



# RIGHT2KNOW

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## **R2K Statement on Press Freedom Day 2012: We need more media, not less!**

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The Right2Know Campaign aims to ensure everyone living in South Africa is free to access and to share information. This vision will never be realised without a strong, critical, well-funded media sector, that is free from government and corporate control.

Thursday 3 May 2012 – the 19th commendation of the United Nations’ Press Freedom Day – is an opportunity to reflect on the ongoing struggle to realise that vision.

Despite savage cost-cutting in the newsroom that has left fewer journalists carrying a greater workload and greatly strengthened the hand of spin doctors in the public and private sector, critical investigative journalism continues to exist in South Africa. A broad popular coalition has mobilised against legislative threats such as the Secrecy Bill, and the judiciary holds strong against attacks on journalistic independence. Yet we cannot claim to live in a society in which the right to access and share information through the media is realised by all.

Media are a public good – a constitutional right that is the key to the realisation and defence of other rights. If media consumption and production opportunities remain in the grip of monopolies, they will continue to be enjoyed disproportionately by the economically powerful. In a country with such high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, appropriate interventions may be necessary to counter market forces that contribute to this phenomenon. We should not have to choose between media beholden to political interests and media that are beholden to corporate interests. We need more media, not less; more voices, not fewer.

### **Print Media**

Media freedom and diversity are two sides of the same coin. Without media freedom the media would become the voice of the government, without a diversity of ownership and economic models (non-commercial and commercial) the media would be the voice of an economic elite.

In recent years the print media has come under attack from elements of the ruling party wanting to introduce statutory regulation via a Media Appeals Tribunal accountable to Parliament. In this context the Right2Know Campaign welcomes the final report released by the Press Freedom Commission (PFC) on 25 April 2012.

While many of the details need to be debated further, the PFC recommendations may help strengthen our non-statutory regulatory system. We hope that the ANC General Secretary’s initial welcoming of the PFC recommendations is a sign that the ruling party will abandon its call for statutory regulation of the print media. The Right2Know was also glad that the Press Freedom Commission acknowledged that the issue of “media

transformation” (including ownership, content, and staffing) needs to be addressed to ensure print media credibility. The PFC’s recommendations include considerations for content diversification, skills development and training, a media charter and support for community newspapers.

In this regard the Right2Know Campaign will be engaging Parliament’s ongoing Media Transformation Indaba aimed at addressing the state of transformation in the media, including the high concentration of ownership in the commercial media. We will continue to argue that the definition of transformation must move beyond race and gender profiles in ownership. Transformation must ensure that the media reflect society (including working-class communities) at the levels of ownership, staff and product.

## **Television and Radio**

While major strides have been made since 1994 in terms of the transformation of broadcasting – we now have a three-tier broadcasting system consisting of public, community and commercial media – significant work still needs to be done. The public media tier (the SABC) has been rocked by governance and financial crises since late 2007. The community media sector has been plagued by governance problems and systemic under-funding. The commercial media sector is dominated by a few major players, making it difficult for new players to enter the market. Our once vigilant regulator, the Independent Communications Regulator of South Africa (ICASA), has failed to regulate and monitor broadcasters’ license conditions, and allowed our public broadcaster in the main to serve up a diet of repeats and cheap foreign content.

Given these challenges we welcome the Department of Communications ICT policy review process, which includes a broadcasting policy review. The review includes a Green Paper / White Paper process leading to the tabling of new legislation. We believe that it is both urgent and important to craft a new ICT vision for the country that prioritises vibrant, diverse, citizen-empowering local content.

## **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)**

The internet and digital technologies are changing the way media is produced and consumed. In the past decade South Africa has enjoyed blossoming mobile phone networks and Internet access, creating new opportunities to produce and share knowledge, new mechanisms for exercising the right to know.

However, there are a number of limitations and threats to the democratising potential of these technologies. Most notably we have an effective duopoly of mobile phone companies, whose profiteering make mobile internet access too expensive for the majority of people who use prepaid airtime and data. A system of differentiated airtime and data costs have created a situation of upward redistribution, in that poor users cross subsidise rich users.

We are encouraged by the recently published ANC discussion document on communications that call for a National ICT Policy to “define ICTs as a basic utility, similar to water and electricity.” The Right2Know is committed to campaigning for free basic and affordable airtime and data ensuring that phone penetration does not merely create a mirage of connectivity, but rather enables ordinary South Africans to become producers and consumers of media on more equal terms.

As with broadcasting, much will depend on the ability of the Ministry of Communications to introduce a transformative policy and ICASA to establish the independence to regulate such a policy.

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