



RIGHT2KNOW

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Memorandum demanding print media transformation & editorial independence

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.”¹ 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, and daring to fulfil the purpose of the media as a means to speak truth to power, Qoboza would lose his freedom.

¹ 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>>

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.

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.

Naspers/Media24 - together with Independent Newspapers, Caxton and Times Media Limited - form part of a print media cartel that together control over 80% of all circulation in South Africa. Naspers/Media24 controls over 40% of circulation.

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.

We call on you to support this call and cooperate fully with the Parliamentary process.

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 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 Naspers/Media24 to honour these hard won freedoms and respect our current constitutional democracy and other African and International conventions and treaties.

The Right2Know campaign calls on Naspers/Media24 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 Naspers/Media24.
2. Ensure editorial integrity through establishing an Editorial Advisory Board, which includes members of citizens groups.
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.

<u>Delivered:</u>	<u>Received:</u>
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