

**Media & Society Conference: Why media freedom matters and how does it relate
to questions of national and public interest**

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19 October 2005

No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. Famines have occurred in authoritarian colonial regimes, in repressive military regimes, and in one-party states ...

Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate, 2004

One thing that nearly all media advocacy organisations agree on is that the litmus test for a free media, is the constitutional protection of the right to freedom of expression.

After many decades, indeed centuries of struggle, all South Africans had the opportunity to participate in the democratic process – part of this process was the adoption of a Constitution and Bill of Rights. Clause 17 of the South African Bill of Rights protects those rights to free expression, singling out the press and other media.

Additionally, within our democracy, there are other legislative and institutional provisions that provide further protection to the right to free expression. To return to the tests commonly utilized to test freedom of the media, Reporters Without Borders considers the number of journalists murdered, expelled or harassed, and the existence of a state monopoly on TV and radio, as well as the existence of censorship and self-censorship in the media, and the overall independence of media as well as the difficulties that foreign reporters may face.

At the recent All Africa Editors Forum, President Thabo Mbeki re-emphasised the importance of press freedom - "the truth whether good or bad had to be told," he said. During the Forum our colleagues from Gambia told delegates horrifying stories: "Our offices have been burnt down, our press has been bombed and one of editors has been shot, and there have been no police investigations on any of these cases," said a Gambian delegate.

Our Togolese delegates informed the Forum how journalists are being hounded and harassed in their country.

We, on the other hand, are fortunate that on all these counts of media freedom most SADC countries, particularly Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, score high – reflecting high-levels of media freedom in our region.

Media freedom is core to the mission of the SABC; central tenet of the SABC is that in order for it to fulfill its public broadcasting mandate it has to enjoy freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence. In fact, the SABC Board, which is appointed by the President on the advice of the National Assembly, controls the affairs of the SABC and is explicitly mandated to protect the SABC's freedom and independence.

While the editorial policy goes further and explicitly states that:

That our freedom of expression and journalistic and creative independence is protected by law and that this is fundamental to operations of a public broadcaster

But why have we placed such a premium on media freedom?

The words of Sen, as quoted at the beginning of the address, go to the nub of the matter. A free media provides an essential safeguard in the functioning of an effective democracy. It encourages transparency and good governance and it ensures that society enjoys the rule of true justice. Freedom of the press is a bridge of understanding and knowledge. It is essential for the exchange of ideas between nations and cultures which is a condition for true understanding and lasting cooperation.

It is only when freedom of expression is guaranteed that all citizens will be provided with the information they need to be free, because it is then that we are able to reflect the world to the nation and the nation to itself.

While on the libertarian fringes of the media debate are those that argue that information is commodity and any restriction placed on its dissemination amounts to an unfair

trading practice, most would locate an argument around why a free media matters is within the public interest. Even the restrictions placed within a democracy on media freedom, such as regulations around reporting on children and restrictions on racist hate speech, are also justified in terms of serving the public interest.

The public interest is generally posited to mean the interests that different sectors within society share in common. The national interest shares this notion of interests across differing sector but extends that beyond civil society and importantly locates these interests within the national project. It is also important to note that within a constitutional democracy, such as South Africa, the distance between public and national interest is very short.

Locating the national interest within the national project is a key element. This means that media who serve the national interest are making a conscious decision to actively engage with and promote non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy. Importantly, the content given to this advocacy approach is rooted in an understanding of where we as South Africans are coming from – a past, located within and emerging from a colonial system, where people were oppressed and exploited on the basis of race, class and gender.

This has implications for the way in which we choose to report, but it does not prevent us from presenting colourful, critical and controversial programming. Locating media within the national interest also requires a level of vigilance, because there are a number of individuals – both within the public and private sectors – that are only too willing to conflate the word national with personal.

But within this paradigm, the media can not serve the national interest unless it is free.

An essential element of a free media serving the public and national interest, is because such freedoms allow everybody to participate in the national conversation. However, when structurally the majority of people are prevented from accessing the means by which to participate in such a conversation, the danger lights must flash.

As such, as the public broadcaster, in the context of a newly emerging democracy, beset by issues of race, class and gender, notions of public and national interest are central to our understanding of a free media.

In order for media freedom have meaning and matter, interventions have to be made at a range of levels so as to ensure that a plethora of voices are heard. These can take the form of ensuring a diversity of ownership, through initiatives such as the MDDA and also anti-trust legislation, through skills development programmes targeting sectors of society traditionally excluded from participation, and the internal policies and goals of media organisations. To illustrate the last issue, we at the SABC work towards a range of corporate goals, so as to ensure that meat is given to the notion of media freedom. Key to news division's delivery of the "meat" would be achieving the goals of:

Ensuring the SABC promotes democracy and non-racialism by building empowerment through innovative programming that informative, entertaining and educative in all official languages

and

Ensure compelling, professional and authoritative news and current affairs programming that tells the SA story accurately, fairly and in a balanced way while reflecting the world, in particular Africa, to all South Africans in line with SABC's Editorial policies

If media freedom in its fullest sense is only enjoyed by an elite both within the nation and internationally, it means very much less and will serve neither the public nor national interest, than when a free media is also one to which all citizens have access