

Media battle royale looms



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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Now that we're all back from holiday slaving over our hot terminals, ready - or not - for the new year, you can be forgiven for thinking that the hoo-hah last year about media freedom is a thing of the past.

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After all, the media and the ANC appeared to have called a truce towards the end of 2010, when the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) and a high-powered ANC delegation led by deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe met to discuss the proposed media appeals tribunal and other burning issues.

After the big meet, Motlanthe announced that the ANC would suspend its calls for a state-appointed media tribunal - the aim of which would be to oversee complaints against journalists - until it made its own submission to the press ombudsman, which is reviewing all its processes. Motlanthe also said the party would consider what had come of the review before deciding its future course of action.

A cunning feint?

This could be a cunning feint on the ANC's part to con the media (which is not known for having a long attention span) into dropping its guard on this controversial proposal. Or maybe the ANC has called off the hounds in the interest of re-establishing a working relationship with the print industry, what with the 2011 local-government elections coming up.

Nevertheless, both press ombudsman Joe Thlooe and SANEF chairman Mondli Makhanya are wary and have both told me that they will not be panicked or pressured into making any concessions that are not in the best interests of the media.

The evil Protection of Information (POI) Bill is still lurking menacingly in the halls of Parliament with the ANC crying that it is not a media bill - and not intended to undermine the freedom of the press - so there's no need to worry our little hot heads about it. But, under the shrewd eye of activist Mark Weinberg, the Right2Know campaign is watching its passage through the Ad Hoc Portfolio Committee and co-ordinating opposition to and protests against it.

Battle lines have been drawn

So, rather than a detente, I'd say the battle lines have been drawn for 2011 and well they should be. This is important, people - for all of us in the media - in the journalism, advertising, marketing and public-relations industries. And for all South Africans, too, so please do sign up for that Right2Know Facebook group, keep informed and join us to march against these alarming threats to our freedom of expression.

I rather suspect that what we will see this year is that the debate over the tribunal and POI Bill will broaden into a push by the ANC and government for the print industry to "transform". Already there were noises about this late last year, coming from Lumko Mtshede, the head of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) statutory body, and President Jacob Zuma said in the ANC National Executive Committee [statement](#) on 8 January 2011 (and this is the full passage relating to the media):

“ *The country needs a strong and diverse media that is independent of commercial and political interests, which will support nation building as well as efforts to deepen, consolidate and strengthen our democracy, social cohesion and good governance. We will continue encouraging the print media in particular, to speed up its transformation processes, in line with the attainment of freedom and democracy in the country in 1994. The ANC will continue to promote and fight for media*

freedom as it has always done throughout its existence. ”

Far-reaching consequences

This is going to be very interesting and it will have far-reaching consequences for the print industry in this country. The MDDA is required by law to help increase diversity of media ownership and control and, indeed, the print industry has not managed to grow black ownership credibly over the past 15 years. This is partly because newspaper companies are a dog of an investment in the bigger scheme of things. Mvelaphanda, for instance, made it known last year it is not entirely happy with its investment in Avusa.

So it looks as if the print industry may be the arena for a fascinating battle royale this year but I would also keep my eye on these intriguing areas:

1. Who will replace [Nazeem Howa](#) (now CEO of TNA Media, the owners of *The New Age*) at Independent Newspapers? As operations chief Howa ran the Independent from top to bottom, his replacement (or replacements) is absolutely crucial.

I fear not many would want the job of enforcer of the Irish's ruthless cost-cutting mindset. It's a job the journalists at the company will not thank you for and I don't believe any of the three executives directly below Howa - Moegsien Williams in Joburg, Chris Whitfield in Cape Town and Alan Dunn in Durban - want the job.

2. How will *The New Age* fare with its government-friendly sunny South Africa news agenda? Maybe it will create a new market - like the *Daily Sun* has in the past eight years - but its target market of [LSM 5-7](#) is the same as the *Sun's*, which is an aggressive and well-run beast with which to compete. Further, the *Daily Sun's* own [market research](#) shows that its readers are disillusioned with the government.

3. Will *The Times* survive at Avusa? The word is that this is the year the paper that is distributed free to *Sunday Times* subscribers must show a profit and pick up a credible paid circulation. In the third quarter of last year, *The Times* was at 14 000 copy sales and, no matter how the company tries to spin it, any reader can see that the all-important retail advertisers have never warmed to the product so it is unlikely that it is really bringing in the bacon.

If *The Times* must go, it will be a blow to Avusa media head Mike Robertson, as it is his baby - originally designed to increase *Sunday Times* subscriptions. There is also the possibility that *Sunday Times* subscriptions might start to decline without *The Times* sweetener.

4. Notwithstanding [24.com's Geoff Cohen](#) telling Bizcommunity that the corporate restructuring of late last year - that saw him become the new News24 boss reporting to Media24's newspaper division - was really just a shifting of the chairs on the deck, I think the move will see much closer co-operation between print and online. For a while now, there have been rumours that Media24 is developing its own tablet PC and I think we will see movement on this or a bigger push by Media24's print content on to existing tablets such as the iPad.
5. And we have yet to see what will come of Caxton's big Internet push with Moneyweb [developing](#) the Internet presence for its sizeable stable of community papers. If this works, it will be South Africa's first big experiment in hyperlocal.

For more:

- Daryl Ilbury on [what 2011 will bring for the radio industry](#)
- Why we need to speak up for free speech - a [guide to the proposed media appeals tribunal and Protection of Information Bill](#)
- [Right2Know](#) Facebook page

- Interview with MDDA head Lumko Mtimde on [media transformation](#)
- ANC document on [Media Ownership, Transformation and Diversity](#)
- The [Press Ombudsman's](#) website
- The [MDDA's](#) website
- [SANEF's](#) website

For more:



- Biz Trends 2011: [Marketing & Media South Africa](#)
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