

We're part of society!



The media have a responsibility to serve the aims set out in the constitution - even where we do so at a profit, says Joe Thloloe, the chairperson of the SA Editors' Forum at a conference in Johannesburg. While there is room for variation in how that mandate is interpreted, there is no room for those who are motivated by greed to pander to the lowest tastes.

Joe Thloloe's speech to the Sanef conference:

I'm delighted that I'm sharing this platform with two academics who can talk with authority on the difficult concepts of ideology, democracy, race, society and the role of the media in it.

I'll leave the analysis, classification, and abstraction to them because on some issues I have a fear of heights. Of course, I do read their learned works and they help me improve my practice.

For now I talk from a media practitioner's perspective on what I see as the role of the media in today's South Africa. I will not even attempt to abstract this to "media in society".

This conference comes when we celebrate our National Media Freedom Day - October 19 - when we look back at the day 28 years ago when 17 black consciousness organisations and three publications - the World, Weekend World and Pro Veritate - were banned and hundreds of people were arrested.

That day showed how closely media are linked to the people they serve. I'll come back to that theme.

Today's South Africa

The other day I peeped over the shoulder of a friend as she was preparing a report for her bosses after the release of AMPS figures. The report, eleven years after the birth of our democracy, shocked me. It told me that 10-million South Africans 16 years and older are unemployed and of these 9-million are indigenous Africans. It painted the picture of South African society as a pyramid, with the affluent at the pinnacle, and the bulk, the poorest, at the huge base. There is now a sprinkling of blacks at the pinnacle. It said the lowest category, in LSM 1, people whose households earn less than R890 consisted almost completely - 99,4 percent - of indigenous Africans, two and a half million of us. Coloureds in this category were 17 000 and there were no Indians or whites. AMPS told me that 21-million of us have to live in households that earn less than R4 000 a month. All this, in spite of a general movement up the LSM continuum, with the lower LSMs showing improvement by shifting into the upper groups.

In December 1996 South Africans defined their mission in a constitution that was drafted after extensive consultations. This is the national consensus that Professor Karikari referred to in his presentation.

The explanatory memorandum that accompanies it states: "The process of drafting the Constitution involved many South Africans in the largest public participation programme ever carried out in South Africa. After nearly two years of intensive consultations, political parties represented in the Constitutional Assembly negotiated the formulations contained in this text, which are an integration of ideas from ordinary citizens, civil society and political parties represented in and outside of the Constitutional Assembly."

The preamble of the constitution spells out South Africa's vision, which is to:

- Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

When I read the AMPS figures against the backdrop of this vision, I see that South Africa's long walk to freedom lies ahead.

Media

Having said this, I should also mention that media are of their societies and in their societies. We suffer from the same ills as the rest of society, even when we try to perch ourselves above it. The media

have to grapple with the divisions of the past; have to lay the foundations for democracy and openness in the industry; have to improve the quality of life of their workers...

Just as the rest of society, we suffer from the legacy of the education policies of the apartheid regime and struggle to get skilled people into the industry. We are part of the chorus that moans about the quality of the graduates from tertiary institutions. We need journalists who can handle complexity, who can disentangle fact from fiction and who can bring understanding through their stories.

Society goes on to complicate the lives of the media even more:

The Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

And the South African Constitution that I quoted earlier says:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research."

Society has thus reserved a special place for the media, artists, academics and scientists. But our "special rights" are embedded in the right of every member of our society to freedom of expression.

That is why Jimmy Kruger, who was Minister of Justice in 1977, didn't ban just the newspapers or just the people's organisations. He tried to shut both up.

What we as the media should be asking ourselves is: Why did society single us out? Why were the manufacturers of shoelaces, for example, not accorded this honour? Do we deserve this special place? Does our performance live up to this special place?

At its launch this past weekend, The African Editors' Forum repeated what journalists have always maintained, that "public and media scrutiny of the exercise of political and economic power is essential for the promotion of democracy and human rights".

We have taken on the job of being the watchdogs of society – albeit for a profit. I still insist that the media in South Africa are part of South African society and are therefore obliged to strive for the goals spelled out in the preamble to the constitution.

We also have three other responsibilities:

- To hold up the vision that is in the constitution and remind South Africans of their commitments;
- To hold all those in power accountable for turning this dream into reality; and
- To tell the daily story of the bumpy journey to this new world.

We will be judged on how well, collectively, we meet these responsibilities.

Each print or on-line publication, TV or radio channel will have its own recipe: more or less information; more or less education; more or less entertainment – to quote the old Reithian formulation – and this will provide for diversity.

At this stage in our history however there is no place, I believe, for those who are driven by greed to pander to the lowest tastes. Professor Karikari spoke about the frivolous and the diversionary and I'd like to add the bizarre. The market, not the legislators, will root them out.

We have to fix this plane while it's in the air, flying.

** Joe Thloloe is chair of the South African Editors' Forum. This paper was delivered at the Sanef / SABC / University of Limpopo conference on "Transformation of the media in a society in transition." Thur, 20 Oct 2005*