

P.J. Fourie

## **Rethinking the role of the media in South Africa**

### *ABSTRACT*

The main purpose of this article is to stimulate and contribute to the debate about the role of the media in South Africa as a developing country. Against the background of an overview of the relationship between the government of apartheid and the media, and the similarity of this relationship to the conflict between the African National Congress (ANC) government and the media in 2000 and the early part of 2001, it is argued that there is a need to rethink the role of the media in South Africa. Such rethinking could start with a reevaluation of the values underlining the concept of "freedom of expression". Both the media and the government use the concept of "freedom of expression" as a basis for their interpretation and debate about the role of the media in South Africa. Yet, the historical development of the concept, the values associated with it, and its meaning and relevance in terms of the nature of present day society, including developing societies such as South Africa, are seldom investigated and debated. In short, the concept is taken for granted and dealt with as a matter of course without critical consideration of its content, the values it embodies and its applicability to modern democracies. From such a point of view, a starting-point for discussing the role of the media in South Africa could be a critical investigation of whether the meaning(s) and values attached to the basic concept of "freedom of expression" are still appropriate today. For the government, it would entail a critical investigation of the compatibility of the concept of "freedom of expression" with the developmental role they want the media to play. For the media, it would mean an investigation into whether their modes of operation, their production of content and their distribution of information and meaning are still in line with the original values associated with the development of the concept. Tentative arguments to support this view are presented in this article.

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*Prof. Pieter J. Fourie is the head of the Department of Communication at the University of South Africa, Pretoria.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2000 and the first half of 2001, a growing conflict between the South African (African National Congress) government and the media developed. In an uncomfortable way the conflict resembled the relationship between the government and the media in the years of apartheid. On the surface, even the points of contention in the war of words and threats under both governments resembled each other. Under the banner of "the freedom of expression", the media insisted, or at least tried, in both cases, to report critically on the government's ideological stances, failed policies and corruption. In response, both governments claimed that the media, with their negative, "irresponsible" and mostly uninformed reporting were sabotaging the government's larger (and more "noble") goals of furthering the national interest. In many ways, the conflicting points of view are not simply diametrically opposed arguments or counter-arguments. The larger significance of this debate lies in the fact that little effort was made to clarify the complexity of the issues involved. One such issue, if not the main issue, is clarification about the role of the media in society and, more specifically, the role of the media in a developing country such as South Africa. The other equally vexing issue is how to discern between the political agendas of governments and their strategies to counter the negative publicity that places their power under threat and the promotion of true and honest developmental goals. Who should be responsible for defining and delimiting each of these once they became intertwined?

The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, it is to document the similarities of the conflict between the South African media with the government under apartheid and the conflict that arose between the African National Congress (ANC) government and the media in 2000. Such documentation and comparison, brief as it is in this article, is necessary to remind the role players, in other words, the government, media owners, journalists, policy makers, and scholars and students of the media, how fragile the issue of the freedom of the media is, especially in a young democracy such as South Africa, and despite the Constitutional protection thereof.

Secondly, and with the above in mind, the purpose is to emphasise the need to reach more clarity about the role of the South African media in development. Clarity about this is a prerequisite for the establishment of a relationship between the media and the government in which the principles of democracy are honoured. With this as the second purpose, the article is about the terrain of the role of the media in society. To understand the media in relation to society is, in the words of Kaarle Nordenstreng, "the eternal project of mass communication research" (1997:107). It is a topic that has been well researched and since the groundbreaking work of Siebert, Peterson & Schramm in 1956, *Four theories of the press*, under revision.

Such research and theorising about the role of the media are done mainly from two methodological perspectives: the sociological and the normative. In the sociological paradigm, the purpose is to describe the *real* role and impact of the media in society. The issue is approached from an “objective” angle and claims to be based on empirical testing. In the normative approach, the emphasis is on the *ideal* role of the media. This approach is value based. The purpose is to provide cognitive maps for thinking about the relationship between media and society, and to raise professional consciousness (cf Nordenstreng 1997).

This article does not pretend to be based on, or contribute to, the sociological project. Neither does it offer a contribution to the revision of the normative project either in the form of conceptualising and substantiating a new model and/or typology of media roles or a new paradigm for thinking about the role of the media in a developing country. At the most, and against the background of the normative paradigm, its purpose is to raise some arguments that may contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of the media in the South African (developing) society, and to the establishment of a democratic relationship between the South African media and the South African government.

In Section 2.1, this is done by way of a historical narrative of the animosity between the apartheid government and the media in which some of these issues are placed in focus. This section serves to highlight the traditional role of the media under a repressive regime and of the kinds of strategies a government can employ to counter the negative publicity that threatens its power base. Section 2.2 focuses on the tense relationship between the current ANC government and the media in 2000 and the first part of 2001, and on the issues involved. In section 3, it is argued that this relationship is complicated by the government’s insistence that the media, by way of their reporting on the government, should contribute to the government’s developmental goals. Secondly, this section focuses on the incompatibility of this expectation with the values underlying the concept of “freedom of expression”. This raises the issue of how the media should or could respond to a government’s developmental goals when no clear demarcation and definition seems possible between the government’s national goals and its party political ideologies, agendas and foibles. The media, on the other hand, it is argued, should also engage in a process of rethinking the content and validity of the values that inform the concept of “freedom of expression” in a global and postmodern society. This implies a rethinking of their modes of operation.

## **2. GOVERNMENT/MEDIA RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE APARTHEID YEARS**

Prior to the overthrowing of apartheid in 1994 and the first democratic elections in South Africa, South Africa had a mainstream media consisting mainly of a public service

broadcaster and four dominant newspaper and magazine groups that were owned and managed by white people and produced by mainly white male journalists. The Western mode of media production was adhered to, including Western news values. Reporting on Africa and African events was thus limited, and the focus was on famine, war and corruption .

Media ownership was strictly regulated and a plethora of laws existed with the sole purpose of safeguarding the entrenchment and distribution of the apartheid ideology. In terms of content the mainstream media catered mainly for the white population and their needs. The content predominantly represented the white population's Western history, culture, economic and political interests. To a great extent, the citizens were uninformed about the misery of the majority of the black population who lived under the apartheid rule .

With restrictions on the publication of any material related to the exiled African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (PAC), and with "enemies of the state", such as Nelson Mandela, behind the bars of Robben Island, a generation of white people grew up who, until recently, hardly knew what Mandela looked like, let alone what he thought and what the liberation movements stood for. In short, with the exception of the contributions of a few alternative newspapers, it can be argued that the mainstream media contributed to a cognitive construct of a white utopia - an island of white well-being, progress and prosperity surrounded by, so we were made to believe, a sea of African corruption, lack of leadership, incompetence and rapid decline. This level of ignorance among the white population was acquired, among others, through the mechanisms of a state-controlled educational philosophy, apartheid-inspired interpretations and preaching of the gospel, and through a media that, on the one hand, supported apartheid ideology or turned a blind eye to its inhuman consequences but, on the other hand, were severely threatened, restricted and censored .

## 2.1 Media relations during the rule of apartheid

The National Party (1948-1994) kept the media under the constant threat of legislation and by doing so ensured that the media would apply self-censorship and control to the detriment of freedom of expression, freedom of opinion and criticism. This part of South Africa's media history is well documented by authors such as Roelofse (1983); Hachten and Giffard (1984); Oosthuizen (1989;1996); Tomaselli & Louw (1991) and Abel (1995). The following is a brief and cursory summary of this history and it is based mainly on two seminal works: Hachten and Giffard's *Total onslaught: the South African press under attack (1984)* and Abel's *Politics by other means: law in the struggle against apartheid, 1980-1994 (1995)*.

### **1950 1960**

As early as 1950, two years after the National Party came to power, the then prime minister, DF Malan, echoed the sentiment that media comment and criticism ought to be restrained by patriotism. He lamented the fact that the South African press, could not apply self-discipline.

The English South African media and its owners came under attack as being remnants of the British colonial power fostering anti-government sentiments, thus jeopardising the National Party's ideal of independence and a new nationalist patriotism.

Foreign newspapers were accused of misrepresenting South African affairs, misleading people by false reports and inciting public opinion overseas against South Africa. The then minister of external affairs, Eric Louw, argued that much harm had been done by slanderous newspaper reports about South Africa, also quoted in the United Nations, as though they were facts. He subsequently called for the deportation of foreign journalists who abused South Africa's hospitality.

In a similar vein, the then minister of post and telegraphs, Albert Hertzog, alleged that the South African Press Association (SAPA) had a monopoly in the supply of news, which was first passed through London where it was filtered and sometimes twisted (cf. Hachten & Giffard 1984:53).

These kinds of allegations resulted in the appointment of a Press Commission in March 1950 to investigate the monopolistic tendencies in the press, accuracy in the presentation of news in South Africa and abroad, and the adequacy of self-control and discipline by the press.

The establishment of this Commission can be seen as the first step towards direct government control. To forestall such control, the Newspaper Press Union (NPU) established a Press Board of Reference and adopted a code of conduct. To this the South African Society of Journalists (SASJ) objected as giving in to self-control under the threat of government control. During the time of the Commission's investigation, which lasted until 1962 when it published its report, allegations against and attacks on the media continued. A few examples are the following:

In 1954, JG (Hans) Strydom, who later became Prime Minister of the country, told a Nationalist Party meeting that the English-language press was writing things that incited the "Natives" against the laws of the land. Later on, and as prime minister in 1957, he elaborated on this statement by describing the English-language press as South Africa's greatest enemy. Negative local and international reports about the growing

polarisation in the country, as a result of the further implementation of apartheid, triggered this outburst.

Strydom's successor, HF (Hendrik) Verwoerd, blamed the economic depression in South Africa on the irresponsible and unpatriotic behaviour of the English-language media. This accusation was backed by an analysis of British newspapers done by the then South African Information Department, which purported to show that three quarters of the items published about South Africa concerned negative subjects, which created an unfavourable impression on the British media public.

After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, a state of emergency was proclaimed, similar to the state of emergency in the 1980s. The media was severely restricted in its reporting and comments on the massacre.

### ***1960-1980***

In 1961, South Africa became a Republic. In parliament, prime minister Verwoerd blamed the criticism against his government and their apartheid policy as the consequence of inaccurate reports and a wrong interpretation of the policy of the Government. He said, among others: "...I would like to see members of the press coming together...to ensure that they apply self-control and discipline themselves, and to ensure that their patriotism also serves as a background for them [to] jealously supervise their own profession...I therefore insist that the press, in the interest of South Africa, particularly in the times in which we live, should exercise care and that they should keep an eye on each other". (cf Hansard, April 14, 1961.)

In 1962 the Press Commission (appointed in 1950) released its first report and called for the establishment of a statutory Press Council (despite the existence of the Press Board) to monitor the media's self-control methods and initiatives. (For an overview of the Press Commission's findings and recommendations, and of the Press Council, see Hachten & Giffard 1984: 50-75.)

In 1966 Verwoerd was assassinated and succeeded by JB (John) Vorster as prime minister. Despite the existence of the Press Council, Vorster continued the threat of state control and legal action. His line of attack was that the media were primarily responsible for causing confrontation between black and white, and for stirring up racial emotions.

Following the Soweto uprising in 1976, Vorster's government passed an Internal Security Act through Parliament. This widened the scope of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act and empowered the minister of justice to ban organisations or publications and to

imprison or otherwise restrict people without proof of their membership of the banned South African Communist Party. They could be banned if they were deemed guilty of “expressing views or conveying information, the publication of which is calculated to endanger the security of the state or the maintenance of public order” (cf Hachten & Giffard 1984:72).

In 1977, the government threatened with a Newspaper Press Bill (1977). This bill united the English and Afrikaans newspapers in an unprecedented show of opposition. The bill was withdrawn, but the National Press Union was given a year to apply self-discipline.

In 1980 a Commission of Inquiry into the Reporting of Security News from the South African Defence Force and Police (the first Steyn Commission) was appointed. This Commission called for the formulation of a national communication policy, which would in turn be determined and controlled by the national strategy. As far as the role of the media in society is concerned, it was spelled out that in the case of conflict between state and media interests, state interests in terms of national security would be paramount. The Commission’s report articulated three additional functions for the media if it was to survive as a free and independent medium of mass communication:

- The media had to censor itself in the reporting of the activities of the state’s internal and external enemies as these were defined by the state. This implied a shift in the press’s watchdog role from the state to the enemies of the state.
- It had to sustain and promote a positive image of the state’s security and defence agencies.
- Above all, the media had to mobilise public opinion in pursuit of attaining the goals of the campaign for total strategy (meaning the perceived total onslaught on the country from communism and communists).

The above was expected to be made in the name of the national interest. The national interest obviously coincided with the interests of the government in power that wanted to protect the political status quo at all costs.

The saga of conflict and confrontation continued under the prime ministership of PW Botha. A Second Steyn Commission was appointed with the brief to inquire into, and report on, the question of whether the conduct, and handling of matters by the mass media met the needs and interests of the South African community and the demands of the times.

In April 1981, the Commission issued a report exceeding 1000 pages in which it dealt with, among other topics, the Soviet onslaught and how the media conceded to it, the media's emphasis of the evils, as compared to the benefits of white rule in South Africa, and the media's emphasis on the lack of civil rights for Africans in South Africa as against civil rights violations in the rest of Africa.

The commissioners reached the conclusion that:

The image of South Africa projected in the international and internal arena is deliberately distorted and calculated to present a one-sided, and grotesquely negative picture of the government of the day and of the White population as a whole (cf South Africa 1981:76).

In its recommendations, the Commission (cf. South Africa 1981:166–169) proposed a journalists bill. This intended bill proposed the professional registration of local and foreign journalists and the deregistration of journalists convicted in court of subversive activities. Such journalists would then be legally disqualified from practising as journalists. Qualifications for admission to the profession would be worked out by the profession, the media owners, the government and academics. Fortunately for the media, this recommendation of the Commission was not accepted by the National Party government. The major result of the Commission was the creation of the South African Media Council, which replaced the Press Council in 1983 (cf. Hachten & Giffard 1984:99; Oosthuizen 1996: 129-132).

Hachten & Giffard (1984:86) conclude that the Steyn Commission illustrated the "continuing pattern in press-government relations in which government savagely criticizes the press and then threatens new crippling press controls, but when the NPU agrees to 'put its house in order' - in other words censor itself, the government once again backs down, until the next time".

Concurrently with its attacks on, and investigations into, the affairs of the media, the government conducted its own propaganda. In 1978-1979, revelations were made in the press that the South African Department of Information had been conducting a secret propaganda war to sell apartheid to the world. This was the beginning of the so-called Information Scandal. It was revealed that the determination of the government to get its message across, to influence local and foreign opinion leaders and to infiltrate local and foreign media organisations culminated, among other actions, in the funding of the *Citizen* newspaper and deals to buy the *Washington Star* in the USA. (For a detailed overview of the Information Scandal, see Hachten & Giffard 1984: 229-261.)

Disclosures in the South African Press and by the Erasmus Commission spurred extensive



digging into the Information Department's activities in Africa, Europe and the United States. Most of all, it also drove the power battle within the National Party between PW Botha (the successor of JB Vorster) and the then minister of information, Connie Mulder, to the fore. Mulder was made the scapegoat of the information debacle when he revealed that the then prime minister JB Vorster and other members of Vorster's cabinet had known all along about the secret propaganda projects. Today, many political analysts see the Information Scandal as the beginning of the demise of the National Party and of Afrikaner nationalism.

The National Party itself responded to the Information Scandal by introducing an Advocate General Bill in 1979. This bill proposed the creation of the post of an advocate general to investigate any allegations of bribery or corruption. It also proposed that no newspaper be allowed to report about such matters without the prior permission of the advocate general.

The National Party's critique of the media was mainly focused on the press. Broadcasting was government controlled and in the hands of the public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). One of the Government's reasons for the late introduction of television in South Africa (only in the mid 1970s) was that television would expose its citizens to the lies about their country and government distributed by the foreign media.

In line with one of the NWICO's premises, the government argued that South Africans would be exposed to Western media cultural imperialism. The truth, it seems, was a fear that a powerful medium such as television would bring South African viewers in contact with the realities and wrongs of apartheid and make them aware of the abnormalities of the South African society under apartheid. This reason was, however, not expressed as such. In parliament, it was argued that the moral and Christian values of South Africans would be "poisoned" by coming into contact with the permissiveness of Western societies (cf Eiselen-Drury 1976).

### **1980 -1994**

The history of government media relations in the eighties is documented in detail by Abel (1995). He focuses specifically on the banning of specific editions of newspapers, the crackdown on the alternative media and the closure of newspapers, specifically alternative newspapers, such as the *New Nation*. Suffice it to say that in the 1980s, the government continued with, and intensified its opposition to, any form of criticism and representations reflecting the worsening political, economic and social state of the country.

With the declaration of a state of emergency in July 1985, it was possible to intensify media censorship. Journalists were subpoenaed to reveal their sources, editorial offices and the homes of journalists were searched, and foreign journalists were condemned by the then minister of foreign affairs, Pik Botha, for their representations of violence. At the same time, Botha requested that South African journalists working for foreign media register and thus be regulated.

In November 1986, the State President summoned the heads of the four large media groups to meet him. He later told Parliament that he told them: "We cannot carry on this way. Wittingly or unwittingly the hand of a diabolical enemy is being strengthened [by the media - PJF]". According to him he had "brought peace" to black townships by banning foreign television cameras. He offered to exempt the established newspapers from the emergency regulations if they and the NPU would discipline themselves (cf Abel 1995:261).

On 7 January 1987, eleven newspapers carried full-page advertisements asking the government to unban the ANC. Within a day, the Police Commissioner prohibited publications from explaining the policies of banned organisations. The media reacted with time-consuming and expensive court cases.

On 11 June of the same year, and now in the third year of the Emergency, the government promulgated even more restrictive control over the media, prohibiting the publication of information about security forces, any restricted gatherings, boycotts, illegal organisations, people's courts, restricted persons or detainees, any blank spaces in newspapers, any subversive statement, including anything discrediting compulsory military service, and anything encouraging people to participate in an illegal gathering or attack on the security forces, opposing any member of the Cabinet, engaging in civil disobedience by refusing to obey any law such as conscription or paying for rent or services, staying away from work, joining or supporting any unlawful organization, participating in people's courts, committing any other act named by the Commissioner of Police in the Government Gazette, and so on (cf Abel 1995).

As far as the alternative media are concerned, numerous examples can be cited of threats to ban editions of newspapers such as those of *South*, *New Nation*, *Cosatu News*, the *Weekly Mail*, *Vrye Weekblad* and others, and of the actual banning of newspapers such as the *New Nation*. (For a detailed history of the *New Nation*, see Abel 1995: 272-290.)

The above are examples of the apartheid government's authoritarian handling of the media, making it almost impossible for the media to enact its function to provide citizens with information on events and conditions in society and the world, power

relations, interpretations and comments on the meaning of events and information, and so on.

Younger scholars and students of media studies already tend to forget this recent history. A reminder thereof is thus essential. It is especially essential against the background of the conflict between the media and the ANC government in 2000 and the first part of 2001, and the uncomfortable resemblance of this conflict with the apartheid government's thinking about the role of the media in society.

## **2.2 Media relations under the African National Congress (ANC)**

Since 1990, South Africa has experienced radical political changes, also in terms of the democratisation of the media. A new Constitution with a Bill of Rights guarantees the freedom of expression. Section 16 of the Bill of Rights stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press, freedom to receive and impart information and ideas, as well as the freedom of artistic creativity. Although these rights are not unqualified (cf. section 36 of the Bill of Rights), the Constitution clearly makes provision for a free media and for the free flow of information (cf South Africa 1996).

In 1992, the ANC published its media charter . In this document the ANC committed itself to an affirmative action programme to empower communities and individuals from previously disadvantaged sectors of society to gain access to the media, to set up broadcasting and printing enterprises at a range of levels, to make provision for training, and to upgrade civic education in order to ensure that communities and individuals recognise and exercise their media rights.

New broadcasting, telecommunications, competition, labour, regulatory, and censorship laws have led to the following key media developments since the ANC came into power:

- The public broadcaster (SABC) was restructured and is in the process of further restructuring
- Community radio stations were established.
- Black media owners entered the media market.
- Telecommunication services were improved.
- Regulatory bodies were established in line with international standards and practices, for example the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA ), now incorporated in a single regulatory body, namely the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA).

In general, it can be argued that the media market is more open than before, in line with, but at the same time under, the pressure of major international trends such as privatisation, liberalisation, convergence and internationalisation.

However, at the time of producing this article, the relationship between the media and the government was deteriorating. The following are some examples that clearly remind us of similarities to the apartheid government's response to the media.

In 2000, government officials and cabinet ministers increasingly claimed that the media did not support development plans and ideals and were thus not serving the national interest (cf. for example "Engaging the puppet master" in *Mail&Guardian*, 27 July - 2 August 2000; "M&G and ANC slug it out in the high court" in *Mail&Guardian*, 25-31 May 2001; and "Media should be an open book" in *Sunday Times*, 1 April 2001; "Media moet dans. Skaamteloze verwagting in ANC" in *Beeld*, 16 May 2001). There was increasing criticism that the print media was still mainly white owned and controlled. This criticism reminds us strongly of the apartheid government's attacks on the English-language South African media as being a residue of British colonialism and thus of not serving the Republic's interests (cf *ANC Today - Online Voice of the African National Congress*, Vol, No 1, 26 January 2001, as an example of this kind of thinking).

In 1999/2000, the South African Human Rights Commission conducted an investigation into claims that the South African media were racist (cf South Africa 2000). The research involved content analyses of media reports, hearings of editors, and so on. Topics such as the relationship between media and racism, media and ideology, the representation of racial groups, white-dominated ownership of the media, and discrimination within media institutions were addressed. The main finding was that the South African media were racist. However, although it cannot be claimed that there are not incidents of racism in the South African media, be it in their institutions and/or content, criticism against the report, its findings and recommendations can be made from a methodological point of view. Research findings were not backed up with sound empirical proof. An overall impression was that the research itself was conducted from a specific ideological point of view and that examples of the media being racist were looked for and analysed haphazardly from this ideological point of view. The Commission's research finding can thus be seen as subjective, hypothetical and deterministic. Many examples of efforts in the SA media to eradicate the myths and stereotypes of apartheid, and of how the media as such are contributing to a less racist society, can be cited. (cf Fourie 2001).

A further development that gave rise to conflict was the disagreement between the government and the media about the funding of a proposed Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) (cf GCIS 2000). The government claimed that the South.

African media did not represent the South African society. Many groups still felt left out. The planned budget for the MDDA to advance diversity in the form of setting up and subsidising media enterprises in marginalised communities was, at the time of writing, close to R40 million (\$4 million). The media was uneasy with the concept of subsidisation and with the recommendation that the mainstream media would have to contribute to the funding of the MDDA. From the media's point of view, it was argued that despite the proposed independence of the MDDA, such an agency could impede freedom of expression .

In late 2000 and early 2001, the ANC announced a plan to start its own newspaper. This is a clear reminder of the National Party, which started the *Citizen* and tried to purchase the *Washington Star* as part of its own propaganda war, and of the Information Scandal that followed (cf Hachten and Giffard 1984: 229-261). The ANC's plans were based on a similar motivation, viz. that the South African media and the foreign media were too critical of the government and focused only on the negative aspects of the government and its policies.

On 26 January 2001, the ANC launched its own electronic journal on the Internet, *ANC Today - Online Voice of the African National Congress*. This electronic journal was seen to be a direct consequence of the ANC's perception, as expressed by President Thabo Mbeki in his opening letter in the electronic journal, that the white-owned media are anti-government.

In this letter, he accused the white-owned media in the same way the National Party accused the press. Whereas the National Party blamed British imperialism and the capitalist interests of the goldmine owners (with their economic interests in the English-speaking press), Mbeki and his government were seen to blame everything on racism, colonialism, apartheid and the capitalist interests of white media owners. The following quotation from this letter summarises Mbeki's view of the media at the launching of their journal.

"...We therefore have to contend with the situation that what masquerades as "public opinion", as reflected in the bulk of our media, is in fact minority opinion informed by the historic social and political position occupied by this minority. By projecting itself as "public opinion" communicated by an "objective press", this minority opinion seeks to get itself accepted by the majority as the latter's own opinion."

"Of special importance, the people must be informed of the progress we are making with regard to the social transformation of our country and continent, the obstacles and opposition we have to overcome for our programmes to achieve

further progress" ( *ANC Today - Online Voice of the African National Congress*, Volume 1, Number 1, 26 January 2001. Available at: <http://www.anc.org.za>. Accessed on 26 January 2001).

Volume 1(1) of the journal continues with reports about the ANC's version of the alleged arms scandal in 2000/2001 and an attack on the media that has, according to *ANC Today*, "almost without exception acted as uncritical participants in fuelling this furore".

In March 2001, the South African National Editors Forum (Sanef) and Mbeki met to discuss the deteriorating relationship between the media and the government. The possibility of setting up a media agency in the President's Office (similar to the system in the USA's White House) that would facilitate daily communication between government and the media was proposed. This meeting was a strong reminder of the meetings National Party premiers, ministers and government officials had with the media.

In May 2001, the tension between the government and the media escalated when eleven prominent black South African professionals and business men joined the government in its attack on the media and paid for a full-page advertisement in the *Sunday Times* (12 May 2001). They accused the media of promoting a white right-wing campaign against President Thabo Mbeki. In the advertisement, it was claimed, among others, that:

"...there is a perceptible and increasingly strident campaign against black people in powerful positions..."

"...certain journalists use the language of democracy to subvert democracy..."

"...the media provide a platform for a coalition of right-wing forces made up of so-called white liberal politicians..."

The ANC supported the advertisement through its spokesman Smuts Ngonyama, who commented that several journalists harboured political agendas that were anti-government. The chairman of Sanef, Mathatha Tsedu, stated that Sanef was not aware of such grouping and that "we do not think the South African media should be "imbongise" (praise singers) of any government and that Sanef hoped that the signatories of the advertisement did not expect or advocate the media to be praise singers of the government (*Advert slams 'right-wing white media' . Pretoria News, 7 May 2001*).

In a document, *The balance of forces in 2001: a discussion document of the ANC National Executive Committee*, the media were named at least nine times as an enemy (*Mail & Guardian* 11-17 May 2001). Among others, it was claimed in the document that the majority of media establishments were owned, or controlled in terms of content, by forces whose agenda was to weaken the ANC and precipitate its long-term defeat, or to shape an ANC that satisfied their interests.

In June 2001, Sanef, Mbeki, some of his cabinet ministers and government officials met on Sanef's request at Sun City in the North West Province for a two-day discussion of their deteriorating relationship. At this meeting, it was argued by, among others, Deputy President Jacob Zuma, that the media were not part of the African Renaissance. He claimed that reports contained factual mistakes, lacked focus and purpose, were often poorly researched, lacked depth of analysis and balance, and that there was a need to look at news values and how they were determined. He asked whether the media should play the role of social observer or whether they should become part of the transformation process in the country (*Pretoria News*, 30 June 2001).

From the media's point of view it was argued that all levels of the government's communications system were inadequate. The quality of the information that the government passes on is, as a result, often poor or outdated by the time it is made available. Likewise, it was argued that the quality of the dissemination of this information by the media to the public was often wanting. Both faced massive tasks to upgrade skills within their own ranks (*Mail & Guardian*, 29 June - 5 July).

The meeting, which was held behind closed doors, ended with a joint declaration in which both groups acknowledged the unacceptable levels of mistrust and hostility between the media and the government. They imparted their decision to have regular information sessions.

In line with the South African Society of Journalists in 1950, the South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ) (representing over a thousand journalists) aired the organisation's scepticism of Sanef's discussions of this kind and of signing a record of understanding with the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions on the issue of subpoenas to journalists to act as witnesses in court cases. (cf "SAUJ slams editors' agreement with policy", in *Mail&Guardian*, 25 - 31 May 2001).

How did the media itself report the deteriorating relationship? In editorial comments and analyses, the media was almost unanimous in its view that much of the tension was the result of the South African and the foreign media's criticism of President Mbeki and his government's dealing with issues such as:

- AIDS and Mbeki's controversial points of view about the treatment and causes of AIDS
- An alleged conspiracy by high-powered ANC members and black businessmen to oust President Mbeki
- Mbeki's so-called "quiet diplomacy" stance on Zimbabwe despite president Robert Mugabe's controversial and undemocratic policies concerning land reform, human rights, and the fact that Zimbabwe's economy, judiciary and media were, at the time of writing, alarmingly falling apart with vast economic and political consequences for South Africa
- The subpoenas of journalists to act as witnesses in court cases
- Scepticism about the government's performance in the fields of housing, land reform, the provision of water, electricity and telecommunications
- Alleged corruption by government officials in the government's multi-billion arms deal

It was furthermore argued that what Mbeki and his government feared was not the effects of the media on his domestic constituency, but the effects of his image and that of his government on foreign investment (cf Holiday, Anthony, 2001 "Mbeki fixated on his image", *Mail&Guardian* 6-12 July 2001).

From the media's point of view it was argued that they were not responsible for Mbeki's actions or lack of actions. Mbeki and his government's actions and/or lack of actions were responsible for their alleged negative image.

### **3. RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA**

With hindsight, the reason for the conflict between the media and the apartheid government is clear. The National Party went out of their way to enforce the ideology of apartheid, be it through the passing and enforcement of discriminatory laws, the gospel as interpreted and preached by the majority of the Afrikaans churches, the judiciary system, the education system, and security and military intervention.

However, part of their propaganda war was to uphold an image of democracy to the rest of the world. For this, they needed a free press, or at least the guise of a free press. Not having a free press, and given the high value placed in the Western world on the freedom of the media after the Second World War, would have further stigmatised South Africa as a totalitarian state. They therefore needed the media, but were at the same time threatened by the media. Except for the states of emergencies, they could not ban the media outright or apply outright state control of the media.

Their tactic was one of constant threats to the media, of passing numerous laws that



made it as difficult as possible for the media to function. Through their attacks on the media, they created suspicion about the media in the minds of the citizens and thus contributed to a credibility crisis for the media.

Despite the ANC's more open and democratic attitude towards the media, the 2000 - 2001 conflict made it clear that both the government and the media still needed to rethink and agree on the role of the media in South Africa. Such rethinking could depart from a reflection on the role of the media in present day postmodern society. South Africa is a part of this society, but, at the same time, also part of the developing Third World.

In the remainder of this article, it is argued that the main reason for the tension between the ANC and the media is not the fact that the media openly criticise the government for not performing as it should, thereby threatening the power of the government which, as a political party, expects the media to support its own political agenda and ideology. Neither is the reason the lack of government information and communication with the media and with the citizenry, or the government's attack on the media's news values, news frameworks and alleged unprofessional conduct.

Rather, two major reasons for the conflict are:

- the inherent irreconcilability between the government's increasing expectation of the media to play a development role and the right to freedom of expression as entrenched in the Bill of Rights, and
- the media's justification of their mode of operation and production on the grounds of their right to freedom of expression.

Both the media and the government use the concept of "freedom of expression" as a basis for their interpretation and debate about the role of the media in South Africa. Yet, the historical development of the concept, the values associated with it, and its meaning and relevance in terms of the nature of present day society, including developing societies such as South Africa, are seldom investigated and debated. In short, the concept is taken for granted and dealt with as a matter of course without critical consideration of its content, the values it embodies and its applicability to modern democracies.

From such a point of view, a starting point for discussing the role of the media in South Africa could be a critical investigation of whether the meaning(s) and values attached to the basic concept of "freedom of expression" are still appropriate today. For the government, it would entail a critical investigation of the compatibility of the

concept of “freedom of expression” with the developmental role they want the media to play. For the media, it would mean an investigation into whether their modes of operation, their production of content and their distribution of information and meaning are still in line with the original values associated with the development of the concept.

Some of the most prominent values are the following:

- Man has a God-given faculty for reason and can therefore think for him/herself.
- The natural rights principle can be extended from the religious to the political sphere.
- Within the political sphere, freedom of expression is the only guarantee against despotism and government abuse.
- The freedom of the individual can be secured only under the rule of law.
- State control is a licence for despotism, and thus contrary to the principle of maximising the well-being of people. The press should serve as a check on the conduct of the state.
- Only a free press can guarantee that there is an abundant supply of facts and arguments about facts, thus cultivating the habit of questioning and correcting opinions and leading to the victory of truth over falsehood (cf Keane 1991; Ronning 1994).

These were/are the values that provided the impetus to think about the primary role of the media as one of protecting the individual from the state’s misuse of power and to search for and expose the truth. With the emphasis on the role of the media to *protect* society from the government, the table was set, from the beginning, for confrontation and conflict between the government and the media. For this reason, the right to freedom of expression is often seen to be a so-called “negative right” (cf Ronning 1994).

How relevant are these values in today’s society?

### **3.1 The government, the media and development**

From the protective function of the media and the values that underlie it, it can be deduced that the media cannot be expected to act primarily as an instrument for development, except perhaps to contribute to the development of the emancipation of humanity through the exposure of despotism and the search for truth.

In terms of the values underlying the concept of “freedom of expression, the South African government’s view that the media should play a developmental role is thus controversial and confrontational. The government’s stance should, however, be seen

against the background of the known premises of the media development theory , closely associated with and developed as a result of the equally controversial New World Information and Communication Order debates during the sixties and seventies. According to this way of thinking on the role of the media, it is claimed, among others, that

- the state should be able to restrict the media if economic interests and the developmental needs of the society are at stake; and
- to protect developmental objectives, the state should have the right to intervene by restricting and censoring the media, establishing state subsidised media and directly controlling the media (cf McQuail 1987:121).

Criticism against the media development theory is, among others, that concepts such as “development”, “developmental needs” and “developmental objectives” are undefined and used in a vague manner to justify governments’ misuse of power.

To resolve the matter of the media’s developmental role (as an underlying reason for conflict,) the South African government and the media would have to reach an agreement on what is meant by development and what the role of the media could be in fostering development. An impediment in this regard is that the government, despite its official policies of reconstruction and development and of economic growth, has not been clear in its own communication about developmental goals and the application of its policies in this regard.

### **3.2 The media and the need to rethink its modes of operation**

As mentioned above, the concept of “freedom of expression” needs revision against the background of the new kind of society, or the postmodern society as the present-day society is often referred to. Despite being a developing country with all the needs, problems and challenges facing developing countries, South Africa is undeniably also part of the global order and the so-called era of postmodernism. This “new” society is characterised by

- a new world economic order in which local economies are integrated into a global economy;
- a new political order in which the characteristics of the nation state and of democracy as such have been and are changing;
- a new society in which the known boundaries between left and right, liberal and conservative, and classes and races are blurred, and in which a new role is subscribed to civil society; and
- a new culture often characterised by the prominence and omnipresence of the

media industry and its related industries such as PR, marketing and advertising, the Internet, and the mass entertainment industry. (Cf. Giddens 1990; 1999.)

This changed and changing society did not leave the nature of governance and the role of the media in this new society untouched. Yet, in their discourse about the media/government relationship, both the South African media and the South African government still rely on points of view, including conceptualisations of freedom of expression, that were more appropriate in earlier democracies.

For example, the original emphasis on the media as a platform for the broadening and expression of human thinking, and on the media as a cultural product and a symbolic form of expression, has largely been replaced by an emphasis on the media as an industry. As is the case with all industries, the media industry places its own economic interests and profit in the forefront. The consequences hereof for the role of the media in society are far-reaching and necessitate new thinking about the structure and nature of media ownership, the quality and value of media content, media audiences, and the nature of the media as a democratic institution. In short, the nature of present-day media in all its facets differs considerably from the nature of the media at the time of the development of the concept of "freedom of expression" and the values associated with the concept (cf Habermas (1984) and Thompson (1995) for the theoretical discussion of the media and/as the public sphere).

Furthermore, the original idea and ideals of pluralism to produce a well-informed public opinion that will contribute to democracy have been replaced with market-driven strategies such as liberalisation, privatisation, internationalisation and commercialisation, the impact of which has in many instances been the increasing superficiality, emptiness and meaninglessness of much of the present-day media content.

It can be argued that media pluralism has in itself become an economic ideology as destructive as the totalitarian control of the media. It has become a form of control driven by the economic interests of media owners and media conglomerates, and thus a control of public discourses often formed by economically driven news values and frameworks ("what will sell?") and by the perceived need to entertain and to *alert* public awareness instead of *informing* it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the decline of public service broadcasting as explained by Tracey (1998). He provides an explanation that urges scholars, students and media practitioners to revalue concepts such as "public service", "the public", "media professionalism", "broadcasting management", etc. and to formulate broadcasting policy against the background of a renewed appreciation of the inherent meaning of concepts such as these. Also in South Africa, public service broadcasting is declining against the background of commercial interests. This is happening at a time when broadcasting is, nevertheless,

increasingly expected to contribute to nation building. Nowhere can the trends of liberalisation, privatisation, internationalisation and commercialisation have a more devastating effect on the role of the media in nation building and development than in broadcasting. The government's broadcasting policy, which is geared towards and based on the above trends, is contradictory to its expectation that the media (particularly broadcasting) should play a developmental role.

In terms of modes of production and distribution, South Africa has a developed and First World media system. However, at the same time, it has to function in a developing country with developmental needs and conditions such as high levels of illiteracy, poverty, of unemployment, etc. all of which impact on access to, and use of the media. This duality intensifies the complexity of the role of the South African media in the South African society and its modes of operation in this society. For example, despite being a highly developed media system, access to, and use by, audiences are still mainly limited to a white minority and a black elite who can afford and use the media.

For the government, this situation raises questions about the media's claim to be the *vox populi* of the South African people and therefore of the legitimacy of the media's claims to the right of freedom of expression. To the media's claim that it is its right to inform the public and that by so doing, it contributes to the formation of an informed public opinion and thus to the development of democracy, the government can rightly ask: who do you inform and who's public opinion do you distribute?

These issues threaten the media's very existence and thus causes conflict and tension. Questions such as these challenge the myth that the media is a vehicle for the dissemination of rational knowledge. Much of recent critical media content analyses (cf Thompson 1995; Bourdieu 1998) shows that questions such as knowledge about what?, by whom?, to whom? and for whom? are becoming increasingly relevant. These questions challenge the myth that the public needs the media to be informed and to express their views and experiences. They raise fundamental issues about the media's modes of operation, the nature and quality of their products, their owners and their audiences. Most of all, questions like these urge the media to investigate their own being and reason for existence. Once the media accept the challenge to do such an in-depth critical self-investigation of the need for their existence, would they be in a better position to motivate their claims to freedom of expression in a more convincing way?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It was argued above that there is a need to rethink the role of the media in South Africa. This became apparent against the background of the history of media/government relations under apartheid and the conflict between the media and the ANC government in 2000/2001. Central to this rethinking should be a re-evaluation of the traditional values associated with the concept of "freedom of expression" in the changed "postmodern" world. Against such a background, the government's expectation that the media should play a developmental role and the media's First World modes of operation in a developing country could be investigated.

Much of what has been written above could be controversial. However, as is the case with all theories and debates about the role of the media in society, the above falls within the domain of normative theory and is thus prescriptive, idealistic, debatable and tentative. As such, it should serve the purpose of further discussion and debate.

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