

Transforming SA media

Unions suggest alternatives

At a hearing of the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT) in Johannesburg in January this year trade union federations, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu), recommended how they wanted the print and digital media to be transformed, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

Since the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994, mainstream print media ownership has remained in the hands of big corporations. As a result, the mainstream print media has continued to be pro-business and more capitalist and market-oriented in outlook. Its critics have been quick to point out that this has resulted in the media not being diverse enough to cater for all social groups and thus promoting inequality.

It is because of this and other reasons that the PDMTTT was set up to collect views from key stakeholders around the country such as community media, civil society, and non-governmental organisations on how media transformation could happen in South Africa.

Set up by the Print and Digital Media SA, a body of print and digital media owners, the task team is expected to develop a common vision and come up with a strategy for print media transformation. The team will also recommend the best practice for SA and how this should be implemented, monitored and enforced.

This is no easy task as explained by Nactu: 'Transformation is a difficult project. We fear transformation. We would rather do things the way they have always been. Transformation disturbs the rhythm of life - the trauma of change is, to some, unbearable. Those who have benefitted from the political systems of the past, are often reluctant to let go of their positions, and to allow change to occur. As far as possible, they would like to hold onto the privileges that come with power.'

ALLIANCE POSITION

Cosatu's position as explained by its spokesperson Patrick Craven was more of an Alliance position as the views were the same as those of the African National Congress (ANC). Throughout his presentation, Craven referred to an ANC discussion paper from the 2007 Polokwane Conference, which expressed concerns on 'the increasing concentration of ownership, control and content within the international media environment'.

The ANC paper argues that the media were 'a contested terrain and therefore not neutral, but reflects the ideological battles and power

relations based on race, class and gender in our society. It cannot claim that its role is merely to reflect interests - rather it helps to shape the interests.'

Cosatu argues that the transformation of the print media is required urgently. 'Four big companies - Naspers, Times Media, Caxton and the foreign-owned Independent Group - control more than 90% of the sector, as they have done for many years. Compared to the digital and broadcasting media, the structure of the newspaper industry has hardly changed since 1994.'

The four companies dominate the market through their editorial, printing and distribution services and also get most of the advertising income.

'In our view the biggest obstacle to transformation is political and economic - the 'big four' are closely bound together with big business and reflect the broad outlook and prejudices of the capitalist class' which supports 'the "free market" and private enterprise,' argues Cosatu.

Media ownership by big corporates 'reinforces a major ideological offensive, largely driven



William Matlala

Whose interests are the print media serving? Readers buy newspapers in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

by the opposition and fractions of the mainstream media.' Cosatu cites a 'united front' of mainstream media's rejection of the nationalisation of the mines in which the idea was met with ridicule. Furthermore, nationalisation was shown to be against the 'national interest' and a threat to 'attracting foreign investment'. At the same time, alternative views on the matter were ignored.

Print media ownership therefore has to be diversified as information is a source of knowledge and power.

'There can be no real media freedom without diversity in ownership of the media. Especially for the poor, media freedom should be understood to include their participation not merely as consumers, but also as producers of news and analysis... Media diversity supports, promotes, deepens, consolidates and strengthens democracy, nation building, social cohesion and good governance', added Cosatu citing the ANC paper.

MEDIA FREEDOM

Although being at the forefront of campaigning for the passing of the Protection of State Information Bill popularly known as 'secrecy bill',

the ANC paper says the ruling party recognises media freedom.

'The ANC has always fought for media freedom, which it believes is a cornerstone for any democracy to flourish. All of us have a responsibility to defend media freedom and editorial independence from all forms of compulsion, whether it be political, economic or commercial... freedom of expression is in the self-interest of all who believe in democracy.'

Nactu believes that the secrecy bill before parliament is against 'those very ideals of freedom as espoused by the freedom fighters of all the liberation formations during the 1980s and early 1990s.'

Therefore, government should go beyond lip-service when it comes to media freedom. 'The role of the media to engage in digging up the dirt and investigating corrupt practices by officials of government - whatever government - should not be tempered with; and that restrictive measures to muzzle the free flow of news, belong not in a democracy, but in totalitarian regimes, and that we as a democracy, should avoid undemocratic tendencies calculated at restricting the media,' argues Nactu.

The mainstream print media is accused of presenting their views as the only realities and truths.

'One of the biggest problems with the media is the tendency to create its version of the truth, helped by lazy journalists who base their stories on other stories written elsewhere, without independently checking their truth. This leads to the development of a phoney consensus, media view of the world, in which one particular view becomes "reality".'

Giving the First National Bank (FNB)'s *You can help* campaign advert as an example, Cosatu says: 'How else can we explain the FNB's unthinking assumption, revealed in their recent advertisements that everyone wants a change of government? That, after all is what they read in countless biased and negative editorials and comments by "expert" analysts, who rarely if ever talk to the bulk of ordinary South Africans but rely on what they read in their papers to establish the truth.'

'The right of the public to access information is thus undermined by media that, whether negligently or maliciously, distorts or misrepresents information. This is why there have been justifiable calls for a media



Patrick Craven presented for Cosatu.

watchdog body to hear complaints by readers and the public. Why should journalists not have to answer when they disregard basic ethical, journalistic principles?', asks the federation which doubts that the mainstream print media is 'independent' when it's controlled and owned by corporations. This situation creates the media's 'biases'.

'In the longer term, however, we have to look at the ownership of the print media. How can we achieve transformation? Simply to transfer ownership of the same kind of capitalist newspapers to new black owners will solve nothing. The most pressing challenge is to collect a diversity of ownership throughout our communities and civil society, so that the media truly belongs to everyone and reflects the broad range of views in society,' adds Cosatu.

BLACK OWNERSHIP

Nactu argues that fewer black people were mainstream print media owners. 'however, we do see blacks being elevated to senior positions of editors or executives in media houses, the ownership remains in the hands of whites. The one example one could cite is that of Media 24. Just check the composition of the board and shareholding, you will begin to see that cosmetic change has taken place, but by and large, the company remains white controlled'.

Nactu also scoffs at black empowerment as it is currently happens in the media, which it argues, has been overlooked in favour of 'political correctness or political incorrectness' in which the 'politically incorrect' are ignored. 'Cadre deployment, even to the boards of corporations, seems to suggest that big business colludes,

and often curry favours with those who hold political power, and tend to elevate politicians with little business acumen to powerful positions in their companies.'

COMPETING VIEWS & IDEOLOGIES

It seems that there are competing views on the media between media owners and trade unions as well as the ANC. Media owners take a liberal-pluralist view while the unions take a Marxist view. However, it is interesting to see what middle ground will be reached. Others have also cautioned against taking unions seriously as it is common practice to use rhetoric which is very different from actual practices on the ground.

South African media can be said to be operating under a liberal-pluralist thinking. According to Michael Gurevitch, 'Pluralists see society as a complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all of the time. Media organisations are seen as bounded organisational systems, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalised pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an autonomous managerial elite who allows a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals.'

The liberal-pluralist view sees society as made up of small groups of people that are networked and whose relationships are mediated by the media. The media is seen as a Fourth Estate after the executive, parliament and the judiciary. In this line of argument liberal democracy becomes the basis for bringing social cohesion and the free market promoted as guaranteeing economic independence.

Individual pluralism is expressed as social consciousness and the assumptions are that individuals are free and equal within society. If one takes into account high levels of inequality in South Africa such thinking is wishful. Other ideals of pluralism are that people exercise their right of choice and when

there is conflict on particular issues, consensus based on social norms and values that included regular elections can resolve it.

However, liberal-pluralism has been attacked for its blindness on a number of fronts. One of which is its failure to take into account social, economic and political contexts. According to Stuart Hall, 'Larger historical shifts, questions of political process and formation before and after the ballot box, issues of social and political power and economic relations were simply absent, not by chance, but because they were *theoretically outside the frame of reference*.'

Issues of class and power are also not dealt with by liberal pluralism. Hall argues further: 'Class formations, economic processes, sets of institutional power relations were largely unacknowledged. What held society together, it was agreed, were its norms. In pluralist society, a fundamental broadly based consensus on norms was assumed to prevail throughout the population. The connection between the media and this normative consensus then could only be established at the level of values'.

The Marxist views of the media differ from those of pluralists.

'The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade,' wrote Karl Marx. He added that the media were: 'the public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power, the omnipresent eye, the omnipresent mouthpiece of the people's spirit that jealously guards its freedom' with a responsibility to 'come forward on behalf of the oppressed in its immediate neighbourhood... to undermine all the foundations of the existing political state of affairs'.

Gurevitch again writes: 'Marxists view capitalist society as being one of class domination; the media are seen as part of an ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within

the context of the dominance of certain classes; ultimate control is increasingly concentrated in monopoly capital; media professionals while enjoying the illusions of autonomy, are socialised into and internalise the norms of the dominant culture; the media taken as a whole, relay interpretive frameworks consonant with the interest of the dominant classes, and media audiences while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative meaning systems that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favour of consistently oppositional definitions.'

TASK TEAM OBJECTIVES

Be that as it may, the PDMTT will address issues of ownership including low levels of black ownership in large media companies, management, control and employment equity, and skills and enterprise development. Other key issues are 'concentration and market power that results in anti-competitive behaviour that blocks new entrants'.

According to the Indie Trust, the development of 'new media products for regions and communities' as well as 'the choice of languages' and diversity of voices are part of the task team's mandate.

Other objectives are to: 'research, study and make findings on transformation of all areas of print and digital media, for mainstream and community media' and 'recommend areas of transformation, methodology of implementing transformation, targets and the mechanism to monitor and enforce transformation.'

The Indie Trust further notes that the task team 'is a result of longstanding debates and calls within the broader society and parliament for transformation of this sector of the SA media

landscape. From the Human Rights Commission investigation into racism in the media, to the recent interactions between parliament's Portfolio Committee on Communications, the accusation against print media in particular was that it was untransformed, did not reflect the diversity of SA voices, especially the rural and the poor, and was white-dominated both in ownership and issues covered.'

Print media owners have been accused by the Competition Commission of 'creeping acquisitions' in which they assumed 'cartel-like behaviour where emergent community and small privately-owned media were smothered through a variety of anti-competitive behaviour.'

The task team terms of reference note that 'the media previously played a key role in both propping up the apartheid regime and in fighting it. As a part of a new society, it must be proactive in redressing the imbalances of the past, while still ensuring its independence and being proactive in its vital role of promoting democracy. Thus, efforts to transform the South African society have to include transformation of the media in all its facets.'

Advertising, printing and distribution of newspapers, magazines and digital media, for mainstream and community publishing will be investigated.

The task team, which will produce a report on its findings, is made up of the following members: Nkwenkwe Nkomo (chairperson and expert on advertising), Neo Bodibe (spokesperson and expert on competition policy), Anastacia Martin (representative member of digital media), Jan Malherbe (management, printing and distribution) and Nomvuyiso Batyi (expert on telecoms and broadcasting policy). ¹⁸