

We often forget the strides that have been made in the media industry in South Africa since the end of apartheid and the repressive conditions under which the media industry operated prior to 1994. In the current context of complaints by the ANC about the lack of transformation in the industry and the poor reporting by the mainstream commercial media, the gains in ownership changes and the massive growth of the community media sector in South Africa are sometimes overshadowed. Despite a positive early relationship between the media and the ANC government, things have become progressively more difficult between these two institutions and the criticism from the ANC more vociferous in recent years.

Tracing the ANC's criticism of South African media

By Vanessa Malila

20 YEARS OF
DEMOCRACY

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The arguments by the ANC have not only led to a tension between the media and the government, but also resulted in a number of institutional changes. Parliamentary discussions have resulted in the investigation by the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT). In addition, the Press Freedom Commission was established by Print Media SA and the South African National Editors Forum as a result of questions around the self-regulatory structure of the print industry. What are some of the arguments made by the ANC to prompt such a close investigation of the media industry, and how have these changed over the past few years? While there are many different aspects of the media's conduct that have been referred to by the ANC in their analysis over the years, three key areas will be examined in this article: content transformation, ownership transformation, and freedom of expression.

Content transformation

One of the biggest arguments, made consistently in the documents analysed, was that the media were adopting an anti-transformation, anti-developmental and anti-ANC stance. Often these three separate issues were considered to be interrelated so that the ANC argued in being anti-developmental and anti-transformational the media were being anti-ANC; and similarly by reporting in what the ANC considered to be anti-ANC tones, the media were being anti-transformational and anti-developmental. In its 51st National Conference Resolutions, the ANC notes that "media and communications are contested terrains and therefore not neutral, but reflect the ideological battles and power relations based on race, class and gender in our society and that some sections of the media continue to adopt an anti-transformation, anti-ANC stance and are not accountable to the general public."²

A particular aspect of content diversity highlighted by the ANC in their criticism of the media is the type of content being produced by the sector. The ANC argues in its 51st Conference Resolutions that there is a need for content that caters to the gender, cultural, racial, language, geographic, and age diversity of citizens. Public broadcasting in particular should be "mainly local...and sensitive to gender, culture and the well-being of children"³. The commercialisation of the print media is blamed by the ANC for the fact that content reflects the upper elites in society as a result of commercial interests and advertisers' demands. In its discussion document on the transformation of the media⁴, the ANC notes the tensions between editorial content and business imperatives by arguing that "it stands to reason that media institutions will tend to reflect the preoccupations, values and world view of this small group of society. Even where management may adopt a hands-off approach to editorial matters, they would certainly step in to prevent their title from adopting an editorial stance that may antagonise their target market or alienate advertisers"⁵.

Even the public broadcaster has not escaped some criticism and although it is praised for the fact that its content is more diverse than that of the commercial broadcasting and print sector, a lack of funding is blamed for the fact that the SABC in some cases has to compromise on its public service mandate (ANC, 2007: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2404>). While the SABC is regarded as having made some gains in terms of language diversity, the ANC argues that English is still the dominant language and not enough effort has been made by the media to ensure that citizens are able to consume media in all official languages. "Our government should ensure that every citizen has access to diverse range of sources of information and media in languages of their choices (in particular indigenous languages)" (ANC, 2010: <http://www.anc.org.za/docs/discus/2010/mediad.pdf>). The commercial broadcasting sector is strongly criticised for containing too much foreign content and as such lacking diversity.

Ownership and control

Ownership concentration is perhaps the issue most consistently criticised within the ANC documentation as the key factor maintaining a lack of transformation in the media industry. The fact that the South African print media is concentrated in the hands of 'the Big Four', Media 24, Caxton, Independent Newspapers, and Times Media Group, is regarded as impacting not only the political economic functions of the media such as competition amongst owners and impact on pricing, but also cultural and wider societal relations as a result of the impact of ownership on content, access to media, representation, and newsroom demographics.

The tone of the ANC's criticism towards the lack of transformation in ownership

and control of the print media grows increasingly stronger between 2002 and 2012. While the ANC acknowledged some advances in the plurality of ownership in the conference resolutions of the 51st National Conference held in December 2002, in 2007, the ANC's strong emphasis on ownership as a key means of transformation is undeniable. While there is acknowledgement from the ANC that the number of newspapers and those aimed at black readers has increased, the print sector is still regarded as highly concentrated, and as such problematic in its inability to promote transformation. In an effort to address this concentration, the ANC calls on the Competition Commission to investigate the sector's anti-competitive behavior as a result of a lack of diversity in ownership (ANC, 2010: no 110).

Ownership is thought to be strongly impacting on the ability of the media to provide a "free flow of information and a culture of open debate"⁶ within South African society. The ANC argues in its discussions on the 'battle of ideas' that print media content is highly homogenised and commercialised as a result of the sector's anti-competitive environment. Ownership transformation is regarded as central to the transformation of the media as a whole because of the impact of ownership on printing, distribution, content, employment and advertising. One way to overcome the lack of ownership diversity first suggested by the ANC in 2007 was a media sector specific Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) charter. The introduction of a media specific transformation charter is thought by the ANC to be essential in getting newsrooms more racially and gender diverse and in doing so ensuring the spread of information and a diversity of views to media audiences. The ANC argues in its discussion document on transformation of the media that, despite some changes in ownership, the lack of diversity of views in the media is the result of "sluggish change in the composition (whether by race, class or gender) of the managerial and senior editorial staff of some of these institutions" (ANC, 2007: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2374>). It further argues that "despite changes that have taken place since 1994, regrettably the facts are that the average black ownership in South African mainstream print media to date is 14% and women participation at board and management levels is at the diminutive 4.44%" (ANC, 2013: 20). Beyond ownership transformation through a media charter, the ANC also called for the strategic implementation of the Employment Equity Act to

ensure that newsrooms reflect the demographics of South Africa (ANC, 2002: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2495>).

Freedom of expression

Early documents reviewed regard freedom of expression as essential to South Africa's young democracy, and diverse views as necessary for a diverse citizenry. The ANC criticises the commercial and monopolised nature of the media for limiting freedom of expression through their lack of transformation. "The right of expression has little meaning if the means do not exist for the free expression of views. If control of the media – and access to the media – is concentrated in the hands of a few, then the capacity for the masses to receive and impart information is severely curtailed" (ANC, 2007: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2374>). However, only a few months later, the quest for freedom of expression is sidelined, and the media are accused of taking this too far and in doing so hampering the rights of other citizens. As a result, that self-regulation of the print industry is argued by the ANC to no longer be "adequate" to ensure the rights of citizens are protected (ANC, 2007: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2536>). This is also when the ANC introduced the possibility of the Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT), which it regards as essential to balancing the need for freedom of expression of with other human rights. The call for a Media Appeals Tribunal came out of the ANC's argument that the self-regulatory system was biased toward the media and resulted in content that infringed on other democratic rights.

Conclusion

Significant changes to the media industry have taken place since 1994. Despite considerable gains in fulfilling a watchdog function needed, or perhaps as a result of this watchdog performance, the media has recently been strongly criticised by the ruling party. Their criticism has resulted in a number of changes to the institutional character of the industry, changes in regulation and perhaps a more reflective self-awareness that was absent before the PDMITT report. Perhaps indeed, as the criticism has grown louder, so too the levels of self-censorship and paranoid self-awareness have also grown. What is clear is that the relationship between the media and ANC will continue in a fractured and confrontational way as long as the ideologies of the two institutions on the role of the media in South Africa are irreconcilable.



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Endnotes

1. This article comes from research conducted by the author for the Media Policy and Democracy Project (<http://www.mediaand-democracy.com/>) as part of a collaboration between the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa and the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University which aims to promote participatory media and communications policymaking in the public interest in South Africa. The full report will be published later in 2014.
2. <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2495>
3. <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2495>
4. <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2374>
5. <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2374>
6. This is an extract from the Media Charter adopted by the ANC in 1992 (Oosthuizen 2002: 92).