

CONTRIBUTION TO SANEF PANEL DISCUSSION 19 OCTOBER 2005

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My starting point, as a social scientist, is the adage that knowledge is power, in that through keeping people informed about what is happening in the wider society of which they are part (whether local, national or international) you empower them because we humans are interdependent (as poet John Donne put, no one is an island). Of course a free press is also a cornerstone of democracy, and should play a crucial role in holding those in positions of power accountable. We should never take it for granted, but remain vigilant to ensure that we maintain this, and other freedoms, guaranteed by our Constitution.

There is an unfortunate trend towards apathy in our society – the decline of a strong civil society in the post-1994 period is frequently lamented. There is a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive, which is far more constructive. For example, the protest action that we see around us is a reaction to discontent over issues such as housing and services. While there is a place for protest action, as long as it is properly planned and controlled (for otherwise it tends to alienate people who might be sympathetic to the plight of the protesters), there are usually more effective ways of getting things done using various lobbying and advocacy strategies, as in overseas countries where both courts and media are used strategically for this purpose.

The tendency to apathy and protest is probably linked to the faulty assumption that South Africa was automatically transformed into a democratic society in 1994 because of the change of government. That is not the case because the structures of society, and its culture (using this term to describe what unites us across sub-cultural ethnic or class divides) take much longer than a few years to change. Take, for example, the prevalence of corruption : It is probably more obvious now, but corruption was intrinsic to the very nature of the homeland system, and the damning findings of the Nel Commission report into the Masterbond scandal about corruption in high places were presumably responsible for its embargo by the apartheid government. The prevalence of violent crime, too, needs to be understood in the same way.

In other words, we are in a crucial period of hopefully changing our society for the better and we need to engage fully in the process of building and entrenching democracy and human rights. What are some of the ways in which the media can contribute to this process?

I find myself singing the same song as I did twenty years ago, when I commented on the failure of the supposedly liberal media to bridge the divide between ‘white’ and ‘black’ realities, reality, of course, being a social construction. While there has been some progress in bridging racial divides, the media has largely (with some exceptions) failed to reflect the divide between the lived realities of the better off and the poor, especially in rural areas. The average newspaper reader, preoccupied with perceived increased levels of crime still does not know, for the most part, about the gross human rights abuses which many rural folk experience, and the lack of protection available to them – e.g. the suffering of women and children sleeping in the bushes at night at Nongoma, in fear of their lives.

There are, of course, understandable reasons for this divide, including insufficient staff to do justice to all areas, and the type of readership/listenership/viewership targeted. I would like to see the media playing a more proactive role in bridging these divides, and providing their target groups with more information about how the other half lives. According to Zulu-speaking colleagues, articles on the same topic reported in Zulu and English language sister newspapers are not necessarily exactly the same, and I would like to suggest that journalists themselves do a content analysis of the ways in which the same news is reported for different readership, and, if there are differences, the rationale behind them.

If we are really concerned with entrenching democracy we should be paying far more attention to the development of good investigative journalism. I have heard, repeatedly, that there simply are not enough people in the newsroom and/or enough experienced people, to spend much time on in-depth investigation. Linked to this is an apparent lack of elementary research skills on the part of many journalists; e.g. I often have to dig through my own press clippings to find information for journalists, who should be keeping their own records. However, a great deal can be achieved through the use of technology. It is possible to maintain an extensive network through periodic visits to areas and regular telephone contact, especially in this cellphone age. Fax and internet are indispensable tools in this regard, especially in dealing with politicians, business and bureaucracies. Let me cite the example of following up on problems regarding land restitution in this province by way of illustration.

For some inexplicable reason the media is not giving nearly enough attention to what is going on at the provincial office of the Land Claims Commission, with most of the coverage coming from the *Mercury*. There are serious implications for the stability of the province if this issue is not handled properly, and there is good reason to believe that gross irregularities are taking place. To cite but one example, recently two claims which appear wholly lacking in validity were settled in Kranskop, at huge cost to taxpayers. Now it would be easy for journalists to send faxed questions to the government offices (national land claims commissioner, director-general) about whether the claims were validated and, if so, exactly how this was done (ideally, of course, they could also do a bit of digging into records themselves, or talk to land owners who have access to the records). If no satisfactory answers were forthcoming, the media could then say so publicly. In other words, name and shame officials who do not provide information to which we are all entitled. Internet searches can identify issues for further follow up, e.g. in case of the (now) former Commissioner, Ms Shange, there is (or certainly was) a fair amount of information on the internet about NGOs she is personally involved in, the name of one of which just happens to coincide with the organisation allegedly awarded a great deal of land validation work, raising important questions about conflict of interest. Again, questions should be asked.

What also frustrates me is a marked failure to contextualise, and to make links between events and stories, which is integral to basic research and analysis skills. For example, there have been a number of media stories about the malicious prosecution of Pietermaritzburg magistrate Ashin Singh and court papers are available (and the media should be making maximum use of court papers). The prosecutor in the Singh case is the very same person who prosecuted the Shaik case, and is involved in the Zuma matter. According to Singh's high court affidavit applying for leave to bring a

private prosecution, this prosecutor led false evidence (furthermore, his key witness perjured himself). Surely such a coincidence should at least lead to questions being asked. A critical approach should be integral to good journalism.

Finally, is the media using its considerable resources (relative to ordinary individuals), including through legal means, to make maximum use of legislative our constitutional right to access to information?

My comments are obviously looking at general issues and, fortunately, there are also a number of exceptions, with high standard reporting on various issues. We have seen some good media coverage of important environmental issues which are themselves intrinsically intertwined with human rights. We only have one earth, and we need it to fulfil the most basic of our rights.

The struggle to give meaning to the rights enshrined in our constitution only began in 1994. We must not sit back, but most involve ourselves fully in building a society in which the human rights of each individual member, regardless of status, skin colour or language, are paramount.