

Not yet uhuru



Ownership changes, yes. But what about capital and content? **Gibson Boloka** investigates media transformation

Media in South Africa has been going through radical changes. I deliberately call these changes, rather than transformation, due to the manner in which the whole process unfolded. These changes have taken place in all media forms from print to electronic, as shown by the take over of the *Sowetan* by a black consortium, New Africa Investment Limited (Nail), launch of the *Sunday World*, the unbundling of a few radio stations by the SABC and the establishment of a free-to-air television station, e tv.

My deliberate use of the word 'change' is prompted by the fact that it was a kind of racial substitution which forms an important part, but only a small one, in the transformation process.

It was presumed that through racial substitution, the media would not only be on par with the changes taking place within the country such as racial equality or representation, but would further change the manner in which the media reflect the new society itself. Through equal representation in ownership, it was often presumed that the dominant voices of apartheid would be diluted and give way to a new voice that is representative and reflective of a new society.

Two factors have meant that this has not been the case. They are the lack of capital shift to accompany ownership transfer, and the failure to re-train journalists to work in a new paradigm.

As much as the ownership changes are taking place and being celebrated in both political and economic circles, capital has remained the same. In response to the absence of capital shift, which prompted Nail's discontinuation of N-shares, Dikgang Moseneke lamented the limited capital located in black hands. However, racial substitutions in ownership are still often mistaken to constitute real transformation of media in South Africa.

Capital impacts on content, as I will later argue. But can ownership without capital bring about changes in terms of content? If the answer is affirmative, then one could come closer to shouting over the rooftops: "Transformation!". If the answer is negative, we should whisper: "Change!".

The latter option is the prevailing situation. Contrary to ordinary change which is exemplified by racial substitution, transformation in South African media should have started with re-training media practitioners and managers. These people, whether as individuals or representative of some institutions, are products of a particular history. The ownership changes do not prepare them for the new challenges.

Thus, many South African journalists and editors, even after these changes, still can't respond to the question of what is newsworthy in the new South Africa. The answer that many of them give is similar to the one that they would have given in the 1980s. Recent exaggerated and one-sided reports about land invasions in Zimbabwe prior to the general elections show that while ownership has shifted, content remains the same. Conflict (especially interpreted in simple racial terms) determines what is news. In other words, just like in the old South Africa.

Ownership in the media remains meaningless if it does not implicate content. Otherwise, all that has taken place in the media is nothing more than the Olympics which come and go. In other words, transformation requires, most importantly, a mental shift in an attempt to prepare individuals for a new era. Without this shift, the legacy of apartheid will dominate and continue to be a benchmark for judging good media in the new South Africa.

What I am calling for in this regard is a flexible Africanisation of media content which has to do with chang-

ing the perception about Africa and its people, and with coverage of stories that are based on moral values and respect. In terms of this, before thinking about individuals, we relate their actions to the larger society of which they are products. This differs completely from westernised media content wherein an individual is a news-maker.

However, the changes in post-apartheid media clearly show that ownership in terms of race does not, on its own, necessarily change content. This is contrary to the previous era of apartheid in which content directly reflected ownership.

In my view, capital determines content more than ownership does. And ownership does not automatically mean capital. So with limited capital in black hands, transformation will continue to mean only the taking over of historically white-owned media firms — at the price of heavy loans and without fundamental change in content.

Transformation should be an integrative and ongoing process which comprises all the changes - i.e. in racial ownership, capital and content.

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DUMISANI BEYI

"Yiz'uvalo, inqobo yisibindi — fear is nothing, the thing is courage"

In this picture I have shown Makana standing on Robben Island, away from the battle, thinking about what had happened in the battle and to his people. Makanaskop is behind him and he recalls how the warriors were running down the hillside. Makana was a great chief and I still remember him today because he did not give up on his hopes even as a prisoner on Robben Island.