

BLACK WEDNESDAY: THE LEGACY OF THE EARLY BLACK PRESS AND  
INDIGENOUS MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Presented by Anetta Mangxaba

**A** | **I** | **P**

ASSOCIATION OF  
**INDEPENDENT  
PUBLISHERS**

# Background

- The Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) is a dynamic national organization dedicated to promoting the interests of the local, grassroots independent print media sector in South Africa. We represent hundreds of small, locally owned media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online publications, from all corners of the country.
- AIP boasts a total of 178 publications from 147 publishers, reaching a combined monthly readership of 7,491,699 with a print run of 2,497,233.
- These publications, both online and print, are published in a wide range of South Africa's indigenous languages, including isiXhosa, Sesotho, SiNdebele, Setswana, Sepedi, isiZulu, Isimpondo, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepulana, across all nine provinces.

# Independent Media

- Independent media refers to outlets that operate without control or influence from governments, corporations, political parties, or other external entities. These platforms aim to provide objective, unbiased journalism, focusing on transparency and accountability in their reporting.
- AIP members are independent publishers, often rooted in the very communities they serve, ensuring authentic representation of local voices.

# Lessons from the Early Black Press for Indigenous Language and Community Media Today

## **Historical Context of the Early Black Press and Current Independent Grassroots Media**

- Much like *Imvo Zabantsundu* and other early black newspapers, today's independent grassroots media continue to pioneer African perspectives, providing a platform for marginalized voices.
- Community media today still strive to address political and social challenges that affect the communities they serve, emphasizing self-representation and cultural preservation, particularly for marginalized groups.

# Advocacy for Indigenous Language Media

- The early black press was a powerful tool for using indigenous languages to empower and educate communities. Today's indigenous language media have inherited this legacy, continuing to uphold the value of indigenous languages for community identity, as *Imvo* did.
- Indigenous language media today face similar marginalization in a predominantly English- and Afrikaans-dominated media space, making it critical for community media to protect and promote these languages.

# Challenges Faced Then and Now:

- Grassroots community media, both then and now, grapple with limited resources, political pressure, and censorship then. Today, they also face challenges related to economic sustainability and technological advancements.
- Government and corporate biases continue to influence advertising revenue, impacting the financial viability of indigenous and community media, much as they did historically.
- AIP remains committed to leveling the media landscape, ensuring its members are recognized as significant contributors to the media sector and society at large.

# Empowering Through Storytelling

- The early black press empowered African communities to tell their own stories, countering colonial narratives. Today, indigenous language and grassroots community media must continue to serve as platforms for local voices, fostering cultural pride and awareness.
- These outlets act as bridges between the past and the future, preserving cultural traditions while addressing modern-day issues.

# Education and Political Engagement

- The early black press educated readers about political rights, social issues, and empowerment during times of oppression. Similarly, grassroots community media today play a crucial role in educating communities about local governance, human rights, and social justice.



# Digital Transition: A New Era for Indigenous Media

- Digital platforms offer indigenous language media the potential to reach broader audiences. However, the challenge lies in adapting to digital trends while staying true to cultural and linguistic roots.
- The resilience of early black press leaders, who overcame resource limitations, serves as inspiration for today's community media, which operate in smaller newsrooms yet produce quality content with minimal resources.

# Collaborations and Solidarity

- The early black press united African communities by highlighting shared struggles and visions. Today, AIP supports independent indigenous language media in forming networks for knowledge-sharing, resource pooling, and advocacy.
- In 2023, 10 independent grassroots publications participated in an exchange program with publishers in the USA, fostering international collaboration and knowledge sharing.

# Media as a Driver for Social Change

- Early black newspapers were at the forefront of challenging unjust systems and advocating for social reform. AIP's independent grassroots media continue this legacy, giving a voice to marginalized communities and driving social change.

# Sustainability of Indigenous Media

- Drawing lessons from the financial struggles of the early black press, today's indigenous media must explore sustainable funding models to ensure their longevity.
- Government support, through entities like the MDDA, and international bodies such as UNESCO, play a crucial role in promoting the sustainability of independent grassroots and indigenous language media.

# Preserving Legacy While Innovating

Recognizing the historical legacy of the early black press as a source of inspiration is essential, but we must take this legacy further. AIP members are empowered to embrace innovation, ensuring that indigenous media remains relevant and competitive in a rapidly evolving media landscape. As a result, many of our print publishers have expanded onto digital platforms, adapting to modern audience needs while maintaining their core mission of community service and cultural preservation.

The early black press, such as \*Imvo Zabantsundu\* and other pioneering publications, were acknowledged by the oppressive regime of the past. Yet, today, many of our independent grassroots media outlets still struggle for recognition, even though a significant number are funded by the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), a government institution. Despite some of our members having successfully run publications for over 25 years, these publishers are often overlooked by the government and other key industry stakeholders.

AIP is at the forefront of advocating for these publishers, ensuring that their invaluable work in their communities does not go unnoticed. While history allows us to look back at the contributions of early black media, AIP is committed to ensuring that today's independent grassroots media—owned by this era's dedicated publishers—receives the recognition it rightfully deserves. We aim to pave the way for future generations, encouraging children and aspiring media professionals to acknowledge both the legacy of early black media and the ongoing work of current independent media pioneers.

# Preserving Legacy While Innovating – AIP projects

- AIP has been working closely with the South African National Editors' Forum on a number of concrete projects to strengthen indigenous language media.
  - We are designing a course for journalists writing in indigenous languages. This is being offered by North West University.
  - We have run 2 major national indigenous language media conferences to bring together journalists, NGOs, academics and other stakeholders working in indigenous language media.
  - And this is just the starting point of the projects we are wanting to launch!

# Conclusion

- These lessons from the early black press remind us of the importance of indigenous language media in preserving language, traditions, heritage culture, empowering communities, and fostering social change. The AIP remains dedicated to ensuring these media outlets continue to thrive in today's dynamic media landscape.