First Critical Thinking Forum addresses media freedom

By Angelo Coppola 12 Aug 2010

The first of a series of Critical Thinking Forums, hosted by *Amandla* and *Mail & Guardian*, took place yesterday, Wednesday, 11 August 2010 at Atlas Studios in Milpark, Johannesburg. The forum, hosting speakers including Ferial Haffajee, editor of the *City Press* and Jackson Mthemb ANC spokesperson, addressed media freedom in South Africa and associated legislation and th challenges that need to be addressed.

Seconds out, round #1...

I bought tickets for a fight and witnessed a...well, I don't know what. It was a shadow boxing session, combined with a civilised fencing exercise that carried an undercurrent of maliciousness. The topics, medi freedom and the Protection of Information Bill, combined to create an overall atmosphere that impending draconian legislation could lead to Zimbabwe-like media control.

Mthembu, the appointed ANC panelist, didn't pull any punches, initially - perhaps he sensed the atmosphe In his opening flurry, he accused the print media of choosing to focus on only one aspect of a rather broac discussion document - the Media Appeals Tribunal, or MAT - in keeping with the fight analogy.

More critical issues - Mthembu

The ANC view, articulated by Mthembu, was that the discussion document is a public document and open for debate. He wondered why the media had focused on the MAT when there were more critical issues relating to media ownership and diversification, BEE and EE and spreading the media footprint to the rural areas.

His opponent didn't quite react as Mthembu expected. Perhaps it had more to do with the fact that Mthemb and Haffajee had been sparring around the topic for several days in various forums and appeared to be suffering from fatigue. While Haffajee concurred that there were issues of ownership and BEE that hadn't been addressed, she insisted that the MAT be taken off the table before any meaningful engagement cou take place. Having said that, Haffajee acknowledged that the print media sector had been guilty of "peddlir backwards" in terms of media ownership, BEE and employment equity issues.

ANC handling of SABC

Wits University Journalism chair and founding editor of *M&G*, Anton Harber, stepped into the fray suggesti that the ANC had to admit that there were issues that they should address at the same time, specifically around their handling of the SABC and the lack of development of the rural media networks.

Mark Weinberg, from the Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC), wondered whether there wa

political will within the ANC to up the funding required by the SABC, from the current 3% to the target of 60 before the self-imposed deadline of 31 December 2010. He suggested that the state had a critical role to but wondered whether they could do it. He maintains that transformation is a government issue. He went further, suggesting that if government were serious they would break up the big media groupings and limit them to a set number of newspapers per city. The government had this within their power to do so.

Lack of political will

Weinberg concurred with Harber, suggesting that the reason the ANC weren't looking at their own contribution to the current state of the SABC and the development of the rural media network probably hac more to do with the ruling party's lack of political will. Weinberg wonders whether this was because it woulc require a fundamental policy shift, which was at odds with the ANC transformational approach.

Mthembu suggested that there should be a parliamentary investigation into the print media space, but he h every faith that any potential legislation would still have to pass through the constitutional court. Haffajee reiterated her position that it was disingenuous to have the MAT on the table and discuss how the sector could address its many challenges. Both Harber and Weinberg agreed that for any meaningful discussion take place, the MAT should be removed.

Debate, only just begun

Judging by the number of questions from the mixed audience of various media stakeholders, ranging from self-proclaimed government "spin-doctor" to journalists and a representative from COPE, the debate has only just begun. Whether it will go all the way to an ANC-driven parliamentary investigation and a statutory body, or improved self-regulation, as the media seem to be hoping for, the underlying issues of BEE and employment equity and ownership structures will need to be resolved.

ABOUT ANGELO COPPOLA

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