

# ANC vilifies journos in attempt to quash free speech

 By [Herman Manson: @marklives](#)

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The ANC has made public its plans for the future of South African media in a discussion paper prepared for the ANC National General Council 2010, to be held 20 - 24 September in Durban. The discussion paper makes it quite clear how the ANC views the media - it unashamedly vilifies journalists as dishonest scoundrels - and rather disconcertingly notes the success of the apartheid regime in staying in power through censorship and media control.

## Discussion paper

The [discussion paper](#) claims "fractions" of the media still adopt an "anti-transformation, anti-development and anti-ANC stance". Questioning ANC policies, or more likely aspects on the implementation of those policies, remain unwelcome. Dissenting voices gets tagged with the "anti-transformation and anti-development" label, an overused and now meaningless smear tactic of politicians unable to adapt their language to the reality of a post-apartheid society.

As an example of successful "independent broadcasting regulation", the ANC holds forth the SABC. It positions the near-bankrupt state broadcaster as an example of a "competitive broadcast industry forged in the crucible of the struggle against apartheid control, repression and censorship".

This is the same organisation [rocked by a 'blacklisting' scandal](#) in 2006 when then news and current affairs MD Snuki Zikalala was caught out banning then *Business Day* political editor Karima Brown (who recently [made the news](#) when she joined the soon-to-be launched pro-ANC newspaper [The New Age](#)) from the broadcaster, as well as for taking analyst Aubrey Matshiqi off-air.

## Unwelcome at the SABC

At the time, the Mail & Guardian Online also reported that staff at the broadcaster was made aware that opinion from William Gumede and Sipho Seepe would be unwelcome at the SABC. Moeletsi Mbeki, Elinor Sisulu and M&G Media CE Trevor Ncube were no longer to be used for comment relating to the situation in Zimbabwe.

More recently, the *Sunday Times* alleged that the SABC has received orders from the ANC not to air interviews with former President Thabo Mbeki.

While the SABC might have won the fight against 'apartheid-control' it has clearly not been able to convincingly win the fight against media repression and censorship.

## Irony

The discussion paper notes the importance of media control and censorship by the apartheid government and the role this played "in helping to ensure the survival of the apartheid regime - in particular, in ensuring ongoing support from its key constituencies by keeping them in the dark..." (point 49) but clearly does not catch the irony of making such a statement in a document designed to help undermine investigative reporting in South Africa.

In an attempt to thoroughly confuse any foreign agents typing up a synopsis of this paper to their home regimes (most likely those [bloody Brits](#)) the discussion paper, evidently unedited and with no spell checker available, notes "that independence from such pressures (political, economic or commercial) does not presume that journalists are unique human beings with unique journalistic genes and genealogy." We journalists are "impacted upon by the environment within which they operate", writes the author, "and by the circumstances that spawn them".

## "Cursory scan"

A "cursory scan" of print media by the authors of this discussion paper "reveals an astonishing degree of dishonesty, lack of professional integrity and lack of independence".

So the discussion paper establishes journalists as without journalistic genes and genealogy (who knew?!), generally dishonest, unprofessional and uncritical of their own work environment. Where can this possibly lead us?

Bribery! Not the in-your-face kind parliamentarians made themselves guilty of during Travelgate, and nothing quite on the scale of the arms deal, but still. Apparently "faceless leaders within the ranks of our Alliance" are bribing journos on a regular basis. No doubt the faceless comrades will be outed and called to account at the General Council meeting, where evidence of such widespread bribery will also be presented. Media is described as a "protection racket" (point 61) that needs to be whipped into shape by the ever-generous leaders of the alliance.

## Bashing the messenger

Not quite done at bashing the messenger, the paper notes that "freedom of expression needs to be defended but freedom of expression can also be a refuge for journalist scoundrels, to hide mediocrity and glorify truly unprofessional conduct" (point 67).

To defend the poor citizens of this country for these 'greedy, self-serving ass\*les' (in the dobbie that would refer to journalists), the ruling party will discuss setting up a [Media Appeals Tribunal](#).

Currently the [press ombudsman](#) ([Joe Thlooe](#)) settles disputes between the media and "those in the news" but the discussion paper declares that "the mere fact that the press ombudsman is from the media ranks, a former journalist, and is not an independent person who looks at the media from the layman's perspective poses an inherent bias towards the media with all interpretations favourable to the institution and the other party just have to understand and accept the media way which is grossly unfair and unjust."

## Staffed by loyal comrades

There seems little doubt that the Media Appeals Tribunal stands a substantial chance of being staffed by loyal (ANC) comrades.

Media organisations will also be investigated for "uncompetitive behaviour regarding monopolistic behaviour [uhm this was really written in an official document making its way to this country's top leadership], price collusion, access to general services and so on". This probe will be extended to associated industries such as paper, printing and distribution.

The SABC should again be "aligned to the developmental goals of the state", which only raises the question of when it ever

pursued any other agenda. A public financing mechanism will put the SABC even more firmly in the pocket of the ruling party.

### **Shift spend away**

Government spends a huge sum of money communicating to citizens via the media and the report calls on Government to shift spend away from mainstream media to community and small commercial media. That should give soon-to-be-launched *The New Age*, a bump shouldn't it?

The discussion document notes that "there is a big challenge of affordability and sustainability by the new media entrants. The high cost of printing machines prohibits smaller media owners from growing into some significant operation." It subsequently calls for financial aid so "media co-operatives" can purchase printing presses. I'm going to coin a phrase here - but that sounds like Gupta luck.

The paper finally sets out its principal aim - for ANC ideologue to dominate the national discourse. To ensure this is achievable, legislation needs to limit and diminish the free press.

### **Protection of Information Bill**

Apart from this discussion paper, the [Protection of Information Bill](#) is already winding its way to be rubber stamped by Parliament. According to the [Freedom of Expression Institute \(FXI\)](#), the bill will potentially cover any action taken by the state and allow it to be classified "in the national interest" and hence classifiable. The bill could also see investigative journalists sent to prison for up to five years for the disclosure of classified information and the failure to report the possession of such information, asserts the FXI.

Meanwhile, a new section of the Criminal Procedure Act will force journalists to reveal their confidential sources (see reference to "faceless leaders" above).

In this context, an investigation by the Competition Commission becomes less about embracing diverse ownership and more about reducing strong media organisations. Some PC body will rule on what you may read and how that information was sourced; even journalism students may expect interference in their educational curriculum to ensure "developmental communication... mainstreamed as opposed to sensationalism." Tax payer money will fund presses for "new" old media entrants.

## **Political intolerance to dissenting voices**

Taken together, the various proposals currently being driven by the ANC through Parliament, combined with the discussion paper on media and which might well be the basis of future ANC policy, paint a disturbing picture of political intolerance to dissenting voices. It's an intolerance that's finding an outlet in bashing the media while a disengaged public watches from the sideline.

This assault on the free press currently underway can only foreshadow personal restrictions and fewer rights for South Africa's citizens in the future. This paper wants to rule [till Jesus comes](#). Atheists will tell you that that is a very long time.

### **For more:**

- ANC.org.za: [discussion paper on media transformation, ownership and diversity](#)
- Bizcommunity special section: [special focus on media freedom](#)
- Bizcommunity Twitterfall: [#ZAMediafreedom](#)
- Google News Search: [Protection of Information Bill media appeals tribunal](#)
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- Google Blog Search: [Protection of Information Bill media appeals tribunal](#)

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