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MAKING MEDIA HISTORY

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Jeremy: In the special broadcast today in association with the Media Monitoring Project and the Open Society Foundation, we examine our media heritage, moments to be proud of and also to maintain and to hold on to that heritage.

Two special guests today Joe Tholole of the South African Press Ombudsman as well as William Bird who is the Director of the Media Monitoring Project they are sitting in Johannesburg with me. And throughout the course of this hour we are going to be joined by a number of key South African media players hopefully with some recollections of top media moments.

Before we get there and before we unpack the debate of the discussion for you, let's just set the scene first with this audio montage from SABC archives.

[Audio montage]

Well politics, entertainment, sports and key media moments in South Africa. Joe Tholole let me start with you a very good morning to you. You listened to that, anything you would like to throw into that. What was your key media moment?

Joe: My key media moment was in fact 1996 when the new constitution was adopted and it gave us media freedom and freedom of expression. That for me was the key media moment for this country.

Jeremy: William Bird you spend all day doing this kind of thing. Do you have a key media moment?

William: I don't actually have one key media moment. We've been so busy considering looking at all these various media moments that it's just fascinating to see our history in terms of how many of our key media moments coincide with key historical moments which is what we try and do in that montage getting some of those key historic moments to combine with some of the key media moments.

So like the Hansie Cronje King commission, that was one of the first commissions of that kind that was broadcast live and some of the other issues that are similar to that.

Jeremy: Joe do we have a media heritage in this country that can be justifiably proud?

Joe: We certainly have. In fact while we were listening to the montage I was wondering, there are two elements to this question. One is the stories that were actually covered and then the other is what was happening in the media. I think those are parallel but very tight together.

Jeremy: William Bird what about you?

William: Well I think if you look at media heritage in terms of traditions that have been passed down on to people I think there are certain things that we can be proud of and certain things that I think we have to try and improve on substantially.

I think one of the things that typified what we tend to report on is that people would be told particular elements they wouldn't necessarily have things explained to them.

And that was very much a strategy of apartheid star reporting where they would just tell you five people were killed in a township today or something happened and they wouldn't explain to you the context to that or why things happened. And that is a particularly difficult tradition to try and change because instead of telling people the news you start explaining the news to the people and one has a very different effect on the other because telling people news has a particular perspective and explaining the news to people opens things up for them to make up their own minds about events.

Jeremy: Joe we've become better as a broad media church in giving the context that William Bird speaks about.

Joe: There are times that I think we've done ourselves proud but there are moments where we've fallen on our faces. For example if you remember somebody like [06:26] who went into prison, got himself arrested came out and wrote stories about conditions in prison. As a result of that coverage, the prisons act was passed which forbade journalists from covering what was happening in prisons.

The same thing happened when he got himself arrested and went and worked on a potato farm in [06:46] came back and wrote a horrific story but again it led to more banning of what journalist could or couldn't do. But we have had these moments where we actually challenged the system and the results were fantastic.

Jeremy: Are we continuing to do that? It is all about fearless reporting, fine investigative journalism. Do you think that we continue to push that envelope or more driven by profit and other motives perhaps?

Joe: What is happening now is that we are in a stage where we are examining our values as journalists as well as a society and this is where the tests are coming in. People moving in too fast, moving in too slowly and we have this uncertainty. But it is new territory and people are trying to test it.

Jeremy: And what was this uncertainty mean for journalists do you think?

Joe: In some senses we get flack from the public who believe that we are out to get them. But at other levels people are saying that we are not doing a thorough enough job. Investigating, getting things done in the way old journalists used to do. We need another [07:55]

Jeremy: Is it all about big personalities?

Joe: It is not personalities; it is the ideas that drive these people. When [08:04] took over as the editor of the World, he took over a publication where sports was on the front cover. Where the mixture was crime, sex and sports and he transformed it and turned the World into the voice of the voiceless. And as I said for me that was another very key media moment when [08:25] became the editor of the World.

Jeremy: We are looking then at the 60's and the 70's Joe. Was that the golden era of South African journalism?

Joe: I would say yes because the terrain was clearly defined. You are either for apartheid or against it. You either had a cause to fight or you stayed out of journalism. Now the story is more complex it requires much more subtlety and I don't think we have the skills to deal with these very subtle stories that are happening in the country.

Jeremy: William Bird that is a very interesting point then, a lack of cause. Does that make for poorer journalism in 2007?

William: Well it certainly means there is often a lack of a clear news agenda, and it's what the Media Monitoring Project pushes for all the time is i think that we need to be adopting a news agenda that's progressive that promotes open discussions and debates and one that promotes the Human Rights of all people. Including obviously the right of freedom of expression I think very often at the moment there is a sense that freedom of expression somehow stands outside of all the other fundamental human rights where is of course integral to all of our human rights and they are all interdependent.

Jeremy: But journalist and editors will say to you William that we strive to do that on a daily basis to the best of our abilities.

William: Some of them do and some of them perhaps don't. I think when you open the xenophobic that clearly is challenging certain ideas about your practice as well as your ability to exist and contribute to South Africa.

Jeremy: What's your view Joe, has that landscape William refers to become patchier?

Joe: As I said patchy because we were still experimenting. Everybody is experimenting trying to find out what the right cause is. But I still go back to the idea that any good journalism around the world is journalism that is fighting a cause. If it isn't then it's not worth the paper it is written on.

Jeremy: What do you think the cause is right now?

Joe: I've got my own personal beliefs. I believe that our responsibility today as journalists is to hold up the 1996 constitution and the values that are contained in it and remind South Africans of their commitments in 1996. And at the same time try and hold everybody accountable for making that reason come true.

Jeremy: What do you think the cause is William?

William: Pretty much I have to agree with him, I don't have my jacket with me but otherwise everywhere I go I carry a copy of our constitution with me because those are the values that I think we should be striving to make our new tradition so that in 10 years time when we host this programme again we can say what our media legacy is now, what our media traditions are now and we can say it is our constitution values.

Jeremy: And in 10 years we'll have as much grey hair as [11:05] Our special media conference today on media at SAFm, we are looking at media heritage, what it is and how we continue to build on it, moments to be proud of and how to maintain and build the heritage.

We are on the line now to Ryland Fisher editor of the Cape Times. Ryland a very good morning to you and welcome. What stands out in your memory as we look back and try and establish what the media heritage of South Africa is, any special memories?

Ryland: If one were to talk about defining media moments maybe we spoke about [11:37] because there are so many. Key moments in the media are inclusively great political moments but reflecting on history and reflecting on media we can think of information scandals [11:51] I can think of the release of Nelson Mandela or the first democratic elections etc.

However for me the key media moments in my own career must be the brutal killing of the [12:04] on the 4th of August 1996. [12:08] witnessed this killing and the graphic pictures [12:18] giving evidence and giving documents to the police and helping the police with the investigations [12:30] this act. So that's an incident that has a profound impact not only on the [12:38]

Jeremy: Ryland thank you very much for your contribution, former editor of the Cape Times. Janet Smith is the executive editor of the Saturday Star, Janet good morning to you.

Janet: Hi, how are you doing?

Jeremy: Well thank you and thank you so much for joining us today. What stands out in your mind?

Janet: You know I thought about it quite a lot and I think the story that really made an impact on me and it was actually published before I became a journalist in the late 1989 [13:09] And the headline being [13:15] and that began a series of phenomenal stories that emerged across the media and I think that it created a sense of bravery and it might have not existed before in the mainstream media.

[13:31] media freedom being broadcasted on radio [13:37], radio Luanda, radio Lusaka, radio Madagascar across the continent. Very brave journalists during [13:44] and radio freedom during those days and those of us who were quite a lot younger that might have had [13:49] in different ways to that were quite inspired.

Jeremy: Janet thank you very much for joining us today, executive editor of the Saturday Star. In the line to us as we continue to dive into the subject Allister Sparks editor of the Run Daily Mail. He is now a well know columnist and former editor of news at the SABC. Allister Sparks a very good morning to you. Joe Thololoe was talking earlier about good journalism having to be defined by a cause. Do you agree with him?

Allister: Well I didn't hear that part of it Jeremy and I'm not quite sure what he means by that but I think good journalism has to be first of all fair, balanced and sometimes it can be defined by cause I don't think it necessary has to be.

Jeremy: What about the state of journalism right now. I also asked Joe when the golden era of South African journalism was. Has it passed?

Allister: Yes I think journalism has gone into a depth, it has recovered and I think the print media is doing quite well at the moment. It's got some excellent editors, it's got some courageous journalists but I think that the real problem is that is it an over traded industry and that newsrooms are under staffed therefore individual journalists are a to junior and b to overworked to do a job as thoroughly as they are ought to do.

Jeremy: What about the broadcast media?

Allister: I think broadcast is in a deplorable stage.

Jeremy: And how do we get that right then Allister Sparks, what needs to change?

Allister: Well it's got to change at the SABC Jeremy. It's got to change with the manner that the board is selected and through that of course the manner with which the chief executive is selected. At the moment you've got a chief executive who is also the editor in chief but he is not a journalist and he has no journalistic experience whatsoever and a panel of politicians chooses the board.

Jeremy: And what is the consequence of that Allister?

Allister: The consequence is right there, we hear it every morning it is deteriorating quality, it's ongoing squabbles and it's loss of public confidence in the public broadcaster. So there is no benchmark really for the private broadcasters to rise to.

Jeremy: Just in terms of your key media moments, you've been around at some very important junctures of South African history, Allister Sparks what stands out for you?

Allister: My own person key moments of course I think was the Run Daily Mail exposure of the information scandal for which effectively brought down the force of the government [16:05] succeeding him, introduced [16:09] for all his faults and they were many, did try to bring reforms to apartheid and as [16:18] once noted, there is no moment more dangerous for an evil government when it tries to reform it's ways.

That's the beginning of the end; I think that's what we saw with [16:30] when he tried to start amending communism. The moment to try to fix a bad system one thing leads to another, a chain of reaction of unintended consequences and the whole thing collapses. So that for me was the high point.

Jeremy: Lets go back to the information scandal at the time when you were managing the process. How much courage did you need, how difficult was it to handle the line?

Allister: It was an extremely difficult and worrying time. The investigation lasted two years, I had a wonderful investigative team working on the story that we had initially a single source who told us an enormous amount of information, that source still lives so I keep the identity of the individual still secret. And I made a ruling and I thought that since we won't be able to prove any of the allegations in the court of law we had to have collaborative information.

So we were preparing for the court case as we were preparing the story and that meant that the investigation went on for two years before we very suddenly and with the help of the Sunday Express begun getting the confirmation we needed and disgorged it all at once. I believe had we chipped it out piecemeal the paper would have been closed. As it happens we were able to drop a nuclear bomb, which detonated with such force that there was no countering it.

But it was very anxious; it was very tough for the investigators because they worked for two years without publishing it. And I had them prepare memos for me which I kept in volumes partly just to ensure that there was a memory bank and secondly to have them writing something because they went through tremendous frustrations.

Jeremy: How much pressure did you come under from your owners?

Allister: Well for my four-year editorship I was under Run Daily Mail i was in court six times, we had the [18:16] commission trying to shut down our investigations. We had huge threats; we went to conviction and then got that overturned on a second appeal. That kind of thing, I mean it is a very nerve wrecking business. Running that sort of journalism is and takes a huge toll on the nerve and I didn't always have the backing of my own proprietors in the running of the Run Daily Mail.

They were objecting that it was acquiring a lot of black readers and not enough white readers, put pressure on me to change the paper which I declined to do so I got fired, so all that adds to an accumulation of issues which were quite server.

Jeremy: Having said that Allister Sparks I'm sure you loved every moment of it.

Allister: Well yes and no. It took a tremendous toll on my family life; it took a tremendous toll on my health. I do believe when I left I was unemployable in the South African media after being fired from that job and I became a foreign correspondence working for major publications such as the Washington Post, The Observer in London, The [19:22], The Economist, other papers and I today regard that as the high point of my career I was able to function as a free journalist and I regarded myself as not being restricted by censorship laws.

Jeremy: And Allister Sparks very quickly and just a final question to you and a little earlier Joe Thololoe was talking about media personalities, media heroes and he was referring to the late Percy [19:48]. Who stands out in your mind?

Allister: One stands of head and shoulders above all and that was [19:52] the first editor of the Run Daily Mail who turned it from a rather tartly, right winged newspaper to a real [20:02] breaking pioneer on many fronts and inspired a whole slue of young journalists of whom I was one. Raymond Louw, Ricks Gibson, myself and [20:14] all of who went on to do other things in other parts of the media. He was a giant, he was a reclusive man but an unsung giant of journalism stands out I think historically is the most remarkable of all but there has never been any real recognition of what he did.

Jeremy: Continuing with our broadcast today with the Media Monitoring Project and also the Open Society Foundation as we examine South Africa's media heritage. We'll hear from our guests in just a moment but lets just relive some of those key moments once again.

[Audio Montage]

Jeremy: Key media moments in South Africa's recent history. I wonder how many of those you recognise, Charlize Theron winning the Oscar, F W De Klerk unbanning the ANC, The PAC and the SACP, [] remembering the summiting of the Mount Everest, Steve Biko, Sepp Blatter, Desmond Tutu opening the first TRC public hearings, 1995 Rugby World Cup win, Mark Shuttleworth and the last Thabo Mbeki with the famous I am an African speech.

TJ Lennon independent newspaper photographer welcome and good morning to you. Do you have a key media moment that you can share with us?

TJ: Hello Jeremy it is very difficult to choose one moment but I think the most dramatic moment for me was when the AWD invaded [03:31] Botswana and there was an incident where two AWD men were on the ground and the [03:58] Botswanan police opened fire on the two of them and that was a dramatic moment in the sense [04:05] holding the country to ransom [04:10] images of that suddenly got dispelled in that moment.

Jeremy: How tough was getting a photograph like that one?

TJ: Jeremy I think it reflects very much the challenge [04:23] you have to be close. There is no getting away from putting yourself in a situation to get a photograph. There can never be the distance that one would have in any other media forms, you have to be as close as possible even in a violent situation as that was. And those couple of days were quite dangerous but so were many others and so photographers put themselves under a lot of danger and yes it was kind of a dangerous situation but that's the job.

Jeremy: TJ Lennon thank you very much for joining us. Joyce [04:59] thank you very much for joining us, firstly a very good morning to you and welcome. Are you going to allow me to call you a media veteran? I suppose you've earned your strips.

Joyce: Yes you are allowed.

Jeremy: Do you have something that stands out in your mind?

Joyce: I do have something that stands out in mind. I remember when I was working for the Run Daily Mail under the editorship of Lawrence [05:22] and Raymond Louw. I was sent to cover the [05:25] removal in Natal and I was also working with Jill [05:30]. I don't know where she is now but she was a very good investigative journalist at the time and when we were at the [05:40] we saw these women who had been dumped in a open veld by security police and some of them were giving birth right there on the veld.

This prompted me to come back to Johannesburg to a friend of mine who was a priest, Ian Thompson and I said to him that we needed to organise a group of doctors to go to [06:07] and attend to these women. From journalism I became a social activist because one had a consciousness. Later on a book was written by Cosmos Desmond he was a Roman Catholic priest and the book was entitled discarded people and in that book the medical report was written by my husband and myself, it is one of the [06:37] in that book but we are not identified in that book for fear of what the security police would do.

Another [06:46] to me in journalism was after the [06:49] massacre in Maputo. I was working for radio Mozambique and I wrote an article to describe how the Mozambican and South African communities felt after the killings of the young men and women and that article was published in [07:09]. When I heard on the radio earlier on when Janet Smith phoned to refer to the [07:16] journalist, I felt like I was one of those journalists working when we were outside the country, still concentrating on the issues of apartheid military power.

The third one was not much about the apartheid military power, it was about the [07:35] massacre in [07:37]. My husband was working at a local hospital and patients were being sent there, some were old men and women and some young men who had been brutally beaten by security forces. So he couldn't stand it and I decided to work with him again.

We researched and did reports and sent it to NGO's, and at that time my editor was [08:06], I spoke to him the other day when he was on your show and I was just more or less reminding him that although he was saying The Chronicle

newspaper didn't publish anything some of us did as journalists because we felt we were committed to human rights. That is why I concur with Joe when he said even today as journalist it depends on what aspect you've had in terms of humanity.

Jeremy: Do you agree with Joe that good journalism has to have a cause?

Joyce: I do agree with him because there is no doubt that the economic systems of the world are inadequate; there is market failure in economics. So as journalists we have to interrogate, maybe it is a strong word for journalism, you have to examine issues of the economy, how it affects it's people.

Jeremy: There is nothing wrong with the word interrogate. Isn't that what we are supposed to do Joe interrogate to the best of our ability?

Joe: Except it [09:09].

Jeremy: Point well taken. Joyce very quickly Allister Sparks if you were listening to him earlier to him earlier. I said to him the golden age of journalism, the 60's, 70's and maybe the early 80's and I asked him if that has now passed. Do you think the golden age of journalism in this country has passed or do you have confidence in it's future?

Joyce: I do have confidence in the future of journalism because the democratic stage which was formed has got very many challenges of the legacy of the old, the continuity of the society as such then changed. That's where I have confidence that if we have journalists who are thinkers, then they have to think why such and such a thing happened and then follow it up with investigative journalism.

Jeremy: [10:04] I get my next guest to say a few words as well. [10:10] a very good morning to you from the Media Development and Diversity Agency. Before I talk about the state of journalism and the heritage, have you brought in a well-documented list of memories like Joyce has done?

[Name] Good morning Jeremy, there is quite a number of great memories that one can think of but just to list a few, I remember the power expressed by communities during those dark days when we were able to march to the SABC offices and expressed our views about what we didn't like about the SABC as a propaganda machinery for the national party. And I remember the times when SABC was headed by [10:53] and [10:55] and we went further to initiate our own means of communication and I was part of initiating the first community radio in South Africa, Bush Radio.

We tried so many times to get permission to broadcast but then the minister responsible for broadcasting and interestingly the Home Affairs refused us so many times and we decided to go to with it irrespective if they allow us to do it. And during our first broadcast, they came and confiscated all our broadcast equipment.

That leads me to the great moments that made a mark in my life going back to laws that were elected by the transitional government like the independent broadcasting authority act and the interim commission which laid the foundation for the noble principles and values that are enshrined now in our constitution in 1996 as Joe was talking about.

Wherein you now recognise in the broadcasting front that there is space for all categories and types of public broadcasting, commercial broadcaster and the community broadcasters. And if you look now at what we have space for in broadcasting, we have a huge space of broadcasting services, others empowering communities to own and control and serve their own communities using their own languages.

And I think that remarkable change as a result of enabling environment created by the policy and legislative changes that took place as far back as 1993 and I think we should be proud of these achievements and begin to strengthen and deepen our democracy. And lastly, the creation of our society of an agency that is setup to support and encourage and promote media development and diversity.

Jeremy: A special broadcast today in association with the Media Monitoring Project and The Open Society Foundation as on this Heritage weekend we examine our media heritage, moments to be proud of and how to build and maintain the heritage.

William Bird let's end the programme with that last phrase if we can, maintaining, building the heritage. What do we need to do?

William: Well I think the first thing would be to try and encourage people as we all have been talking about the importance of our constitutional values and the fundamentals of our human rights. I think we are at a particularly interesting time now in South Africa which is media and policy environment where we seeing all kinds of potential shifts some threats from different quarters and I think it is an opportunity for us to reinforce our legacy now which is one of freedom which is one that promotes rights to dignity and equality in terms of gender, in terms of children, in terms of HIV, in terms of all of that kinds of things that we need to continue to build our country to make sure like I said earlier in 10 years time when we have this programme again we can say these are our human rights values that were here since 1996.

Jeremy: Joe is William right when he talks about the environment has become more threatening do you think?

Joe: I don't consider it threatening at this point. It is just that people are experimenting; people are trying out new things, people debating issues. And I think that is the flux that we are getting at this point in time. But ultimately it is going to settle at a point where we will be guided by the constitution that guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

Jeremy: Joyce what about you?

Joyce: Well I actually feel the same as my two colleagues were saying. I think we as South Africans should again reclaim our patriotism; I use that word as we take

it for a stance CODESA, the birth of a new South Africa. In the media we need to do that, I sometimes feel that when journalists who worked outside the country came back, there wasn't really a deliberate tactic to integrate those journalists and the ones who were in South Africa. We sort of saw each other as enemies, I think we need to cement that relationship because there is a lot of experience, skills and knowledge with them and move journalism forward.

Jeremy: [15:11] what about you?

[Name] I agree with Joyce, Joe and William. I think we can't say we are at crisis point, indeed this course is robust and vibrant and I think it is good for our democracy. There is no one who wanted to change the views enshrined in our constitution or in our broadcasting laws, so there is no threat to that. The Legislative foundation is there; there is condensation of ideas in terms of whether there is challenge to the space that has been created. But I think we need to focus our energy in terms of building the achievements that we have, invest in skills, prepare ourselves for the new landscapes where you have converges of technologies, they demand a lot of creativity and innovation, they demand that we do not see ourselves in the eyes of the past and we begin to see if we can contest in this global world.

Can we produce information, can we empower all our communities, can we have all our languages in the newspapers, on the broadcast fronts, on the television and radio so that everyone feels like they have access to the media in our country as all of us in Johannesburg but wherever one is in terms of the geography of the country. But I think the key question is to ensure that the ownership and control is diversified. I think that to me is a difficult question.

Jeremy: That's where we are going to leave it and my thanks to all the panel members today for a fascinating discussion on this heritage day weekend, our programme today in association with The Media Monitoring Project and The Open Society Foundation.