations have failed to come to grips with their roles in community development and in promoting participatory democracy. They have not developed sufficient ties with civic structures that would bring them closer to the communities they serve” (2004: 2).

Securing the important audience numbers by educating and not pontificating, nor pandering to readers remains difficult within the current South African political economy. The success of tabloids such as *Die Son*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Voice* after 2000 has proved that there is a space for a press in South Africa that addresses the working class, whose people are not interested in politics as it is interested in celebrity news, cars, clothes, mobile phones and entertainment in general. But while these newspapers do promote a reading culture among communities that did not previously read newspapers, Berger argues that the popularity of tabloid newspapers should not be at the expense of credible journalism or the promotion of values that are in line with the South African Constitution and he calls for an integration of the ‘progressive’ with the ‘popular’, “else an opportunity for meaningful print journalism catering to the masses would continue to be missed” (Berger, G. 2005. Available: http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?area=/insight/insight_converse/&articleid=245896, 20 November 2006). Tabloids have recognised a big target market among South African readers and identified important trends in the society as a point of departure. Their coverage often deals with issues which concern the community and that makes the tabloids a relevant element in the current media landscape. But while the contribution of tabloids to media diversity deserves notice, their popular nature largely omits the progressive essentials that

form a meaningful part of a democratic society. Tabloids have been criticised for publishing myths and promoting ignorance and it is in this vein that Berger asks whether the circulation of more than 400 000 daily copies of the *Daily Sun* is really as significant for South Africa as the 38 000 in circulation of the influential *Mail & Guardian* (ibid: 20 July 2005).

In an ideologically diverse society like South Africa, it is difficult to obtain a wide spectrum of readers of one newspaper that they regard as their 'own' but a diverse media environment can win the awareness of this wide range of readers, voice their concerns, reflect their views and also provide people with access to media. Diminishing language and cultural groups, for instance, could be addressed in such ways. There is a need for a variety of independent and progressive publications that fill a space and meaningfully contribute to a democratic environment. The realities of the market, however, remain a challenge for these types of publications and comprehensive support of the MDDA subsidy system is important for the independent media of today to avoid the fate of the alternative sector. Louw supports the notion of a subsidy system by the state and commercial media and argues that the development of democratic communication structures should be part of other developmental work in the country and arguments against funding such developments would be "a betrayal of the democratic impulse within the popular counter-hegemony struggle of the 1980s" (1993: 244). In contrast to those who may claim that resources are better spent for basic housing than in media, Louw raises a point: "Housing is important, but so too is democracy. And, in any case, a participative media infrastructure (and the training to use it) represents, in the long run, a greater guarantee of housing for all: by empowering people with such a democratic communication system, all would be given the means by which they are able to make their demands heard on an on-going basis (for housing, jobs, schools etc.)" (1993: 244). The GCIS, in arguing for the establishment of the MDDA, claims that access to information and means of communication cannot be separated from social upliftment and that letting things proceed as they are would be to perpetuate existing imbalances indefinitely – to relegate a great number of citizens to the status of passive recipients of 'government delivery', outsiders in the process of creation.

It is still early to draw comprehensive conclusions as to how effectively the MDDA will fill the gap in media diversity left by the post-1990 demise of the alternative press. With South Africa's democracy being more than 12 years old, however, the MDDA remains a valid initiative contributing to the creation of a more diverse, equitable and free media environment

and helping provide a platform for a sophisticated South African media landscape that aims to meet First World standards. This means an environment that enjoys the balance of all three tiers of the media – private, public and community. Developmental and socio-economic needs of marginalised communities still remain largely ignored by the mainstream structures in society and it is the role of community media to reflect such local issues and debates. It may thus well be that the anti-apartheid agenda that gave rise to the alternative press in order to advocate democracy now needs to transform into an agenda which builds a strong civil society of citizens, within the achieved democracy, who are encouraged to express themselves and access information, bridging a developmental gap to achieve better lives. As the CEO of GCIS, Joel Netshitenzhe, noted: “Without a diversity of voices, democracy will be a mere swan-song” (cited in Hadland and Thorne, 2004: 16). With the counter-hegemonic advocacy of the eighties readjusting towards a more sustainable process of social change and development, the experience of the alternative press remains a valuable asset during democracy in creating progressive media initiatives that address South Africa’s media diversity.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to provide a more contemporary understanding of the South African alternative press, by studying specifically the reasons for and implications of the demise of the alternative press of the 1980s after the end of apartheid. Most previous studies dealing the alternative press, which this thesis has extensively drawn on, have either dealt with the topic during the press's existence thus omitting the developments after the mid-nineties, or assessed only reasons but not adequately the implications of the demise of the alternative press during democracy. This thesis therefore drew these various studies together, while also adding extra research data and theoretical background, in an attempt to scrutinise closely not only the experience and fate of some of the most prominent alternative newspapers, but identify the reasons for their demise and link these to the implications that are still relevant to the media landscape of today. This last section will draw up the balance sheet and bring the study into perspective.

Upon reaching its climax during the 1980s, the South African alternative press existed primarily to fill the gap in coverage left by the mainstream media, which it saw as not fulfilling the needs, nor reflecting the aspirations of the majority of South Africans (Johnson, 1991a: 24). This strategy also implied a leftist agenda, fulfilling an anti-apartheid role within the South African political resistance. None of the alternative newspapers had a mass circulation because in order to become acceptable to the market, the political content would have had to compromise with the established order and the original 'alternative' message would be lost. Alternative newspapers thus weren't formed to pose serious competition to the mainstream in the media market and as Anton Harber stated: "We couldn't be bigger, so we had to be different" (cited in Jackson, 1993: 50).

Former *Mail & Guardian* editor Howard Barrell said, these publications "have sought to free themselves from the political limitations which flow from the dictates of advertising and commercialism" (cited in Jackson, 1993: 53). Journalists on alternative newspapers prided themselves in their independence and Max du Preez said: "We didn't need to be big capitalists; we needed to be media guerillas. We needed something that would be very different – a catalyst rather than a mass circulation paper" (2003: 172). Financial security, however, was always a problem as profit was not regarded a priority and reaching self-

sufficiency through advertising was compromised by the conditions of the market. The leftist values on most alternative newspapers not only rejected advertising of big businesses, but many businesses refused to be associated with the paper's socialist and anti-apartheid ideology in the first place. The main reasons, however, why the alternative press struggled to achieve a self-sufficient level of advertising revenue was because they didn't reach high circulations and (with the exception of the *Weekly Mail*) addressed low LSM, working class readers – an audience unattractive to advertisers.

In order to survive during the eighties, most alternative newspapers thus relied on subsidies from foreign donor organisations. This became a useful strategy towards the immediate purpose of counter-hegemonic coverage but diverted attention away from the long-term importance of achieving self-sufficiency. The funding came mainly with the moral objective of aiding in overcoming the discriminatory measures of the apartheid system, which were condemned worldwide. But when apartheid ended during the early nineties, this donor sympathy shifted to aiding the democratic government and alternative publications were left to search for new streams of acquiring revenue. Commercial imperatives could no longer be avoided after 1990. The alternative press, however, failed to adjust its financial operatives and its ideological positions in a way that would make it self-sustainable while, at the same time, maintaining the alternative purpose.

Grassroots not only faced problems in the withdrawal of funds but it also lost touch with civil society, thereby forsaking its role as a community-based, progressive alternative newspaper. It had the potential to adjust and become a commercial freesheet, after 1990, but this did not take place due to the reluctance of some activists to abandon the Marxist doctrine that the paper followed during the eighties. Other community newspapers, like *Saamstaan* and *Namaqua Nuus*, also failed to adapt their socialist strategies towards securing sustainable advertising revenue and adopting better managerial and marketing skills after the withdrawal of funding. The same financial woes got the better of the left-commercial papers *New Nation* and *New African*. The alternative magazine *Die Suid-Afrikaan* shifted its subject matter with the democratic times, focusing on valid issues like affirmative action but also failed to reach sufficient advertising levels. *South* attempted to adjust to the demands of its audience, which preferred popular rather than political content, and also launched a successful freesheet *Southeaster*, but financial mismanagement did not let either publication achieve a sustainable position. *Vrye Weekblad* was important in destigmatising Afrikaans as an apartheid language

but its financial infrastructure was weakened by many lawsuits, and a small readership and marginal advertising revenue only made it more difficult to reach self-sustainability.

The difficulty with securing substantial advertising was a problem endemic across the whole alternative sector. It concerned every alternative publication and it was, therefore, important for the alternative press to realise that after the end of apartheid, its focus on pressures of the market should have become as important as previously its focus on the former government's unjust rule. The alternative agenda should have been maintained but re-evaluated within the context of democracy and adjusted accordingly, keeping the conditions of the market in consideration. The *Mail & Guardian* struggled through financial crises but was the only alternative newspaper that eventually found a meaningful role within the new political, social and economic dynamics of a democratic environment. It always focused on a more affluent and intellectual audience than most other alternative newspapers, and although it did need the help of the British mainstream *Guardian* to survive after 1990, with more of a sound business structure the newspaper eventually managed to secure its viability through advertising.

The *Weekly Mail* was a more commercially based social-democrat newspaper operating within the alternative sphere and did not let its socialist elements get in the way of accepting advertising even from capitalist companies. Surviving long-term became an important priority and *Weekly Mail's* management steered the paper away from bankruptcy, after the early closure of the *Daily Mail*, by joining the British *Guardian* and by the time Zimbabwean newspaper owner Ncube took over in 2002, it was recognised that the newspaper had to be run as a business. The *Weekly Mail* was not dependant on donor subsidies from foreign NGO's and when other alternative newspapers started closing down as a result of their lack of funds, the *Weekly Mail* re-evaluated its position in the market by reaching a compromise between its alternative ideology and economic imperatives. It could not survive, after 1990, as a commercially independent enterprise and so it integrated itself within the relevant structures of the market, yet maintaining a meaningful agenda and not surrendering its alternative roots of independent journalism. Its coverage holds the present government accountable and the *Mail & Guardian* still exists as an alternative to the mainstream as an outspoken newspaper. As the only surviving alternative newspaper from the eighties, the *Mail & Guardian* has been able to win an important new space in which to function and at the same time maintain its critical but also educative role, thereby contributing to media diversity.

The rest of the alternative sector ultimately failed to adjust from its generally complacent, advocacy-orientated formula of the eighties – in many cases because of its problematic position within the country’s political economy. But it was conversely and primarily adjustments in ideology that could improve the precarious commercial position of the alternatives in the first place. The clash between the ideological and commercial interests of the alternative newspapers was the main cause of their downfall. Democracy, offered more complicated areas of engagement than apartheid and the alternative role of ‘filling the void’ needed to be reapplied to a politically balanced environment. The more resourceful mainstream, including the SABC, significantly improved its coverage as apartheid’s legal restrictions of the media were lifted after 1990 and the alternative press struggled to retain a purpose of offering new readings of society. To maintain its underlying cause of being ‘alternative’, these newspapers needed to hold the democratically elected hegemony accountable and not become praise-singers of the ANC, yet they also needed to identify new and more nuanced developmental, educational or even entertaining agendas, “tempering a zeal for what editors believed people *ought* to read by adding what people actually *want* to read. *Vrye Weekblad*’s du Preez said, in the early nineties: ‘The alternative press should get more mature and sophisticated now. We should put our anger more in perspective, and have more of a sense of humour. We tend to be angry political agents, but I think we can now afford to become more complete newspapers’” (in Jackson, 1993: 69). Tabloids later emerged as successful media in covering popular content but alternative newspapers could have utilised the space as more mature media by, for instance, effectively mixing progressive content with popular content. That way, the alternative press would have found an aesthetic that went beyond apartheid but also strived for sustainability by meaningfully and innovatively blending content that is quality centred with content that is audience centred.

The asset of the progressive thinking of the alternative press should have been developed and utilised in democracy through acquiring a new meaningful outlook. In other words, new space needed to be identified by the alternative press, within which it could operate. During apartheid, alternative newspapers such as *Grassroots* emerged as the voice for the voiceless but heightened politicisation of the mid to late-1980s caused them to lose touch with civil society as they started concentrating more on exasperating the powerful. But when apartheid ended and its rulers were stripped of power, the alternative press did not evolve its counter-hegemonic discourse alongside the country’s transition in politics (as mentioned earlier, efforts of publications like *Vrye Weekblad*, *South* or *Die Suid-Afrikaan* to make their subject

matter more relevant after 1990 became unsuccessful due to scarce finances). Save the sustainable *Mail & Guardian*, the alternative press failed to maintain the alternative role beyond the country's 1994 transition and thereby surrendered the important nature of the 'alternative' values which are vital in keeping a media environment healthy. The context for the reception and appropriation of the mediated messages had changed after 1990 and South Africa's multilingual and multiracial society sought expression for its many different cultures. Giving voice to the voiceless remains important in a democratic environment and providing readers with knowledge is the most basic element required from a democratic dispensation. A new, critical, but also constructive alternative discourse would not reproduce views of the new hegemony but rather once again act as a catalyst in fueling new struggles between competing ideas and beliefs, rival views and ideologies to campaign for the ideals of democracy and debate. The diversity of voices would thereby become stronger and more elaborate than is currently the case.

The capitalist market of democracy marginalised media diversity as seriously as the authoritarian elements of apartheid did, and the new era therefore remained a valid environment for the alternative discourse to find space in. A shift from legal restriction to freedom should never have stood in the way of the alternative agenda, as Albert Camus observed: "Freedom is nothing else but a chance to be better, whereas enslavement is a certainty of the worse" (cited in Jackson, 1993: 233). Being previously linked to a social movement, alternative newspapers should have put forward more significant efforts in trying to outlive their cause after 1990. Failing to do so has given them a purpose during the eighties but limited them in time and specialisation. As Guy Bergers suggests ... "If there is a lesson to be learnt from the alternative weeklies' experience, and that of the other alternative press, it is that such publications are but a small cog in a much bigger wheel. A press that is linked to a social movement is dependent on the health and direction of that movement. It can aid the movement with its cause, but it cannot easily exist without it" (Berger, 2000: 98). Peripheral in their circulation and size, the alternative newspapers, nonetheless, still stand as important records of the true state of affairs in the South African society during the eighties.

The demise of the alternative press rendered South Africa's society poorer for losing the variety of important publications, but it is this lost potential of the alternative press that shows that the goal of publishing for the people remains relevant. Jackson suggested that, after operating in the authoritarian environment of the 1980s, some South African media after 1990

would shift more towards fulfilling a social responsibility as well as a developmental role (1993: 220). But since the country remains a mix of First World and Third World components, the press should rather adapt the social responsibility approach (typical of Western societies) to South African realities. This would support a pluralistic media environment and challenge the political, economic and symbolic power of media as seen within the Marxist perspective. “By allowing and empowering previously disadvantaged groups to own and manage the media, it is hoped that South African audiences will also be exposed to new, previously ignored and silenced perceptions and interpretations of South African society and South African realities” (Fourie, 2001: 121).

A media platform that ensures the diversity of South African voices is heard and read means the genuine values of democracy are being pursued and a number of progressive media initiatives to ensure diversity have been undertaken since 1990, as a part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme calling for the development of all tiers of the media – public, community and private. Social upliftment is linked to access to information and means of communication, which allows citizens to participate fully in their country’s democracy. In this vein, a statutory funding mechanism established in 2002, the MDDA, assists small independent media, through private and state funding, in surviving under the present challenges of existing market conditions. The long history of South African resistance press dating back to the 1800s ended with the emergence of democracy but these initiatives promoting media diversity suggest an opportunity to fill the gap left by the demise of the alternative press with relevance to the new era. Challenges still remain regarding sustainability, which could compromise the small media’s inherent values of community development and promotion of participatory democracy but the history of the alternative press and its end serves as an important learning asset for the relevant, contemporary media structures in dealing with the testing times of today.

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