



# RIGHT2KNOW

1st Floor, Community House, 41 Salt River Rd, Salt River, Cape Town  
Tel: 021 447 1000      admin@r2k.org.za      www.r2k.org.za

18 October 2014

Dr Iqbal Surve

Chairperson

Independent Newspapers

## **Memorandum demanding editorial independence & print media transformation**

The right to communicate free of fear of favour forms the bedrock of our democracy. Indeed it was Mandela himself who said “A critical, independent and investigative press is the life blood of any democracy. It must have sufficient independence from vested interests to be bold and inquiring without fear or favour.”<sup>1</sup> We face a critical time as a nation, with an ever increasing inequality gap, restlessness among those denied access to basic services and amenities, and important debates and tensions on the meaning and the nature of media transformation and diversity, 20 years into our democracy.

In a country as diverse as ours, multiple versions of truth will contest for their expression, often in tense and uncomfortable interactions. It is a marker of maturity both individually and as a society to allow for freedom for expression of multiple voices. It is a freedom which is written into the foundations of our constitutional democracy and embodied through the editorial freedom of the press.

These are hard won freedoms.

In a country such as ours, which has a history of suppression, we draw on the hard won battles of the past, not as a re-engineering of the past to serve new purposes, but to serve as instructive and as a marker of a standard of what we desire to be as a nation. As you would be well aware, today, 37 years ago on a Wednesday in 1977, the apartheid government, known for its paranoid and vicious dislike of free, independent and critical voices, arrested, detained and banned Black Consciousness Movement aligned activists and 18 organisations involved in anti-apartheid activism. Two newspaper publications were also shut down on this day, for similar reasons: The World and the Weekend World both edited by the courageous and skilled editor Percy Qoboza, who was able to transform the papers from their entertainment driven content, to one which would challenge and confront the then government, and give voice to the aims of the BCM. For his courageous stance,

---

<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela “*Nelson Mandela’s address to the International Press Institute Congress , 14 February 1994, Cape Town*”  
<<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3651>>

and daring to fulfil the purpose of the media as a means to speak truth to power, Qoboza would lose his freedom.

For democracy to endure, and for people to have access to information which will accurately reflect issues of critical importance of the day, our journalists need to be encouraged particularly by the owners of the newspaper groups, to cover the stories that really matter to people, and thereby give meaning to the right to communicate. Good journalists dig for information, confirm facts, and try to hold those in power to account. Public trust in news sources is the other side of the same coin of the right to communicate.

### **On managerial interference in editorial independence**

We remind you that the biggest asset of any newspaper is its credibility and the owners should recognise the value of public trust which can be eroded with serious repercussions, if editorial interference for narrow, selfish interests is suspected.

Our activism today, under the umbrella of the R2K which represents a diversity of voice stirred in solidarity on the need to fiercely guard and advocate for the right to communicate.

We support of the repatriation of the Independent Newspapers Group asset to South Africa and the fact that it is a black owned media house that it has committed to changing the commercial print industry in many ways.

However we are gravely concerned that when you fired the editor of the Cape Times, Alide Dasnois, for publishing reports that according to the Public Protector another company you own (Sekunjalo Marine Services Consortium) was involved in Tender irregularities.

Your firing of an editor and threatening to sue her and the reporter is a grave threat to the editorial independence of the Cape Times and press freedom at large.

Independent Newspapers Group has violated the principle of editorial freedom and lost public trust through its actions, which to date remain unresolved.

We remind you as a member of the Press Council of South Africa that Section 3.1 of the SA Press Code states that “the press shall not allow commercial, political, personal or other non-professional considerations to influence or slant reporting”

Constitutionally, Section 16 provides for press freedom, with editorial independence being a cornerstone of this provision. Section 9(2) and Section 15 unfair discrimination, and the right to publish material driven by the dictates of conscience

Various international treaties and conventions, of which South Africa is a party, make further provision for such editorial freedom. The African Commission on Human and People’s Rights( Article 8) specifically makes a provision for media owners to uphold editorial independence and ensure content from undue influence of commercial

We call on Independent Newspapers to honour these hard won freedoms and respect our current constitutional democracy and other African and International conventions and treaties.

We further note than when you assumed ownership of the Independent Newspapers you promised to recapitalise the company and invest in your journalists and newsrooms. To date these have been

empty words. Rather than increasing the number of journalists you have further downsized - increasing the workload and undermining the quality of reporting.

When you assumed ownership you promised a Editorial Charter that would regulate the relationship between managers and journalists. more than 10 months later you have failed to deliver on this promise.

### **Concentration of Media Ownership**

Right2Know has consistently argued that 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.

Independent Newspapers - together with Naspers/Media24, Caxton and Times Media Limited - for part of a print media cartel that together control over 80% of all circulation in South Africa.

Community and small independent newspapers cannot grow, because members of your cartel either buy them up or engage in corporate bullying that puts local independent media out of business.

South Africa needs a media transformation that goes beyond changing the race and gender of the people sitting on the boards and staffing the dominant corporations. Transformation must ensure that the media reflect society (especially the majority working-class and poor) at the levels of ownership, staff and product.

It is only by extending access to the ownership and control of media production that we will ensure media freedom exists as a right in South Africa and not a privilege concentrated in the hands of a few who essentially share the same social and economic interests.

Many democracies around the world have passed laws to limit the size of media companies and ensure appropriate public funding. These laws are not understood as an attack on media freedom, but rather a democratic effort to protect the media from corporate control.

We have called on Parliament to revive their stalled Media Transformation Indaba and explore anti-trust and public funding options to roll back the media monopolies and create an enabling environment for a diverse media.

Independent Newspapers - with its professed commitment to media transformation - must support this call and cooperate fully with the Parliamentary process.

### **In summary:**

The Right2Know campaign calls on Independent Newspapers to:

1. Assure the public of its commitment to independent journalism by developing an Editorial Charter to be drafted by people and institutions entirely independent of the owners of the Independent Newspapers.

2. Ensure editorial integrity through establishing an Editorial Advisory Board, which includes members of citizens groups. A commitment you previously made but have not honored.
3. Ensure journalists are capacitated to focus on their work, through fair remuneration and sufficient number of staff.
4. Engage fully in a Parliamentary exploration of regulatory means to limit concentration of media ownership and ensure media transformation and diversity.

Your commitment to an open, just and accountable democratic society, rests on the extent to which your actions as a media owner uphold the values of press freedom by ensuring journalist and editors can conduct their work, free from undue editorial interference and sanction, and are provided with the necessary resources to carry out their work.

We look forward to your response no later than 30 October 2014.

<b><u>Delivered:</u></b>	<b><u>Received:</u></b>
Signed:	Signed:
Ghalib Galant, R2K WC Coordinator	Name:
Right2Know Campaign	Independent Newspapers