

Media freedom, race relations, and public sphere in South Africa

During my recent visit to South Africa to participate in the inaugural Global Africa Diaspora Summit, I took time off to visit a couple of media houses in South Africa including *The Star* newspapers, *City Press*, and the public broadcaster – South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The visit coincided with the uproar about an artist's painting of President Jacob Zuma in a derogatory image depicting his genitals. The painting called *The Spear* by Brett Murray which was on display at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg spoke volumes about freedom of expression and race relations in South Africa.

Media freedom, race relations, and citizen participation were therefore important issues to discuss with journalists in the rainbow nation.

Consequently, I interacted with a number of journalists including Mr. Jimi Matthews SABC's Head of TV news, Mr. Masakhane Ngcangata, Executive Producer Xhosa News in SABC, Mr. Nyana Molete, SABC's National TV News Editor, Mr. Sefako Nyaka, Editor, SABC TV Current Affairs, and Mr. Moshoeshe Monare, Editor *The Sunday Independent*.



Dr. Uchenna Ekwo (L) of Center for Media & Peace Initiatives, New York and Mr. Jimi Matthews, Head of TV News SABC during a visit to SABC in Johannesburg

My interaction and observation in SABC newsroom clearly showed a degree of integration among the various ethnic composition of South Africa. The Head of Afrikaans desk, Richard shared some views with me especially the soaring ratings of the channel. He subsequently introduced me to Masakhane, the Executive Producer of Xhosa News that claims nearly six million viewers.

Looking at the racial mix of the newsroom, I paused for a moment to imagine what it was in the apartheid era. Obviously, prior to majority rule the white South Africans were in charge of key positions in the public broadcaster. Today, all vital positions are controlled by qualified black officials committed to using the influence of the station to aspire for non-racial South Africa.

One black producer was candid enough to admit that non-whites in the newsroom still feel uncomfortable with the status quo but unfortunately there is nothing they can do about the change towards more inclusiveness.

Journalists in SABC who spoke with me admitted that South Africa enjoys substantial media freedom. In fact, one of them claimed that SABC was truly independent of the government, an assertion debunked by other journalists outside of SABC. The South African Protection of State Information Bill instantly comes to mind as a proposed piece of legislation most critics believe will undermine media freedom. Pejoratively referred to as the Secrecy Bill the controversial law aims to regulate the classification, protection, and dissemination of state information, weighing state interests up against transparency and freedom of expression.

The controversy over the Zuma painting which is clearly a clash of freedom of expression and dignity of one man would have been a test case for the proposed Information Bill assuming it became law then.

Perhaps, the action of the ANC and Jacob Zuma's administration following the display of Zuma's image in a gallery suggested a nation and government committed to rule of law. The ruling party filed a law suit against all those behind the defamation of President Zuma while the public was urged to boycott *City Press* for publishing the complete picture of the painting called *The Spear* showing the president's genitals.

The decision of City Press to publish the entire painting attracted wide comments from different journalists on journalism ethics- a consideration for sensationalism, professionalism, and social responsibility. The larger argument among some of my hosts is that South African constitution explicitly protects artistic expression as a subset of free expression and to tell journalists how to publish stories amounted to censorship.

The irony about *City Press*' publication (that was viewed as an assault on a black president) is that the newspaper had been the bastion of anti-apartheid campaigns during the minority rule of the 20th century. So, to see the newspaper engage in a publication of a painting tinged with racial undertones seemed a reversal of role.

However, the public protest that followed the objectionable publication of City Press clearly shows a society that is engaged with the media. The public sphere is fast changing where citizens can dictate and direct media content. In most countries that lack basic freedom of expression, it is the government that controls media content but in South Africa the demonstration against *The Spear*, Goodman Gallery, and City Press is emblematic of an active citizenry.

The protesters acted to defend their president and his dignity, and to show that they can influence media behavior. What the protesters did not think about was that while their freedom of expression was on display through the protests, they violated the artist's freedom of expression and that of *City Press*, and journalists who work there. Such is the confusion in the quest for freedom.

Uchenna Ekwo filed this report for CMPI