

The Last Word

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All the news that is fit to sell? Media freedom, commercialism and a decade of democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

If one were to single out the most significant change to the South African media, and specifically journalism, during the first decade of democracy, what would that be? Following the dominant discourse in which the majority of ten years of democracy retrospectives were clad, one would probably look for political or legal changes that took place during this period. One would then be inclined to point to the adoption of the negotiated Constitution, where freedom of speech and expression was guaranteed as part of the Bill of Rights. After decades of state oppression of the media, this paved the way for the professionalization of journalism, a shift towards self-regulation and the adoption of codes of ethics. No longer did the apartheid state and its laws determine the limits of journalism, but to a large extent it was now up to journalists themselves to shape the contours of journalism in a democratic society. With the advent of democracy, the media too was set free to act as a watchdog of the new and fragile democracy.

This is, at least, the popular version of events, and one which the media itself often espouses and celebrates. Formally, of course, it is true. There have been spats between government and the media, but despite the alarmist voices heard on occasion from media quarters (“They are moving the press office in parliament - press freedom is under siege!”), these debates centred mostly on differences of opinion regarding issues such as the “national interest” vis-à-vis the “public interest” and the differing views of the media’s role in post-apartheid society. Criticism by Pres. Thabo Mbeki about journalists being “fishers of corrupt men” and similar accusations have been interpreted by the media as attacks, and meetings between Mbeki and media representatives were facilitated by the South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) in an attempt to smooth over the relationship. A Presidential Press Corps was also established, somewhat controversially,

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since the suggestions that journalists would travel on the same – equally controversial – presidential jet did not sit well with members of the Fourth Estate preferring, as Walter Lippmann did, a “large air space” between themselves and a head of state. Until now, not much has come out of those plans, however.

Regardless of these attempts, friction between the media and the government persists, and both parties are viewed with mutual suspicion. But on the whole, these debates – and the tension – could be viewed as a healthy part of what an emerging democratic public sphere is about. Insofar as the debates took the form of clashes, these should be seen as the result of different frameworks through which tenets such as “freedom of speech” and “the public’s right to know” were viewed, as commentators like Shepperson and Tomaselli have pointed out, rather than an attempt to curb the media’s freedom. In this regard, Pieter Fourie has made the important point that more critical reflection is needed on what concepts such as these should mean in the context of a developing democracy, rather than accepting their unequivocal meaning. Unfortunately, the past decade seems to have been marked more by the vigorous defence of opposing positions than committed attempts to examine the foundational assumptions underlying these positions. In the one corner, there was the media, anticipating the new government to pounce on them; in the other, there was the government, viewing criticism by the media as a questioning of their legitimacy and ability. Seldom were these differences of opinion seen as part of the yet incomplete process of negotiation about what a post-apartheid society should look like. The thrashing out of roles and responsibilities, the refashioning of identities and the contestation of new configurations of political and symbolic power were sometimes too easily mistaken for intolerance and a descent into authoritarianism.

The constitutional freedom of the media seems above immediate danger, not least judging from the Constitutional Court judge Pius Langa’s remarks at Sanef’s recent ten-year review seminar which were, according to Anthony Johnson writing in the *Cape Times*, “overwhelmingly reassuring” regarding the future of press freedom in the country. Not everything is rosy, however – some remnants of apartheid-era laws like the infamous Section 205 still plague journalists like a persistent hangover and, as Johnson points out, some incidents like the withholding of crime statistics and the obstruction of journalists wanting to cover protest action did send out worrying signals. But one only has to compare the South African chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa) with other countries in the region to gauge the extent of South African media freedom. More pertinent, then, is the question of what this freedom means for the state of South African journalism in this still nascent democracy. Stated differently, what did the media do with the freedom afforded it under the constitution, and faced with the challenge of contributing towards the transformation of society?

2. IS FREEDOM JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE?

There is certainly a lot to be optimistic about if one considers the use that the media has made of its new-found constitutional freedom. Even considering the oft-bemoaned demise of investigative journalism, the media contributed significantly to the exposing of corruption, for instance. But no overview of the media's performance over the past decade can omit a reference to the scandalous behaviour of journalists in 2003, which has come to be referred to as the "annus horribilis" of the South African media post-apartheid. That the unethical conduct of journalists such as Ranjeni Munusamy, Darrel Bristow-Bovey, Cynthia Vongai and Vusi Mona is referred to in this manner is perhaps not so much of an overstatement as an indication of the limits of the self-regulatory system governing the industry in the democratic dispensation. While the system ostracises cases of spectacular transgression, it can do little more than scapegoating. It lacks the teeth to prevent culprits from re-entering the profession (both Bristow-Bovey and Munusamy resumed writing subsequent to having been caught) and tends either to individualize the problem rather than addressing structural issues that might have led to these transgressions. Following the bad press the media have been giving themselves, Sanef did initiate a series of ethics workshops in different regions to get "back to basics". Of course constant attention to basic skills and an insistence on accuracy, fact-checking and the like remain vital building-blocks towards journalism that is vigilant about its own shortcomings. But these remain cosmetic changes if they are not coupled with a more fundamental investigation into the premises upon which journalism in post-apartheid society is built.

The first decade of democracy did provide a few notable occasions of debates to this order. Unfortunately, these were only partial successes. The investigation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) into the media's role under apartheid dealt with issues of press freedom and media institutions in a broader historical context and against the background of a systemic, historical abuse of human rights. The initial terms of reference were focused on state propaganda and spies in newsrooms, with the underlying assumption that the English press contributed to the undermining of apartheid while the Afrikaans press supported the regime. Even though these terms of reference were later broadened to include an investigation into the treatment of black journalists in the English and alternative media, commentators like Ron Krabill have pointed out that the TRC neglected questions of political economy. Apart from what Krabill and others have suggested was too narrow a focus, the TRC inquiry was hampered in another important aspect, namely the refusal by a prominent media house – and in the light of the TRC's historical focus, an important actor in this period drama – Naspers, to testify in front of the commission. Although a number of individual Naspers journalists came forward with a declaration, a potential opportunity to understand the role of the media during the apartheid era was lost.

Another opportunity for a fundamental examination of the media's role in South African society arose with the investigation of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) into alleged racism in the media. This time the focus was directed not so much at the pre-1994 past, but at the performance of the media during the first few years of democracy. Again problems regarding focus and participation arose. As for the latter, the commission opened itself to accusations of infringement of media freedom by issuing subpoenas to editors. Although these were later withdrawn, the scene was set for interpretations of the inquiry as a witch-hunt rather than an opportunity for reflection and debate. The flawed methodology focused on superficial representations of racism in the media rather than scrutinizing the broader, more intricate power relations between racism, the market and the state (as commentators like Sean Jacobs have pointed out). One of the positive results of this inquiry was its effect on the professionalization process under way in the journalism industry. Sanef took the lead in reassessing the nature, role and operation of the media in South Africa. These attempts included a special workshop on media ethics and a national audit on journalism skills, in which the low levels of competency regarding contextual knowledge and ethical sensitivity among junior journalists came to the fore. A second audit, looking at management skills, is currently under way.

In terms of the political-legal framework referred to at the beginning of this article, the issue of media freedom and the historical legacy to which the new constitutional guarantees were a response did therefore not go unexamined during the first decade of democracy. Although both the TRC and the HRC investigations had serious shortcomings, they were attempts to provide some sort of foundation, to and critical reflection on, what media freedom (or perhaps rather its converse, media repression) meant in the South African historical context. Seen from this vantage point, the media did, however reluctantly, take part in a critical reflection on the implications of the most significant change during the past decade, namely gaining unprecedented constitutionally guaranteed freedom. But because this discourse highlights formal regulation of the media, rational political choice and a legalistic definition of media freedom, the attention was very seldomly directed inwards to media power itself. The liberal consensus around the media remained directed at formal fetters to its free operation in the new society, taking for granted the supposed benefits a free media would have in a democracy, provided it strove for professional excellence to temper unwanted excesses. The limits imposed on democratic participation by the media itself were hardly touched upon. However, it would seem the attention is shifting.

3. FROM THE BOARDROOM TO THE NEWSROOM

In two of Sanef's 'Ten Year Review' seminars held thus far this year, debates started gravitating towards a new perspective on the media freedom debate. Speaking at the seminar preceding the Sanef AGM in Johannesburg, the CEO of the Government

Communication and Information Service, Joel Netshitenze, said media freedom was indeed under attack – but the threat came from within the media itself.

Netshitenze highlighted three manifestations of this threat:

One, the ‘surging power of the bottom line’ that is ‘spreading its tentacles’ from the boardroom upstairs down into the newsroom and the editorial office. Profit is not sought by upping circulation or viewership through socially relevant information, but by ‘feeding the base instincts of consumerism’ of a moneyed market segment.

Two, conglomeration and homogenization. This not only facilitates the flooding of local media outlets by content produced in media-rich countries, but also leads to homogenization of local content, and the ‘rationalization’ of the local industry through measures such as staff cutbacks, which in turn translate into poorer content.

Three, the adherence to management practices according to which the only rewards for journalists are management positions, provided they buy into the bottom-line philosophy.

One might be tempted to view Netshitenze’s comments as a way of deflecting media criticism from the government back to the media themselves. This is, presumably, what led to sarcastic responses such as those by Anthony Johnson. But Netshitenze’s comments follow similar criticisms from editors and media academics themselves. At a previous Sanef ‘Ten Year Review Seminar’ held in Cape Town, the new editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee, made an appeal to the South African media to become ‘embedded with the masses’. She put forward much the same argument about threats to freedom of expression as coming from within the media: the pressures brought about by advertisers; understaffing resulting from a relentless drive for profits, and advertorials masquerading as journalism. Haffajee challenged her colleagues to ‘make a journalism that matters’ by ‘moving the epicentre of journalism’ to the poor and marginalized. At the same meeting, Adam Habib from the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal echoed Haffajee’s sentiments in broadening the concept of media independence to include independence from ‘narrow commercial interests’, with the aim of bringing the interests of the currently marginalized into the media spotlight as well.

Whether the breakdown of the ‘barriers between marketing and editing’ is a new phenomenon of “journalism in the age of the market”, as Anton Harber seemed to suggest in his Harold Wolpe memorial lecture a year or two ago, is debatable. Even positions that seem primarily political during the apartheid era, such as those held by ‘liberal’ newspapers, were also tied to capital. And, as Sean Jacobs has shown in a recent study, although the post-apartheid media are quick to claim their watchdog stance towards the government, they have been remarkably uncritical and unanimous in the acceptance of macro-economic policies that are to their benefit. However, Harber’s point about

editors becoming increasingly eager to cite business successes rather than journalistic breakthroughs is perhaps a sign that this inclination towards the market has become more overt. What is more, it has become globalized. The introduction of independent newspapers to the South African media landscape meant local media having to show profits in foreign currency. But local media companies are not to be outdone – the conglomerate Naspers, for one, is spreading its interests into the rest of Africa in search of new markets.

This market-led journalistic ethos has also been linked to the woes so publicly experienced by the industry during the past few years. Jane Duncan has argued, in a research report for the Centre for Civil Society, that material conditions in the industry, notably the remuneration of media workers, have led to the decline in journalistic standards. In turn, Guy Berger, writing in *The Media* magazine, linked the drive for profits to the lack of skills:

Editors blame the bosses for squeezing newsrooms. Bosses point upwards to boards and shareholders wanting super profits. News editors blame the training institutions for the raw material coming in. Trainers in turn finger the school system.

The juniorization of the journalism industry was also pointed out by the Sanef skills audit in 2002, and can be coupled with the drive for profits through rationalization. The extent of this rationalization becomes brutally clear when one considers the dismissal within the space of two years of the editors of two of the most prominent newspapers in the country: last year Mathatha Tsedu was dismissed as editor of the *Sunday Times*, reportedly because he ‘Africanized’ the newspaper in such a manner that lucrative white readership was alienated. This year, John Dlodlu, the editor of the *Sowetan*, was removed from his post as a result of the steady decline in circulation in a bloody war against the tabloid the *Daily Sun*.

In his overview in *This Day* of the media’s performance during the past decade, the new chairman of Sanef and the editor-in-chief of e.tv, Joe Thloloe, laments these developments:

Now editors have to be salespeople – hence the descent into tabloid journalism (...) We are now at the point where the media are schizophrenic, trying to do the worthy news while keeping an eye on the bottom line.

Schizophrenia might, one is tempted to argue, be an optimistic diagnosis. In any case, it should not be surprising that the professional image of journalism in the country is under threat. The question is whether it is in fact ‘down to each and every individual

journo to help stop the rot', as Guy Berger has argued, or whether more critical structural questions about the industry are even more pertinent.

When one therefore introduces economic questions into an exploration of media freedom and responsibility over the first decade of democracy, the issues become rather more intricate than only pitting government and media against each other. The three axes of political influence, economic factors and professionalization should be considered together in an analysis of what media freedom means in a developing democracy such as South Africa.

Having already given an overview of some of the debates around the first and third of these axes, let us now return to our initial question, but this time from the perspective of economics in the media industry. If one were to single out the most significant change to the South African media sector, and specifically journalism, during the first decade of democracy, what would that be?

4. THE TABLOIDIZATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

A mischievous answer to the question about the most significant development in the South African media during the past decade when viewed from the perspective of economics would perhaps be: the sun that set over alternative media while the *Daily Sun* rose. Within the space of a few years the *Daily Sun* has become the biggest daily in the country, toppling the *Sowetan* from this position. In its wake came the tabloid *Die Kaapse Son* and *Die Son*, as it is known in other parts of the country. Although attaching too much significance to the emergence of tabloids in the light of other important developments in both the print and broadcasting sectors, the rise of tabloids is symbolic of a broader trend in the journalism industry – also as far as mainstream media is concerned – this should not be underestimated. The increasingly competitive media market has led to a 'tabloidization' of especially the print media; a reduction of staff, a 'juniorization' of newsrooms; a preference for commercial imperatives in making editorial judgements and an erosion of specialized reporting. The one new quality daily, *This Day*, that was introduced into the market in the period under discussion, is struggling – so desperate for revenue that it even stooped to washing its copy in the yellow of one of its advertiser's brands on the day that it reported on their results. Although alternative media of the past (e.g. *South*, *Grassroots*, *Vrye Weekblad*) have disappeared, the development of new media technologies has facilitated the mushrooming of virtual communities, many of which may be considered 'alternative' to the mainstream. These however remain restricted to the small percentage of South Africans with access to cyberspace.

A more upbeat analysis would be to highlight the deracialization of media ownership in the print media sector, through the transactions involving the black empowerment consortiums Johnnic and Nail in the 1990s. These transactions brought some of the most prominent newspaper titles under black ownership. Perhaps equally significant, but with more detrimental effects, was the control over a series of newspaper titles gained by the Irish Independent group. The commercial pressure created by this opening up of the local media industry to global competition had, as Anton Harber put it, 'devastating' results on the local media scene.

But although the racial make-up of newspaper owners and editorial staff has changed significantly, some critics – most recently Joel Netshitenze in the speech referred to earlier – have indicated that the print media's class base remains the same, because it still operates according to the same market logic that has it aimed at the most lucrative markets.

In the tabloid media, although these titles are mostly aimed at a black (or 'coloured') audience, this commercial imperative seems even stronger. Consequently, although these new titles have ostensibly brought more diversity to the South African media, questions may still be raised about whether they have significantly broadened the public sphere to encourage a more participatory, democratic exchange of perspectives.

In other words, the question that has been posed on several occasions over the past few years is whether the changes to the racial composition of the boardrooms and the newsrooms did enough to transform the media at functional and structural levels. Indications are that the issue of diversity, more broadly defined than in racial terms alone, will still receive considerable critical attention in the years to come. Although ownership transfers meant a deracialization of the industry on the level of the boardroom, market segmentation still displayed continuities with the societal polarizations of apartheid.

Tabloidization of the mainstream media was not limited to print – the commercial pressure on the public broadcaster is making SABC TV less and less distinguishable from its rival e.tv. The licensing of community radio stations was a very welcome development, and it diversified the radio sector significantly. However, many of these stations have folded subsequent to their licensing, due again to commercial pressures, the lack of advertising revenue or insufficient management skills. It is hoped that the Media Diversity and Development Agency, which seems to have been slow in responding to their brief, will contribute to the expansion of community print media. It is vital that these attempts to broaden the community media sphere succeed in order to start bridging the gap between the 'two publics' to which City Press editor and former Sanef chairman Mathatha

Tsedu referred – the one public being articulate and au fait with the ways to bring their attention of the media, and the other public that falls in the media's blind spot, not attractive to advertisers, without adequate access to the media and unaware of the ways in which their plight may be moved into the media spotlight. If the media claims a special societal role in order to defend the 'public interest', its definition of the public needs critical attention.

Glamour seems to be the magic wand of the post-apartheid media's search for bigger market share – celebrity, gossip and scandal have spilled over from tabloids and pay television into the news media. Random examples: *Die Burger*, erstwhile the ideological stalwart of the National Party, has shed its political allegiances and now celebrates the free market in its ethical code while devoting its page 3 to celebrity gossip. Joe Thloloe points out a similar trend at *The Star*. A programme on SABC3 entitled *Media Focus* is fascinated by commercials. New magazines such as *Glamour*, *Heat* and *Top Billing* have hit the shelves. Reality TV has morphed into all shapes and sizes, and the news media have diligently followed suit in reporting on this pseudo-event. Ten years into its new democracy, the South African media audience seems to be conceived of more as consumers than citizens. It reminds one of the description of the transition to democracy by an unnamed Pan Africanist Congress cadre, quoted by Graeme Addison in *The Media* magazine a while ago: 'South Africans went to the brink of full-out civil war in the 1980s, but decided to go shopping instead.' Is this a problem?

5. CONCLUSION

In his keynote paper presented to the annual conference of the South African Communication Association in Durban last year and published in the latest volume of *Communicatio* [30(1)], Frank Morgan summarizes the civil society argument for media freedom as the view that the media should be a space in which society can – and should – sort out its concerns and priorities free from the power of the state and big business. Implicitly echoing Habermas' criticism of the media's role in limiting the ideal public sphere, Morgan then continues:

But puzzles arise: one when the media themselves become big businesses; another when the media rely on the power of the state to ensure their freedom. Foxes become gamekeepers. And while some civil society advocates call for legislation to protect the media from intervention or coercion by governments and large corporations, others see a need to protect politics and commerce from coercion by the media.

In pointing out limitations and challenges for the South African media, it is not suggested that the media's overall performance over the first decade of freedom in South Africa

was poor. It has done a lot of good during the transitional period. But the task of transformation is far from finished. And if this task is to be completed, the media should not only view its audience as consumers, but also as citizens. But most importantly, it should not attempt to hide the powerful interests it represents behind claims that it is an independent watchdog of democracy or a neutral observer or transmitter of information. In today's soundbyte-ruled universe, in the glow of television screens – even in a developing country such as South Africa – power belongs to those that succeed in linking political power to economic power, and this linkage is established via the media. The media is firmly enmeshed in the triangulation of politics, economics and information. That the media is a business that makes profit, is above argument. But selling information, symbolic and cultural goods is not the same as selling commodities like fish fingers or shoe polish, especially in a young democracy such as ours. Nor is democracy necessarily served by the media just by virtue of its being there. It may just as well limit democratic participation or distort its meaning.

Journalism is not an arbitrary endeavour. Media can speak truth to power, and this is a vital function in a democratic society. But this function starts with the acknowledgment that power is also located in the media itself.