

'Monopoly media ownership hurting SA democracy'

The issue of media ownership concentration at the hands of a few companies - 95% or so of print media is in the hands of Caxton, Avusa, Media24 and foreign-owned Independent Newspapers, and 42% of radio by SABC - was once again at the forefront of an intense media discussion hosted last night, 29 October 2009 by Amandla Forum in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva ^{30 Oct 2009}

According to Karl Marx, media is a weapon of the capitalists to enslave and abuse the working class, and Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) spokesperson Patrick Craven said: "95% is the biggest concentration in the world, something even unthinkable in developed countries.

"In the face of it, there is no diversity in media, resulting in SA media monopolies producing the worst form of media which is always pro-business, anti-communist and anti-working class."

Craven also lashed out at the SABC for not shifting its journalistic values as done in print media, and for allowing itself to be used as a channel to push political agendas.

'Experts' No, diversity Yes

"We have noted with interest the mysterious emergence at SABC of so-called independent analysts who call themselves experts, but who truly have no mandate to speak on behalf of the people, but yet they are treated like God. We have to put a stop to that," he said, fuming.

Lumko Mtimde, CEO of Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), said it was regrettable that new small print media players continue to depend on distribution and printing facilities provided by big companies, which allegedly dictate how the processes should be done.

"Our country needs a diverse media to help deepen and defend our democracy. Media is power, you can use it well or abuse it," he added.

"It is sad how these big companies still see us as their competitors, charging us exorbitant fees for printing and distribution whereas they should be helping us prosper," a community media source, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals, told Bizcommunity.com on the sidelines of the debate.

Beyond the hype

Some say the Big Four manipulate the country's audiences, choosing what news should be read according to their 'hidden agendas' and their advertisers' and shareholders' interests.

Franklin Huzies, of the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), said mainstream media report issues of service delivery, especially violent protests, in the way of creating hype, which he said is wrong.

"There are a lot of unresolved issues beyond that hype, [and] that is where we as community radio play a key role.

An incorrect impression created in the new South Africa is that freedom of expression is only reserved for

big companies with big advertising budgets, he said, adding that this continues to create a huge gap between social classes.

Giving a voice to the voiceless

“Ask us why there has been such a tremendous growth in community radio. It is because we facilitate local communities to voice their grievances about issues affecting them to change things.”

He said community media's main challenge is lack of resources, which they are hoping to get in order to, among others, stop mainstream media for poaching their staff.

Craven said while there is ground for optimism in the future of broadcasting - proposals on enacting new broadcasting policies and digital migration which will create more channels but might lead to 'Americanisation' if there is no local content - the prospect of print media transformation is less encouraging.

“That is why we as the alliance partners, ANC, SACP and COSATU, are thinking to launch our newspaper, which will appeal to a much broader audience and probably end the reign of those monopolies, something we believe is long overdue.”

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ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.
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