

THE MEDIA, THE AFRICAN UNION, NEPAD AND DEMOCRACY

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI,
AT THE SANEF CONFERENCE

Johannesburg, 12 April 2003

I am pleased to welcome you to South Africa and to this seminal conference, which aims to develop guidelines for the engagement of media from across the African continent with the African Union and its programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The African Union has committed itself to cooperate and work in partnership with the different African formations of civil society, including the media, so that together we can tackle the urgent challenge of the political, economic and social transformation of our continent.

I am told that some of the issues that the conference will focus on include the important issue of media freedom in Africa.

I trust that you will also find time to discuss another critical matter - what we might entitle "Reporting Africa to the Africans".

During the years of our struggle against apartheid, I spent nearly 28 years in exile, with 20 of these on the African continent. As a result of this, I got to know something, however limited, about a fair number of African countries.

When we returned to our country in 1990, we realised how little many of our people knew about the rest of our continent. Over many years we had absorbed an image of the African continent projected by a media that was relentlessly contemptuous of many things African.

Among other things, this had encouraged a feeling of superiority towards other Africans even among the oppressed in our country. They knew nothing about Timbuktu in Mali, as an ancient centre of learning which still has books published as early as the 13th century, that cover such subjects as mathematics, physics, astronomy, medicine, law and other subjects.

Neither did they know of such great modern African universities as those of Ibadan, Ife, Ahmadu Bello, Makerere, Dar es Salaam, and others. When young people coming out of our schools after the Soweto uprising of 1976 entered Nigerian schools, they were surprised and amazed to find that Nigerian children much younger than themselves were ahead of them in various subjects such as mathematics and the physical sciences.

Very few in our country knew anything about the large, varied, highly vocal and fearless mass media of Nigeria, believing the tales they were told that Africans knew nothing about press freedom.

They knew nothing about such great African singers as the Congolese, Zao, and the Nigerian, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. They had no idea of the Ouagadougou African Film Festival and its contribution to the determined effort by Africa's creative workers such as Ousmane Sembene of Senegal to tell the African story from the point of view of Africans.

Indeed the oppressed in our country did not even know anything about the state of African soccer and fondly imagined themselves as the inevitable champions of Africa. Soon after we were readmitted into international sport, our national soccer team suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the national teams of Zambia and Zimbabwe. The circumstances demanded that we try as fast as possible to understand the state of African soccer.

I am suggesting that the South African media has a responsibility to report Africa to the South Africans, carrying out this responsibility as Africans. I dare say this applies to all of us

gathered here and therefore relates to all our countries. I am, of course, proceeding from the assumption that you were African before you became journalists and that despite your profession, you are still Africans.

Central to the conceptualisation of the African Union and its development programme, NEPAD, is the collective determination to promote African unity and the political and socio-economic integration of our continent. This is informed by the conviction that the peoples of Africa are interdependent and share a common destiny.

It makes no sense that they should be separated from one another by ignorance of one another. Indeed that dangerous state of unknowing, which leads to prejudice and superstition against and about one another, would make it impossible for us to achieve the goal of African unity.

As Africans I presume that you are at one with this old African objective and would therefore see it as one of your central tasks to report Africa to the Africans, reporting Africa as Africans.

Again, this presumes that those who would report Africa to the Africans themselves know Africa. I therefore believe that you should answer the question honestly, whether you yourselves know Africa. I do not believe that there is anyone among us who would claim that press freedom permits that we should have the liberty to present a false and uninformed picture of our continent.

Indeed, I have heard complaints among African journalists about distorted reporting of their countries by our own public broadcaster. None of these has suggested that such reporting should not be critical of their countries. What they have asked for is that it should be truthful. Thus to be truthful requires that we know the subject we are dealing with.

We would all agree that you should be able to do the work of reporting Africa to the Africans freely, without restrictions that deny the media its freedom. Obviously, if you report a false Africa to the Africans, this will subtract from the objective of helping us to understand our continent and ourselves, leading to the erroneous appreciation of our continent, which, for instance, led us here to believe that we were the natural soccer superpower of Africa.

Your conference is therefore justified to address the issue of what should be done to guarantee press freedom on our continent. In this regard, I would like to draw your attention especially to the Constitutive Act of the African Union. I am certain that you are familiar with Articles 3 and 4 of this Act, covering the Objectives and the Principles of the African Union, which include democracy, human rights, popular participation and good governance.

You should then read this together with Article 23 of the Act, which deals with the issue of the Imposition of Sanctions to oblige all member states to comply with the provisions of Articles 3 and 4, among others.

Paragraph 2 of Article 23 says: "Furthermore, any Member State that fails to comply with the decisions and policies of the Union may be subjected to other sanctions, such as the denial of transport and communications links with other Member States, and other measures of a political and economic nature to be determined by the Assembly."

Last year, we suggested that these obligatory provisions contained in the Constitutive Act, which was legislated into effect by our parliaments, and is therefore law in each of our countries, and the fundamental law of the African Union, should not be watered down by displacing them with the voluntary provisions of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). The media responded to this by going on the offensive, alleging that we were trying to compromise the effectiveness of the Peer Review system.

I was convinced then, as I still am, that this ill-informed criticism was based on two troublesome matters that are relevant to your important conference. The first of these is ignorance. Our critics were obviously ignorant of the provisions of the Constitutive Act, while they pretended that they were making informed comments about what Africa needs to do to

overcome its problems.

Like all other systems of its kind, the African Peer Review system is voluntary. In good measure it is based on the OECD peer review system, which is said to represent best international practice. Its central objective is to engage peers to help the Member States of the African Union to achieve defined political and economic benchmarks, some of which are drawn from such documents of the African Union as the Constitutive Act and the African Charter on Human Rights.

Frankly, it was absurd to argue that the matter of freedom of the press, and other democratic freedoms, should be dealt with through the voluntary processes of the APRM rather than the obligatory, legal regime provided for in the Constitutive Act.

If I were interested to weaken the drive to respect these freedoms, I would argue that they should be protected through the Peer Review system, which also provides for voluntary accession by Member States. Strangely, this is what evidently irate and alarmed members certainly of the South African media proceeded to do, all the while claiming to be the best defenders of press freedom!

As things stand today, the majority of African countries represented by the distinguished delegates present here have not as yet acceded to the APRM, which is perfectly within their rights. When it is established later this year, this Mechanism will not be able to work in any country, which has not decided to subject itself to such peer review. However, I have no reason to believe that any African country will take a conscious decision to exclude itself from such peer review.

The second reason that our supposed defenders of press freedom insisted so much that we should elevate the NEPAD Peer Review Mechanism above the Constitutive Act of the African Union, was because they are convinced that as Africans we cannot be trusted to promote democracy in Africa without the guardianship of the Western countries.

Because of the new partnership with the G8 countries that we are trying to build through NEPAD, the view is that it is important that these countries should have the possibility to starve our peoples to oblige their governments to democratise our continent. Sections of the African media have felt no sense of shame in demanding that the G8 countries should not support NEPAD if our countries do not implement the wishes of these countries.

Contemptuous of the principle and practice we hold dear, of the right of our nations to self-determination, they say that Africa's future should be decided by those who are richer than ourselves. In exchange for full stomachs they will feed, we must be ready to sacrifice our liberty and independence.

The reason these great defenders of African press freedom prefer the NEPAD APRM to the African Union is that they are not convinced that the Western countries have as much leverage over the African Union as they may have over NEPAD.

All this makes for very distressing reading, reflecting as it does on what is happening at the precise moment when our continent is taking bold steps to determine its future. I am even told that there are some Africans who describe themselves as members of African civil society, who have decided to fly to Evian in France to demonstrate against NEPAD.

This will happen when we will be meeting the G8 Heads of State and Government in June, to secure their commitment to help finance specific projects covering such areas as peace and stability, infrastructure development, agriculture, water and sanitation, affordable drugs and medicines, and other matters such as market access.

Strange to say, Africans will fly to France to demand that nothing should be done to help our continent to move forward on these matters, on the basis of programmes conceived and elaborated by us as Africans. I think the most sensible thing for these Africans to do, if they were inspired to oppose African liberation and development, would have been to demonstrate

at the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, rather than at a place in France closely associated with the high cost that France imposed on the Algerian people as they fought for their independence.

Specifically to address the matter of press freedom within the context of the African Union and NEPAD, I would suggest that you focus on a number of concrete steps.

You should pay attention to the process of the establishment of the Pan African Parliament and work to ensure that this parliament acts as a vigilant guardian of the freedom you seek to defend. You will therefore have to familiarise yourselves with the Protocol currently being legislated into force by our national parliaments.

You should pay similar attention to the processes towards the establishment of ECOSOCC, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union, which will be "composed of different social and professional groups of the Member States of the Union." You will have to ensure that you are represented in this Council, which can put the matter of press freedom permanently on its agenda.

If this has not been done, you should establish direct contact with the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, to ensure that this Commission keeps the matters of concern to you permanently on its agenda. You might be interested to know that the Commission will also feed into the African Peer Review Mechanism.

When the institutions of this Mechanism are established or decided, later this year, you should also relate to them, bearing in mind that their scope of work will cover only those countries that would have acceded to the APRM.

Your access to the Assembly of the African Union will enable you to persuade this organ of the Union to impose sanctions on any Member State, should such a State act in violation of the freedoms contained in the Constitutive Act and other instruments, which freedoms include the freedom of the press.

You might also wish to urge the earliest possible establishment of the Court of Justice of the African Union provided for under Article 18 of the Constitutive Act, and work to influence the content of the protocol that will spell out its mandate. Article 26 of the Act says, "the Court shall be seized with matters of interpretation arising from the application or implementation of this Act." Accordingly, matters relating to the denial of the freedoms contained in the Act would fall within the jurisdiction of the Court, whose judgements would be binding on all Member States.

We must also bear in mind that the Constitutive Act specifically binds Africa to the provisions of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These are among the instruments that will help all us to address our shared concern about the protection of our democratic freedoms. To ensure that we move speedily towards their establishment, will require that we make constructive suggestions towards the achievement of this goal.

It may very well be easier for you to position yourselves as a protest movement and make all manner of demands about what African governments should do with regard to the important matter of press freedom. I would suggest that you should rather take advantage of the opportunities that have emerged, to help our continent to institute the mechanisms and procedures that will help us to ensure that we entrench democracy throughout Africa.

I do not believe that thinking Africans, such as yourselves, would consciously engage in the rather fruitless exercise of pushing at an open door.

Those who have followed the evolution of the media in this country would be aware that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there emerged newspapers that were owned and run by black people, which conveyed what, at the time, they categorised as the Native Opinion. This

Native Opinion asserted the right of the African people to equality, justice, freedom, development and independent thought.

This was an alternative view to the one represented by established newspapers, mostly owned by big business, which advocated the views of the white colonial settlers in our country.

A century ago, in 1903, Sol Plaatje, who was to become the first Secretary-General of the ANC, initiated the formation of a Native Press Association, so as to ensure some degree of cohesion among the different native newspapers, which included, *Ilanga lase Natal*, *Koranta ea Bacoana* (Batswana), *Leihlo la Babaso* and *Ipepa lo Hlanga*.

As we know, none of these newspapers could survive because few, if any, businesspeople were prepared to back any media that sought to give an alternative opinion to that of the white ruling bloc. Although these newspapers did not survive for a long time, the Native Opinion did not die.

In time, this Native Opinion was propagated by different sources -new newspapers, the ANC when it was formed in 1912, the independent churches, trade unions and many other South Africans who struggled for a free and democratic society.

Without doubt, this is the story of all our countries, where there has always been a contest of ideas between the natives and the settlers, a permanent struggle for the hegemony of the Native as opposed to the Colonial Opinion.

The question that faces all of us at this conference is whether this struggle between the two contending viewpoints, as represented in the past by the Natives and the Colonialists, ended when we won our independence and freedom.

I believe that our response to this question will determine the manner in which we engage the process of the regeneration of our continent.

In 1991, Njabulo Ndebele, the current Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, wrote about South African writers, not just journalists, in his book *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* saying:

"Ultimately, South African culture, in the hands of whites, the dominant force, is incapable of nurturing the civilisation based on the perfection of the individual in order to permit maximum social creativity. Consequently, we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness and limitations. It is totally heroic.

"Even the progressive side has been domesticated by the hegemony of spectacle."

The media is critical to the formation and dissemination of ideas. That is why the issue raised by Ndebele is important for us at this conference. This is because if we are not able to produce people who engage in critical thinking and in 'subtlety of thought and feeling', individuals capable of close analysis and are mature enough to know that life necessarily always presents us with successes, failures, weaknesses and limitations, heroes, heroines and villains, we will fail to respond adequately to the many varied challenges of our time.

This calls for a journalist who I believe, would take forward the Native Opinion of equality, justice, freedom, democracy, development and independent thought and challenge the hegemony of the spectacle, or what we may call the hegemony of the sensational.

In its September 1988 issue, the prestigious periodical, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, published an article by Serge Halimi, carrying the sub-title "Myopic and cheapskate journalism". Commenting on the US media, it said, among other things:

"Already under fire for its obsessive treatment of President Clinton's alleged sexual improprieties, American journalism has recently been shaken by a number of scandals which cast doubt on the professionalism of some of the country's major news media: CNN, NBC, Time, the Boston Globe, etc. Invented stories, plagiarism and testimonies obtained under pressure come high on the list. However, what is more fundamentally at issue is the whole money-making ethos of news journalism nowadays; a journalism which succeeds because it is easier and more profitable, which entertains rather than informs, and which chooses to ignore the international dimension of news.

"Ten years after Francis Fukuyama speculated about "the end of history", American journalists are becoming increasingly alarmed at the possibility of an "end of news". It appears that consumers of the world's news are being turned off by an overdose of excessively superficial coverage of a world, which offers them only powerlessness and frustration. They are giving up news. It is not the case that the world's press is collapsing on every hand, but in more than two thirds of the world's countries it is definitely in decline.

"Subscriptions are not being renewed and young people's interest in the news has fallen to disastrously low levels. The reasons for this disaffection are multiple, but we could begin with the sickly and abstracted state of a journalism which is going fast downhill "as mainstream press and TV News outlets purvey more 'lifestyle' stories, trivia, scandal, celebrity gossip, sensational crime, sex in high places and tabloidism at the expense of serious news in a cynical effort to maximize readership and viewership; as editors collude ever more willingly with marketers, promotion experts and advertisers, thus ceding a portion of their sacred editorial trust; as editors shrink from tough coverage of major advertisers lest they jeopardise ad revenue."

I believe that as we advance the Native Opinion, we should honestly ask ourselves whether these observations apply to us or not, and what we should do to avoid the disaster portrayed by Serge Halimi. I would also like to plead that we avoid resort to claims of "media bashing" to protect the media from legitimate criticism, refusing to address the critical matter of the social or public accountability of the media.

On September 17, 2001, Professor Walden Bello spoke at the Asia Press Forum in Seoul, entitling his address "The Conglomerate threat to Critical Journalism." Among other things, he said:

"(Asia) is today experiencing a number of conflicts between the press and the authorities. I think it is important to be discriminating here and not regard all situations as the same...But whatever their differences, it is important to closely monitor the situation in all these countries and others, so that the freedom of the press is not compromised in some countries and is expanded in others.

"What I would like to focus on in this talk is the threat to the integrity of journalism in the region, posed by the increasing concentration of the production and delivery of information and opinion and entertainment production in the hands of a limited number of global conglomerates. This threat, I would contend, is as dangerous - if not more so - than that posed by government.

"Robert McChesney, a leading specialist on the media, wrote recently "in few industries has the level of concentration been as stunning as the media." In a very short period, the global media has come to be dominated by seven multinational corporations: Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, and Bertelsmann. All these conglomerates are western-controlled, four of them being American, if we count Rupert Murdoch, who is now a card-carrying US citizen and is headquartered in the US, as an American."

Having detailed the penetration of these conglomerates into Asia, he writes:

"Concentration of power and influence by the western media conglomerates has been accompanied by four notable trends in reporting and opinion making:

- * homogenisation of views underneath surface pluralism;
- * commodification of news and views;
- * diffusion of an anti-analytical methodology of reporting and analysis that fails to draw out the relationships among phenomena or developments; and
- * Pervasiveness of a paradigm that filters out inconvenient data and filters in only those that fit its underlying assumptions."

Later, Professor Bello said:

"Homogenisation, commodification, and abstracted empiricism are part of a larger problem, and that is a non-self-reflective press that is imprisoned in a framework that does not so much interpret reality but organises it in ways favourable to its underlying interests. I am not talking about a conspiracy to falsify reality. I am talking about the conceptual and ethical assumptions that form the pillars of what is now commonly called, following Thomas Kuhn, a "paradigm." I am talking about an ideological process that "filters in" some aspects of reality and "filters out" others, thus unconsciously distorting the perception, reporting, and analysis of the social world."

He summarises his views as follows:

"Let me conclude by saying that even as authoritarian controls over the press continue to be a threat to a free press in Asia, and even as we fight to lift outright censorship or self-censorship in places such as China, Malaysia, and Singapore, we must not lose sight of the fact that the greater threat to the integrity of the press and media is the centralisation and concentration of the global media in the hands of a small number of western corporate oligopolies.

"This trend towards monopolisation carries with it the very real dangers of the imposition of the hegemony of an ideology whose hallmarks are an ideological uniformity beneath a surface pluralism, commodification of information production and delivery, an underlying paradigm suffused with values filtering out uncongenial truths - uncongenial that is, to the eternal truths of the superiority of free markets and western-style liberal democracies - and a methodology of abstracted empiricism.

"What this means is that the practice of responsible journalism, in Asia and elsewhere, has become one of deconstruction and reconstruction. The reporter or the opinion writer must, on the one hand, deconstruct the ideological and methodological filters that subtly reshape the realities that are presented to the people by the dominant media. Then, we must place events, both local and international, in their very real relationship to the structures and dynamics of a process of globalisation that is not neutral but serve the interests of certain groups.

"Reading, writing, or presenting the realities of our societies and those of the world is an effort that must engage to the full our critical faculties - one that unites writer and reader, viewer and broadcaster in a common enterprise of education, discovery, and liberating action. To make a difference in this age of globalisation dominated by mechanisms of ideological control far stronger than the state-controlled media of totalitarian states of the past and present, journalism must cease being a dispenser of factoids and once again become an instrument of liberation by being reflective, critical, and a partisan of the truth. This is what it means to fight for freedom of the press and freedom of thought in our time."

The delegates gathered at this conference represent an important segment of the African intelligentsia. You practise your craft during an exciting and challenging period in the evolution of our countries and continent. Within this context, it is not possible to avoid responding to the critical challenges posed by Professor Bello.

The question you face is whether you will take it upon yourselves to follow in the footsteps of Sol Plaatje and, in advancing Native Opinion, "once again become an instrument of liberation by being reflective, critical, and a partisan of the truth", no longer victim to the hegemony of

the sensational!

Perhaps the simple question is - will you become embedded among the African masses, and define ourselves as activists of the African Renaissance, or will the rebirth of Africa pass you by!