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Address by SANEF Chairperson Mahlatse Mahlase - Black Wednesday Commemoration Gala Dinner

19 October 2018

Good evening

On behalf of SANEF

Our partners and other stakeholders, thank you for honouring our invitation.

All of us here send our well wishes to President Cyril Ramaphosa. We wish him a speedy recovery.

To our distinguished keynote speaker, Bonang Mohale, thank you for being our Superhero.

Tonight is a celebration of our hard won freedom and the strides we have made since 1977, when the apartheid regime unleashed its brutality against those who dared to speak truth to power.

It is a day to remember that some of SANEF's own founding members; Mathatha Tsedu and Joe Thloloe were amongst those who were detained and tortured for their audacity to challenge the illegitimate apartheid government.

They were amongst those who used their writing to thrust into the public the pain of the voiceless, exposing the atrocities of the repressive government and ensuring that the world does not forget.

On the anniversary of Black Wednesday we commemorate theirs and many other journalists' bravery, remembering that the freedom to do our work without fear or favor, protected by the Constitution, came at a bloody cost.

On this 42nd anniversary, we would also like to take a moment to reflect, not only on the struggles fought and won by the media under apartheid but the battles we have faced in democratic South Africa and also ponder about our role and the future of journalism in our evolving society – a resilient society made up of a people who have over decades demonstrated their thirst for freedom, and excellence, against all odds.

A powerful society, borne out of a people who did not let the barrel of the gun intimidate them to cower in corners, and give up their quest for true freedom.

Ours is a glorious society, built on the sweat and blood of the migrant labourers who did not let the depths of the mines dim out their hope for a prosperous future.

Ours is an optimistic society, built on the ubiquitous sense of courage and pragmatism, that made it possible to propel from the ashes of apartheid, both prisoner and jailer to a pedestal of peace and justice for all.

Very few can deny that the dream of the rainbow nation has long disappeared.

In its place a nightmare that seems to never end has gripped the depth and breadth of our society. It manifests itself in the kind of greed that has the terrible phenomenon of “state capture” as one of its symptoms.

As journalists we have the difficult responsibility of telling that hopeful story born in 1994 but over time has become a story of despair.

We have been tasked with the heavy responsibility of explaining or piecing together the capture of the state.

What we know is for State Capture to occur a number of preconditions need to be in place.

For example, political accountability needs to be weakened. Public institutions need to be shaken at their roots, if not entirely blown away. Society needs to be apathetic. And the media needs to be domesticated.

To varying degrees, some of these factors were present when the worst invasive breed of individuals and groups spread their tentacles through various nodes of power.

Some sang along as a wave of populism ignored principles and helped propel to sacred institutions a number of people, we have since realized should not have been allowed to be the custodians of our most dear principles, values and institutions.

The role of the media in creating the fertile environment for the band of rogues to grace our most sacrosanct institutions, needs an honest and thorough assessment.

This is so that such heinous mistakes can never, ever, happen again.

Just like Madiba said, we should say “never and never again!”

We know those who were part of the capture, saw media as an important vehicle – or how else do we explain the attempt to decimate the public broadcaster in the past few years?

In his unprecedented apology to the public - The Sunday Times editor Bongani Siqoko says; “What is clear is that we committed mistakes and allowed ourselves to be manipulated by those with

ulterior motives”.

The recent events have again suggested that the media industry has a lot to do, if the dream of meaningful democracy is to be truly realized.

They have again reminded us that with that the rights secured in section 16 of our Constitution come with a heavy responsibility because our pens are mighty and can be used to help build or help destroy the foundation of a new South Africa – borne out of hope and yet to be told sacrifices.

We need to take this moment to deeply introspect - take a hard look at ourselves, so that we can take steps to exorcise the cancer of unethical conduct that has taken root in some parts of our being. We need to honestly answer why studies show that trust in the media is eroding. This was long before the recent apologies.

The 2018 Eldeman Barometer findings show that trust in SA media has fallen, with 61 percent believing that news corporations are more concerned with attracting a big audience as opposed to reporting and 59 percent believe news publications sacrifice accuracy to be the first to break a story.

While we try and find answers and ways to rebuild the trust relationship with the public we serve, they should not be despondent and neither should we be.

The media industry is packed with throngs of ethical journalists, who are driven by a deep commitment to journalism in the public interest and for public good.

They are not driven by short term material gains. They are imbued with a great sense and commitment to the project of building a free and prosperous nation.

Recently, many heroes and heroines took great strides to unravel the corrupt schemes we often refer to as state capture.

As soldiers of truth, they continue to expose the shenanigans of unethical leaders in many spheres, including government and private business.

Despite what our critics say Steinhoff, the collusion ahead of 2010, Bosasa, VBS etc. – were exposed by the media.

The journalists have done so at a great personal risk.

Our work has earned us names – an oppositional force, Stratcom, to askaris and so the list goes on. Bell-Pottinger in service of the Guptas and politicians who sold their country for personal enrichment - waged a multi-million rand public relations war to discredit us – to silence us.

When they saw they were losing they found other desperate means including invading our homes.

Some of the Journalists who worked on the Gupta Leaks were directly threatened or intimidated and some of them needed bodyguards as they connected the dots.

Social media bots were unleashed on journalists to defame them, degrade them and tarnish their image.

Despite the war against them which was physical, verbal and psychological – many of our journalists courageously continued working hard to expose the rot – in pursuit of Gogo Dlamini’s right to know – following in the steps of the 1977 generation.

We know because of recent events that the enemies of media freedom are again circling and that very bad idea of a Media Appeals Tribunal is again being resuscitated.

Those who have been exposed for being beneficiaries of ill-gotten gains and playing a hand in deferring our people’s dream for a just and prosperous South Africa are again looking to silence us.

Weakened as we are – we must continue pushing back.

When we met with President Ramaphosa in May, we asked him to do the right thing and throw the “Secrecy Bill” in the rubbish bin.

It was passed by Parliament in 2013, and it needs only the president to sign it into law.

We remain positive that President Ramaphosa will still do the right thing – as an important sign of his commitment to democracy, which cannot be sustained when draconian ideas and draft laws bubble around.

If he has any doubt, he can send it to the Constitutional Court, so we can get finality on this matter.

Black Wednesday is also an opportunity to reflect broadly on what role an organisation like Sanef can play in tough times like these, when so many media institutions are going through difficult times.

News outlets may struggle to carry out their mandate, and serve their social contract, if they themselves are dealing with considerable strife.

Our own research has shown that the industry is facing a number of threats.

These include complaints of inappropriate managerial interference in the sacrosanct editorial spaces. Editors being fired both un-procedurally and unfairly or intimidated in order to tone down their outlets’ reportage.

We know journalists too have been pushed out when they fought back. Editorial decisions being taken in order to achieve particular commercial goals.

Our editorial might – being weakened by the rounds of retrenchments or newsrooms forced to let go of those with the experience, institutional memory and agency to push back on any encroachment – because they are too expensive.

Today we also launched the 2018 Glass Ceiling research – the biggest ever done by SANEF and Genderlinks – reflecting on the challenges facing women in South African media.

We undertook this follow up study because as SANEF and the media - we are part of the South African society that has to transform.

The study finds that there has been dramatic shifts in the race and gender composition of media houses since 2006 with black men now comprising half of top media managers – so it's no longer just a white boys club as some of the respondents said.

The number of black women in top media management has increased fivefold but is still 20 percent lower than black men.

But there is still a worry –the gender gap appears to be widening and black men are moving up the ranks at a much faster pace than black women and while there is an increase in women middle managers, there is a decline in skilled professionals.

We should be disgusted that the pay gap between men and women is increasing instead of decreasing. So as an industry we have to walk the talk on gender parity.

It has to be unacceptable that sexual harassment is a daily reality for women in the media but it is not prioritized.

There are also new threats including cyber misogyny that could spiral out of control.

In response to the identified lack of black women media managers, SANEF has prioritised the training and up-skilling of women in our industry through projects like the Media Management Skills programme.

Many of the women who have previously participated in this programme have moved up into senior management positions.

From the 2016 programme, four graduates have been promoted to become editors! This is made possible by the funding from the FP&M Seta, and the commitment of our partners - Frayintermedia and Wits Journalism, not to mention the hard work of the women involved.

SANEF has also played a central role in the re-circulation of the NQF level 5 journalism occupational qualification under the Quality Council for Trades & Occupations (QCTO), this has been in partnership

with FP&M Seta as the Assessment Quality Partner.

This qualification has been updated to meet the needs of modern newsrooms and equip journalists with the necessary practical skills in workplace environments.

Media law and ethics remain a critical component in grooming the next generation of truth warriors.

The certificate targets people with a matric but is suitable for graduates and others who are currently working in newsrooms. We look forward to the official roll out of the qualification by the QCTO.

On this Black Wednesday anniversary it is also an opportunity for corporates in South Africa to introspect – are they playing their role in ensuring journalism thrives?

We thank our partners that have come to support us tonight to ensure that Madiba's values – that media freedom and democracy go hand in hand and live on.

He firmly believed that Journalists are the mirror through which we can see ourselves as others perceive us, warts, blemishes and all.

Some of you might come under scrutiny as we do our work of reporting without fear of favor – but his advice even to his own political party that can be shared is that don't wilt under scrutiny – strive to be better – to be the cooperate citizens that help realize the dream of a prosperous South Africa.

Hey we saw that News24 's three months investigation revealed how the country's biggest banks, insurance companies and car manufactures have been caught advertising on fake news websites by buying programmatic advertising that lands on dodgy websites.

And we know the risk of fake news to a democracy, you can ask the Americans. We are approaching an election next year – at a delicate time in our country – choose to strengthen our democracy with your pockets and not destroy it.

As SANEF we are also working with other media partners calling on the government to prioritize the progressive realization of the right to universal and free access to online information to enable citizens to exercise their basic information right.

We hope that the New Digital Industrial Revolution Commission announced by the President in the state of the nation address in February will put the issue of universal access to the internet – and a basic level of free internet access – high on the agenda.

The key things that can and should be done to ensure progress in opening up information to the public is to make it easier for the public and the media to use PAIA to access information.

A major improvement in the law will be to make provision for pro-active disclosure of information and also we need government websites and data to be zero-rated as the e-government policy envisaged. As a country we are in need of a new page.

The late Robert Mangaliso said “the wheel of progress revolves relentlessly and all the nations of the world take their turn at the field-glass of human destiny”.

To paraphrase the rest of his quote -

It is now journalism’s turn – SANEF will not retreat, Media will not compromise, we will not relent, journalism will not equivocate, we will be heard and South Africa will remember!

Media freedom for SANEF is about South Africa.