

'Black Wednesday' honoured by media

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Thirty years after the infamous Black Wednesday, 19 October 1977, which saw the apartheid regime ban The World and Weekend World newspapers and Pro Veritate (a Christian publication), alongside 19 black organisations and detain scores of critics, the SABC and SANEF jointly organised the third Media and Society Conference to remember the sad event and debate the way forward on media freedom.

“This conference should assist us in the media to understand our role in society and reassess the press-public relationship, which will put democracy at risk if it is not well understood and restructured,” SABC board member Thami Mazwai told the audience.

“As journalists we are not pro-government, but we must be pro-truth. And let's not forget that truth is not universal, but is affected by culture, time, technology and other unforeseen factors, which brings us to the issue of philosophical and cultural dynamics that today's journalists must understand if they are to operate well in the society they live in.”

Current tensions

The two-day conference, held at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg on 18-19 October 2007, comes against the backdrop of simmering tension between the state and media, with the latter accusing the former of resorting to apartheid's 'dirty tricks' to suppress media freedom.

On 19 October 1977, the then minister of Justice Jimmy Kruger banned The World and Weekend World newspapers for 'publishing inflammatory material that threatened the nation's security'. The newspapers' editor Percy Qoboza and other journalists were subsequently arrested and jailed.

This drew the condemnation of John Patten, the then president of SA Society of Journalists, who was quoted at the time by The Citizen newspaper as saying: “In a free country, the government does not tell the press what it may or may not publish.”

Worrying regulations

Now, SANEF fears that history might repeat itself despite the changing political and media landscape. “We are concerned about some pieces of government regulations such as the Film and Publications Act and National Key Points Act that might have a negative effect on freedom of expression,” SANEF chairperson Jovial Rantao said.

The most interesting part of Friday's session was perhaps the heated debate about freedom of expression/public interest versus human dignity/privacy by a panel of media gurus, chaired by City Press editor Mathatha Tsedu and comprising Sowetan and Sunday World editor Thabo Leshilo, SABC group CEO Dali Mpofu, Rhodes University's Prof Guy Berger, press Ombudsman Joe Thlooe, author Ronald Suresh Roberts and Prof Mathole Motshekga.

"When people make claims of public interest, they must also bring proof and comprehensively explain why it is in the public interest that a certain story must be published," Prof Berger said.

Dignity

"Freedom of speech is a pregnant concept," Mpofu said. "It is just a figure of speech, press is only a machine and the real freedom belongs to people. The restoration of human dignity is important and the biggest limitations of rights are other rights.

"Dignity is the core of values. If you are driven by profit, your view of public interest may be deeply affected and you may not understand its real meaning. We should balance freedom of expression and human dignity."

Prof Motshekga urged journalists to place culture, values and humanism at the forefront of all their interpretations of freedom of expression.

Roberts launched a scathing attack against Wits University's Prof Anton Harber and Sunday Times editor Mondli Makhanya for practising what he called "PowerPoint Corrupt Journalism".

At Thursday night's gala banquet, the conference recognised and honoured journalists who braved the apartheid machinery to objectively tell their stories. Among them, the current minister of safety and security Charles Nqakula, a journalist in 1977 and Union for Black Journalists' vice-president.

Nqakula criticised today's journalists for their "lack of research and strategy" and "carelessness".

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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