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SANEF Chairperson Ms Nwabisa Makunga

Nat Nakasa Awards Ceremony speech 14 September 2024

The Nat Nakasa Family, Ma Gladys Maphumulo, Mr Thami Nakasa and the entire family in attendance

Our Sponsors Sanlam, Ms Nwabisa Mpondo and your team.

Ms Lindiwe Rakharebe, the CEO of the Inkosi Albert Luthuli ICC

My colleagues in the Sanef Mancom and Council.

Our formidable Sanef office team - led by Executive Director, Reggy, Hopewell and Dzudzie

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

It is wonderful to be here, to celebrate some of the most courageous journalism in our country.

The Nat Nakasa awards are a special marker in the calendar of Sanef.

Not only is this a moment of celebration of courage among our peers but one upon which we must reflect on the state of our industry and our commitment to the values that Nat held so dearly.

I want to give a special thank you to our KZN colleagues, Judy our convener and Slindile our co-convener for all your hard work leading to this evening.

And of course, we would not be able to do this without Sanlam, our partners over the years who have made hosting these awards possible.

Your contribution to this journey is incredibly valued, so thank you so much.

About a week or so ago, I moderated a conversation where I got to interact with the leadership of Sanlam and the broader community of corporate South Africa, civil society, and the labour movement.

One of the key questions that came up was about how we characterise this moment in South Africa.

May 29th gave us an electoral outcome that although anticipated, marked the beginning of a new journey for our country.

Some say there is a noticeable wave of positivity and hope in the air - No DNA, just RSA, the GNU is GNU'ing.

But others vehemently disagree and say beyond the spirited PR campaign, is a nation whose fault lines remain deep inequality and structural exclusion.

Whatever your perception of this era in our country, we must agree that as journalists we are not simply spectators of history.

In many ways we have the power to influence the direction of our country; we are part of a broader circle of power yet firmly on the periphery of power.

Therefore, whatever the characterisation of this moment in our history, there is one thing we can all agree on that this time demands of us - heightened vigilance.

Many of you will instinctively respond that vigilance is something that as a South African journalist we do very well.

Of course, we do when the circumstances are obvious, and our scepticism is well founded.

But what happens when the opposite is true?

What happens when we believe that there exists a concept of angels and devils?

What happens when we inherently believe the era, we are in is that of the reign of angels and in some ways, our hopes and dreams for this country may be in the hands of a system that is designed to keep itself accountable?

In this instance, Colleagues, I argue that recent history has shown us that when this happens, we must resist the temptation of complacency.

We must not be deaf to the call of accountability; without fear or favour, nor can we be lethargic in our response to the abuse of power and injustice.

Colleagues, this moment demands that we step up the challenge of history; that we are even more vigilant to the insidious nature of the abuse of power by those who proclaim to want the best for this nation.

This is what this moment demands of us; it is what South Africa demands of us and it is the standard to which we must hold ourselves as individual media practitioners; as media houses and as an organisation.

Secondly, this moment demands a much deeper level of awareness and appreciation of the increasingly complex landscape in which we operate.

It placed on us an extraordinary responsibility to grapple with the technical aspects of the challenges that face our society and the information eco-system as a whole.

Let me perhaps take you back to three years ago.

Shortly after the Satchwell report came out; Sanef held a Media Ethics conference in which we invited different speakers.

One of them was one Songezo Zibi, then a banking executive and former editor.

In his speech Zibi reminded us of the extraordinary responsibility that journalists have to shape society through the integrity of the information we publish.

It is unthinkable, Zibi argued, that riots may erupt, and scores of people die, because of inaccurate reporting by journalists.

Zibi was correct.

But that is only half the story.

Three months later, in this province, one of the deadliest riots erupted; scores of people died; because of disinformation.

Only this was not driven by journalists. It was driven by nefarious actors, using tech platforms to which everyone has access.

What does this mean for journalism?

It means we no longer enjoy the monopoly over the information eco-system.

It means we operate, side by side, with players whose agenda is to pollute the information landscape; to undermine and break down institutions of democracy and to ultimately cause anarchy.

Some may argue that while deeply problematic, this is not in the forte of journalists to contend with.

Our view is that it is as much our problem as it is that of the broader society.

But we, as journalists, hold a peculiar place in society where people look to us to start and drive the conversation about how we respond to these.

This is precisely why Sanef has taken it upon itself to work with different organisations, local and global, to study best practice on how to preserve public interest journalism as an antidote to disinformation and digital harms.

We do this while also understanding the responsibility that our public bodies have to combat these harms.

It is also why we ask our valued stakeholders in the room to support the incredible work of this organisation in its dealings with overly complex matters that have a far-reaching impact on our society. Deputy chair, the last point I would like to make is about what I believe should anchor the work we do.

That is earning public trust.

It is a well-established fact that organisations, public or private, are increasingly losing public trust.

Be it government, business, the judiciary, or the media.

This is a phenomenon the world over.

But for us as journalists, the work we do can only have an impact and be effective if we largely enjoy the trust of those we serve.

This is why it is vitally important for us in this room and as an industry, to reflect deeply on what we do, even unconsciously, to undermine and erode that trust.

All of us pressured. Everyday feels like war. Newsrooms have shrunk; jobs are being lost; revenues are down, and we have a skills challenge.

Still, even in that context; we must always be ready to reflect on how we conduct ourselves; what decisions we make; that may further erode the standing of our craft in the eyes of ordinary South Africans.

In that reflection we must be honest; frank and accountable.

Colleagues, after all, it is said and done.

May we remember that this craft of Journalism is a gift. It is given to us to work on; It is given to us to cherish; It is given to us to fight for.

To protect, to honour, and to be truthful to South Africa, our democracy, and its people, may we never betray its cause. And may we never betray the spirit of Nat Nakasa.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.

Have a good evening and congratulations to all our winners!