

Dear Editor

Thank you for the opportunity to respond, as former Editor of the Cape Times, to Songezo Mjongile, provincial secretary of the ANC in the Western Cape, on the issue of transformation in media.

I will not reply at length to Mr Mjongile's claims, in this and other newspapers, that the Cape Times "has been a mouth piece for neo-liberal fascists", or "a mouth piece of the English white interests" or reflected "the views of the dominant classes". Our detailed and careful coverage of the struggle for social justice in the Western Cape, the debates on our opinion pages about more equitable political and economic systems for South Africa, and the editorial positions we have taken on issues such as white privilege and the need for transformation are there for anyone who takes the trouble to read them. As for his allegation that as Editor of the Cape Times I appointed "only white journalists", that is nonsense, as any visit to that newsroom will show.

But he is right that the print media sector must be transformed. However, transformation does not only mean replacing white editors and journalists with black editors and journalists – important though that is – it means transforming ownership of media so that profits are no longer the only, or even the most important, driving force.

The history of the Independent Group among others shows clearly how the relentless search for profits - and profit growth - strips newspapers of the resources needed to cover the news as it should be covered.

News editors have to make impossible choices about which stories to cover; overburdened reporters resort to telephone journalism; and the voices of those who are the hardest to reach are no longer heard.

The interests of shareholders and those of readers often do not coincide. Shareholders look for dividends, but readers – like journalists - want good quality journalism.

When news broke that the Independent Group was to be sold – at last - to a South African buyer, we set up a trust to bid for a significant stake in the company on behalf of staff in perpetuity. Unfortunately we failed (though the new owners have offered individual staff a small, still undisclosed, share).

The real transformation to which Mr Mjongile refers will take place when journalists and readers have a sufficient stake in our newspapers to protect them against damage not only from politicians, but from corporate interests whose focus on profits threatens to empty newspapers of content and to muffle the voices of the poor and vulnerable.

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