

## **ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT NEWS COLLECTIVE**

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### **1. INK AND POLITICS**

Many new members have joined INK in the last year or two so it seems a good idea to set down INK's limited position on politics, as specified in the constitution and practices to date. Basically the position is that INK is not primarily a political organisation but that a certain amount of political lobbying is inherent in INK's goals of promoting the alternative media.

#### **Background and INK Constitution**

**A.** The two factors which are absolutely fundamental to INK are that:

- a. we are primarily a trade organisation and
- b. we are only for radical and alternative publishers.

**B.** At the foundation of INK it was not clear how INK would develop. There were three worries:

- a. INK would become a political forum and that this would lead to splits and weaken INK's practical activities
- b. INK would lose its identity, diluted by magazines with no political content
- c. magazines owned by organisations whose primary purpose lay outside publishing (perhaps with charity or government subsidies) could try to veto INK activities on the grounds that they are political.

**C.** The solution chosen was to lay down in the constitution that:

- a. INK was 'primarily a trade organisation'
- b. members must be radical and alternative
- c. magazines published by organisations whose primary purpose was not publishing would not be allowed a vote at INK meetings.

**D.** The word political means all things to all people. It was certainly never intended that INK should keep out of any activity which someone somewhere might call political. Indeed the corporate trade associations act in a discreet but highly political way.

## **INK Policy as it Stands**

*INK has developed the following policies which are relevant to these issues.*

### **A. Membership.**

INK can refuse membership without needing to give a reason, so we have not tried to define the political criteria for INK membership more specifically. However, with the rise of the terrorism issue in politics we have stated that INK does not accept members who advocate protest beyond the traditional methods. Also, magazines have been rejected because the INK general meeting or exec cannot see enough content which it would call radical and alternative.

### **B. General political position-taking.**

This is a grey area. There is nothing in the constitution to prohibit INK taking political positions on any topic. However the constitution and practice are that INK 'normally operates by consensus', so taking a course which could lead a group of members to resign would be arguably against the spirit of the constitution. Moreover the constitution states that 'all substantial acts' (and this certainly includes making political statements) of the INK executive must be notified to members, who have the right to object. If any member objects such actions are frozen until the matter is resolved.

### **C. Publicising INK members and INK.**

It has always been a goal of INK to publicise the alternative press. Tools to do this are lobbying, public statements, the INK Digest newsletter, and off the page advertising. Publicity requires simple, attention-grabbing messages, and this inevitably conflicts with INK's reluctance to become a political forum. For instance the recent disappointing Big Issue subscriptions ad would have performed better with a clear message/image. See the report below on lobbying and the proposed editors' forum.

### **D. Development Options**

It has yet to be resolved to what extent INK publicises itself as a route to its members. Clearly, e.g. with the INK web site, INK is the entity we are promoting. INK could develop into a publishing company (*see business plan*) and even a quality mark. The constitution states that INK is owned by its members.

### **E. Lobbying for media reforms.**

*See the report below and a copy, to be sent soon of Ian Henshall's submission to the ITC enquiry.*

This is one political activity which INK has endorsed from the start. The press release that marked the official launch of INK stated: INK is calling for a review of editorial practice in the broadcast media. Jean Lambert of the Green Party said: 'News editors need the courage of the convictions that many of them already have. They should recognise that the current structure of Parliament does not reflect public opinion on many important issues'... 'Information and diversity of opinion are the oxygen of democracy. Market forces must not be allowed to deprive us of these sources of truth' said Tony Benn.

### **F. Joint Ventures**

The INK constitution is structured so that groups of INK members can co-operate with only minimal oversight from INK. Both INK Distribution and the INK leaflet are examples of such INK projects. A joint advertisement project might make a controversial statement to attract interest. Without the full approval of INK it would have to be clear that INK had facilitated the ad not endorsed the content.

## **2. HOW INK IS PUBLICISING THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

One of the aims of INK is to publicise the alternative media. This paper looks at the ways that INK can influence the mainstream debate, and floats the idea of an INK editor's forum, using our editorial muscle to back up our message.

Lobbying and PR are the primary tool for poorer organisations to reach the public. However, as INK is a media organisation itself, the corporate media outlets often see us as competitors and are reluctant to publicise our existence. The Financial Times was the only mainstream newspaper to report on the launch of INK.

### **PART ONE – Own Publications**

Here are the existing tools for publicising INK and INK members within the confines of the alternative media.

**1. Web site.** We ask members to allocate a small amount of advertising space per year to publicise the INK web site which now takes credit card payments directly for subscriptions to INK titles.

**2. INK leaflet.** This could be evolved into a more general publicity tool, especially for the INK web site.

**3. INK Digest.** This is a digest of articles from those INK titles who send copies to the office. It goes out from time to time to a press list and to those who respond to the INK leaflet and ask for it as free service.

**4. The INK Awards.** The exec is working on a plan for a public awards ceremony for various categories of the Alternative Media to be made by respected journalists like Monbiot or Pilger. We have currently found a volunteer who is seeking funding sources.

### **PART TWO - Official lobbying.**

Where I or the exec find the time to lobby officially, we would not feel the need to report in detail so long as it promotes established INK policies. *See the position paper on Ink, Politics And Publicity (above).*

Currently I am lobbying for greater diversity of views in the broadcast media with a view to getting INK members and our ideas into the mainstream. *Please look out for my submission to the current review of broadcast news conducted on behalf of the ITC by ex-Independent editor Ian Hargreaves.*

I hope that INK can co-operate with some or all of the following on these issues: Green Party, Socialist Alliance, Liberal Democrats, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, Voice of the Viewer and Listener, National Union of Journalists.

### **PART THREE - Personal Lobbying by Ian Henshall**

I should like to take this opportunity to inform you of my personal lobbying activities, when I describe myself as chair of INK speaking in a personal capacity.

My main channels are my newsletter - which goes to all INK members and many specific journalists and editors in the corporate media, complaints to the BBC and direct communications with journalists and politicians. The main tactic is to complain about specific instances of bias, omission of relevant facts or opinions, or incorrect facts.

As readers of my newsletter will be aware, I have taken a view on the official Blair/Bush account of the 911 attacks: it is unlikely to be true, Bush was complicit in the attacks, and a Watergate-style scandal is likely in Washington. I don't claim support from INK for this thesis. However I believe there could be an outcry later as people ask why the corporate media swallowed the official 911 story. This would provide a further opening for INK to argue for media reform.

### **3. TOWARDS A BUSINESS PLAN FOR INK**

#### **THE INK BUSINESS CONCEPT**

INK plans to achieve economies of scale by taking over aspects of its members publishing activities, freeing them up to do what they are best at: reporting the news as they see it.

Most INK members publish only one title, but in the modern publishing environment this is not a recipe for success. Many INK members are trapped in a cycle of low resources, low sales and low advertising revenues. The INK plan will increase revenues and save on publishing costs, allowing members to improve their magazines, starting a benign cycle of improvement and growth.

Unlike conventional publishing companies, INK would not own its member's titles and would have no influence in their content. This is what happens in the music business, for instance, where a label has a contract with a band but no influence on the band's songs.

INK's business strategy has been to recognise that alternative publishing has a poor financial image, and that we need to test our plans empirically before we can credibly seek funds. INK has been growing organically in the years since it was launched.

Now that we have a track record we can look at ways to accelerate our growth by accessing greater financial resources. As a first step we need to pay for a full time worker for a year, primarily to expand the number of INK distribution outlets. Other tasks are: fundraising, PR mail outs, organising an INK conference, attending conferences and festivals, work on leaflet distribution, and helping members make savings on print bills.

#### **SOURCES OF FINANCE**

##### **A. Charities, arts bodies, public funding.**

Nowadays charities, arts bodies etc are highly reluctant to support ongoing projects, preferring to put seed money into something which can be independent as soon as possible. As INK projects are designed to be self-financing, this criterion fits well.

There are obstacles. State or charity money has legal constraints on political content, enforced by legal advisors. This is why publications funded in this way are usually very bland and do not sell well. There is also a widespread antipathy to the media - most people do not differentiate between the corporate media, the local press and the alternative press. As a company that facilitates publishing rather than a magazine itself, INK may be able to overcome some of these problems.

##### **B. Soft loans and business angels.**

There are many people nowadays who have a lot of money, perhaps as a result of the property boom or a successful small business. Many INK titles are funded by soft loans from such people, who know they risk losing their money but at least would like reassurance that it is being used sensibly. Such investors are motivated by support for INK members' views and are likely to be encouraged by a viable plan which is based on a track record.

##### **C. Conventional venture finance.**

City-based equity finance, though politically liberal nowadays, requires very detailed data and seeks a rate of return of around 30% pa. We sky high fees from City advisors, it is hard to get interest in proposed loans of less than a few million pounds.

##### **D. Business to business finance.**

This is said to be the commonest growth route for very small businesses. Basically it means credit, loans, or even a partial or complete buyout from other companies in the industry. Because they know the industry and they know us, they can assess prospects with more confidence.

##### **E. Finance from within INK.**

We could ask members to come up with say one to five thousand pounds each. If successful, this would make a total war chest of perhaps a fifty to a hundred thousand pounds.

## **THE INK BUSINESS PROFILE**

From the business point of view INK can be seen as a publishing services company which services, but does not own titles. The basic argument for INK's viability is this. Almost without exception commercially successful publications are produced by publishers which have at least five, more often 20 plus titles in their stable. This is because of economies of scale on the publishing side: print buying, ad sales, distribution, subscription marketing etc.

INK titles are somehow surviving under this enormous handicap of isolation, so the expansion of INK can only release a huge synergy and generate a lot of money. INK's track record of projects can be seen as the components of a publishing services business.

### **A. Subscription marketing.**

By industry standards, the INK leaflet has been hugely successful. As a rule marketers can expect to write off income from a new sub to marketing costs, only benefiting from the renewal. For most titles the INK leaflet does much better than this. However it has not been so successful when put into non-INK titles.

### **B. Distribution to non-newsagent outlets. e.g whole food shops, bookshops, etc**

See the INK paper on distribution. This is potentially far more lucrative than expanding the leaflet project.

### **C. Newsagent distribution.**

For any large-scale retail sales, newsagent access is probably essential. The earlier project was aborted (see distribution paper) basically because the current set up (e.g. `Smiths and Menzies`) is geared to the needs of mass selling titles only. However, we DID establish that INK titles will sell in suitable newsagents. We now propose a different system outside the wholesale cartel, with copies directly mailed to selected newsagents and paid for through credit card accounts.

### **D. General publishing services.**

Print buying, ad sales, PR, marketing are all essential functions of publishing which members may be unable to do effectively.

## **GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

A conventional detailed and researched business plan is not appropriate for INK at this stage. We could not spend the sort of money that big investors would want to lend us and the work involved would be a project of its own. Our research base for the plan would have to be the evidence from our existing projects, which would not convince anyone outside the industry.

### **3. SPECIFIC PROPOSALS**

#### **A. EDITOR'S FORUM**

When you lobby, people are wondering what power you have. NGO lobbyists implicitly threaten politicians with a loss of voter support, corporate lobbyists generally prefer to bribe politicians and journalists. INK has potentially a massive amount of power through the readership of INK titles.

INK titles have around 2 million readers, they sit around a long time and they are read purely for their political content. Contrast this with the Daily Mail, said to be the primary influence on Tony Blair. It has twice as many readers but most of them are buying it for sport, fashion etc and almost every copy is in the bin within a few days.

Shortly after INK formed, a separate group was set up to look at editorial and investigative co-ordination, involving Schnews, New Internationalist and others. It started well but fizzled out through lack of carry-through and at that time INK was in its infancy and unable to pick up the thread.

I would suggest that we look at an INK Editors Forum, meeting say annually, as a way of co-ordinating INK lobbying. We could do this by running a focussed campaign, for instance around demands for reform of the corporate media.

#### **B. SECRETARIAT**

I recommend that the next stage of INK's expansion should be the hiring of an energetic full timer with a track record in sales or marketing on a six month contract with the task of expanding INK distribution outlets and chasing sources of grants i.e. fundraising.

The funding would be raised in the context of the major INK Distribution proposal which Peter and Steve are working on currently. This should increase the INK Distribution network so radically that the extra turnover would generate the surplus finance.

If successful, this person could stay on or be replaced by someone who would ser vice the distribution network. This person could also help the INK office to offer paid-for services to INK members, building towards the publishing services model for INK discussed in this paper.

*From Ian Henshall, chair INK  
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INK is the umbrella trade organisation for he UK alternative press. Comment is written in a strictly personal capacity. To get future newsletters, or be removed email to [inkchair@pro-net.co.uk](mailto:inkchair@pro-net.co.uk). For an archive go to [www.coffee.uk.com/crisis](http://www.coffee.uk.com/crisis). For INK administration contact [steve@inkadmin.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:steve@inkadmin.fsnet.co.uk).