World Press Freedom Day

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Limiting Press Freedom
Often the celebration of World Press Freedom Day on the 3rd of May tends to focus on highlighting the media’s struggle for independence and freedom of expression. Press freedom and the laws governing the media have been hotly debated in a number of Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, including Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Botswana. While the media laws in Zimbabwe and Swaziland have already been implemented, a controversial Mass Media Communications Bill was proposed in Botswana in 2001. The Bill sought to place both journalists and print media under the control of the state directly through the Minister of Communications. Fortunately, plans for the enactment of the restrictive Bill were abandoned as a result of vigorous protests against the Bill from the media.

Commercial Pressure Building
In South Africa, press freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, which states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media” (Bill of Rights Clause 16(1)(a)), but the recent assault of journalists following an investigative journalism programme (Beeld, 22/4/2005, p. 6), and the growing hold of advertisers on editorial policies, remain challenges faced by the South African media. Media expert, Professor Anton Harber, of the University of the Witwatersrand’s Department of Journalism and Media Studies, noted that the credibility and independence of the media is currently under threat:

The proliferation of media outlets has made the selling of advertising more competitive...owners of mass media...have to sell their souls to attract advertising, so intense is the competition. The power has shifted from the publisher who controls the outlet, to the advertiser who funds it (Business Day, 20/04/2005, p.15).

The South African media need to develop convincing strategies to prevent further commercial infringements on their editorial policies.
Adding Real Value

While the SADC media face a number of challenges, recent awards that celebrate excellence in journalism highlighted some of the positive work and the value of the media as a source of information. In 2005, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) observed some particularly good examples of human rights reporting in a range of South African print and broadcast media. *The Star* ran an article on the day following International Women’s Day, which described the violation of women’s rights. “Women’s Day worthless as dust to some workers” (*The Star*, 9/03/2005, p. 3) highlighted the plight of women who worked for the Durban Roodepoort Deep Gold mine: “Priscilla Majola, a single mother-of-three, was sorting and lugging - by hand - huge chunks of granite”. The article detailed the manual labour that the women perform daily without any protective clothing, the lack of proper health facilities available, the appalling working conditions, and how little they get paid for their work. The article was unusual in its focus on a women’s workforce and the medium is to be commended for raising the issue of the violation of the basic human rights of the women concerned. *The Star* ran a follow-up article the following week (16/03/2005, p. 3), which noted that the mine had closed down due to the “bad publicity” it had received after the first report was published.

The *City Press* is to be commended for running two articles in the same edition that addressed labour rights and children’s rights. “Retail workers’ rip-off” (*City Press*, 17/4/2005, p. 1) highlighted the poor wages that casual workers get paid by major retail supermarkets across South Africa, while “Children learn lessons of suffering” (*City Press*, 17/4/2005, p. 26) was a full-page feature on the poor conditions under which many children in KwaZulu-Natal attend school.

Previous research by the MMP in its Empowering Children & Media project found that children are often unlawfully identified in stories about criminal procedures. *The Citizen* led with the story “Killer Kids” (22/4/2005, p. 1), which was about three children who stabbed a “slightly mentally handicapped” man to death. While the use of the term “slightly mentally handicapped” is problematic (as it suggests the people with disabilities are passive (for further details refer to the Disabled People of South Africa’s pocket guide)), the children involved in the crime were not identified in any way. Protecting the identity of children in criminal cases not only ensures compliance with the law but also serves to protect the best interests of the child. As such stories that do so are to be commended. *The Citizen* is to be commended for reporting this story in such a way that the identities of the children concerned remained protected. On the same day, *The Citizen* also carried an awareness article about the use of cellular telephones to access pornographic messages. The article highlighted the difficulties of monitoring and prohibiting children’s access to these types of messages.
Positive articles that focused on people living with disabilities were featured in the *Beeld* and *The Star*. The *Beeld* article, “In Johan se skoene” (In Johan’s shoes) focused on the life of a man who became physically disabled after he was involved in a car accident (6/4/2005, p. 15). The journalist used a positive discourse in the description of Johan’s everyday challenges, and did not represent him as a helpless victim, but rather as able to live a full and complete life, with his disabilities. *The Star* article, “A ‘sparkling jewel’ in a difficult world” (22/4/2005, p. 8) profiled Julia Moloi, a young woman who founded a magazine entitled *We are Capable*, which “aims to change people’s mindsets about disabled people and earn disabled people respect”. The article explained that while Julia was born with cerebral palsy, she is committed to living her life positively, and to encouraging other people living with disabilities to accept themselves: “I pray and say, ‘God, I’m the best masterpiece you’ve created’”.

All of these articles give voice to sectors of society that are usually neglected, and underrepresented and raise issues that are often marginalised by the mainstream media. Previous monitoring by the MMP reveals that the media tends to represent women, children, and people with disabilities as helpless victims who rely on the support of others in order to survive or live “normal” lives. Another positive aspect of these articles is that unlike most news stories, these stories were not event-based, but stemmed from the journalists’ own initiatives.

Through the investigative journalism of the current affairs and documentary programming, television media has played a major role in highlighting some of the major challenges facing the upholding of children rights. In March, SABC3’s Special Assignment played a significant role in highlighting the abuse of girl children in a child sex ring in the Western Cape, where a high-ranking public official was involved. e-tv’s 3rd Degree (12/4/2005) played its role as media watchdog by highlighting some of the issues that street children face, the aid that non-governmental organisations provide to these children, and the role that government plays in providing for the poor and vulnerable members of South African society. Both television channels are to be commended for making the effort to address some of the challenges faced by marginalised groups, and using their freedom of expression to give voice to these marginalised members of the community.

**Abusing Press Freedom**

All of these examples of positive journalism are undermined by some of the reports that are featured in the *Daily Sun*. While it is expected of tabloids to be flashy, graphic, and dramatic, in many instances, such reports tend to perpetuate existing stereotypes. The tabloids, like any other medium, have the right to freedom of expression, but that right comes with responsibilities, and does not mean that the tabloids can violate other rights, and constitutionally valid laws in pursuing their right to freedom of expression.
An example of the type of story printed in a daily tabloid is “Runaway mum leaves her baby tied to the bed!” (Daily Sun, 22/4/2005, p. 1). The article relates how a 15-month-old baby was “tied to the bed with a shoelace” by his mother, “to keep him safe until his dad came home”. The article is accompanied by the full names and photographs of the father, who later discovered the baby, the baby, and the mother, whose photograph is captioned “Bad mum”. The mother’s actions constitute child abuse, but no acknowledgement of this abuse is made within the story. Instead, the story furthers the abuse, and is a violation of a number of laws, codes of conduct and the Constitution.

The Child Care Act (No. 74 of 1983), states: “The identity of the child shall not be revealed”, and section 154 (3) of the Criminal Procedures Act (No. 51 of 1977) states: “No person shall publish, in any manner, whatever information, reveals or may reveal the identity of the accused under the age of 18 years, or of a witness at criminal proceedings who is under the age of 18 years.” Both Acts prohibit the naming and identification of abused children, and state that such identification violates children’s rights to dignity and privacy. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the South African Constitution also protect the best interests of children: “A child’s best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child (Bill of Rights, Section 28(2)).

Despite its growing readership and popularity, the Daily Sun violates these laws at the expense of the most vulnerable members of the society. The paper missed an opportunity of reporting the above story in a positive manner and thereby highlighting issues of abuse.

The rapid growth of tabloid papers is to be welcomed, as it has introduced new readers to the market. Many of the tabloids carry content that would not normally be covered in other dailies; information on basic services, and valuable educational supplements and articles. By targeting and reaching out to previously ignored audiences, tabloids have a key role to play in informing and educating people about their rights, as well as freedom of expression including press freedom. When the media violates the rights of the most vulnerable members of our society, it is not only a violation of an individual’s human rights, but also a violation of the value of press freedom.

Comments, queries, or suggestions?
Contact: William Bird 082 887 1370 or Nonceba Mtwana 082 968 5913
or the MMP on +2711 78812 78 or mmp.info@mediamonitoring.org.za