

media on the menu

For once, the editors were all on time. After all, you can't task the politicians with being tardy if you arrive late for a breakfast with the president



HEAR YE... *The State President addresses the SA National Editors Forum.*
Pic: Nicolene Olckers, Beeld.

NELSON MANDELA: **T**HE MASS MEDIA are one of the pillars of democracy. We would like an independent and robust press which can criticise freely and without fear — and be prepared if we criticise it.

The press has made mistakes, some very serious. The government too has equally made mistakes. We have joint responsibility to address the problems of the country.

There is a perception among the population that the mass media is controlled by a minority section of the population. You can make that observation without questioning the integrity and honesty of that minority that owns and

controls the media. But it is a totally unacceptable situation in terms of our vision. Even those who have committed themselves to democratic values, some who have fought for transformation and suffered, cannot accurately portray the aspirations of the majority because they do not live among them. Therefore, with the best will in the world, they are unable to express their aspirations. So it is a great concern that ownership and control is vested in a minority.

There are 20 members on the council of your forum, and I find that 12 — the majority — belong to a minority. Our objective as a new democracy is to ensure that our institutions of government in particular, and those of opinion makers too, must accurately reflect the aspirations of the country. A forum like this is intended to reflect this, but the majority reflect privileged members, and this can affect the orientation of the forum itself.

You may have had some reason for this. From the point of view of democracy, you can defend such a result in terms of merit. But you must also accommodate the views of the majority in the long term in a forum of this nature which will have a major role in shaping attitudes. If you are perceived as being controlled by a minority, it can undermine the good work you are doing.

Government has this problem too, where its institutions are dominated by a minority. We have to transform this, but it is a process which can't be done overnight. We want to do this without disruption and without lowering standards. When I go abroad, I find we are represented by members of the minority, not the majority. When I went to Mozambique recently, the majority of the delegation was white. I had to say to president Chissano that this is the situation I have inherited. These are men and women with integrity and who are as committed to transformation as much as I am, but that they are a minority is a process which we want to change. So this is something that we want to address.

The establishment of your forum is most important, it corresponds with our national policy, pulling population groups together to speak with one voice. In this spirit, I welcome this meeting.

THAMI MAZWAI (*SANEF Chairperson*): Affirmative action features very prominently in our agenda. We are very conscious that the media is the mirror that the outside world uses to understand our country and that it should reflect the whole country. Also among our activities, we are busy with drawing up an Editorial Charter, linked to a code of conduct (you can't have one

without the other). This document will show that South Africa is committed to a free and independent media.

We are currently concerned with Section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act. Warrants issued under this act and requiring journalists to give evidence in Cape Town recently were withdrawn, but our concern is that the law itself has not been scrapped. We must protect the credibility of the media. Once journalists are subjected to having to disclose their informants, it destroys their credibility. I was a victim of this Section 205 and went to jail for refusing to reveal my sources, as have some of my colleagues. With the advent of democracy, this law should be consigned to the scrap heap.

Media diversity has also featured prominently in our discussions. ...

MANDELA: Before you move on, let me say that your concerns with 205 need to be discussed with the Ministers of Justice and of Safety and Security present. Now, if a journalist says that a secret source gave information, is this something you in SANEF are proud of? Can it not be abused, where gossip is raised to truth?

MAZWAI: We in South Africa are transforming from a secretive society and as time goes on there is going to be more openness. We are talking about a code of conduct to serve as checks and balances that we as editors will put into place to use to ensure that secret sources are used with integrity and honesty.

ANTON HARBER (*Editor, Mail & Guardian*): Unidentified sources can be abused. But without their use in the cases of Watergate, and the Third Force exposes, the sources would not have emerged. So there is a real value to democracy in secret sources. As regards Section 205, journalists are seeking no special privileges. Yet, if a situation is created where journalists are can't cover Pagad in Cape Town, that does not serve the interests of journalists or of the ministry of Safety and Security, who in fact get a lot of information from what gets published.

MANDELA: I am concerned with these "inbuilt" guarantees that the use of secret sources won't be abused. What are these guarantees?

BRIAN POTTINGER (*Editor, Sunday Times*): A single source story that is not checked is bad journalism. The guarantee you seek lies in training. We are addressing that in our programme of action.

MANDELA: Some journalists in other countries do frown on the practice because of abuse.

RAYMOND LOUW (*Editor, Africa Report*): In fact in Sweden, they prosecute those journalists who

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reveal their sources, and with good reason. In South Africa, the Open Democracy Act will incorporate protection for whistleblowers. It is important that the press has access to secret sources.

MOEGSIEN WILLIAMS (*Editor, Cape Times*): In terms of safeguards, the audience is the ultimate judge because we only sell our newspapers or attract our audiences if people believe our journalism is credible. If we are not careful with our sources, the public will not buy our papers.

MAZWAI: We will follow up with meetings with the Ministers. On a different topic, we would like to set up three-monthly meetings with yourself.

MANDELA: Let us agree in principle on that.

MAZWAI: On the question of media diversity, a lot of publications have closed despite playing a crucial role in the struggle and more recently in ensuring that South Africans talk to each other. We in SANEF will have talks with the Independent Media Diversity Trust to put in place a training programme for independent publications - a lot collapsed because of poor management. And we will be going to the newspaper houses to get them to contribute funds to the Trust. Media diversity will come from several media. The big media groups are being bought into by Nthatho Motlana and Kagiso Trust, but this will not change the culture there which will continue for several years. While this situation continues, we need more media.

MANDELA: Who would like tea and who would like coffee ... or anything stronger than tea or coffee?

HARBER: You want us to accurately reflect the drinking habits of the journalistic community!

MAZWAI: We would like to see state funds channelled through the IMDT. Direct government funding of media will not work. Of course there would need to be annual statements, but placed in the hands of the Trust. In five years, the funded publications should be profitably serving communities. We cannot just talk about diversity in the media and not do anything about it.

MANDELA: That is a very positive step. I am very concerned that mass media should not reflect its ownership and control, but the population of the country. There is an attempt from traditionally white organisations and parties to resist transformation. Some of the newspapers that used to support the apartheid regime have radically moved away from that position. Their editorial columns give unqualified support for transformation. Generally speaking, though, I seem to feel that the conservative press is trying to preserve, one way or another, the status quo. Take their editorial comments. If you sat with the editors, they would find it difficult to justify their views. Because of this some senior black journalists are not writing for their audiences, but for a particular group because in the new set up they feel they should be getting promotion. They therefore believe the only way to get ahead is to join a campaign against transformation. This can be done with integrity; nonetheless, they know that Thabo Mbeki does not promote them. Those who employ and pay and promote, are the persons whose views count. Hence diversity in the media is very important and I welcome it.

HARBER: The function of this organisation is to make sure that ownership changes are carried through all the industry, and also with press freedom. We want to carry a commitment to

press freedom — to carry that passion — to all levels of the state, including the judiciary where elements are hostile to press freedom, the civil service where there are people hostile to openness, and to the population as a whole.

We are concerned that there remain a range of statutes on the books which restrict press freedom. This needs attention, and must be updated and brought into line with the new constitution.

MANDELA: I request you to compile a list of these. Sometimes, government does not know all the details that concern you.

LOUW: We have given a list to Cyril Ramaphosa, the Minister of Safety and Security and the Minister of Justice, beginning two years ago. We as civil society groups don't have the resources to investigate all the restrictions on the press. We provided a list and recommended that government set up a task group of several members of the media, civil society organisations and legal people in government so that the process can be embarked upon. Comtask itself could not deal with the whole range, although it found that there is this legislation that should be removed.

“If senior black journalists criticise us, give us the right to criticise them.”



DENNIS CRUYWAGEN: I want to ask ...

MANDELA: Speak up Dennis, you sound like a woman!

CRUYWAGEN: I was trying to charm you, sir! What I find regrettable, when black journalists have suffered such a lot, that someone of your stature, sir, should go onto a public platform and criticise unnamed black journalists. It is very dangerous, and I appeal to you to stop it.

MANDELA: I don't want to personalise the issue. But if senior black journalists — who are in a position to interpret the aspirations of the community — criticise us, then give us the right to criticise them. Freedom of expression is not a monopoly of the press; it is a right of all of us. I would like to avoid discussion where you criticise me, and we criticise you and you want to make me name you.

HARBER: We don't want this as a forum for criticising what specific editors and papers say and do. Yes, it is agreed that debate and criticism is a two-way process. We should seek to do this in an atmosphere that is helpful and constructive for the right kind of independent relationship. An attack that is on a group of journalists as a whole from a public platform can be dangerous and is not healthy for government or the media. You may think criticism oversteps the mark and you must say so. We would like to keep it in a way that doesn't harm journalists.

MANDELA: Well, if you expect us not to criticise, you are mistaken.

HARBER: It should be a healthy exchange, but let us keep it healthy.

MANDELA: It is about nation-building and rec-

onciliation that senior black journalists attack me. We would have had bloodshed unless we had not made these into fundamental policy. This country would have gone up in smoke. You have no idea of what we faced. Few of you know that the right wing had set a date to stop the elections. I had to see certain individuals to get them to intervene. They criticise me about reconciliation without coming to me to ask “why are you doing this?”. The country was on the brink of civil war three months before the elections. But journalists, especially black journalists, criticise this policy in public. Can you give me a reason why I should not criticise them?

I meet with an editor like Brian [Pottinger] and talk to him and then he says the ANC is dishonest in the next editorial. I don't want us to discuss this where you force me to make us defend ourselves and yourselves. Let us rather talk about issues of understanding.

BRIAN POTTINGER: This is not a forum for personal matters, but the point is that criticism should be specific. If there are problems with an editorial I wrote, then mention me. Our concern is really raising professionalism, and to ensure this is not just words, we are looking at a programme of action with educational institutions, training the trainers, internships and cadet schemes. Lots of mistakes are not mischief, but a lack of knowledge. We also want a series of seminars where civil servants can meet journalists and explain how they work. Strengthening knowledge is the key to understanding.

MANDELA: The basis is accepting the integrity of the press and with whom you're interacting. Once you question this, you

destroy the basis of a relationship with another human. If you question our integrity, we can't keep quiet. We have had strange experiences with some journalists, where you brief them on the true facts — but some are beyond the pale; they say they agree with you and later say the opposite. You can't expect us to be quiet. We will not reply to every criticism. But certain criticisms you can't ignore.

The mass media is important, without it we will never succeed. I don't want a mouthpiece of the ANC or government. The press would be totally useless then. I want a mirror through which we can see ourselves. No man is an island, and it is a mistake to see transformation as the result of one man when it is a collective effort. Where government makes mistakes, you must say so. Where you make mistakes, so we should say so. Where you do a good job, we should congratulate you.

JUDY SANDISON (*Editor, Radio News, KwaZulu Natal*): We are concerned about community education of people about the role of the press in a democracy. The release of all results of local elections in our province was delayed, so we released them as they came in. It tended to be urban results first, which favoured the ANC. Some listeners wanted us to hold back results till all were in, not understanding how the media covers elections. If ordinary people do not see the value of a free media, no one will fight for us if we are under threat.

MANDELA: Social values can't be corrected in

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just two and a half years. I appreciate the steps you are taking to make the community understand important issues.

SHAUN JOHNSON (*Editor, Cape Argus*): We are at the beginning of a transformation process. The media has been criticised because it has taken two years into democracy before this body was formed. But its formation was absolutely historical and will lead to total representativity. We do represent a much larger grouping, and are like a cabinet of national unity at present given that we were elected according to interest groups. Don't judge this group on its two weeks of existence, but on the Editorial Charter which it will come up with, and which includes transformation.

MANDELA: I had thought you were directly elected.

MOESIEN WILLIAMS: We have a sunset clause that expires next year.

MAZWAI: We have five working groups in SANEF, and these include affirmative action and training, and diversity.

I attended a black publishers group that was launched on Saturday, and they admitted they don't have the skills. This is the situation in both print and community radio. We have to do a programme to train them. We want to ensure that when we launch SANEF next year, we have a track record: we need a robust year. At the end of the day, we can't criticise other people for not changing, when we ourselves are refusing to change. You can't have one set of standards for government, another for ourselves, or for big business.

The question of communications between government and media is of absolute importance. Our function is to tell the public what government is doing or saying, whether we like it or not. We are not judges, but messengers. If information comes from the rock face, we can reflect it better. With all respect, I don't think government has done a good job of selling itself. Take a list of RDP achievements — it is inexplicable why there has been such a bad job communicating these. Government is not the best communicator. We want to do our bit to smooth it out.

MANDELA: Please note the spirit of the following comment I am going to make, so that you don't misunderstand me. We had the January elections. We have various ways of communicating — through the mass media, and direct with our constituencies. Sometimes it is difficult communicating via the mass media. We give out information we regard as crucial, and the press keeps quiet. Let us look at the patterns indicating popular support. In the the 1994 elections there was 62 percent support for ANC. Then we had local government elections and we came out with 66 percent. Then there were the local government elections in in the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal where the IFP got 44 percent and the ANC 33 percent. One newspaper said that in Kwazulu-Natal, the IFP has won, but in that province the ANC rules, because the total budget for IFP areas is R1.78 bn and R4.2bn for ANC areas. On numbers the IFP won, but the ANC increased its support there considerably. Then the coloured community in the Western Cape: in the general election, we got 9 percent, now we increased to 33 percent. Are we communi-

cating or not? Our constituency would not have continued to grow if we had not been communicating. But our method of communicating with the mass media leaves much to be desired. You can see this also in our method of communicating amongst ourselves, which is defective. Sometimes, I do not know our achievements in housing, health or water until I ask for reports on these.

JOHAN DE WET (*Editor, Beeld*): We do not have black journalists on Beeld. We have a programme of development, but our black journalists are grabbed by NGOs or government.

MANDELA: We have the same complaint. Our people are being grabbed.

DE WET: Very few black journalists write in Afrikaans. We wanted to appoint a black journalist as an assistant editor but we cannot afford him now. It would be of great benefit to us to have black journalists, but it is very difficult to find them.

MANDELA: Some of the Afrikaans newspapers have moved away significantly from supporting the apartheid regime, and Beeld is one. You criticise us, we don't always agree. But you are objective — I read the paper almost daily — and I want to complement you for that. (Of course, [looking around at other editors at the table] I also read all the other papers too!

Black journalists not staying for a long time may be because of the background, because this paper has been regarded as a mouthpiece for the apartheid regime. We have had serious problems in transforming leaders of the liberation movement to nation builders. They have an atmosphere of resistance to everything white and associated with government. Now we want the same people to lead the new process. This is where I have singled out some black journalists — not all, I expressly said "some" — for making it difficult for us in promoting reconciliation, without which we would not have had peaceful transformation.

Some black journalists are lagging behind whites. I have noticed the change in *Beeld*. Willie Kuhn (ex-editor of *Beeld*) is a trustee of the Children's Fund. It is absolutely necessary to allay the fears of a minority, as it has been throughout history. That is why we have emigration today, because of fear. We can't afford that. We must make sure people are not threatened, although we can also not compromise on transformation and the need to deliver to the disadvantaged. I don't want to pacify people in an irregular manner. We have struggled, been exiled, tortured, jailed and nevertheless been able to fight and win. So it is not cowardice to say we want peace and reconciliation. I never expected such progress as we have had, and the press has had a very important role in this transformation. Don't be impatient and think that you'll remove the image of Beeld and other newspapers within two and a half years. It will take some time. Beeld did contribute to preparing attitudes of Afrikaners towards change. A number of articles and columns have been very positive. This has been the contribution of all sections of the mass media.

LOUW: On media diversity, community radio and print do not have money, besides not having skills. One of the proposals that government should entertain is a subsidy system through the IJMDT to enable that to happen. There are lots of models around the world. We want to investigate these to find what is appropriate for us. The principle is that the state,

not the government, perhaps even through a multi-party vote, should funnel funds through an independent agency, ensuring there is a Chinese wall between donor and recipient. This is very important for media diversity.

MANDELA: I have noted your point. I have asked several ministers to look at the distribution of government advertising. There are companies contracted by the previous government to which we are still bound. Some of this is unacceptable. Some of the papers most critical of us are where we are distributing adverts to. Newspapers that are objective in their point of view are not getting any of these adverts.

MAZWAI: Thank you for those wise words!

MANDELA: I have asked for an equitable adjustment of advertisements. But we are dealing with clever boys who anticipated things and entered contracts so that the practices of the apartheid regime continue. That may be one of the ways to help fund newspapers.

LOUW: I am a little worried that the implication may be that if a paper is not supportive of government, it won't get advertisements.

MANDELA: One newspaper has boasted recently that it received R12m in adverts in one year. That is a newspaper which every issue must have an editorial attacking the government, and the cartoon portrays me with thick lips and looking like a real ... I don't know, with Joe Slovo perching on the one shoulder and Jay Naidoo up on the other.

They get a lot of advertising from us, and they use that funding to attack us.

LOUW: That is the price of democracy.

MANDELA: I am not saying they shouldn't do this. But that there should be equitable advertising.

HARBER: The Broadcasting Act encourages diversity. There are new radio owners emerging. But there is only talk about diversity in print, and no tangible government policy for this.

MANDELA: This is something you should discuss amongst yourselves. Be realistic — you don't transform overnight. It is a mistake if you think you change the practices overnight.

There is not threat to press freedom as long as the ANC is the majority party in government. There can be no threat to press freedom because we have suffered badly from a lack of freedom of the press. For us to make that mistake, would tarnish the leadership and the image of the country. We want your co-operation. The tendency to think that one man is responsible for moderate policy, and to ask what happens when he goes, and not to look at the collective, is to harm not only my party, but the country as a whole. I can assure you there is no threat from us to freedom of the press.

PRESIDENTIAL AIDE: Sorry to interrupt, but the Nobel laureates Mr de Klerk and Archbishop Tutu are here to see you, sir.

MANDELA: Well, they can wait! [continues] It is a mistake that some of our neighbouring countries have made, to crush opposition parties. If you do that, the whole process of transformation will slip away. Let us invite everyone; we have a strong case and the best weapon is to confront them at the table. This is how we have eliminated a number of parties. So it is not just a tactic — we believe vigorously in the freedom of the press.

Thank you very much, I must go as there are people waiting for me.

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