



Having it both ways: balancing market and political interests at a South African daily newspaper

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Abstract

The process of democratic transition in South Africa has brought many changes to the national political economic context within which media companies operate. These changes have also brought challenges for South African media companies to reposition themselves ideologically, with their political-economic interests in mind. Coinciding with these local challenges to the South African media's ideological positioning and economic strategising was the re-entry of the South African media into the global arena. Heightened levels of competition and the accelerated influx of foreign content have increased the imperative for local media groups to adjust their strategies. Local media companies have implemented several strategies, including restructuring, globalisation and commercialisation, in response to these challenges. The implications of these macro-shifts can also be noticed on the level of specific individual media outlets. This article examines such a repositioning at the Western Cape-based Afrikaans daily newspaper *Die Burger*. A mouthpiece of the Nationalist government during the apartheid era, *Die Burger* had to fundamentally shift its ideological positioning to fall into step with the values of a newly democratic society. This was done by distancing itself from its former political position, and instead embracing a supposedly apolitical market ideology. The shift towards a market-led perspective can be seen most clearly in a management strategy known as 'synergy', a practice raising questions regarding orthodox journalistic ideals such as editorial independence, and democratic ideals such as equal access to the mediated public sphere. This article aims to establish the manifestation,

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nature and influence of synergy at *Die Burger* and its implications from the perspective of critical political economy.

Keywords: Afrikaans; apartheid; arts festivals; *Die Burger*; political economy; synergy.

Introduction

In a recent study of contemporary Estonian media, Harro-Loit & Saks (2006: 312) lament the diminution of the border that separates journalism from advertising. While acknowledging that the commercialisation of journalism is increasingly taking place around the world as part of the spread of consumer culture that views journalism as primarily a commodity, they also point to the particular vulnerability of media in an environment

that has changed dramatically from totalitarian political censorship exercised across half a century to a media context which arguably enshrines the independence of journalists ... The counterbalance to economic pressure should be journalism's ideology of professional independence, but in transitional societies the journalistic community and its professional culture may be too weak to resist such pressures. Furthermore, media concentration and a modest job market make the ideology of professional independence extremely vulnerable since journalists tend to be less loyal to their professional ideals than to the ideology of their employer.

Although direct comparisons between European and African countries remain problematic in many ways, the commercial pressures on the mediated public sphere in Estonia as a transitional country do raise interesting points of similarity with post-apartheid South Africa. Although the latter is much larger (a population of 47.4 million versus 1.36 million), the South African media market is still fragmented according to language and race, which creates several smaller distinct markets. The mainstream print media sector (excluding the recent spate of popular tabloid papers aimed predominantly at a black or coloured working class) is especially small in terms of the population as a whole, focused as it is on a literate and well-to-do elite.

South Africa is also a transitional democracy, emerging only recently from decades of apartheid rule and centuries of colonial repression. The shift from an oppressive environment to one where journalists self-regulate within an industry experiencing escalated commercial pressures as a result of global competition, has created similar dilemmas for the South African mediated public sphere. This pressure has manifested acutely in the Afrikaans media sector, which had been forced to undergo major shifts in its political orientation after the demise of apartheid – a period during which the sector was aligned with the ruling regime.

This article will discuss one of the strategies that the Afrikaans media sector has used to reposition itself ideologically and economically, through a particular focus on one of the major Afrikaans newspapers, *Die Burger*. This repositioning, while

successful from a commercial point of view, has far-reaching implications for the role that the Afrikaans media sector has come to play in the post-apartheid public sphere. Through this discussion the article hopes to provide an illustration – from the post-apartheid South African context – of some of the issues that media in other transitional societies in a globalised world might also be facing.

Background

The advent of democracy in 1994 brought significant changes to the South African media industry. In the changing political and economic climate the media were transformed and restructured in a number of different ways. While these shifts in the first place were linked to the fundamental political changes that South Africa underwent during its transition from apartheid to democracy, traces of neo-liberal globalisation can also be seen in the increasingly commercial nature of the South African media sphere.

In the privately owned print media sector companies and publications changed hands in a process of drastic restructuring, in an attempt to become more representative of the country's racial demographics. Several critics (Tomaselli 2000; Jacobs, Timmermans & Mgoqi 2001; Bennetts 2004; Duncan 2003; Steenveld 2004; and Berger 2004, *inter alia*) have, however, argued that the South African mainstream print media continue to operate under the same commercial logic as they did before democratisation. In other words, even as racial redress took place on an ownership and executive level, the perspective and orientation of the mainstream print media remained informed by the search for lucrative audiences. To exacerbate the situation, the previously alternative, anti-apartheid print media publications disappeared after democratisation (with the possible exception of the weekly *Mail & Guardian*, having evolved from the erstwhile alternative *Weekly Mail* to a more high-brow mainstream publication, yet retaining a critical perspective). The entry of tabloid newspapers to the market has stirred up controversy and criticism, and although they are certainly commercial enterprises (they also form part of big media conglomerates Naspers and Independent), they have managed to focus attention on a section of society hitherto largely ignored by mainstream commercial print media (see Wasserman & Du Bois 2006; Wasserman 2006a). Attempts to diversify the public sphere through state intervention and restructuring remain largely limited to the broadcasting sector (where new community radio stations were established). The work of the Media Diversity and Development Agency, aimed at providing funding for start-up community print media, remains limited.

While the media in post-apartheid South Africa has to some extent displaced formal political organisation as the site for the contestation of claims to rights and citizenship (Jacobs 2006), it is still marked with the strategies of inclusion and exclusion inherited from apartheid. Market segmentation largely correlates with persistent

racial categories, including emergent popular forms such as the conglomerate-owned tabloids which cater for the majority lower-income black audiences.

Not surprisingly, then, the mainstream media are biased towards the current government's neo-liberal macro-economic framework and reject attempts by, for instance, new social movements to change the dominant order (Jacobs 2004). What remains important to understand in terms of the post-apartheid mainstream media's political role, is that the broad-based politico-economic consensus is obscured underneath an overtly liberal-pluralist normative framework which proclaims media independence and political neutrality within the broader framework of constitutional democracy (cf. Wasserman 2006b). Therefore, while the media in post-apartheid South Africa are central participants in the continued power struggles for control of public discourse and political agendas, explicit support for political parties (as was the case under apartheid) has disappeared. Instead, the media's political positioning now only becomes evident through a critical reading of their structures, routines and discourses. Such a reading brings to light a fragmentation and disproportionate distribution of symbolic capital indicative of the fractures and contestations in broader society, as well as of continuing political power struggles.

While a number of commentators (e.g. Tomaselli 2000; Horwitz 2001; Jacobs 2004) have outlined the politico-economic shifts occurring in the South African media since the beginning of the democratic transition, little attention has yet been paid to how these macro-shifts translate to the micro level of individual media products. This article sets out to investigate how the broader shift in the South African media towards a liberal democratic ethos, coupled with a market-orientation, was reflected in an individual newspaper, and what the implications of this shift were for journalism, and ultimately the post-apartheid public sphere.

The shift from apartheid to democracy

Under apartheid, the white press was a 'pivotal institution in the racially and ethnically based struggles for economic and political power' (Horwitz 2001: 36). The mainstream commercial print media were broadly divided along ideological lines that corresponded with ethnic and linguistic differences in the white community, with very limited attempts to cater for black or coloured audiences (e.g. in separate, 'extra' editions). While English-language newspapers were linked to the interests of mining capital (and provided a limited, liberal critique of apartheid), Afrikaans-language newspapers supported Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state. They served as key institutions for the articulation of nationalist ideology, even while some of them questioned the establishment from time to time (Tomaselli & Dunn 2001).

Especially the Cape Town-based daily *Die Burger* (owned by Nasionale Pers, or Naspers as the conglomerate is known today) acted as the mouthpiece of the National Party, with an inside track to government decisions and policies (Horwitz 2001: 46). The demise of apartheid meant the loss of white privilege and Afrikaner political

power. Under apartheid, the Afrikaans media by and large served as vehicles for the ideology of apartheid and platforms for the National Party. In a new, democratic society, Afrikaans media had to rid themselves of this historical load and reposition themselves ideologically and politically in a new democratic society.

With the start of democratic negotiations in 1990, *Die Burger's* mother company, Naspers, ended its official association with the National Party. It exchanged its promotion of ethnic Afrikaner nationalism for support for the process of negotiations that led to the first democratic elections in 1994 and the adoption of a negotiated constitution in 1996.

Tomaselli (2000: 286–287) describes the transformation of Naspers as a process in which the link between the company's political and economic interests was rendered explicit. In terms of its economic interests, the National Party's inability to represent big capital in the post-apartheid era led Naspers to break with the practices of Afrikaner capitalism. In 1996/97 Naspers formed new subsidiaries and sold shares to black businesspeople. Its managing director, Ton Vosloo, announced that the company had sold the 'family silver' to black business interests for moral and practical reasons (*Sunday Times*, 11 August 1996: 4; see also Tomaselli 2000: 286).

In terms of political interests, the Afrikaans newspapers underwent significant shifts, some more than others. The Gauteng daily *Beeld* had consistently taken a more liberal stance than *Die Burger*, which until deep into the 1990s still vilified the new government and processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that sought to bring apartheid transgressions out into the open. *Die Burger* still officially supported the National Party in the 1994 election, but not in the next election in 1999 (Scholtz 2005).

As business entities, the Afrikaans media still occupy a powerful position in the media landscape in this country, and Afrikaans media audiences are well represented in the higher economic strata. The repositioning of Afrikaans media therefore also entailed a negotiation between a position of material power on the one hand, and a new-found identity as cultural minority on the other – while the Afrikaans-speaking community also had to redefine itself as inclusive of both the white and black speakers of the language.

The abovementioned tensions between the political and economic spheres can be noted in the discourse accompanying the repositioning of *Die Burger*.

Die Burger today declares different political and economic aims and interests from those that it openly professed at the height of apartheid, when it was known as 'the mother of Afrikaner nationalism' (Tomaselli 2000: 287), and by implication thus also the form of ethnic capitalism associated with it (ibid: 280). Since the democratisation of South Africa the publishers, editors and managers of *Die Burger* have regularly fluctuated between an emphasis on political or economic interests when trying to explain the reasons for the paper's radical repositioning (Bekker 2005; Brand, H 2005; Breytenbach 2005; Rossouw 2005a, 2005b; Louw 2003: 42, 73; Rossouw 2001).

These fluctuations seem to result from a tension between the imperative to clearly demonstrate the newspaper's new-found commitment to non-racial democracy and majority rule, while remaining politically non-partisan enough to pursue market success unhindered.

The fluctuation between political and economic explanations becomes very apparent through a process called 'synergy' – a strategy of (self-) marketing and promotional campaigns with partners inside and outside the Naspers media conglomerate. This strategy is a factor to be reckoned with, also on an editorial level and in the content of *Die Burger*. Because synergy brings a new and seemingly stronger focus on commercial considerations and self-interest into the newsroom, it raises professional, ethical and ideological questions regarding the role of journalism in a changing society.

Definitions of synergy

In the world of big (media) business, the term 'synergy' often refers to a cooperation strategy between different parts of the same organisation in order to maximise profits and/or reduce costs to gain a competitive advantage. Used in this sense synergy has become something of an industry buzz word, but it still means something different to different people (Mosco 1996: 192; see also Bekker 2005; Rossouw 2005b; Brand, H 2005). Media scholars also use synergy in a number of ways, both to criticise and support media commercialisation (Mosco 1996: 192). This study will concentrate on the critical perspective.

In the literature of the political economy of communication, synergy is often described as a form of 'strategic partnership' (see for instance Golding & Murdock 1991: 23–24; Reich 1992: 91–94; Webster 1995: 75–96; Mosco 1996: 175–199; Curran 2000: 128–133; Croteau & Hoynes 2000: 46–75, 2001: 109–145). In this context, then, synergy is used (at least in part) to analyse and describe the global reach of corporate media power and hegemony through their ownership, management structures and relationships through boards of directors, shareholding schemes and other links to political and economic elites.

The growth and extension of corporate power can also be labeled a form of synergy. The fact that integration – horizontal (cooperation between different media platforms) and vertical (cooperation within a specific media production chain) – involves strategic partnerships on different levels, leads Botma (2006) to propose the alternative terms 'vertical synergy' and 'horizontal synergy' to illustrate the link between the concepts of synergy and integration.

However, in contrast to media practitioners and scholars who prefer to limit the concept of synergy to strategic partnerships within the same organisation, this study aims to broaden the definition to include strategic partnerships between different organisations and powerful groups, including the relationship between media companies and advertisers, promoters and readers. Synergy then also becomes an

analytical tool for approaching wider media tendencies such as commodification, diversification and consumer observation from a critical perspective. Motivation and support for this move are drawn from the broad definition of synergy in the work of media scholars such as, inter alia, Golding & Murdock 1991; Reich 1992; Webster 1995; Mosco 1996; Curran, 2000; and Croteau & Hoynes 2000. Their uses of the term 'synergy' refer in the main to American and British examples on a corporate level, but often also include examples of editorial analysis on a meso and micro level.

Thus defined, synergy refers to macro processes like integration and conglomeration, but also to sponsorship and marketing actions on a meso level. In the case of Naspers and *Die Burger*, 'synergy' is used to describe the organisation of coverage on an editorial micro level around special sponsorship events.

Viewing this strategy from the point of view of critical political economy, the concept of synergy can be defined as follows:

The formation of partnerships (with partners in and/or outside a particular company) for the canalisation of resources (power and money) through a political economic system with the strategic aim to maximise advantages and minimise opposition.

Synergy in historical context

The media company Nasionale Pers (Naspers today) was established in 1915, publishing *De Burger* as its first newspaper in 1915 (Naspers website 2005). This newspaper, as well as its subsequent sister newspapers *Volksblad*, *Oosterlig*, *Beeld* and *Rapport*, supported the broad ideals of the policy of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid from their inception, albeit taking a more reformist stance in the 1980s and 1990s (Diederichs 1999: 76; Froneman 2004: 61, 66; Muller 1990: 760). From the outset it is clear that the political and economic interests of the media company Naspers and its newspapers like *Die Burger* are inseparable, and will always have to be balanced with each other in some or other way. Political economic approaches assuming this link between the political and the economic have often been criticised for emphasising structural power at the expense of individual agency. When investigating the way in which strategies like 'synergy' have been used to reposition *Die Burger* in terms of a new post-apartheid political dispensation while meeting commercial challenges, care should be taken to include a focus on relationships and individual agency within the journalistic environment.

Although this study accepts that no clear division exists in practice between political and economic interests at Naspers, it makes practical sense to develop a theoretical model with a separate focus, as did Froneman (2004) in his description of the publication motives of media owners. Froneman's use of concepts from Schillinger's dynamic systems theory (1989) is relevant here because it allows for

the inclusion of human agency in a structural analysis of a media strategy such as synergy.

Using C. Wright Mills' definition of motives in his 1940 essay 'Situating actions and vocabularies of motives' Schillinger (1989: 5–6) argues that 'strategies' and 'motives' are synonymous. According to Schillinger (ibid: 5) motives are cohesive strategies for justifying action or behaviour. In the context of the definition of synergy in this study (see above) the justification of synergy (one motive/strategy), can thus be seen as an indication of the broader range of motives/strategies used to balance political and economic interests.

In order to describe publication motives in world press systems, Schillinger (ibid: 7–11) identifies three primary motives: survival, ideology and market. For each of these she develops a vocabulary for classifying press systems. These vocabularies, used to justify motivated action, are also applicable on a micro level of media analysis (ibid: 6), as Froneman (2004) illustrates.

Froneman adapts Schillinger's motives to arrive at two central motives that drive media strategies – idealism and market orientation – in his analysis of the general interest Naspers magazine *Huisgenoot*. These two motives correspond to a theoretical division between political and economic interests and will be used in this study to explore the functioning of 'synergy' as a motive/strategy at *Die Burger*. The adapted Schillinger/Froneman model of motives can be summarised as follows:

Idealism (political): To build a group and protect it through the challenging of power and influence. This includes the creation of hegemony about the timeless right to existence of own interests. The focus is, therefore, on own interests and constructive content. Timeliness is not important and the emphasis falls on positive, usable information, values and ideals that do not have a market value. Accompanying values include loyalty to group identity and unity.

Market (economic): The protection and development of market interests take priority. Only private enterprise can ensure economic development and the optimisation of wealth. Pluralism of ideas and opinions, personal freedom and initiatives, democracy and individuality are emphasised in the vocabulary of the market motive because it catalyses innovation, competition and a consumer culture, and undermines strong state regulation.

These two motives underpin the theoretical points of departure of this study. It is accepted that seemingly opposing political and economic interests will always be jointly present at *Die Burger* and will eventually have to be balanced. Because these interests (as part of national and transnational processes) form a complex, dynamic whole, one way of identifying their functioning in an individual media outlet is by analysing the motives of the publishers, managers and editors of the newspaper. Such an analysis will also bring to light ways in which one of these particular interests (political or economic) is being covered up for strategic reasons, or being brought into balance with the other. This argument leads to another theoretical assumption,

namely that synergy is a clearly distinguishable strategy and/or motive used to balance political and economic interests, or to disguise one of these interests for strategic reasons.

Synergy at *Die Burger*

With the two abovementioned theoretical statements in mind, specific questions and issues pertaining to synergy at *Die Burger* can be investigated by a qualitative analysis of newspaper content, corporate literature and published statements by the newspaper's owners, publishers, managers and staff members.

The analysis of synergy motives at *Die Burger* involves the application of the adapted Schillinger/Froneman model to public statements by the publishers and editors of the company. To analyse synergy in the newspaper content, about 200 samples of news reports, advertisements and promotional copy pertaining to synergy projects from 2004–2005, in which *Die Burger* had been involved as a partner, were analysed as examples of 'synergy traces' (Botma 2006: 32–33; 269–279). In order to establish triangulation, findings from interviews with key personnel of Naspers, Media24 and *Die Burger* were also included (edited transcriptions of these interviews are available on request from the authors).

Research questions included the reasons for the strategy of synergy; an indication of the broader political and economic motives and strategies of owners and publishers that synergy forms part of; how synergy is organised and promoted in the paper; and the possible influences of synergy on the content and journalism practice of the newspaper. These issues are addressed in a discussion of three themes.

The political-economic challenges that synergy at *Die Burger* seeks to address

The inability of the National Party (NP) to represent and safeguard the interests of big capital in the transition to the post-apartheid era has played a role in the transformation of Naspers and *Die Burger* since the late 1980s (Tomaselli 2000: 286–287), and led to a range of synergy projects since 1994, including the sponsorship and organisation of Afrikaans cultural festivals (Vosloo 2003). Without the political protection of the NP, and in the face of the real or perceived threat for Naspers, *Die Burger* and Afrikaans language and culture, strategies had to be formulated that would, in different ways, both protect the company's economic interest and balance that with its political interest.

Either political or economic interests are routinely understated by managers or editors of *Die Burger* when talking about different synergy projects – the context of the project determines which of the two interests will be understated/stressed. When statements made at different times are juxtaposed, it becomes clear that different motives are emphasised according to context and strategic need. Consider

the following two statements by the then editor of *Die Burger*, Arrie Rossouw. He declared (2001: 6) his reasons and optimism for *Die Burger's* involvement at the annual Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) – the oldest and biggest Afrikaans cultural festival, and also arguably the stronghold of traditional white interests – as follows:

On condition that the naturally converging interests of white and coloured Afrikaans speakers are stimulated further, the economic inequality amongst speakers can be reduced by empowerment, and the technological sense of adventure amongst Afrikaans speakers can be enhanced, the word Afrikaans will be heard for some time to come (and, must I add, will be the key to profits!). (Translated from Afrikaans.)

This expression can clearly be identified in terms of the market motive. But, in a different context, Rossouw (2005b) declares his motive for supporting Afrikaans arts festivals as follows:

Except that it is a business decision (and many people now accuse us of having this as our only consideration), it is also a strategic decision: we want to promote the Afrikaans language in South Africa, and we think that as a newspaper we can play a cardinal role in this regard. So, naturally, we are going to give more attention to an Afrikaans arts festival, or pop festival (...) or bazaar where a lot of Afrikaans speakers gather, also with the aim, inter alia, of promoting Afrikaans. (Translated from Afrikaans.)

This statement in turn understates the economic consideration (without negating it, or for that matter, balancing it instead with the stated political motives) but definitely leans toward the political side of the vocabulary of motives. When questioned directly whether Afrikaans then (also) remains a 'political' interest for the newspaper, Rossouw (2005b) described it as a 'cultural' interest.

Ton Vosloo (2003: 4), chairman of Naspers, also tried to balance political and economic motives in new ways in his description of the origin of the KKNK:

Our biggest stakeholder in terms of where we sell, etc., when it comes to newspapers, magazines and books, will probably be the Afrikaans-speaking community and their endeavours. For argument's sake, when the Afrikaners gave away political power in 1994, I started (...) festivals with an Afrikaans heart, a cultural affinity, because they said our people were down at the time and you need to give them some hope because South Africa is going to continue and it's not going to be as bad (...) and we started these festivals (...) and we said (...) let's have fun.

The fact that *Die Burger* is mostly at pains to express its support for Afrikaans in the context of the multilingual spirit of the constitution of 1996 (Media24 website 2005; Rossouw 2001; Rossouw 2005a & b), points to reasons why managers like Bekker (2005) and editors like Rossouw (2005b) tend to understate the newspaper's current political stance and potential role in ethnic mobilisation. H Brand (2005) explains this as Afrikaans newspapers being 'inhibited by their past'.

From the above variations, read together with statements by Vosloo (2003), Bekker (2005) and H Brand (2005), a picture emerges of different motives/strategies to reposition the newspaper in the new South Africa (since 1994), in reaction to a range of challenges to its political and economic interests, in different contexts. This finding does not correlate with the general perception that the interests of *Die Burger* under apartheid had been mostly political before 1994, and became mostly economic after formal democratisation. At Naspers and *Die Burger* political and economic interests are inseparable, also because of the demographics of the market.

While *Die Burger* cannot be described as a 'white' title in terms of readership anymore, the description is still true of the readership's income profile (and thus also possibly the contribution to advertising revenue). *Die Burger's* white readers (approximately 42% of the total) are also 65% of the buyers of the paper and belong to the middle and higher income groups (AMPS 2004; Breytenbach 2005). Therefore the white group may still be an important focus point for advertisers, while interests in the coloured group have to be developed for political and economic gains. The circulation and marketing managers of *Die Burger* described their frustration at having to deal with a clear division between the paper's white and coloured readers, where income from the white market segment is higher and more certain (Breytenbach 2005; Beukes 2005). Marketing must therefore also be repeated in clearly demarcated geographical areas to reach all readers. This colour divide is also still clearly visible at most major Afrikaans arts festivals sponsored by Naspers (Breytenbach 2005; Beukes 2005; Topley 2005).

Of these sponsored Afrikaans cultural events, currently the most aggressive synergy marketing to bridge the gap between white and coloured readers for both ideological and economic reasons centres around the Suidoosterfees (an annual festival in Cape Town). Although the festival failed to take off commercially in the first years after its inception in 2003 and also failed to attract many white festival goers, it showed signs of drawing a more inclusive crowd in 2006, partly because the festival was moved away from the original venue close to predominately coloured townships, to a traditional mainstream theatre venue in the centre of Cape Town. The festival represents a huge synergy project in which Koos Bekker, CEO of Naspers, takes a special coordinating interest. Participating affiliates spend a great deal of money on the organisation, infrastructure and marketing of this pet project of Bekker's, to impress 'the boss' (Beukes 2005). It is therefore questionable whether this struggling festival has gathered its own spontaneous momentum yet.

Die Burger's clear support of Afrikaans in the current South African context (Media24 website 2005) means being able to draw on (in part) a wealthy niche market – a sought-after commodity in the modern media landscape. But in the exploitation of the market there also lies a stiff challenge to change historic perceptions and cultivate and harvest new interests, without losing valuable vested interests. An urgent repositioning in terms of both these sections of the Afrikaans market was brought on by the change to a new political dispensation which demanded that newspapers

like *Rapport* and *Die Burger* (which under apartheid had separate editions for white and coloured readers) gain the trust of coloured readers. At the same time, economic interests dictated that they not alienate their white readers (Wasserman 2005: 21–23). This was a daunting task that called for creative strategies.

According to *Die Burger* the biggest threat to its survival and growth is declining circulation (Breytenbach 2005; Rossouw 2005b). Circulation building therefore forms the basis of synergy projects structured around the newspaper's subscriber loyalty card (Beukes 2005) (more about this later). Aside from subscriber recruitment, *Die Burger* has contemplated a few drastic strategies to safeguard and strengthen its market position, such as accepting English advertisements in its free community newspapers ('knock-and-drop' derivatives of the main paper) and including English supplements in the main newspaper (Louw 2003). The placing of English advertisements on a large scale could, however, damage *Die Burger's* credibility as a champion of Afrikaans. Such an economic strategy would also have negative consequences for the other (ideological) side of the balance sheet.

The proficiency of readers of *Die Burger* in English is, however, being exploited economically without political consequences, by having the newspaper take part in synergy projects around Naspers's television interests, like M-Net. Reality TV in particular gets a lot of coverage in *Die Burger* in this way (Louw 2005).

The apparent ageing of the paper's reader profile is also seen as a threat to its survival (Rossouw 2005b). Therefore a number of synergy projects are aimed at young people, with the result that parts of the content are popularised specifically (more about this later).

The organisation of synergy at *Die Burger*

Subsidiaries of Naspers meet regularly at a group synergy forum to discuss joint ventures and products (Schneider 2005). This allows the managing director, Koos Bekker, to coordinate special projects, like Afrikaans arts and culture festivals, with the aim of involving the conglomerate's book publishers, magazines, newspapers, and Internet and television interests. *Die Burger* regularly takes part in synergy projects within Naspers, while also getting involved in synergy projects with partners outside the company. This means that the political and economic interests of the company and newspaper must be taken into consideration on a strategic macro level as well as on the micro level of editorial planning.

Sponsorships also form part of the entrenched synergy strategy at *Die Burger* (Breytenbach 2005), and can be seen as part of the commodification of capitalist media enterprises (Mosco 1996: 153). However, with radical changes to the political-economic context within which the newspaper functioned in the past decade, the nature and intensity of the sponsorship deals that Naspers, Media 24 and *Die Burger* became involved in, changed considerably. Within a few years of the establishment of the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees in 1995, the phenomenal growth of this

Afrikaans arts and culture festival established it as the model for sponsored Afrikaans festivals in towns nationwide (and even internationally) (Rossouw 2005b).

The sponsorship of festivals involves subsidiaries of the company on different levels. For *Die Burger*, its involvement includes pre-promotion, responsibility for aspects of organisation, as well as reporting during and reviewing after the festival (Breytenbach 2005). In this way sponsorships also have clear implications for journalistic practice, because the boundary between promotion, advertising and editorial content is being put under severe pressure (more about this later). Festival sponsorships at *Die Burger* generally entail three different contributions: cash, operational support, and dedicated media coverage. In some instances the newspaper also contributes to the festival program by sponsoring the attendance and performance of its own artists, known as *Plussterre* (Plus Stars).

These artists are usually lesser known and relatively inexpensive to acquire, mostly by means of talent competitions amongst readers. Breytenbach (2005) refers to them as 'no-name brand' artists. *Die Burger* also uses *Plussterre* to supply entertainment during sponsorship, branding and promotional occasions, for example the regular announcement of the winners of circulation-building competitions such as *Pryslyn* (a regular feature since the late 1990s).

Because of the popularity of the *Plusster*-concept, in 2004 *Die Burger* launched a huge publicity campaign, modelled on its affiliate M-Net's *Idols*, to select its first official *Plusster*, Willem Botha (Breytenbach 2005). The 17-year-old became a household name overnight and as part of his prize (despite a limited repertoire and no prior credentials) he was invited to perform on major festival stages with the cream of Afrikaans pop stars. Despite scathing reviews early on (see Booyens 2005: 10) the newspaper 'carried' this teenager for the full year of his 'reign', continuously singing his praises in promotional copy dressed up as editorial content, even 'reviews'. The former editor of *Die Burger*, Arrie Rossouw (2005b), suggests that *Die Burger* became frustrated by the fact that it could only report on the 'stars' created by other commercial institutions, and thus decided to create its own pop idol. Economically, it was clearly an attempt to exploit the popularity of Afrikaans music, while politically it was also most likely an attempt to bridge the gap between the newspaper's white and coloured markets (the finalists came from both these demographic groups).

The formal sponsorship treaty that usually regulates the promotional relationship between *Die Burger* and festival organisers stipulates the amount that will be spent on advertisements and special sponsored editions, and that members of the management and editorial staff will get a prime spot for a promotion center and certain rights to display their trademarks prominently at the festival. As part of the agreement *Die Burger* stipulates the exact promotional and advertisement space for the festival that will be utilised over a specific time – these include synergy projects and competitions structured around the *Pluskaart* (loyalty card for subscribers only), the most sophisticated niche market development at the newspaper.

The *Pluskaart* is primarily a loyalty club for subscribers. All subscribers qualify, but the historical economic disadvantage of coloured readers is also manifest in the fact that the majority of subscribers, and thus also participants in the often up-market *Pluskaart*-projects, are white (Beukes 2005). In this way the wealthy traditional (mostly white) readers can be capitalised upon without the negative associations with Afrikaner nationalism that an overt focus on this demographic might still trigger. This is a good example of the ability of a synergy project to hide a politically ‘tarnished’ fact – that affluent white readers are targeted, while the majority of the paper’s readers are coloured. Perks for cardholders include special discounts or promotional offers around events sponsored by the newspaper or in partnerships ranging from big companies to retailers and artists. The *Pluskaart* concept includes an additional element made possible by technological advances, taking the commodification of media markets and products to a new level: the surveillance of consumers.

Through its link to the Infinity consumer card with its nationwide synergy partners, *Die Burger’s Pluskaart* simultaneously became a smart card that could monitor the spending patterns and movements of individual consumers (Breytenbach 2005). Thus it is possible to build up a database of consumers for purposes of marketing one’s own products, or that can even be sold to advertisers or for other promotional ends. *Die Burger’s Pluskaart* was subsequently subdivided into smaller niche markets, based on fields of interests linked to existing newspaper supplement and sections, including books, movies and adventure.

A qualitative analysis of newspaper content from July 2004 to July 2005 (Botma 2006: 179–181) made it clear that certain names and institutions regularly crop up as synergy partners. These entail the repetition of similar projects with specific partners, but also the continuous formation of new and different partnerships within the range of regular partners. The patterns of cooperation thus established create a structure of inclusion and exclusion that is naturalised – in other words the structure is hidden and accepted as a given. *Die Burger’s* long and varied list of synergy partners includes those from theatre, as well as cabaret producers, arts dealers, Afrikaans singers and popular comedians to the organisers of car shows, hotels, restaurants, meat retailers, music stores and optometrists. For the synergy partner the bonus is to be found in the direct association with the brand of *Die Burger*, and guaranteed exposure. The newspaper benefits because it can offer something tangible to its subscribers and at the same time it can include a mechanism whereby it can steer consumers to synergy partners/advertisers. In the process consumers can also be observed, in order to gather data for future marketing purposes. Through the special offers incentives are also constantly created to spur other readers to join the exclusive club of advantaged subscribers.

To manage synergy efficiently, editorial staff and representatives of the promotion and circulation departments meet to discuss and coordinate strategies for the organised coverage of specific projects (Louw 2005). These include ‘flooding’ – repetitious coverage in editorial, advertising and promotional space.

The influence of synergy on the organisation of coverage and content at *Die Burger*

Conglomeration, as part of the process of spatialisation (Mosco 1996) contributed to an environment where profitability was emphasised as indicator of success at Naspers, Media24 and *Die Burger*.

In reaction to what is often seen and described as a battle for survival, *Die Burger* decided on synergy as a strategy. The special relationships created in this way between the newspaper and other interest groups (Beukes 2005), as well as the pressure on the newspaper to promote its brand (Breytenbach 2005), stretched the traditional boundary between advertising, promotions and editorial content.

Through synergy projects as part of Naspers and with outside partners, journalists at *Die Burger* are put under pressure to cover specific projects – like TV programmes and Afrikaans arts festivals – extensively. According to Rossouw (2005b):

Yes, there always is somebody else's festival that will not necessarily get the same amount of publicity (as our own project), except if it generates a lot of news. But then, we are the sponsor, we were asked and have a specific interest in the project. That is why we will give it more attention. It is only logical: if you are a sponsor, you have to market yourself – nobody else will give you publicity and promote your brand (...) In the end this is the nature of these sponsorship arrangements. (Translated from Afrikaans.)

Commercial pressures dictate that the popular aspects of synergy projects, like reality TV and popular Afrikaans music, will be emphasised (Breytenbach 2005). This is linked to a tendency to focus on entertainment and celebrities in the traditional 'serious' news environment. The newspaper, for example, has become more colourful over the years and focuses progressively on sensational coverage, specifically on its page 3, which is now reserved for gossip and celebrity news. Because advertising revenue is the life blood of *Die Burger*, the newspaper is forced to 'play it safe' and repeat success formulas through its synergy projects (ibid). The emphasis on light entertainment fits this profile.

Some 'serious' news has been given greater prominence in recent years. The editorial section of the paper was extended considerably, so that more space could be allocated to financial journalism. The aim is to further exploit lucrative audiences and markets. The development originated and still continues as a synergy project between *Die Burger* and *Beeld*, its sister paper in Gauteng.

The study shows that the standard sponsorship deal between *Die Burger* and synergy partners stipulates the exact space allocated to advertising and promotional copy. The official policy of the newspaper is to make a clear distinction between editorial and advertising/promotional content and to indicate it clearly to readers through the use of, inter alia, banners and headings (Rossouw 2005b; La Vita 2005). The formal sponsorship deal does not include any agreement of editorial coverage,

but this study clearly shows that numerous synergy projects were covered in the editorial columns of *Die Burger* between July 2004 and July 2005. The subsequent explanations of the managers and editor (Breytenbach 2005; Beukes 2005; Rossouw 2005b) that all editorial coverage of synergy projects occurred freely and on merit, according to traditional news values, do not coincide with the findings of this study. Orchestrated editorial coverage of a number of synergy projects and the published results thereof, was clearly visible.

The study shows how the erosion of traditional journalism practice through synergy led to a level where organisers and even participants were reporting on their projects. There was also coverage in a quasi-review format written by members of the paper's promotions department (responsible for the publicity of special events and competitions) and self-congratulatory and self-fulfilling reporting on the success of the projects as a way to create and ensure success – or at least the perception of success. Examples are plentiful, but most noticeable around the organisation and coverage of the *Die Burger Plusster* competition in 2004/2005, the launching of *Die Burger Buite* club in 2005, the coordination of publicity for the Cederberg festival (in Clanwilliam) in 2005, and the relaunch of the former educational supplement *KleinB* as a commercial publication to market a club for young readers (whose parents are subscribers).

In the case of *KleinB* (for children aged 6–13), youngsters are attracted with club specials, but on condition that their parents subscribe to the newspaper first (Stander 2005). Breytenbach (2005), the newspaper's circulation and marketing manager at the time, describes this practice as 'naughty marketing'. The then editor, Arrie Rossouw (2005b), did not share the view that it might be a questionable practice:

I do not have a problem with the fact that parents may have to subscribe to the newspaper (in order for a child to become a club member). It is only another way to do marketing. You (also) give away stuff to their parents regularly, such as movie tickets. What is the difference? You could ask yourself if it is morally acceptable to market to children, but the world now turns on marketing aimed at children. The world turns on people who market to children, who get on the nerves of parents about their children, or who get on the children's nerves to get on the nerves of their parents to buy stuff. (Translated from Afrikaans.)

The practice of total marketing was naturalised to such an extent that key personnel in *Die Burger*'s editorial staff, who were interviewed for this study (Rossouw 2005b; Schneider 2005; Louw 2005; La Vita 2005) thought it quite normal that the promotions department could write 'news' reports on synergy projects for publication in the regular news columns. In this instance the editorial staff, as possible oppositional force, exerted little agency and offered little to no resistance to synergy.

Examples of agency as oppositional force to synergy do exist at *Die Burger* (Brand, G 2005; Pople 2005), but while journalists can exert agency to soften the influence

of synergy on editorial content and attempt to uphold conventional journalism ideals and practices, they cannot halt the synergy process or turn it around.

Conclusion

By, inter alia, using the adapted Schillinger/Froneman model of synergy motives, this study showed that *Die Burger*, through its strategy of synergy, tries to balance political and economic motives in ways that contribute to the commercialisation of the media. The institutional power of Naspers and *Die Burger* to organise synergy also contributes to the promotion of the logic of the synergy motives and strategies of the company and newspaper, and the elimination of alternatives. In this way hegemony is created around synergy, through the coverage of synergy projects in the form of advertisements, promotions and editorial content in combinations where the boundaries between commercial interests and journalism become unclear.

The hegemony thus created possibly contributes, on the one hand, to consensus amongst consumers (readers) about the value (credibility) not only of the particular offering and artists involved, but of the synergy project itself. These include coverage of the project in the newspaper, and by implication also the organisation of coverage behind the scenes. Thus commodification is no longer recognised as a power process, but as part of a natural order, common knowledge, a generally accepted reality of social life (Mosco 1996).

The hegemonic power of synergy is not absolute and is contested (synergy does not deliver guaranteed results), but the general occurrence of synergy at *Die Burger* indicates that it does sometimes succeed in channeling power and resources through the political economy of the newspaper, in reaction to challenges.

A number of ethical questions regarding the synergy practices of *Die Burger* could be the focus of further research. There are indications that the forming of partnerships that synergy presupposes leads to patterns of exclusivity that are not compatible with the democratic ideals of equal access and fairness. The newspaper's promotion of its own interests, tied to those of synergy partners, is at first glance also not in line with its own ethical code which prohibits any conflict of interest.

There is also reason to question *Die Burger's* view and conduct with regard to its target marketing of children. At face value it moves very close to contravening the guidelines of the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASASA 2005), if it is not in contravention already. A further study on the ethical implications of synergy could include the question of whether or not Naspers and *Die Burger* contravene the Competitions Act of 1998 (South Africa 1998) with some of their synergy practices.

This study focused on a specific, local example of how strategies such as synergy balance political and economic forces and lead to the blurring of the conventional boundaries of journalism. Further comparative work could establish to what extent

this process is unique to South Africa, or a part of global trends and shifts in journalistic paradigms.

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Herman Wasserman, Gabriël J. Botma

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