

Significance of this year's conference

SANEF-SABC 3rd Media & Society Conference

By Jovial Rantao, SANEF Chair

A generation of special South Africans was honoured last night at this venue.

These men and women – which included the likes of Percy Qoboza, Steve Biko, Joe Tlholoe, Nat Nakasa, Maud Motanyane, Allister Sparks, Harold Parkendoff, Rashid Seria and many more – had a few things in common. One common characteristic among those who were honoured at the special gala dinner by SABC and the SANEF was that all of these South African were brave.

The other was that they remained steadfastly committed to the work, their calling, in face of serious adversity. The third common denominator, and perhaps the most important of them all, was that they stood for truth. The truth was something they held dearly. It was something that they were prepared to live and die for. Infact, sadly, some of them did pay the ultimate price for the truth. The truth was the main defence and weapon against a system that was prepared to unleash its might – bullets and all – against anyone who go it wrong.

The truth that they told was a reflection of the voices of the communities that the newspapers they worked for existed in. These publications were truly anchored in these communities. They had their finger on the pulse. These men and women told the truth and when this truth became unpalatable for powers that be, we all know what happened. Two newspapers – The World and Pro Veritate – were, along with 19 organisations, banned. The main pillars in the work that the heroes were honoured for last night were truthfulness, honesty, fairness and balance.

These pillars came to life in every story they published. These pillars were there in the headlines that were written, in the pictures that were published. These pillars were the foundation of the many published stories that told the truth and revealed the suffering of the black majority under a repressive government. October 19, 2007 is hugely different from October 19 1977. We have a democratic government in place of the minority rule regime of the National Party. The media today is free to publish and broadcast that which it deems fit to publish and that which they deem to be in the public interest.

The media landscape has changed drastically, to reflect the boom in the economy of our new South Africa. Some of the challenges of today include the dawn of the new media and multimedia. Newspapers, radio and TV are now faced with readers, listeners and viewers who, at any given time, have an i-pod in one hand, a cellular phone in another and are sitting in front of a laptop. We have to catch this person attention. Find a way of drawing them away from the many multi-media gadgets in his hands and consume our media.

Our growing media family has seen the arrival of new tabloids newspapers whose new and robust style of journalism has led to a debate within SANEF.

A third challenge is the political environment that we find ourselves in. A large number of resources have been placed by the media to cover the run-up to the elective conference of the ANC in Polokoane. During this period, the media has been bombarded with all kinds of information which they have to work on and ultimately publish. What will assist the media to overcome these and many other challenges is excellent journalism. It is the excellently written word. It is the truth. It is honesty, fairness and balance.

We have to produce excellent journalism in our newspapers, on our radio stations, on our television stations and on the internet.

What the generation of '77 fought for was the voices of the people to be heard. What they fought for was robust debate, an engagement by society on issues that concern them.

For this robust debate to take place today, the media needs engagement.

The pillars of truth - honesty, fairness and balance - are still in place and are contained in code of ethics. We acknowledge that freedom comes with responsibility. Self regulation is a mechanism through which editors and journalist can be held accountable for what they publish. These mechanism are there for the public to use and test.

They are there for consumers of our media to challenge whether or not that which is published as the truth is infact the truth.

Readers, listeners and viewers must engage the media and challenge the facts. They have to challenge the headlines. These challenges must come so that when people make statements about self-regulation they know what they are talking about. These test must come so that editors/journalists can be held accountable. These test must come so that a dialogue, like we have today, can take place.

The generation of 2007 stands for exact values as the generation of 1977.

The question has been asked a number of times whether media freedom in this country was under threat. Our answer has been that there is no huge threat on the freedom of the press but there were developments in this country which have given SANEF reason to engage with legislators to point our areas in proposed or current legislation which would be a threat to press freedom.

There are some pieces of legislation which have been or are about to be introduced by government for other reasons, but legislation which will have a massive impact on media freedom.

These developments reinforces SANEF belief that while the freedom of the media and freedom of expression is enshrined in our constitution, we have reason to engage with government and the South African communities about the importance of media freedom.

Three years ago, sensing this very need, SANEF launched a multimedia campaign, MFYF, to try and sensitize our readers, viewers and listeners as well as the general public about the sacrosanct of media freedom. The pay-off line of the campaign was: *"What you can't see can hurt you."*

The creative tells the story of a novice diver who takes advice from an expert on sharks.

The expert says to the novice:

Don't worry about the sharks you can see – worry about the ones you can't.

Shark attack survivors always say –

I felt something hit me.

I felt a tug on my leg.

I felt something pull me under.

I felt.

Never I saw.

They never saw it coming.

So what's that got to do with media freedom, you may ask?

Well, this is an ad about making sure you can see what's coming.

The media are your eyes and ears on the world.

Media freedom guarantees your right to know, and participate in, your country. And that's real democracy. Media freedom is your freedom. Insist on it.

Today, as South Africa commemorates the 30th anniversary of Black Wednesday, Sanef will intensify this campaign.

SANEF will heighten the MFYF campaign because, our experience in dealing with government and other parastatals, in particular around the Film and Publication Amendment Bill, have been instructive. Through the legislation, the Department of Home Affairs wanted to curtail children's access to adult content. However, in the execution of their noble task, they remain blind to the danger that the amendments posed to the media in this country.

We are sad that this particular piece of legislation, one of the many that threaten media freedom, has been passed by the National Assembly, despite our protest that it will harm media freedom. We have engaged with the NCOP committee dealing this legislation and live in hope that the offending provisions in the bill will be removed.

We continue to engage the DHA in a search of a solution and, if everything else, we will plead with President Thabo Mbeki not to sign this particular legislation into our statute books.

The FPB is not the only piece of legislation we are concerned with. We are extremely unhappy by amendments to the National Keypoints Act.

We believe that 2010 will benefit this country and its citizens but remain concerned at the restrictions proposed by Fifa, through the Department of Trade and Industry. In addition to restricting the use of a host of emblems, the media would, if this piece of legislation goes through, be restricted from using words such as 2010 Fifa World Cup, World Cup 2010, RSA 2010, Football World Cup, Fifa World Cup, SA 2010, 2010 Fifa World Cup, Africa 2010 and Soccer World Cup.

How is the media expected to report on the biggest miracle since the 1994 historic elections and not use these words?

We have also placed on the record with government, our position that we want removed from the statute books laws that impinge on media freedom. These include the Section 205, (others). We are happy that we have met with the Department of Justice to talk about these laws. We have agreed to hold a conference soon to discuss our concerns and to try and find a middle ground.

These discussions, along with the debate that we expect to take place today, are taking place at the right time. It is correct that, at this time in our democracy, we can pause and debate our issues that concern all of us.