

TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

1. As the ANC prepared, in 1992, for the challenges that would necessarily follow the achievement of a democratic breakthrough, the movement produced the 'Ready to Govern' document. Among other things, it said:
 - "South Africa has been a closed society, with many restrictions on the flow of information. Legislation, the structure of ownership of media resources, skills, language policy, and social deprivation have undermined access to information for the majority of the population.
 - "The ANC believes that the transition to democracy in South Africa entails a movement from a closed society into one based on a free flow of information and a culture of open debate. At the core of democracy lies the recognition of the right of all citizens to take part in society's decision-making process. This requires that individuals are armed with the necessary information and have access to the contesting options they require to make informed choices. An ignorant society cannot be democratic.
 - "The ANC asserts that mere declarations of media freedoms on their own are not enough. These freedoms must be underpinned by an equitable distribution of media resources, development programmes and a deliberate effort to engender a culture of open debate. This requires policies of affirmative action to redress the inequalities in our society.
 - "The ANC is committed to media freedom and various mechanisms to bring it about..."
2. At its 51st National Conference in Stellenbosch in 2002, the ANC reaffirmed the importance of a free and diverse media to the democratic process and to the task of fundamental social transformation.
3. The Stellenbosch Conference noted that:
 - "Communications play a major role in deepening our democracy, promoting a culture of human rights and as a key pillar in the transformation of our country. *"Valuable progress has been made in*

transforming the media and challenging the legacy of the apartheid media discourse, but a lot still has to be done. "The media itself faces major challenges with regard to equity, skills development and improvement in working conditions. "Media and communications are contested terrains and therefore not neutral, but reflect the ideological battle and power relations based on race, class and gender in our society..."

4. The task we face as we prepare for the 52nd National Conference is to examine once more our understanding of media transformation, the place of media in a democratic society, the key features of the prevailing media environment, analyse the changes that have taken place over the last five years (and since the dawn of democracy), and identify the challenges that still lie ahead.

CONTEST OF IDEAS

5. At Stellenbosch we observed that media and communications are contested terrains; one of the most important fields on which the battle of ideas is fought.
6. Yet there persists a pretence in many quarters that those in the media are somehow a breed apart from other human beings, that they are not impacted by the dynamics within society and therefore do not hold personal views on social or political developments. Others pretend that even if journalists and editors do have personal views, they do not allow these views to encroach upon the hallowed ground of objective reporting.
7. As noted in an input to a seminar organised by the SA National Editors' Forum (SANEF) in 2004, "Because ideological advocacy is presented in our country as something the media avoids as a matter of principle, you then end up with an ideological hoax of historical proportions"
8. The reality is that the media – in South Africa as in every other society – is a major arena in the battle of ideas. All social forces are therefore engaged, to varying degrees and with differing success, in efforts to ensure that the media advances their ideological, political,

social, economic and cultural objectives.

9. Throughout its history the ANC has engaged in the battle of ideas, understanding that the achievement of its objectives of a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa is dependent on its capacity to convince the people of the correctness of its positions, policies and programmes.
10. The media is consequently one of the sites of ideological struggle with which the ANC – like other social actors – has sought to engage.
11. In doing so, there is a danger of understanding the media in terms of two opposite extremes. The first of these is that the media, its content and its ideological allegiances are necessarily fixed by prevailing patterns of ownership and control, and that progressive forces will never receive favourable treatment as long as these persist.
12. The second view holds that the media is much like an empty vessel, whose content will be determined by those who are most vigorous and persistent in engaging with it. Both views fail to acknowledge the complexity of the structure of the media and the forces and factors that influence its content.
13. Just as we much challenge the notion that the media is necessarily ideologically neutral and non-partisan, so too must we resist the impulse to seek a media which mechanically follows a single ‘progressive’ political line. Rather we need to seek a media which is able to reflect the diversity of views and interests within society, and to act as a forum for a vigorous exchange of views – a contest of ideas that enriches the democratic process and contributes to the building of a national democratic society.
14. The question that needs to be answered is

whether the media today is capable of playing such a role. What progress has it made? What challenges remain?

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

15. South Africa’s prevailing media environment cannot be understood outside of the specific set of conditions under which the media developed during apartheid. At the time, the media was characterised by a centralisation of ownership and control among a few large white-owned companies and the state broadcaster; censorship and repression were used to silence dissenting voices; and the majority of South Africa’s people were denied any opportunity to access or influence in any significant way the predominant forms of communication and information dissemination.
16. There have been a number of important changes in the intervening period, most notably in the field of broadcasting, where the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has largely been transformed from being a mouthpiece of the apartheid government to becoming a public broadcaster with a mandate to serve all South Africans.
17. Under an independent statutory body - initially the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and now the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) – a number of commercial and community radio stations have been granted licences to broadcast. Together with the sale of a number of former SABC stations, the radio broadcasting environment has opened up significantly since the advent of democracy.
18. There have also been a number of changes in the print media field. While the number of newspaper titles has increased significantly,

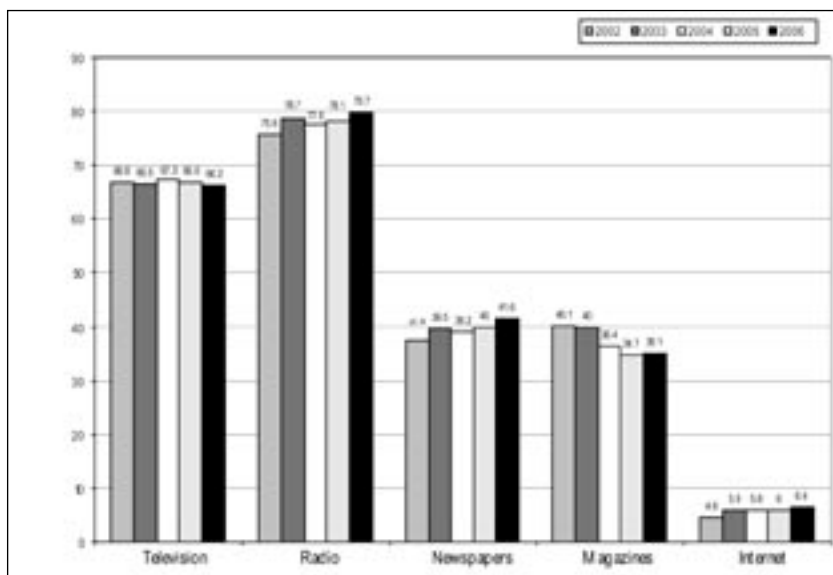


Figure 1
Consumption of media in South Africa (2002–2006)

and a number of mass circulation papers aimed specifically at black readers have emerged, the print media remains highly concentrated.

19. Different forms of media have very different levels of reach among the population.
20. *Figure 1* illustrates the consumption of the different forms of media over the last five years. Among the discernible trends is the steady growth of radio penetration; the growth of newspaper consumption alongside a decline in magazines; and the relatively rapid growth of internet penetration (from a small base).
21. It is important to note that there are significant differences in consumption of media according to race and class. Radio, and to a lesser extent television, are the forms of media most consumed by the poorer sections of society (mainly black), while the print media and internet are most consumed by the more affluent sections of society (where most white South Africans are to be found).
22. As we shall discuss later, this has an impact on where advertising revenue is directed, which in turn is a defining feature of the commercial media sector (and even, to a degree, the public media sector).
23. The differences in the patterns of consumption have certain implications for efforts to encourage diversity within the media, and provide access (both as producers and consumers) to a greater proportion of the population.
24. Most of the major national and regional radio stations in South Africa are part of the SABC, a public broadcaster which operates in terms of an Act of parliament. While operating independently of government, it is guided by a public service mandate.

25. The SABC national radio network comprises 18 radio stations. Thirteen of these are dedicated specifically to public service broadcasting. There are 11 full-spectrum stations (one for each of the official languages), a station for the Indian community broadcasting in English, a community station broadcasting in the !Xu and Khwe languages, and five commercial stations.
26. Since 1994 a number of private radio stations have been licensed (some of which were previously owned by the SABC). There are currently 13 commercial radio stations and around 100 community radio stations licensed by ICASA.
27. *Figure 2* illustrates the great disparity between the consumption of commercial radio stations (including SABC) and community radio stations. However, it is significant that community radio listenership has increased significantly in the last five years, while commercial radio listenership has declined. This is particularly impressive given that the community radio sector is barely a decade old.
28. Since community radio is more likely than its mainstream counterparts to give voice to a broader, more diverse and currently under-represented range of South Africans, then it is vital that this sector continues to grow.
29. Among the issues that will need to be considered at a policy level is whether provision needs to be made for the licensing of more community radio stations so that those sections of society that remain under-represented in the media, the poor and working class in particular, have access to the means to exercise their right to free expression.
30. Community radio faces a number of significant challenges, including a lack of resources, unreliable revenue streams, and

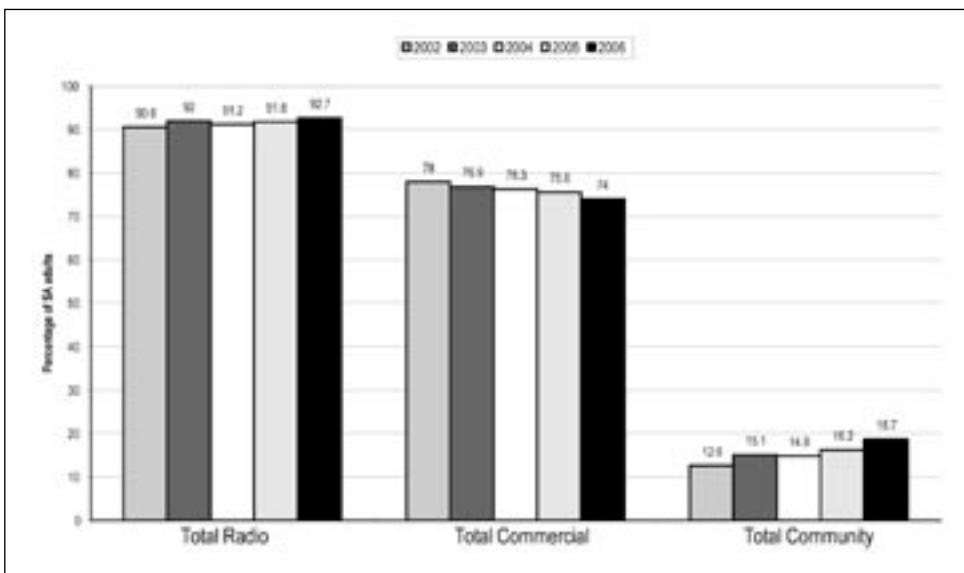


Figure 2
Consumption of radio
in past 7 days
(2002–2006)

lack of media skills and technical expertise. Those community stations that have managed to have an impact have done so largely because of the tenacity and determination of their staff, the support of the community and the material assistance provided by donors, government and agencies.

31. The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is one vehicle established by government to assist this media sector. It is a statutory development agency for promoting and ensuring media development and diversity, set up as a partnership between government and major print and broadcasting companies to assist in development of community and small commercial media.
32. In the 2005/06 financial year, the MDDA made R3.5 million available to support community publications and print projects, R2.7 million to community radio stations and R2.4 million to small commercial media.⁴ Government contributed R7 million towards this, while R10 million came from the main print and broadcast companies.
33. If we are serious about the development of community radio, then it is necessary to look at mechanisms to ensure they have the resources and skills to sustain themselves.
34. There have also been important changes in the **television** environment. The SABC has three free-to-air TV channels and two satellite pay-TV channels aimed at audiences in Africa. Combined, the free-to-air channels broadcast in 11 languages and reach a daily adult audience of almost 18 million people. There are more than four million licensed television households in South Africa. The SABC TV channels devote about 17% of their airtime during prime time to news and news-related programmes.

35. M-Net, South Africa's first private subscription television service, was launched in 1986. Today, it has over 1.2 million subscribers in 49 countries across the African continent. It does not broadcast news programming.
36. In March 1998, the consortium Midi Television was awarded the first privately owned free-to-air television licence. The station they operate, eTV, is a commercial service dependent on advertising. It does not charge subscription fees. The eTV channel started broadcasting on 1 October 1998. News broadcasts and a 24-hour service were introduced early in 1999.
37. The respective viewership of these stations is reflected in *Figure 3*.
38. One of the most important elements of the changes in broadcasting has been the transition of the SABC from an apartheid government mouthpiece to a public broadcaster that has a responsibility to educate, inform, entertain and contribute to the development of the South African people. It is a statutory institution with a public service mandate to fulfil.
39. Yet this transition has raised a number of challenges. One relates to the issue of funding. While it is not a commercial venture, some of its stations have an explicit function to generate revenue through advertising. The public funding available to the SABC, including from licence fees, is not sufficient on its own to enable it to operate such a diverse and extensive range of broadcasting services. But the need to generate advertising revenue contrains its ability to perform its public service role.
40. Another challenge is to ensure that in its editorial approach the SABC avoids both

Figure 3 Television viewership by station (2002–2006)

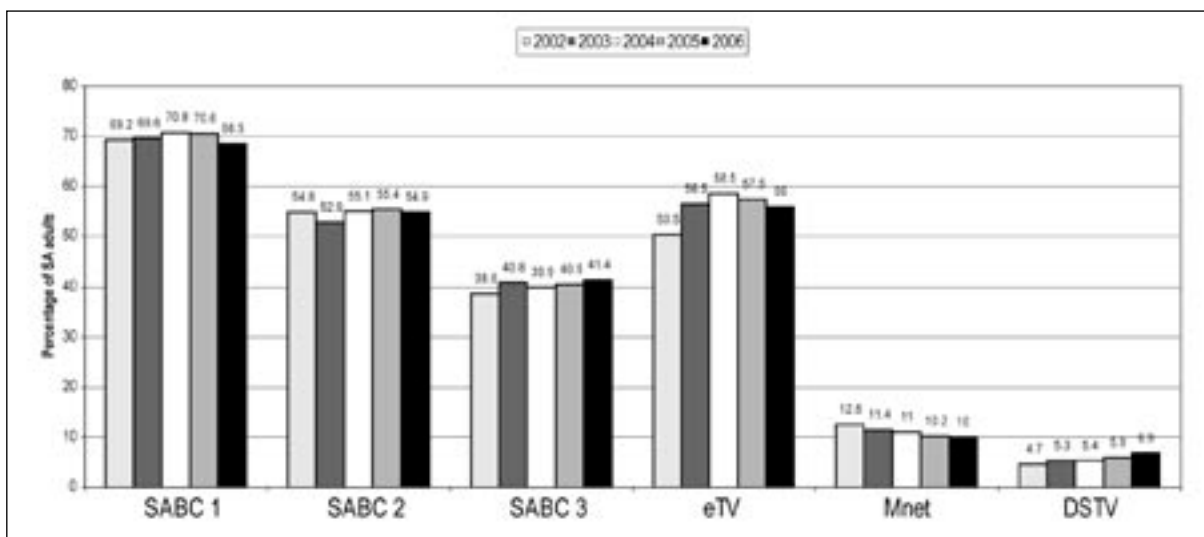
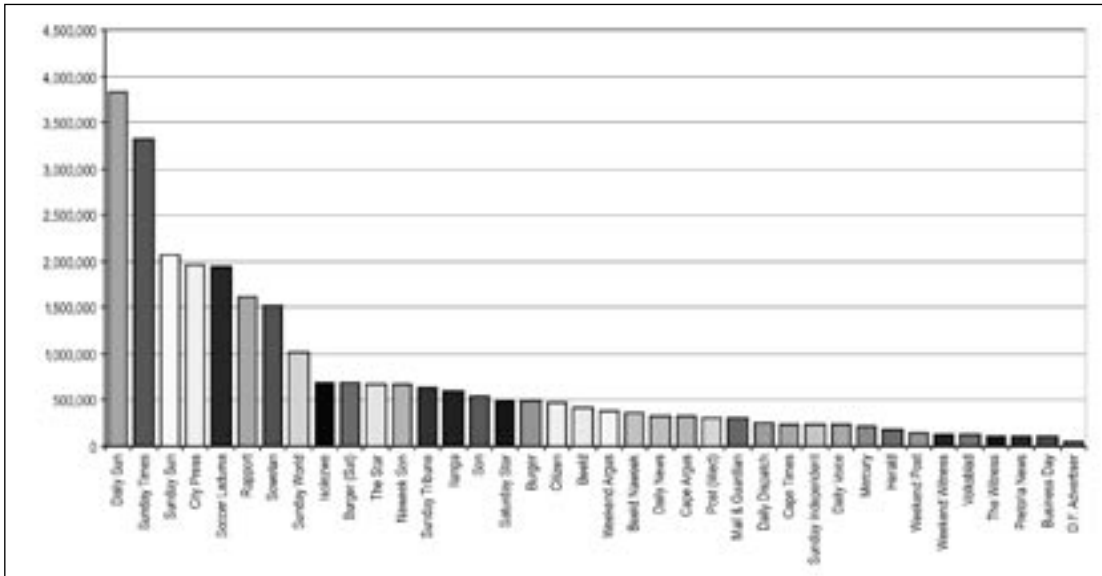


Figure 4 Newspaper circulation (2006)



the perception and the reality that it is an uncritical mouthpiece for the government of the day. It remains vitally important that the SABC can be relied upon as a credible source of accurate and balanced news, information and analysis, representing in its coverage the diversity of South African society. While non-partisan in its approach, the SABC nevertheless has a responsibility to uphold and promote the values enshrined in the Constitution. The public broadcaster should be explicit in its commitment to nation building, reconciliation, forging an inclusive national identity, and the reconstruction and development of society.

41. The SABC is likely to face a further challenge in the implementation of its public service mandate as the broadcasting environment becomes more cluttered and more competitive with the entry of new services, the development of new technology for content delivery, and the opening up of the broadcast spectrum. This raises difficult questions for government, legislators and regulators in how to balance the desirability of a developmental public broadcaster with the need to ensure South African people are able to freely choose from a range of broadcast services.
42. In contrast to broadcasting, there are no publicly-owned mainstream newspapers in South Africa. There is, however, a broad spectrum of daily and weekly newspapers, all of which are privately owned and run on a commercial basis. The array of titles, only some of which are shown in *Figure 4*, would suggest a healthy diversity of voices in the print media – a hundred flowers are blooming, a hundred schools of thought contending.

43. Yet, although there are a great many newspaper titles available in South Africa, ownership of these papers is concentrated in the hands of just a few companies. *Figure 5* indicates the percentage of newspapers sold divided according to the companies that own the various titles.
44. This illustrates that three companies – Media24, Johnnic Communications and the Independent Group – together account for 95% of weekly and daily newspapers sold in South Africa.
45. The consolidation of ownership probably makes commercial sense, allowing for economies of scale and for the same resources (including content) to be shared among different titles. Yet such consolidation does not contribute to greater diversity in the print media. Rather it limits the possibility for a wide range of voices and interests to be

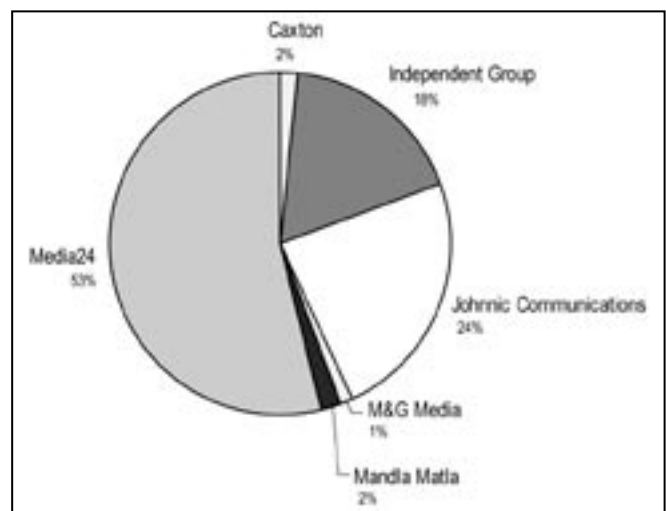


Figure 5 Newspaper circulation by group

heard.

46. New media forms are now also achieving some prominence. The internet is considered to be 'new', having been in general use for little over a decade. During that period both traditional media institutions and web-only news providers have set up a presence on the web. Traditional media institutions, particularly print, tend to have an advantage over other online news providers because they already have significant news generation capacity.
47. Though it's growing, internet reach remains low in comparison to other forms of media. This reflects limited access to information and communication technology among the majority of South Africans. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that, even among those with internet access, web-based news services have not displaced traditional forms of media.
48. While the internet provides greater opportunities for a greater number of people to 'publish' views, news and other information for mass consumption, this hasn't had much impact on the South African media environment. On websites dedicated to news provision much of the content comes from wire services, actually reducing diversity. Alternative sources of information on the web in South Africa do not yet have substantial reach nor impact.
49. However, there is much potential for this to change, rapidly. Technology is developing at a pace where the divisions between various forms of electronic media are becoming increasingly blurred. New generation networks being developed are capable of carrying audio, video and web content, enabling users to receive information on a variety of devices,

es, from computers to TVs to cellphones.

50. While access to computers may currently be limited for most South Africans, the number of South Africans with cellphones is relatively high, and growing, as illustrated in *Figure 6*.
51. Given this brief overview of the media environment, how are we to understand the progress of the effort to ensure the South African media is free and diverse?

MEDIA FREEDOM AND DIVERSITY

52. One of the most important achievements in transforming the South African media environment since the democratic breakthrough was the removal of media censorship and the commitment of the new democratic order to guarantee the right of all South African's to freedom of expression, including freedom of the media.
53. The Constitution, adopted in 1996, says: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes:
 - a) freedom of the press and other media;
 - b) freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
 - c) freedom of artistic creativity; and
 - d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research."
54. The Constitution further says that this right does not extend to propaganda for war, incitement of imminent violence, or advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to harm.
55. As with all the rights contained in the Constitution, South Africans have recourse to the judicial system, in particular the Constitutional Court, should they feel these rights are

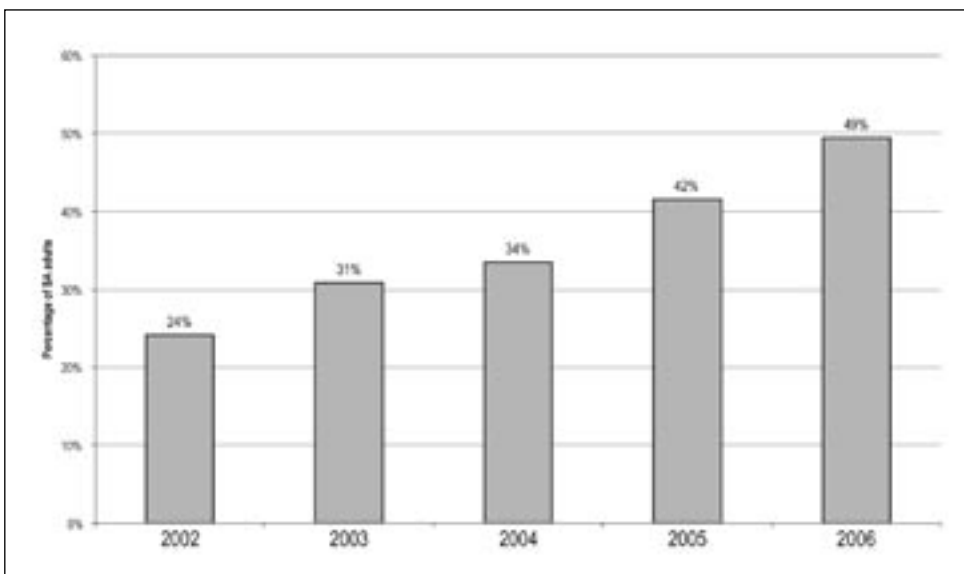


Figure 6
Cellphone usage
(2002–2006)

being violated or denied in any way.

56. Since the transition to democracy, a number of cases have been brought before the courts testing the applicability of this right in various circumstances. Of course, the right to freedom of expression needs to be balanced against other rights, such as the right to human dignity and the right to privacy.
57. There have been legal challenges ranging from issues of defamation and community radio licensing to applications to broadcast court proceedings and the refusal of journalists to testify in criminal cases.
58. In each instance, the courts have had to weigh way up the legality and constitutionality of opposing claims. Whatever view the organisation might take on specific rulings, the ANC has always insisted that the courts are the appropriate site to settle such matters. The organisation has therefore urged respect for these decisions.
59. While some have argued that the decision to take legal action against a media institution is a form of “intimidation” or an attempt at censorship, the ANC has argued that all South Africans should be able to exercise their right of recourse to the courts. If their actions are frivolous, malicious or intended to narrow the scope for free expression, then it should be up to the courts to decide on such matters.
60. Yet, as we have noted in conference resolutions and policy documents before, the absence of state censorship and the constitutional guarantee of media freedom is not sufficient for the realisation of the right of all South Africans to freedom of expression.
61. The right of expression has little meaning if the means do not exist for the free expression of views. If control of the media – and access to the media – is concentrated in the hands of a few, then the capacity for the masses to receive and impart information is severely curtailed.
62. That is why the issue of media freedom cannot be pursued in isolation of media diversity. Media diversity is an integral and necessary component of a progressive understanding of media freedom.
63. Not only does there need to be a diverse and generally representative range of views and interests represented within the media, but all South Africans need to have avenues to express their views and ideas in the media. The struggle for media freedom therefore also involves the extension of access to the media to as many people as possible.
64. As we struggle towards the achievement of greater media diversity, we should not assume that the goal of media freedom has been achieved simply because the South African media is not subject to any censorship or state interference.
65. The freedom of the South African media is today undermined not by the state, but by various tendencies that arise from the commercial imperatives that drive the media.
66. The concentration of ownership, particularly in the print sector, has a particularly restrictive effect on the freedom of the media. The process of consolidation and the drive to cut costs through, among other things, rationalisation of newsgathering operations, leads to homogenisation of content. Within a group, a number of titles will often use the same news stories and rely on the same journalists.
67. This is not a particularly South African phenomenon. Around the world, consolidation of media groups – and the drive to maximise profit – has led to a global homogenisation of news. In addition, it doesn’t make much commercial sense for a newspaper to have international correspondents stationed around the world when it is far cheaper to use international wire services. There have even been instances when South African newspapers have published stories about South Africa taken from international news agencies.
68. Despite protestations to the contrary, there are an increasing number of instances where the supposedly-sacred separation between management and the newsroom is breached, where commercial considerations influence editorial content.
69. This takes place in a media market in which there is fierce competition for a slice of the upper income market, where the most advertising revenue is to be found. Given that this end of the market represents very particular class interests (and is predominantly white) it stands to reason that media institutions will tend to reflect the preoccupations, values and world view of this small group of society. Even where management may adopt a hands-off approach to editorial matters, they would certainly step in to prevent their title from adopting an editorial stance that may antagonise their target market or alienate advertisers. Dedicated professionals that they may be, most editors still need to keep an eye on the bottom line.
70. The drive to cut costs also diminishes the research capacity, infrastructure and time available to journalists, leading to a herd mentality within large sections of the media. Complex social dynamics and events that lend themselves to a multitude of interpretations are reduced to homogenous sound-

bites. If one newspaper report takes a particular approach to an issue, it is a fairly safe bet that most other media will follow their lead, with little pause for critical reflection. Certain phrases and descriptions, no matter how inappropriate or inaccurate, achieve an almost universal usage. Claims published by one media outlet are frequently reported as fact in most others without any effort to inde-

pendently verify their accuracy. More insidiously, terms like “funding scandal”, “Islamic extremist”, “controversial minister” and (to many a journalist’s shame) “generally corrupt relationship” are commonly applied to events and individuals without a moment’s thought about their veracity or the value judgements that may inform them.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- The right of the media to publish, broadcast or otherwise distribute information, news and analysis is guaranteed by the Constitution, upheld by the institutions of the state and safeguarded by the judiciary.
- Media workers are able to operate free of coercion, harassment or intimidation.
- In many respects, the media still retains in large part the patterns of ownership, control and consumption that evolved under apartheid.
- Significant changes have taken place in broadcasting. The SABC has shifted from being the voice of the National Party government to fulfilling, with greater or lesser success, the mandate of a public broadcaster. The broadcast sector has become more diversified with the sale of some SABC radio stations and the licensing of new commercial and community stations and a private free-to-air television station.
- There have been some changes in ownership of media institutions, including an increased presence of black ownership in a number of newspaper titles and commercial radio stations. However, there remains a concentration of media ownership, particularly in the print sector.
- The establishment of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), with a mandate to support the formation and sustainability of media that would not otherwise exist in a purely market-driven environment, creates the possibility of a great number of media voices from among black, poor and previously-marginalised communities.
- Even where changes in ownership have taken place, there are areas of the media where there has been little discernible change in the content and orientation of the various titles. Reasons for this include:
 - sluggish change in the composition (whether by race, class or gender) of the managerial and senior editorial staff of some of these institutions;
 - continued targeting of the upper income market, the majority of whom are white, as the most profitable segment of consumers, and the associated inclination to avoid editorial positions that may antagonise advertisers;
 - poor resourcing of journalists and low standards of journalism, contributing to a lack of critical analysis, shallowness of public debate and “the tyranny of the sound-bite”.
- There has been little public debate on the role and place of the media in a democratic society in transition. Too often the debate is reduced to a choice between one of two extremes – between a “watchdog” media, that is unrelenting in its criticism of government and the ruling party (and models itself as an unofficial opposition); and a “lapdog” media, for whom those in positions of power can do no wrong. Much more debate needs to take place in society and what we understand by a critical, independent and diverse media.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- What role should the media play in the deepening of democracy and the advancement of fundamental social transformation?
- What are the existing and potential threats to freedom of expression and of the media?
- What mechanisms, programmes and campaigns need to be undertaken to ensure that ever greater numbers of South Africans, particularly the poor and working class, are able to exercise their right to freedom of expression and impact more decisively on the national discourse?
- What does the democratic movement need to do to ensure that within a free and diverse media the progressive political and ideological perspectives supported by the majority of South Africans achieve prominence?
- Within the context of the Constitutional right of freedom of expression, and the challenge of extending the practice of that right to all South Africans, what are the respective responsibilities and functions of the democratic government, the commercial media sector, civil society and the structures of the ANC?