

# 'Talk Across the Races'



**South African media's unmet goal**

Last year the South African Human Rights Commission (HRC) hearings on racism in the SA media sparked much debate. Prompted by complaints from the Black Lawyers' and Black Accountants' associations, which felt that white-owned and controlled media unfairly attacked the country's black leadership, the hearings called in mainstream print and broadcast editors to testify on newsroom operations, decision making and the pace of transformation. After the hearings media organisations across the country ran workshops on racism and the media. *Anthea Garman* asked **Mathatha Tsedu**, chair of the SA National Editors' Forum (Sanef) and deputy chief executive of SABC news, if there are signs of significant change...

## What impact did the hearings have on the media?

The hearings were extremely useful. They forced us to look at ourselves in a very public debate and to find answers. We journalists are experts at discussing others and giving advice and criticism, but we're also experts at avoiding discussing ourselves. The good thing about the hearings was that almost all the mainstream editors were there talking about their own problems and their plans for overcoming them. It was useful for reminding people about the promises they'd made about transformation and getting them to work again at what needs to be done.

## It seems that the SA media is not paying much attention to the World Conference Against Racism which we will be hosting?

One of the difficult things is to get hold of information from the United Nations about what's happening. But the SABC will be the host broadcaster for the world and we are planning to send 100 people to the conference. Our agenda is not finalised but we are holding workshops to ensure that those going have a common understanding of their purpose. As a build-up to the conference the SABC has commissioned inserts both here and internationally to air in the run-up.

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## Can you give us an example?

For instance, here at the SABC we are making changes over the next few months to the main 8 o'clock news bulletin. Racism is a constant issue here and to be thinking about it keeps us on track as we talk about staffing and content. When I was at *The Star* we realised that every time we wrote about Aids we would illustrate the story with a black face. If we ever used a white person the face would be obscured. It's all very well to talk about 'stereotypes', but you have to break that down and ask what it means when you're actually working on the newsroom floor.

## Last year when editors were subpoenaed to attend the HRC hearings the atmosphere was very acrimonious and emotional. Has the discussion become more rational?

No. Even within Sanef, whenever race is raised the discussion becomes very difficult.

## When people talk about race and the media they easily use the term 'white media'. Have there been shifts in control?

There are areas where black control has been attained and is growing, but there are also places where it has been reversed. *The Sowetan*, with *Sunday World* and *Leadership*, and the NAIL (New African Investments Limited) radio stations is a growing empire but our biggest media company – Independent – is foreign-owned and white-controlled and is not looking for black partners. *City Press*, a black newspaper is now back in the Naspers stable and *The Citizen*, which was owned by Kagiso Trust, is now with Caxton. But the bigger problem is that we don't have media that talk across the races – they are still segregated by aiming at specific audiences. However, if you look at editorial control you see more change, with black journalists moving into positions where they can inject perspectives and change decisions about content.

## Do you think it's important to attend this conference?

Some people feel the conference is unnecessary, but I feel the fight against racism is very important. We have to continue the debate begun last year even if it's a reluctant debate. We also need to look at the wider world and see if racism affects just us or also afflicts other people.

## Where's Sanef at now?

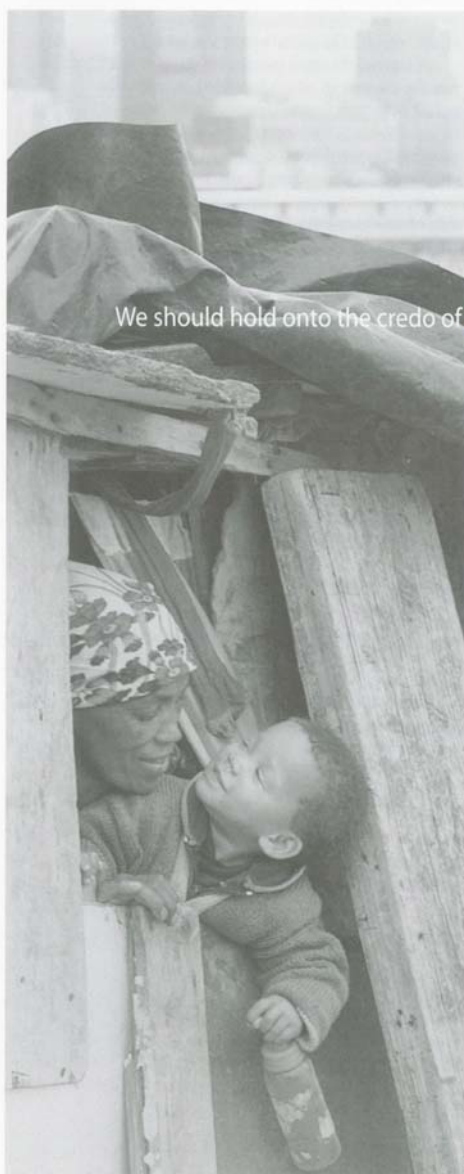
Last year at our AGM we looked again at our mission and goals. Our first priority was press freedom and we asked ourselves if that really is our biggest challenge. We decided no, our biggest challenge now is to find sufficiently skilled journalists to put out a credible media product every day. So we have placed that as our first priority.

## Sanef was born out of a merger between the mainly white Conference of Editors and the Black Editors Forum, and despite very real tension over the race hearings it seems to be surviving...

Our internal tensions have been manageable. We don't have unanimity but we are able to coerce everyone along! My attitude as chair is to engage everyone, whoever they are – even government. At the recent *bosberaad* with the Cabinet (see the "Way Forward" insert in this edition of *Review*) some people arrived really angry with issues they'd been bottling up. But we all realised there's a future out there in which we need to take each other's word and move forward.

## Is there a race-free future for SA?

It's foolhardy to think we will reach a stage when race will disappear, but we must break it down and work at it – each effort makes the country better. And we should hold onto the credo of journalism: concern for the underdogs – the major victims of racism are the poor and illiterate. Our call is to understand that and keep the debate going. ■



Shacks against the skyline: the life of the poor urbanised.

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