

# Change. For the better? Maybe

Who would have thought the Mail & Guardian would be the most stable player in the South African newspaper market?

 By [Anton Harber](#) 18 Apr 2013

With ownership changing at both Independent newspapers and BDFM, editorships and publishing jobs up for grabs in the group, new editors at Sunday Times and the Times and the Times Media Group selling major assets, it is a fast-changing world.

But is it changing for the better?

Any change of ownership at Independent group is a good thing, I have been saying for some time. But the jury is still out on the Sekunjalo consortium, led by Dr Iqbal Survé, until we know who is in his consortium and what the agenda is. There is something unnerving about not knowing who will control such an important public asset and how it is being funded. Is the Public Investment Corporation (already major shareholders in the Times Media Group (TMG))? Is it foreign money, so that the claim that ownership is coming home is only half-true?

## Radical strategic rethink

TMG buying out the 50% of BDFM that they do not own from Pearsons is a good thing. These two companies have been locked into a dysfunctional 50-50 relationship which has impeded strategy for years. The change was brought to a head by the flux in TMG management and the fact that the change in stock exchange rules cost Business Day about 40% of its advertising and it has needed a radical strategic rethink to stay afloat.

Left in place is a strange arrangement written into the original sale agreement with Pearson, that the hiring and firing of editors will remain with a three-person board committee, of which at least two have to come from Pearsons. This means that Pearson will have a veto on the hiring and firing of editors of Business Day and Financial Mail in perpetuity, even though they have no other links with the company. This may provide some protection to the editors, but it is a weird anomaly that cannot last for long.

What will change is another anomaly: Peter Bruce being BDFM publisher, editor-in-chief and BD editor. He will probably return back to a sensible two hats, both editorial. The millinery industry may suffer, but journalism won't.

## Mike vs Peter, or Peter vs Mike?

It does mean that head of print publishing at TMG, Mike Robertson, expands his ever-growing sphere of influence. But now he faces his biggest challenge of all: managing Peter Bruce.

Or maybe it's Peter's challenge to manage Mike.

Either way, it will be interesting to watch.

The emergence of Phylcia Oppelt as Sunday Times editor has been an interesting phenomenon. She and Robertson led a quick, radical and ruthless clean-out of staff, including some of their most interesting and experienced writers. Fred Khumalo has gone, for example, and I understand columnist Johnny Steinberg is following.

The heart of that paper has been its three-person investigative team (which had three places in the shortlist of the recent Taco Kuiper Award, including a second place). Rob Rose has moved to edit Business Times, leaving behind the still-formidable team of Mzilikazi waAfrica and Stephan Hofstatter. But if you judge by the last two weeks' front pages (Mandela Goes Home and Oscar Goes Out), you can only hope that the new team starts to quickly generate some real

news.

## New energy

New TMG CEO, Andrew Bonamour, is certainly bringing visible new energy to their Rosebank HQ. The canteen is gone. So are the pot-plants. And the coffee and milk supply. All of that may improve journalists' quality of life, but he might face a risk he threatens their parking. But editors tell me that he is not touching editorial, in fact he is investing in it, and in training (having got his hands on the R100m capital in the Argus Trust, previously used mostly as one of the many tools of management ego-boosting).

He is selling off Exclusive Books (which may or may not be a good thing, depending on whether they can avoid selling it to that destroyer of book sales, CNA) and NuMetro and deciding what to do with their perennial headache, Gallo. Of one thing one can be certain: unlike all his predecessors, he will decide something and not just leave it to rot away.

Meanwhile, my erstwhile paper, the M&G, looks like a rock of stability and predictability, with reasonably steady circulation, lots of advertising and solid ownership. It might be in real danger of becoming boring. After 25 years of financial and political uncertainty, that will certainly be a change.

For the better. Probably.

## ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5) *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).  
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