

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE SANEF NAT NAKASA AWARDS**

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**TOPIC: The importance of a courageous free media in exposing and holding power to account**

Good evening, esteemed members of the media. It gives me great pleasure to be among all of you today and I am humbled by the opportunity to address you at this important awards evening. I stand before you, the super heroes of our democracy, in awe of what you have achieved for our country. An accurate reflection of what I'm feeling right now is that I am more terrified of journalists than I am with the people I'm supposed to be going after. Intimidated by the intensity of the scrutiny and awestruck by what you have accomplished in this country in the last decade or so and I had to restrain myself from going around asking for autographs.

The average South African feels profound gratitude, like I do, for the role the media has to play especially for the role the investigative journalists.

*From all the media attention I received a few weeks ago, I suddenly find myself a lot more sympathetic to those people who have been interviewed by the journalists who complain afterwards that they were misquoted or they were quoted out of context. I felt that there was a disconnect between what I thought I had said to the journalist who was interviewing me and what ended up in the article that was published. So, if you'll just indulge me for a second - I have to get this off my chest. I was asked by a journalist how my parents felt about my appointment. I was a bit taken aback by the question, but I reckon that given that I haven't done anything yet, they are going to focus on tabloid type questions. I felt it's my responsibility not to be dismissive and to answer every question as accurately and as honestly as possible, with sufficient reflection. So I thought carefully on how I wanted to answer the question. In my head I thought there are two things I wanted to get across: (1) my relationship with my mother is complex and the one thing I wanted to convey is that it is not fair to hold me responsible for what she does. That was the one thing. And the other thing I wanted to convey is that I'm older and wiser and things are not as they used to be. What ended up in a newspaper was, and I*

*quote... “she was asked how her mother felt about her appointment and she said she was probably too busy being glamorous to even call to congratulate her” That is kind of what I said but not exactly what I meant. So it was to be therefore that my whole extended family and group of friends read and they were all quite horrified. So what I learnt from my brief experience in the limelight was that ‘be fair, be brief but not every question needs to be answered with this level of introspection and honesty because quite frankly that’s not the band with all the space in the newspaper. So keep it simple, I’m told, if you want to get a message across and do not report exactly what you feel. But I think it also brought to me to a realisation that no matter how you try to dress up a complicated issue, no matter how you sugar coat it, at the end of the day the journalist is going to take that, break it down and lay it bare. And you gonna have to deal. So yes I’m trying to mend that relationship with my mother.*

*So, to demonstrate that I’ve tried to learn from that experience, I’m going to try to stay on script. Read the script, stay on it, and don’t deviate - but just to demonstrate that I did learn from that experience, I was going to say something about the fact I was quite bemused by the media coverage and the positivity in the media about my appointment because I kept thinking I haven’t done anything yet, so what is the fuss all about?. And I was saying to a friend it is like the Nobel Peace Prize committee awarding Barack Obama the Nobel Peace Prize at the beginning of his Presidency -but I thought it best not to say that because it was going to be a headline - “Hermione Cronje compares herself with Barack Obama”. So, I’m learning.*

So let me get back to the topic. I was asked to talk about the importance of a courageous free media exposing and holding power to account. Now that is what my 12-year old would call a ‘no brainer’. Of course it is important for the media to hold the powerful to account, and more often, that takes tremendous courage to do - but thanks to journalists like yourselves and those nominated today, our democracy has grown and has been enriched by your contribution. You have exposed information and scandals of the powerful and connected.

One of the biggest ‘scoops’ exposed by the long arm of investigative journalism ‘done right’ was what we today call the ‘Nkandlagate’, which the prosecution is still working on bringing some accountability. The consistent crescendo of noise and barrage of unrelenting questions from the media in 2011 galvanised other sections of society-activists and political players to converge towards a single greater objective to protect this country from the corrupt. There are many other significant examples of exposés over the years, which have not gone without recognition in past media awards ceremonies such as this one.

Today we have commissions of enquiry such as the State Capture Commission (known as the Zondo Commission), the PIC Commission and the Nugent Commission, where we hear revelations on a daily basis about how those who occupied positions of power and influence, broke the people's trust. Particularly and close to home for us in the NPA, the Mokgoro Commission – it is to you that we owe these commissions of enquiry, through your unrelenting focus on discovering and exposing what happened.

It is difficult to imagine where we would have been without your digging and exposure of the deep dark secrets in important institutions of state and your exposés of plunder and personal enrichment and political mechanisms. Steinhoff, VBS, Bosasa, Eskom, PRASA, Transnet....All of these investigations, all of these files that have reached my desk over the past weeks, started with journalists shining a light, asking questions, probing, refusing to be scared off. So the work that you have done is substantial.

A few months ago a leader of an opposition party delivered a book authored by a journalist about the plunder of state funds, through political patronage in one of the provinces to the NPA head office in Pretoria as evidence - and he said 'explain to me why they are not in orange overalls'. So that's where you've left me. You have done all this exposing, your efforts have resulted in these commissions of enquiry and there was an announcement in the media that there will be an Investigative Directorate established in the office of the NDPP, whose main focus will be to address state capture. I was appointed as a Director of a Directorate that has yet to be established, and while I am creating that directorate, there is this great public expectation to see warrants of arrests issued as soon as possible. When the NDPP, Shamila Batohi was asked at a press conference a few weeks ago how did she find the NPA, there was a long, pregnant pause and she said "much worse than I'd expected". She was out of the country for 10 years or so, and I have been out of the NPA for the same amount of time and I thought I have kept in touch and kept abreast of what was going on in the institution, but even I have to say the institution was a lot worse than I anticipated.

However, I do not say that as an expression of doom and gloom. I want to say it is important for us to look into this institution - because the media, the judiciary and civil society have had to bear the brunt of carrying this democracy for the last 10 years, and that should not have been the case. We have constitutional institutions that should have protected us from what

happened. And I think we really need to reflect quite deeply on how it is and why it is that these institutions failed us so spectacularly. So it's not just that there isn't a directorate in place for me to head and to do all this important work. The truth is the institutions of the state that had to this job, whose responsibility it was to do this job, like the intelligence agencies that were supposed to have alerted us to the threat of state capture, the threat of the looting that was going on, they were nowhere.

In the police, the situation is very similar to the NPA. Luckily, you don't have to take my word for it. The Mokgoro Commission lays bare what happened at the upper levels of the institutions like the NPA. These institutions - the Hawks, the NPA and the police were compromised - in that they were decimated and hollowed out of all the skills and expertise. The same happened to the SSA, and you don't have to take my word for it because these findings were documented in a report after an investigation conducted into the agency. In the entire criminal justice system there was a deliberate attempt to put people in place to ensure that those who are guilty of crimes avoid accountability.

What Judge Mokgoro did was she made recommendations about two people in the NPA - but what about the rest of the organisation? What about the police? I think for us to rebuild our institutions, for us to get them to play the role they were expected to play and they failed spectacularly, we need to ask... "how did that happen? How could such large institutions be diverted this way?" If I were to throw some of the work back to you, getting South Africa to understand what happened and why it happened is very important.

Yes, there is a story about just straight criminality that is our responsibility to address, but there is a bigger story, more important story about the way South African society or structures are organised. We are a deeply unequal society and growing more and more unequal. We are unequal on many fronts - income inequality, and access to education opportunities and all sorts of everyday common inequalities. Divisions are particularly still around race, and we underestimate the role that those divisions played in getting us where we are. So yes, the Guptas, the Watsons and all these other names that we hear about in the media are important to hold to account, but when I look at the NPA and I look at the ordinary people in the NPA, my former colleagues, then I ask: "How could you let this happen? How did it get to a point where the politically connected did not get indicted?" What happened is there are those who saw the wrongdoing and decided it makes a lot of sense to jump off this wagon, because there will be no accountability. Then there are those who resisted and suffered greatly for it. A lot more people opted to not take on those who were doing wrong.

The state of the NPA today is affected by what happened. It cannot be about removing two or three people at the top and then thinking that the organisation is ready to do business. I have also have to look at how we are going to do this in the directorate. Yes, there is no shortage of money, considering all the goodwill and pledges of support especially from the private sector and other potential donors, to support our work. But it is a lot trickier to figure out how to use the money effectively within reasonably short timeframes, given the laborious processes of government. We are working on ways to rapidly spend the money on the resources we urgently require. We have been working on plans to avoid taking a year to filling posts, which time it sometimes takes to do this.

I would not have taken this job if I thought we did not have a fighting chance. I think we have more than a fighting chance, thanks to you the journalists because you've done the bulk of the work. My job is not an easy job. It is a job of putting strategies together, to identify procedures and processes that will get see us where we need to be but you, members of the media, laid bare the picture. Ours is to see how to get us there. So in addition to your important job of holding powerful people to account, there is also the job of taking people with you - not only the educated ones, the wealthy, but everybody. Including the electorate who voted. So we all have a role to play in achieving that.

With the power of the media to bring the mighty and powerful on their knees with their exposés, there is that much more expectation for the media to report responsibly about matters that affect people's lives and livelihoods. That is a critical balance that must never be missed as we celebrate the brave and valuable work of the media every day. When people don't know what they can believe anymore, your ability to police the powerful and fulfil the role of 'guarding the guards' is weakened.

Make sure that the structures that regulate South Africa's media function well and that your ability to be brave and courageous in your reporting is always protected. You, as the media collective gathered here today, owe that not only to yourselves and to your trade, but to the rest of us who rely on you to bring us information and the news.

Thank you.

