



RIGHT2KNOW

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RE: Right2Know Campaign Oral submission to the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT)

Introduction:

As you are probably aware, the Right2Know Campaign was formed in late 2010 in opposition to the Protection of Information Bill (or what is now known as the Protection of State Information Bill – or more popularly the Secrecy Bill). In early 2011 the campaign resolved that the Bill was a symptom of a broader threat to the free flow of information and resolved to broaden its focus to include campaigning for a free and diverse media that can serve the information needs of all living in South Africa. The Right2Know Campaign now has four legs, one of which concerns itself with the promotion of a more diverse media which can operate independently from government and corporate control. We therefore thank you for the invitation which you extended to us to make a written submission and presentation to the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team.

Limited time:

We would appreciate if it could be noted that we were disenabled from delivering a detailed written submission due to the short time allowed in which to do so. The Media Freedom & Diversity sub-committee of the Right2Know Campaign has the issue of media diversity and transformation as one of its key focus areas, so we are cognisant of the inherently complex nature of the matter. We feel that this issue should be allowed sufficient time for investigation, deliberation and meaningful consultation. We were, however, allowed only an extremely short period in which to prepare a written submission, and due to the demands of the Campaign, were not able to draft such a submission in time for either the deadline (17 Jan 2013) nor for these hearings. Short time constraints disadvantage organisations such as the Right2Know Campaign considerably, since we are not allowed time enough to consult widely with our various constituencies and members (of which there are many within R2K) before the deadline.

Since the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team seeks input from press industry AND non-industry players, we recommended in our correspondence to this Task Team, that non-industry participants should be granted the same amount of time as the industry participants have (ie. a month), to prepare their written submissions to the Task Team. It is

our view that the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team serves to benefit from this, since the credibility of the outcomes of this process will depend on its inclusiveness.

Lack of publicity for PDMTTT:

Furthermore, we are concerned at the comparative lack of an effective publicity campaign to accompany the work of the PDMTTT, as opposed to the publicity campaign which served the Press Freedom Commission (PFC). This creates an impression that the PDMTTT is, 1) a platform for industry-players to talk to themselves without concern for the voice of the broader public and, 2) that the issue of press freedom is given more importance than that of media diversity and transformation, which seems extremely self-serving on the part of the media industry. Of course, this may not be the intention whatsoever, but it is the way in which the process is likely to be perceived, if 1) meaningful public participation is not facilitated, and 2) an effective public awareness campaign is not launched. It is our fear that the PDMTTT is likely to face stern criticism, and once again, a damaging lack of credibility if the voice of the broader public is not heard – which, when dealing with the matter of media diversity, is the most critical voice of all.

R2K's engagement with communities on media diversity:

Please be aware that the Right2Know Campaign has consulted widely with groups of our members, many from grassroots community organisations, in various locations in three provinces during workshop sessions on various media issues including media diversity and transformation, and we will continue to do so in future. As such we would be happy to share with you the insights that we have collected from such communities and their views on media transformation and/or assist the Task Team in meeting with such groups for the sake of allowing space for meaningful engagement with the media using public (and most especially, with those whose struggles include limited access to the media and therefore limited access to free flowing information and diverse views).

Diversity of press content:

We would also like to raise the point, that although much of the discussion surrounding the diversity and transformation of the press in South Africa centres on issues of ownership, there is also a pressing need to raise the matter of a diversity of content in the press.

Feedback from media workshop sessions:

In Cape Town, the following issues were raised:

R2K should campaign to defend existing media freedom and advance media diversity to extend this freedom, as well as campaign for access to telecommunications.

Noted in SA today the existing media is relatively free. We must defend editorial freedom (of editors and journalists) from control of the state and media owners. Stopping the Secrecy Bill is a critical fight. Community/citizen journalists must also be defended from police harassment.

We noted that the dominance of media monopolies and lack of public funding were obstacles to media diversity and agreed that R2K should campaign to roll back monopolies and increase public funding for community media and the SABC. This should include engaging the Parliamentary Indaba on Media Transformation.

The dominant media carries the voices, issues and interests of the elite. R2K should promote alternative and community media to ensure greater diversity. Apart from securing funding for these projects, we must demand that their content does not imitate the commercial media. They should present the voices and issues of those marginalised.

We also need more and better community and citizen journalists.

R2K should not take on the mandate to publish alternative media or to train journalists and media producers. R2K should find and share training and publishing/production opportunities through our network.

R2K should do participatory media monitoring to increase media literacy in our network and document the bias on the commercial media. This documentation should be used for advocacy.

In Gauteng, at our working group meeting on 24 January we had reports of municipal-owned newspapers in the Ekurhuleni municipality and some big censorship issues emerging.

The Right2Know Campaign's position on Media Freedom and Diversity:

In March 2012 our campaign adopted the *Right2Know Campaign Policy Statement on Media Freedom, Diversity, and the Right to Communicate*. The full version of this document is available for download from our website and/or we could send it to you.

The relevant extracts for discussion in this forum, from our policy statement are:

“ During the anti-Apartheid struggle, activists campaigned not only for media freedom, but for a greater diversity of media. This struggle birthed the community media - media projects that aimed to give voice to marginalized communities serving their information needs and providing a platform for them to express their views and participate in the public sphere. The 1994 transition saw the protection of media freedom and the commitment to promoting a diverse range of media that could serve the various interests in South Africa...

However the past 16 years have not seen as much diversification of voices and perspectives in the media as should be the case given the complexity of South African society. Advertising and sponsorship are the primary sources of income for the media and in order to be sustainable they cater for information needs of the wealthier sections of the population and promote perspectives that do not threaten their advertisers. The trend to commercialization of the media has spread to the public arm of the SABC and non-profit community media in the context of a government policy that underfunded public/community media, leaving them to compete for advertising in the marketplace...

This commodification of media (commercial, public and community) has weakened diversity of views and news agendas carried by the media, and led to a prioritization of middle class and politically centrist views. In addition, to reduce costs and ensure sustainability or increase profits, there has been a trend towards media owners cutting editorial costs. This has meant fewer journalists carrying a greater workload and relying heavily on content produced by public relations people in government and the private sector as well as on syndicated content for news agencies. As official news sources are easier to access than grassroots sources, these have tended to dominate news agendas.

However, the past five years have seen, to an extent, an opposite trend towards reinvestment in investigative journalism capacity. This journalism has exposed significant wrongdoings in the public and private sectors, and has played a key role in ensuring accountable and responsive institutions. Yet while all major media groups, especially the newspaper groups, have beefed up their investigative journalism capacity to offer quality content to hold onto audiences, there is evidence that general newsrooms have been cut to the bone. In companies that own several media outlets, copy is often syndicated across the group, leading to a reduction in diversity of voices; furthermore, reliance on news agency copy has become more evident.

The agenda setting media is still largely urban based and still promotes the information needs and voices of an urban middle class, although recently some media have made significant efforts to report on grassroots issues and struggles. Government trade and competition policy has also encouraged rather than contained media concentration. Monopoly ownership of print media has re-consolidated since the late 1990's, with one corporation (NASPERS/Media 24) dominating the market, followed by three others (Avusa, Independent Newspapers and Caxton)...

Community and small commercial media have been left to fend for themselves in a hostile market place. Many of these media serve sections of the population that are of very limited value to advertisers. Community and small commercial print media also face unfair competition from the monopolies who either buy-out successful publications, use their control of print and distribution to frustrate them, and/or launch competing titles with lower (cross-subsidized) advertising rates and access to large advertising sales departments and syndicated editorial content...

In short: The media freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and protected by law is under threat from the state and the market. Elements in the state and ruling party who are threatened by the investigative and agenda setting power of the media are pushing for measures to constrain the work of journalists. Large media companies and the commercialization of public and community media (the dependence on advertising for sustainability) limit the range of opinions and news gathering agendas available to everyone living in South Africa. This commercialization ensures that the media tend to focus on concerns of urban and middle-class people at the expense of working-class and unemployed South Africans...

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...

As such, the Right2Know Campaign will continue to work toward the following objectives:

Expand Media Diversity in Ownership and Control:

A free media is a public good – a constitutional right that is the key to the realization and defense of other rights. If consumption and production opportunities are distributed by a market mechanism mainly, with a limited public service top up, they will continued to be enjoyed disproportionately by economically powerful sections of the population and ownership may continue to move towards greater concentration. In a country with such high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, it is untenable that the production and distribution of media goods should be dominated so overwhelmingly by market forces. There must be less concentrated ownership and control of the media and a greater diversity of commercial and non-commercial media, and forms of journalism, that can serve all sections of the population and enable a greater diversity of voices.

- a. Media ownership must be less concentrated and smaller media organisations must be protected and supported. Strengthening the Competition authorities, and other mechanisms should be explored to tackle the problem
- b. All people should have access to non-commercial media (alternative and community media as well as the public SABC). Such media should be funded from public and other non-commercial sources.
- c. Accountable mechanisms independent of the executive of government must be developed to facilitate the disbursement of public funding...

Since our launching in late 2010 the Right2Know Campaign has shown a remarkable capacity to unite a wide range of people to defend and advance hard-won constitutional rights to access information. Access to information is only one aspect of the right to know. We must take up the fight for the right to communicate to extend the right to know. As the Right2Know Campaign's vision states: "We seek a country and a world where we all have the right to know – that is to be free to access and to share information. This right is fundamental to any democracy that is open, accountable, participatory and responsive; able to deliver the social, economic and environmental justice we need. On this foundation a society and an international community can be built in which we all live free from want, in equality and in dignity".