



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although print media – whether independent or not – have been in existence in Namibia for more than 100 years, the body of research on this form of media is small and somewhat limited. Very little research, whether pre- or post-Independence, has been conducted into the role of the print media in the formation of Namibian society. Taking into consideration the limitations of available research on the subject, this paper strives to be a discussion document for what could – and should – be the starting point of more in-depth research into the media field, especially the role played by print media from their earliest introduction to where the press finds itself today.

Furthermore, narrowing the focus of this paper to the role of the independent print media was necessitated by the absence of any real research into the role and influence of all forms of media, especially the broadcast or electronic media. A larger, if still small, volume of work has dealt with independent media.

This paper seeks to critically examine the role independent print media organisations have played in the colonial, transitional and democratic stages of this evolving and, especially in the pre-Independence era, politically dynamic society, and how influential these publications were in conforming to and realising the aspirations and information needs of a majority of Namibians, while at the same time adhering to the principles of professional journalism.

## 2. WHAT DOES INDEPENDENT MEAN IN RELATION TO MEDIA?

The May 1991 Declaration of Windhoek on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press<sup>1</sup> offers a definition of what *independent media* refers to:

*By an independent press, we mean a press independent from governmental, political or economic control or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals.*

At face value, such a definition seems to suggest a press operating on some utopian level of disconnection from real factors, such as money and the goodwill of those in power, which guarantee and are essential for the continued existence and functioning of the press itself. Furthermore, this definition also seems to remove the independent press from the realm of society by placing it beyond economic and political influences.

Others, like Watson (2003:12), place the media – including the print media – at the heart of and inseparable from the movements within society.

*The media are prominent among the public arbiters of our behaviour. They, as it were, “speak society’s lines”, claiming for themselves the role of a community’s conscience as well as performing as its ever-vigilant guard-dog.*

Scholars like Skeggs and Mundy (1992:6-18) almost cynically suggest that there are no such things as independent media, print or otherwise, and that because successful media organisations are essentially commercial enterprises run according to the business and market principles of supply and demand, there can be no functioning independently from – as the Windhoek Declaration states – “political or economic control or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination” of media products.

Heuva (2001:xi) lumps independent and other publications outside the mainstream media of pre-independent Namibia together under the heading of “alternative media”.

<sup>1</sup>The Declaration was adopted by the participants at the United Nations/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation seminar on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press; the seminar was held in Windhoek, Namibia, from 29 April to 3 May 1991.



In this paper, *mainstream press* refers to the white-owned and -controlled press in Namibia in the pre-Independence era, many of which were established by political organisations or people close to the political establishment. Heuva (2001:xii) refers to these as the “colonial press”. In light of all the above, the working definition of *independent press/independent reporting* refers to a press that explicitly aims to be independent of – especially Government – political and economic influences, and strives to be critical and objective in its search for the truth in its coverage of societal issues.

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE INDEPENDENT PRINT MEDIA IN NAMIBIA

#### 3.1 Before the independent print media: Historical and political context

Namibia, like most other African states and territories, fell under the yoke of European imperialism and colonialism and officially became a German colony in the late 19th century. Brutal wars were fought between the indigenous peoples and the German colonial authorities in the early part of the 20th century as a result of German colonial intrusion into traditional lands and ways of life. The League of Nations mandate for administering the territory was handed to the Union of South Africa after World War I (1914-1918), and Namibia’s indigenous peoples were introduced to a new brand of colonialism. The official policy of apartheid was introduced in South Africa in the late 1940s and early 1950s and subsequently made its way to Namibia. South African colonial rule was as oppressive and brutal as German rule and the indigenous African peoples were subjected to decades of humiliation and degradation through the divide-and-rule policies introduced in the territory by the Pretoria Government.

However, throughout this period, as was the case under German colonial rule, groups and individuals sporadically stood up and confronted the system and policies of apartheid. These attempts at addressing the situation in which most Namibians found themselves at the time were usually brutally and swiftly quashed by apartheid security forces. Until the 1960s, very little was achieved by those seeking a more just society and freedom from South African rule. With the commencement of the liberation struggle in the 1960s, a new wave of optimism and awareness took root within the African intelligentsia and new ways and means were sought to convey liberation messages to the masses. This set the stage for the introduction of print media products that would communicate such messages.

Print media had existed in Namibia since the printing press was imported late in the 19th century. The first privately owned and controlled newspaper published in Namibia, the *Windhuker Anzeiger*, was launched on 12 October 1898. Georg Wasserfall, a German-speaking attorney, was behind the publication. The newspaper mainly focussed on German troop movements, but also later served as an official gazette of the German colonial government (Heuva 2001:17). This kind of relationship set the trend for what would subsequently become the mainstream media in Namibia. All were European-owned and - controlled, and covered local issues from a European colonial perspective. Heuva (2001:17) quotes Ugboajah’s (1985) views of the colonial media in Africa, as follows:

*Both the press and radio supported colonial rule and interests and were unsympathetic or outright hostile to African aspirations.*

Seen against this background and taking into account the high level of illiteracy amongst black Namibians at the



time, there was very little room on the local media landscape for independent publications aiming to reach the majority of Namibians. Hence, until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the winds of liberation were sweeping the continent and African nationalists became more emboldened as a consequence, an independent or alternative press for all intents and purposes did not exist in the then colonial South West Africa. At the same time the white-owned mainstream press<sup>2</sup> almost totally ignored the plight of the African, and openly sided with and defended the apartheid authorities. Despite the repressive environment, the ground was fertile for the emergence of independent or alternative publications.

#### 3.1.1 *South West News: Forerunner to independence in the print media*

Although alternative print media mutely advocating for a more just political dispensation were in existence in the 1950s and 1960s, these publications were mostly the property of the major Churches in Namibia, and mainly conveyed religious content with limited political commentary to black Namibians. No private black-owned publications were in existence. This changed with the arrival in 1960 of the short-lived *South West News*. Although the paper openly pushed an African nationalist agenda, particularly that of the South West Africa National Union (SWANU)<sup>3</sup>, it could be considered independent because, to an extent, it remained outside the forces influencing the operations of the mainstream white-owned media. The paper stood outside the political pressures at play in the mainstream press; and because the paper was black-owned, white businesses, which dominated economic life, were not interested in advertising in the paper, or were very hesitant to do so. Thus, to a large extent, the paper remained outside the economic influences at play within the white-owned press as well (Heuva 2001:147).

However, this proved to be a double-edged sword: the paper folded after only nine months mainly because of a lack of financial resources. In the 1960 founding memorandum of *South West News*, the directors of the company behind the paper, the African Publishing Company, clearly emphasised the issue of finance (ibid.):

*We have not yet been able to attract enough advertising to augment the paper’s revenue ... Racial discrimination does not only make it impossible for the African Publishing Company to secure loans but cripples the press machinery in many ways.*

In the 1960 *South West News* memorandum, the directors of the company also clearly spelt out the purpose and role of their publication (ibid.):

*South West News strives to serve all the people of South West Africa, irrespective of colour or creed, on a territorial basis as well as in relation to the whole of Africa and the world. ... Our object is to serve as a vigorous instrument to promote the social and educational well-being of all inhabitants of South West Africa, irrespective of race, colour or creed. ... Our desired aim is to give objective news and political reporting, unclouded by racial or political prejudice.*

Although the paper was only published in two languages, Afrikaans and Otjiherero, it was aimed at a broad section of educated black Namibians. Articles ranged from general to community news and included columns on farming and education as well as political commentaries. The paper also featured news from around the continent and transmitted important announcements, such as evictions and removals by the Windhoek Town Council pertaining to black residents. Furthermore, it carried political statements by traditional leaders and political parties addressed to the black masses.

<sup>2</sup> The mainstream press of the period included the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Windhoek Advertiser*, *Die Suidwes Afrikaner*, and *Die Suidwester*.  
<sup>3</sup> The founders of *South West News* were also involved in SWANU. They include Zed Ngavirue and Emil Appolus.



In its inaugural edition in March 1960, the paper ran a story on the forced removals under way in Windhoek's "Old Location"<sup>4</sup>. Some of the paper's articles were used as evidence by Namibian petitioners at the United Nations concerning conditions under apartheid in the country. However, the paper had limited reach within the country, and its small readership was largely urban-based. Distribution problems only compounded the financial shortcomings. The paper's collapse left a void in the media landscape that would not be quickly filled.

Although, strictly speaking, *South West News* would not normally be classified as independent because of its close alignment to a political movement and party, it did strive to play the role commonly associated with that of the independent press, namely of being impartial and objective and by acting as the conscience or "guard-dog" (Watson 2003:12) of society at large.

### 3.1.2 Filling the void: Church publications and other print media

The collapse of *South West News* in the early 1960s left a gap in the media field that was partially filled by the Church press. At the time that *South West News* made its appearance, the major Churches in Namibia were going through a transformation of their own. The face of the Churches was slowly changing, with black congregants increasingly occupying leadership positions within Church structures and agencies (Katjavivi et al. 1989:3-26).

Church publications have been around in Namibia since the early 20th century. In the late 1950s and early 1960s all these publications reflected the change in Church leadership during those decades, which was more politi-

cally aware and more outspoken on the plight of their black congregants. Church publications, even though not formally independent due to their close links to the Churches, effectively became the torch-bearers of independent reporting in the country by providing an alternative view to that of the mainstream as regards what was really going on in the country.

The first Church publication, *Osondaba*, appeared in 1901 at Oniipa and focussed on religious issues. It was produced by the Finnish Missionary Society<sup>5</sup>, which more recently became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). In 1941, the name of the publication changed to *Omukwetu*. From its inception, *Omukwetu* was published in Oshiwambo. In the early 1960s, black staff introduced a measure of activism to *Omukwetu's* content by including political commentary besides the coverage of religious and Church issues. Another Lutheran publication, *Immanuel*, was launched in 1961. It basically mirrored *Omukwetu* in direction and in its coverage of the plight of black Namibians. *Immanuel*, which was written in Afrikaans, Khoekhoegowab (Nama/Damara) and Otjiherero, was produced by what was to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (which at the time was known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa). Besides these two Lutheran publications, the Catholic Church in Namibia launched an Afrikaans, Khoekhoegowab and Otjiherero publication entitled *Angelus* in 1963. Its Oshiwambo counterpart, *Omukuni*, followed in 1977. Although mainly religious in nature these publications also carried political content and commentary.

Aside from the above, the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN)<sup>6</sup> launched

<sup>4</sup> On 10 December 1959, 12 people protesting against the forced removal of Old Location residents were killed by the apartheid authorities. The removal of residents to Katutura, which commenced after the 1959 killings but was only completed in the late 1960s, was carried out to make way for the new white suburb of Hochland Park.

<sup>5</sup> Finnish missionaries arrived in northern Namibia in 1870. In 1908, they established a mission hospital at Onandjokwe and a theological seminary at Oniipa a few years later. The first black pastors were ordained in 1925.

<sup>6</sup> The CCN was founded in 1978 by the major denominations with the aim of tackling social problems through a unified front. The CCN became one of the key anti-apartheid organisations within Namibia in the 1980s (Herbstein & Evenson 1989:55).



a newsletter, *CCN Information*, in 1980. Like the other Church publications, it carried political articles. In its August 1985 edition, under the headline "'Namibia needs a free press,' says Tjerije", the paper quoted the former editor of *Immanuel*, Phillip Tjerije, as follows (*CCN Information* 1985:1):

*I think the press in Namibia is not free, because most newspapers in this country are party orientated. An independent press is almost non-existent and there is a vast vacuum for a free press especially in this particular time where we have an imposed interim government ... (T)he level of news reflected by these news is pathetic. The newspapers are not objective.*

Herbstein and Evenson (1989:116) had the following to say on this topic:

*The vernacular church newspapers Omukwetu and Omukuni were perceived as being against the government.*

Thus, the Church press appropriated the role of an independent watchdog and reported openly on the war in the north of the country.

Another illustration of the increased and expanded political commentary and progressive involvement of the Churches, and especially the Church press, was the famous *Open Letter* of 1971. The letter, addressed to the then South African Prime Minister, BJ Vorster, was drafted by the two Lutheran denominations in Namibia, ELCIN and what is known today as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN), and called on the South African state to withdraw from Namibia and grant the territory its independence. Although a Lutheran initiative, the Catholic and Anglican Churches subsequently issued statements through their respective publications in support of the *Open Letter*.

However, this new role of the Church press, and by extension the Churches, did not come without its setbacks. The South African authorities sought to suppress or muzzle the Church presses and their publications by bombing their offices and persecuting individual journalists. The most dramatic attack was the bombing of the Lutheran printing press at Oniipa on 11 May 1973.

Besides the development of an increasingly outspoken Church press, another category of publications also arrived on the scene in the early 1980s. Community organisations launched a string of publications including *Bricks*, the first community newspaper in the country, which mainly served the communities of Khomasdal and Katutura. In 1985, *Speak Out* was launched by community activists and was aimed primarily at the community of Katutura. Then there were the student and labour union publications launched in the late 1980s. Among these was *The Student Voice of Namibia*, the official publication of the Namibia National Students' Organisation (NANSO), while *The Namibian Worker* was the official mouthpiece of the Namibian labour movement.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, *Sister Namibia* was launched. This feminist publication addressed women's rights and issues – something almost completely ignored by the mainstream media.

The alternative reporting characterising these publications could be regarded as being independent given that they, like the Church press, performed the role that would under normal circumstances be that of a truly independent press. They were certainly independent of the socio-economic and political pressures brought to bear on the mainstream white press. However, they did not claim to be independent and even tossed the concept of objectivity out of the window, arguing that circumstances demanded subjective coverage of the plight of

<sup>7</sup> NANSO and the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) were formed in the late 1980s and played a crucial role in the latter years of the liberation struggle by mobilising students and workers inside the country (Herbstein & Evenson 1989:166-167).





black people and their struggle for liberation and, in the case of *Sister Namibia*, the plight of women in the country.

These publications also met with resistance from the authorities. Like those associated with the Church press, community activist journalists were persecuted and the organisations harassed. However, most of the publications folded shortly after independence, mainly due to lack of a financial lifeline<sup>8</sup>.

From time to time, mainstream publications such as the *Windhoek Advertiser* and the *Windhoek Observer* flirted with independent reporting, but these attempts were brief and usually ended after State pressure was brought to bear on the owners (Lister 1995:3).

A number of publications were launched by the liberation movement, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), during the struggle era. Among these was the *Combatant*. However, these publications were never independent and served mainly as propaganda instruments. They were never widely distributed inside Namibia, largely due to the repressive atmosphere.

The Church and community press may at times have taken on the role of an independent press during this era of Namibian history. However, their reporting leaned towards the African nationalist agenda. Nonetheless, despite the repressive atmosphere, there was still scope for independent publications; one such publication was born in the mid 1980s.

### 3.1.3 Telling it like it is: The emergence of *The Namibian*

*The Namibian* emerged at a time when the political situation was heating up. The 1980s were a turbulent time in the country. The apartheid South African state intensified its war in northern Namibia, while at the same time han-

ding limited power to transitional authorities, comprising parties and organisations that it recognised and with whom it was prepared to negotiate. SWAPO and other extra-parliamentary organisations in favour of full independence were excluded from these processes and negotiations. Herbstein and Evenson (1989:167) described one aspect of these times as follows:

*From 1985, the war was made even more inaccessible to reporters by a requirement that police permits were needed to visit the "operational area".*

*The Namibian's* founding editor, Gwen Lister (1995:3), writing on the publication's 10th anniversary, briefly described the events that led to the launch of the paper.

*In 1978 pressure was put on (Hannes) Smith and the staff (of the Windhoek Advertiser) to adopt a stance less critical of "internal" parties... spear-headed by the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance. Smith, myself and a few other staff members left and within a week brought out the first edition of the weekly Windhoek Observer.*

For the next seven years, from 1978 to 1984, the *Observer* took on the role of a progressive independent press. However, the authorities continually harassed the paper. Lister spoke of how, in 1984, she was forced out of the *Windhoek Observer* (ibid.):

*... the newspaper management began to blame me primarily for the Observer's increasing unpopularity with the authorities, and in 1984 the then staff of the Windhoek Observer walked out in protest against my demotion from Political Editor to reporter and I followed suit. The authorities were beginning to close in on the likes of me and management were not prepared to take up the challenge.*

<sup>8</sup> Non-governmental organisations in Europe financed many of these publications. The publications ran into financial problems after independence as donor priorities changed.



Lister's outspoken criticism of the South African-sponsored authorities and the South African forces in the country led to her being ostracised. She also briefly explained the politics at play in the mainstream press at the time (ibid.):

*There appeared to be no future for myself or the rest of the staff in the then Namibian media, which was predominantly anti-SWAPO.*

Seen against this background, and especially with the capitulation of the *Observer*, the media landscape was lacking an independent voice. Lister and human rights lawyer Dave Smuts, along with other future staff, spent the next year canvassing international backing, especially financial support, for the establishment of the paper. They were met by various challenges placed in their way by the apartheid authorities. Lister lived under a ban and her passport was confiscated; and when they tried to register the paper, an excessive fee was demanded, which was only rescinded after a costly court challenge in Pretoria forced the authorities to allow the registration of the paper (Lister 1995:4). The first edition of *The Namibian* appeared on 30 August 1985, with a founding editorial that included the following statements (*The Namibian* 1985:3):

*The Namibian is an independent newspaper committed to independence for Namibia. The newspaper will follow an independent editorial policy and will strive to achieve a greater flow of information and open debate ... By displaying editorial independence with honest and realistic reporting, we hope to contribute to a free and vigorous press for Namibia ... We emphasise that our editorial policy is an independent one. We are at the beck and call of no party or propaganda machine.*

This was a courageous statement at that time, and coupled with the name of the publication, an affront to the

apartheid authorities. The paper was regularly challenged – at times violently – by the South African security forces in the years that followed. From the outset the role the paper played was an explosive one (Herbstein & Evenson 1989: 116):

*... it was The Namibian which was most likely to run pictures of Koevoet flaunting dead guerrillas, depict SWAPO matter-of-factly as the next government, its combatants as freedom fighters and human beings. The most compulsive propaganda of all was to reflect what the reader already knew. The vast fortune spent in the propaganda war was quite literally money down the drain.*

Du Pisani (2000:4,8) gave a detailed account of the coverage provided by *The Namibian* since its inception until the country's independence in 1990:

*From its inception, The Namibian not only chronicled detentions and other unmentionable violations of human rights – the paper regularly published a "detentions update" for several years – but facilitated pluralistic debate on a raft of public issues ... The Namibian carried many a report on the war in neighbouring Angola and on the wanton destruction by Koevoet, particularly in the former Ovamboland. ... Local and international music, too, featured regularly in the pages of The Namibian. ... (The newspaper carried various educational supplements that introduced learners and students to the intricacies of biology, enzymes and photosynthesis. Editorial policy was remarkably consistent ...*

These excerpts serve to illustrate how the newspaper strove to cover issues of interest that were relevant to a cross-section of Namibian society. The paper also ran a series of in-depth investigative articles over the years and regularly carried academic pieces. It also ran numerous articles and profiles on the exiled SWAPO leadership, while covering news from across the continent and the rest of



the world. At the time the coverage provided by *The Namibian* was almost revolutionary and the paper suffered security force harassment, banning and office bombings throughout its first five years of existence, and even immediately after Namibian Independence.<sup>9</sup>

What is important to note about this publication at the time it was launched is that, for the first time, a truly critical and editorially independent paper was available on the local media market. Financially, the paper could say it was independent of local economic pressures as it was funded from abroad, receiving most of its backing from the European Community. However, the paper's close relationship and identification with the ideals and politics of the liberation movement, SWAPO, can in hindsight be seen as having compromised its independence during this era to some degree. Nonetheless, in the context of the generally anti-SWAPO and anti-liberation mainstream publications of the time, *The Namibian* consistently stood as the lone independent voice.

### 3.2 Independence in the print media: "History has deformed all of us ..."<sup>10</sup>

The period from 1988 to 1990 was momentous in the history of Namibia. Namibia was the last African country to emerge from European colonial dominance. Elections were called under United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 in 1989, and the former liberation movement, restyled as a political party, emerged the overwhelming victor. The new nation state of Namibia officially came into being on 21 March 1990. It was a time of great upheaval and promise for the fledgling state.

No sector of society remained untouched by the changes taking place within the country – and the

media sector was no exception. As mentioned earlier, many community publications like *Bricks* and *Speak Out* did not survive the early years of Independence due to various, but especially financial, reasons. It also seems likely that these publications became redundant after Independence, having served their purpose of fighting for a more just political, social and economic dispensation. Many of the activist journalists also moved on to positions within the new Government and other media, such as *New Era*, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and the Namibia Press Agency (Nampa). Their departure deprived these community and alternative papers of their most valuable assets: the people who had helped fight apartheid through their pages.<sup>11</sup>

The mainstream press also had to readjust after years of giving either active or quiescent support to the apartheid authorities. Several mainstream publications suffered the same fate as the community and alternative press and did not survive the early years of Independence, quietly folding in the early 1990s. Others, such as the Government-funded *New Era* and *Namibia Today*, the latter a SWAPO Party mouthpiece, joined the media scene. *The Namibian*, as the country's main alternative paper, made it through the transition relatively smoothly – despite having to shift from donor support to commercial viability. As stated before, its coverage remained consistent, with the only difference being that focus now shifted to covering issues under an elected SWAPO Government. The paper continued to campaign in the interests of its readers and the general public.

Without a doubt, the most important development in the period from 1988 to 1990 – not only for the country but the

<sup>9</sup> The *Namibian*'s offices were bombed in 1990. At the time it was suspected that the bombers were white right-wing extremists. This bombing followed on the 1988 bombing which destroyed equipment and offices.

<sup>10</sup> Du Pisan (2000:9).

<sup>11</sup> It is pertinent to note that community media have struggled in Namibia since Independence, with community newspapers such as the *Southern Sun* in Keetmanshoop and the *Caprivi Vision* failing to establish themselves. This has placed an even greater burden on independent newspapers to develop their national coverage.



media as well – was the drafting and adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia. The section of the Constitution of particular importance to the media was the explicit mention and incorporation of freedom of the press in the supreme law of the new land. Article 21(1) of Chapter 3, Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, reads as follows:

*All persons shall have the right to: (a) freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media ...*

As far as the media were concerned, this very brief statement opened up a world of opportunity and made a complete break from the repressive past.

The next section of this paper looks at the role of the independent print media, bearing in mind the above constitutional provision. It also discusses how the independence of the print media is – and was – received in an independent Namibia. The focus will be on the three main 'independent' daily newspapers, namely *The Namibian*, the *Republikein* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung*. The other daily newspaper, *New Era*, is State-owned.

#### 3.2.1 Freedom to speak:

##### *The role of the independent press through 15 years of independence in Namibia*

Of all the privately owned newspapers that existed in the pre-Independence era, only three have successfully managed to entrench themselves in today's media landscape. They could arguably be said to constitute the best examples of independent press in Namibia today.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The Namibian*

This paper has always been seen as a critical voice and seems to have consistently followed through on the statements made in its founding editorial policy. Through its editorial management,

*The Namibian* has on many occasions voiced a strong belief in its own independence. One example, an excerpt from its 10th anniversary publication, reads as follows (*The Namibian* 1995:28):

*We believe this independent stance best enables us to meet the challenge of providing information to our readers which is truthful, objective and accurate.*

Editor Gwen Lister has on numerous occasions written about accountability and transparency in society, especially in government. But what does this mean in terms of the role the paper has taken upon itself in an independent Namibia?

Since becoming a daily in 1989, from the earliest cases of corruption under the new SWAPO Government and the new civil service to entertainment and sport – all have become regular features. Supplements have come and gone, while some, like *The Weekender*, have become fixtures. The newspaper still reports on a wide range of local, regional and international stories. It is safe to say that the paper has become the newspaper of choice for most newspaper-buying Namibians because of its wide coverage of a cross-section of issues of a very wide interest. In the 10th anniversary magazine, news editor Jean Sutherland (1995:31) wrote the following:

*Apart from trying to provide wide coverage of events in Namibia, we aim to keep readers abreast of the most important news breaking worldwide on a daily basis.*

However, back in 1995, the paper did realise its deficiencies and acknowledged it needed to improve in certain areas (ibid.):

*This includes working on improving our coverage of rural areas, our economics/business section, consumer issues, more investigative reporting and broadening our sports coverage.*

<sup>12</sup> The weeklies the *Windhoek Observer* and the *Namibia Economist* are also examples of the independent press.



Looking at these deficiencies one has to ask how they impact on the independence and role of the publication, and whether anything has changed in the ten years since Sutherland wrote this. *The Namibian* in 2005 still has a heavy dependence on news agency copy. Four of the first five pages usually carry local stories, while the rest of the paper - including the sports section on most days - is dominated by copy supplied by the Namibia Press Agency (Nampa) and foreign news agencies such as Reuters and Agence France Presse (AFP). Economic reporting is still limited, while in-depth coverage of issues is an occasional rather than regular feature. The newspaper, while still heavily 'Windhoek-centric', has made greater efforts to cover rural communities and issues, although it is clearly hamstrung by its lack of reporters in the field.<sup>13</sup> Many of the local reports are often top-down, single-source stories written in reaction to an event that has taken place: for example, a Government leader or official making a statement at an event, a press conference or workshop, or coverage of a crime, often based on the police version of what happened. Local features and investigative journalistic articles are often in short supply, although the paper still breaks a number of stories, some of them complex in nature.

However, much of the coverage is still reactive instead of proactive, with reports tending to be event-oriented rather than investigative in their approach. As a result, reporting on issues such as corruption has at times been superficial. This trend is highlighted in a Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) research report, entitled *Actual instances of corruption as reported in the Namibian print media, 1990-2004*, which indicates that *The Namibian's* coverage of instances of corruption over the last 15 years steadily declined - and between 1998 and 2004 it dropped sharply (NID 2005:9-12).

But what does this mean in terms of the paper's role and independence? It is safe to say that *The Namibian* is still the most trusted and credible voice amongst the independent publications and probably the most independent of them all. With regard to its role, the paper acts as a transmitter of statements by people in authority with its - at times - extensive coverage of the pronouncements of politicians and officials. *The Namibian* is probably the only paper that makes a concerted effort to cover community issues, although too often ordinary people's voices are missing from articles.

The paper's independent and critical tone has brought it into conflict with Government. *The Namibian* is currently the target of a Government advertising ban imposed by Cabinet in 2001, because of its criticism of Government and its policies (MISA 2005:80).

### Republikein

The only Afrikaans national newspaper, the *Republikein*, was founded in 1977 as a mouthpiece of the Republican Party (RP)<sup>14</sup> and the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), to which the RP was affiliated. In earlier years the *Republikein* was a major player amongst the mainstream media, or what Heuva (2001:xii) called the "colonial press". Until 1990 the paper was a mouthpiece for South African propaganda and actively supported the DTA, which was a principal player in Pretoria's attempts to create an internal settlement in Namibia that sidelined SWAPO. Since the paper was established by a political party and acted as a conduit for official propaganda, independent reporting was never a consideration prior to 1990. But Namibia's Independence seems to have changed all that. Executive Editor of the Democratic Media Holdings (DMH) group, Chris Jacobie, said in an inter-

<sup>13</sup> In 2005 the newspaper had regional offices in Oshakati and Swakopmund, and a regular correspondent at Keetmanshoop.

<sup>14</sup> The RP was founded in October 1977 by Dirk Mudge, who broke with the National Party over its insistence on maintaining certain racist laws.



view<sup>15</sup> that, after Independence, they decided to distance the newspaper from all political organisations - not only as a matter of survival in the now independent country, but also to embrace a new role of being an independent newspaper. In fact, the paper openly supported the DTA until at least the 1994 National Assembly elections, but has since adopted a more independent style and noticeably has not backed the RP, which relaunched itself in 2003. During the interview, Jacobie called the independent press "the amplifiers of our conscience", and said the reader and journalist were equal partners in the existence of any newspaper. The *Republikein* became part of DMH in 1992 and today markets itself as the largest advertising medium in the country. In a separate interview, the Editor of the *Republikein*, Gert Jacobie<sup>16</sup>, had the following to say:

*I think the Republikein and DMH group have played their role to such an extent in society that they are trusted by society and seen as an upstanding corporate citizen. We do our bit on a social level, a community level, and in the news and the economy.*

Both the Executive Editor and Editor described the role of the paper as answering to the information needs of its readership, fulfilling the advertising needs of its business partners, and acting as an extra-parliamentary opposition by reporting critically on Government's actions. However, as Gert Jacobie pointed out, some of the challenges facing the paper were a shortage of skilled journalists proficient in Afrikaans and capable of navigating the nuances of the language. Another challenge, according to Jacobie, was the ever-shrinking Afrikaans readership market.

So, once again, the question becomes the following: How independent is the paper, and what role does it play? Even a cursory look at the newspaper on most days would bear out the boast that it is the major advertising medium in

the print media. Most pages in the paper are devoted to advertising, with articles mainly at the front of the publication. If advertising content is a measure of success, the *Republikein* can certainly be described as successful. Nonetheless, as in the case of *The Namibian*, in-depth coverage of societal issues is minimal and advertising and advertorials dominate after the first few pages. Many stories are single-sourced and often feature an official - usually a man - speaking. Moreover, the Afrikaans language use is almost archaic. The paper seems to be heavily reliant on its business approach and editorial content seems to come second to this. This is borne out by statements made by the Jacobie brothers, who clearly emphasised the moneymaking side of the publication. As a result, the editorial content is in danger of being treated too much like a product.

Making money seems to be an overriding factor, rather than fulfilling the role of being a watchdog over society. This is underlined by the absence of any real investigative journalism or critical coverage of Government. One almost gets the impression that the paper, given its pre-Independence role, is reluctant to rock the political boat. It necessarily follows that if the publication is so heavily dependent on advertising, then advertisers could influence content. This, in turn, could have an influence on the independence and the role of the paper. However, the Executive Editor and Editor were both quick to point out that this had never been the case, and that advertisers knew they could not make demands on the independence of the paper.

It should also be borne in mind that the *Republikein* primarily serves a niche market that is relatively wealthy. What this might mean is that it tailors its media product to the needs of this niche readership. So the question now becomes this: Whose conscience does this paper amplify?

<sup>15</sup> By this author, 21 September 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Also by this author, also 21 September 2005.





Nonetheless, the NID (2005:9-12) research report on corruption coverage stated that the *Republikein's* reporting in this respect had risen sharply over the last few years. So there is some evidence that the paper is indeed fulfilling its role as critical voice and public guardian.

### Allgemeine Zeitung

The *Allgemeine Zeitung*, the only German-language daily in Africa, was founded in 1919. Owned by John Meinert (Pty) Ltd from 1978 to 1990, it was taken over by *Republikein* (Pty) Ltd in 1991. A year later, in 1992, it joined the DMH stable of publications.

The paper had close ties to the colonial and apartheid establishment throughout its history in pre Independence Namibia. However, like the *Republikein*, the paper divested itself of this connection after Independence, clearly as a survival tactic. The paper's readership, consisting mainly of Namibians of German extraction, is even smaller than that of the *Republikein*, with daily sales averaging around the 5 000 mark.

In an interview,<sup>17</sup> *Allgemeine Zeitung* Deputy Editor, Eberhard Hofmann said he understood the role of the independent press as being "to supplement the independent voices in Namibia". In the pre-Independence era the paper "operated within the frame of reference provided by South Africa", according to him. Statements made by Hofmann indicate that the paper covers society from a German-speaking Namibian's perspective. Considering that the 2004 United Nations Human Development Index Report states that this section of the population is the wealthiest – and, thus, enjoys a considerably higher quality of life than the average Namibian – it seems safe to assume that issues are tailored to this market. Hofmann also maintained that advertising, although less than that of the *Republikein*, was sufficient to keep

the paper going. This, in his opinion, was because advertisers realised that the readership of the paper was considerably better off than the average Namibian, and stressed that "(A)n advertiser cannot dictate to us". The paper faced many of the same challenges as the *Republikein*, including a shortage of skilled, multilingual journalists. He also recognised that investigative journalism was consistently lacking, not only in his publication, but also in most others in Namibia. He ascribed this to the relatively small size of newsrooms in the country and the constraints put on them by production time and resource allocation.

Based on the interviews with Eberhard Hofmann and Chris Jacobie, like the *Republikein* the *Allgemeine Zeitung* also seems to view itself primarily as a business and only secondarily as a news and information provider. However, this is probably understandable as the German paper, probably more than most, always has to consider its viability. Thus, if there were a considerable drop in advertising revenue and circulation, the future of the paper would be jeopardised. As the author of this paper does not speak German, the *Allgemeine Zeitung's* news coverage and other editorial content cannot be accurately evaluated; however, given the publication's reliance on advertising and its minimal market penetration, its independence has to be questioned. Furthermore, the paper carries a high level of content sourced from Germany and rarely seems to cover wider community issues – although it does cover issues of relevance to German-speaking Namibians – and almost seems to stand outside the realities of Namibia. Coverage is also very reactive, and investigative reporting, according to regular readers this writer spoke to, is a rare occurrence.

That the paper fulfils a role and that it serves a niche in the market are given; otherwise it would not still be in exist-

<sup>17</sup> With this author, 20 September 2005.



tence. However, this role is essentially a moneymaking one. Or as Hofmann himself put it, the predicament that the paper faces is that "(W)e are limited by language".

### 3.2.2 So is this independence?

What becomes evident about the three papers discussed above is that they are all highly individualistic and, therefore, different from each other. Namibia has a tradition of newspapers in which owner-editors took a dominant role, with few checks or balances. None of the newspapers under consideration here have editorial boards or ombudspersons who adjudicate on readers' complaints. Independence can produce idiosyncrasy as well, as in the case of the *Windhoek Observer*, which bears the mark of its maverick owner-editor Hannes Smith throughout.

As a result of the political divides of the past and the divergent ways in which the newspapers have developed, there is little consistent cooperation between these publications in respect of media issues or how they view themselves in relation to each other. For example, it took 14 years for the newspapers to establish an Editors' Forum. Despite this distance between the publications, none of them views the others as direct competition, perhaps because they are all principally published in different languages.

However, one aspect that applies across the board is that these newspapers do not undertake consistent investigative reporting or serious critical analysis – as opposed to straight reportage – concerning the country's power structures. This is something that is vital in a developing society like Namibia's and something that is expected of the independent press in more developed societies. As a result, *Insight Namibia*, a monthly current affairs magazine, has been able to quickly

establish a track record on investigative reporting because detailed probing, particularly on economic issues, is missing from the newspapers. However, this is a role the daily newspapers should be playing. It is evident that the editors of these publications are aware that they are not properly fulfilling their role as independent watchdogs of society: all have admitted inadequacies and have clearly stated that they are working on improving their coverage.

To return to the working definition provided at the beginning of this paper, all three of these publications are *independent* in the sense that they are not owned, controlled or close to Government or its agencies. They also do not see themselves as puppets of the purse even though, in the cases of the *Republikein* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, commercial considerations appear to be at the forefront of their approach to journalism. All three papers acknowledge that advertising revenues are crucial to their survival, but maintain they are not editing reports to please or appease commercial interests. All three contain critical coverage at times, and seem to take their role as the independent press seriously.

## 4. SOME OTHER INFLUENCES TO CONSIDER

### 4.1 The role of ownership

Any discussion around the media, and the print media in particular, has to take note of how ownership influences the functions and role of a media organisation. Concerning the three independent dailies, two of these publications are owned by one company, DMH, which is governed by the Democratic Media Trust. Both the Editor and Deputy Editor of the *Republikein* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, respectively, said the Trust had



been set up to ensure that the money generated by the papers stayed within the organisation in order that DMH publications remained sustainable.

In the case of *The Namibian*, the paper is published by the Free Press of Namibia (Pty) Ltd, which is controlled by the non-profit Media Trust of Namibia and governed by a Board of Trustees. However, ten years after the creation of the Trust was announced, its establishment and the structure of the newspaper as a whole remains a “work in progress”, according to the paper itself (*The Namibian* 2005:3). As is the case with the DMH publications, the function and purpose of this Trust is to make sure the paper is economically viable. Gwen Lister, Editor of *The Namibian*, is the only Director of Free Press of Namibia (Pty) Ltd, according to an article in the 10th anniversary publication of the paper (*The Namibian* 1995:26). Taking into consideration the stated aims of the paper as outlined in its founding editorial, the influence of ownership on the paper does not seem to be a major issue and Lister has on numerous occasions publicly affirmed her belief in the independence of the paper. She has in some ways become an embodiment of the independent spirit in journalism and her role has been widely recognised both locally and internationally in that she has received numerous international media awards. According to both the Editor and Executive Editor of the *Republikein* as well as the Deputy Editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung*<sup>18</sup>, editorial independence was highly valued within the DMH stable of publications. It seems, therefore, that such independence would be very difficult to sacrifice.

However, there are other factors that might influence the role and independence of the press in Namibia. One of the most important of these is that DMH owns the principal printing press in Namibia. What would happen if DMH decided to reserve the presses to publish

only its own papers? This question was posed by Jeanette Minnie, former Regional Director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), in an article in the 15th anniversary magazine of *The Namibian* (2000:45). This is an important issue, considering that DMH publishes virtually all other papers, including *The Namibian*, *New Era* and *Namibia Today* – the latter being the SWAPO mouthpiece.

Another factor to keep in mind when discussing the independent press is that, while Namibia covers a large geographic area, it is sparsely populated. Thus, distribution – and, therefore, reach – is a problem for all the national newspapers. If newspapers are not distributed to all corners of the country, then their effectiveness in playing a role on a national level is reduced (Minnie 2000:45). However, this is also where radio plays an especially important role. In Namibia, radio is arguably the most influential medium of communication for the mass, largely rural, audience.

There is also another side to the discussion of ownership, with which no one seems to be comfortable. In Namibia most, if not all, of the private or independent media are still white-owned or –controlled, 15 years after Independence. This aspect begs exploration, as it did in South Africa in the late 1990s.<sup>19</sup>

Considering how often senior Government officials have over the last 15 years referred to the independent press as “imperialist” and “foreign-owned”, and considering that none of the major papers has a counterpart written entirely in an indigenous African language,<sup>20</sup> the questions about white- or black-owned media remain pertinent.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews, 20-21 September 2005.

<sup>19</sup> The Human Rights Commission of South Africa in 1999 launched a year-long investigation into racism in the media. Editorial control, ownership and portrayal featured prominently in the investigation. At the time, the media in that country were still predominantly white. The issue of stories being told from a white journalist’s perspective also enjoyed prominence.

<sup>20</sup> Although *The Namibian* does feature a two- or three-page Oshiwambo section each day.



## 4.2 Under Government pressure?

An independent and critical press is a threat to those in high positions who have something to hide. Over the years, journalists and newspapers – particularly those discussed in the latter section of this paper – have been labelled as “imperialist” and/or “foreign-owned” whenever they dared to do their duty as independents and report on wrongdoing or corrupt practices. David Lush (1995:23), in the 10th anniversary publication of *The Namibian*, wrote the following in this regard:

*Like their colleagues all over the continent, Namibian media workers do find themselves at the mercy of (mostly-local) power mongers and money brokers. (sic)*

As Eberhard Hofmann of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* stated, this type of negative reaction from Government might lead to independent publications censoring themselves, as happened to some mainstream publications before Independence. This, in turn, reduced their independence, role and usefulness in society. However, it should be kept in mind that the atmosphere within which the media functioned before Independence and that in which it functions now are poles apart. In the pre-Independence era, papers were often physically harassed, as in the case of *The Namibian*, whereas in post-Independence Namibia, State dissatisfaction with the media seems to be implied rather than overt. Once again, there is always an exception to any rule. The Government’s advertising ban on *The Namibian* since 2001 serves as a prime example of Government flexing its muscles to try to curb the influence and role of the paper. But the ban seems to have had limited impact on the operation and functioning of the paper, which already had strong support from other advertisers and a loyal and expanding readership.

If a Freedom of Information Act becomes a reality in Namibia, as is common in other democratic societies in the world, the expansion of public access to information in possession of the State would enhance the role of the print media. The more fundamental question is whether this legislation will ever see the light of day.

At the moment the relationship between Government and the press, especially the private independent press, seems to be one of love-hate.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this paper, research on the subject of the role of the independent press and media in general in Namibia is scarce. Much of what is contained in this paper is based on an analysis of historical developments, personal views, deductions, and contemporaneous interviews conducted by the writer. Obviously, much more investigation has to be done into the role of the press, especially the mainstream press under colonialism.

Too often the independent press uses Government as its principal – and only – source of information, at the expense of alternative points of view. The 2002/2003 Media Monitoring Project Annual Report conducted by MISA’s Namibia Chapter states the following in this regard (MISA 2003):

*Given that these media quote so heavily from the President, Ministers and other government officials, this creates a strong sense that they are vehicles for the government of the day rather than reflecting the diversity of Namibian society.*

The report (ibid.) also refers to the Namibian media as being chronically weak because of this.





It seems as if the independent press has not quite figured out what their role and purpose is in this continually evolving and developing society. The publications discussed spend much of their energies and resources on simply producing a newspaper each day without having the time or inclination to really explore the possibilities of their independence.

The independent press, in their unpacking of Namibian realities, should seriously and vigorously test the constitutionally protected freedoms of expression and the press in how they cover society. As this paper has highlighted, an independent media, including the print media, have an important role to play in fostering democracy.

As the Fourth Estate, an independent media serve as a watchdog over society – creating pressure and motivation for Government structures and other institutions to be transparent and accountable for their actions. This is especially true in a society such as Namibia's, where civil society is generally weak, the elected parliamentary opposition is fractured, and the ruling party is constantly trying to impose its hegemony.

For a democratically developing society, the role of the media becomes especially significant and it is not surprising, given the Namibian context, that the independent media have appropriated for themselves the mantle of an influential extra-parliamentary voice. It is a crucial role: one that should be considerably developed and expanded, not just by the publications that have been the focus of this paper, but by other media as well. Then we may be able to answer the question posed in the title of another MISA publication,<sup>21</sup> "So this is democracy?", in the affirmative.

<sup>21</sup> MISA brings out its annual report on media freedom in the Southern African Development Community under this title.