

Wipe the lipstick off this pig...

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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An independent (with a lower case "i", please note) media is vital to the success of our fledgling experiment in South African democracy. And media, as the gurus like Professor Anton Harber constantly tell us, should remain free from undue influence from business pressures or proprietors...

So, a publication proclaiming itself to be concerned with independence of media in Africa and stating that it is an "independent" report should be just that... or at least I would have thought so.

Professor Harber is one of the contributors to this report - produced by Ornico, an agency which unblushingly proclaims itself "Africa's leading brand and media intelligence" (sic).

Almost predictably, Harber (the Caxton Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Wits University, incidentally) squarely lays into Independent (with a capital I) Newspapers and its new owners (who own this newspaper, by the way), saying they are one of the biggest threats to media independence in this country.

He says (and who would contradict such an august media statesman as the Prof?), "At a time when editorial independence is under threat from politicians, advertisers and owners, it is worth remembering ourselves why we value it. I would boil it down to one reason: it produces better, more interesting, impactful and useful journalism."



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So then, what of Ornico's "independent" media report?

It doesn't start off too well. There are a slew of quotes lifted lock, stock and URL from websites. As you would see on a website, there are lines saying " read more (TMR)" and "See the full article (TMR)".

I have no idea what TMR means and, in the absence of a clear web address, I wondered whether Ornico had somehow managed to insert a click-through interface onto its pages. Sadly, not so. Something to remember: if you're going to try and put something from the web into print, make sure it works...

Then there was the reference to Gareth Cliff as the "*enfant terrible*" of South African radio.

Dear, oh dear. If you are going to use a foreign language, at least Google the correct spelling... you might get some of that "better, more interesting, impactful and useful journalism".

But it is the content which is so interesting - especially from the point of view of media independence from advertisers.

Not long after Harber's attack on Independent Newspapers comes a soft-soap interview with Chris Roper, editor-in-chief of the *Mail & Guardian*, which proclaims itself "fiercely independent" (unlike us, I suppose). Joseph Goebbels would've been proud.

Then there are similar fawning chats with Katy Katopodis, from Eyewitness News (EWN), Gareth Cliff (CliffCentral), Esmare Weideman (boss of Media24), Herman Manson (MarkLives.com), *Daily Maverick* publisher Styli Charambolous, and an "opinion piece" by Jon Pienaar of the Association of Independent Publishers.

Interesting that, apart from the stinging attack on it, Independent Newspapers (the biggest newspaper organisation in this country) doesn't get a mention.

Wonder why that is?

Let's look a bit further. What do all the above contributors have in common? Ah-ha - they have all bought advertising space in this reliable, "independent", "media intelligence" publication. Independent Newspapers did not.

Funny old world, isn't it?

It's a sad day when experienced journalists and media outlets conspire to put out a piece of advertorial puffery masquerading as something approaching "better, more interesting, impactful and useful journalism".

This is advertising. It is not unbiased or reliable content.

And those of you associated are an even bigger threat to the perceived independence of the media than we (at Independent Newspapers) could ever be... and that's because your own self-righteousness won't ever let you see reality.

For the record: nobody put me up to writing this. I have never been told what to write in this column. I have always written - and will continue to write - what I like. That's why I have, on a number of occasions, awarded Onions to this company. People haven't always liked them, but no one has come down on me like a ton of bricks.

That's what you call independence people... Google it while you're looking up "*enfant terrible*"...

For damaging the image of both media and advertising, all of you get Onions.

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ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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