

1 Introduction

South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid permeates all facets of social life, including the media. This is reflected not only in the patterns of media ownership and control, including imbalances within the newsrooms, but also in the lack of access to alternative media platforms for many of the country's marginalised communities.

Alternative media platforms that emerged in earlier periods to give expression to the views and perspectives of the majority were either suppressed, or unable to survive under market conditions shaped by the legacy of our history. While it is acknowledged that many media practitioners from the alternative media sector have risen up the ranks of the mainstream media, and helped transform it in the process, the public media discourse continues to be shaped by a narrow range of interests.

The challenge of democratic transformation in South Africa as it affects the media is, therefore, a challenge to ensure that, ultimately, all interests, sectors and schools of thought are adequately catered for by the media industry.

1.1 Government's commitment

Government is committed to ensuring media development and diversity and promoting development communication. This is already being done through a range of instruments, including amongst others, an independent regulator for the broadcasting industry, the broadcasting infrastructure roll-out programme of the Department of Communication (DOC), legislation facilitating access to information and the setting up of Multi-Purpose Community Centres, alongside private sector initiatives such as the Print Development Unit.

A further necessary critical instrument in media development and diversity is the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), which will contribute to addressing the legacy of exclusion from access to the media and promote a diversity of voices in South Africa's media. The agency has been designed to complement, and not duplicate the work of, other statutory and institutional initiatives, to assist in ensuring that the freedom of expression and access to information clauses in our country's Constitution are realised.

The MDDA's key role is, therefore, to help create an enabling environment for media development and diversity. To do this it will work closely with the media industry, donor organisations, government departments, other statutory and institutional initiatives, community media and the communities these represent, to encourage efforts towards redressing the inequities of the past, and enhancing the diversity of views in South Africa's media discourse.

1.2 Background

Government's decision to establish an MDDA is informed by the Task Group on Government Communications (Comtask) recommendation in 1996, which stated that government should "Facilitate the process of setting up a statutorily recognised media development agency comprised of independently recognised elected trustees, which agency will operate a statutorily recognised subsidy system for community and independent media in South Africa".

This decision, initially motivated by the alternative and community media sector in the early 1990s, was further endorsed by the National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, which was adopted by Cabinet in 1998. The Plan emphasises the need to promote freedom of expression and media diversity, and government's central role in ensuring that there are instruments, like the MDDA, for this purpose.

The MDDA will be set up within a context of competing demands for limited public resources. Government recognises this in its recommendations around the role, relationships, functioning and funding of the MDDA.

An interdepartmental committee has acted as a government reference group in the development of the Position Paper. This group consisted of the departments of Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, Communications, Education, Finance, and Trade and Industry, as well as the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Service in the Presidency. The Position Paper benefited from extensive research into the media environment and consultations with and submissions from a wide range of stakeholders (see Annexure 1), including public hearings conducted by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communication in March 2001.

1.3 Defining media development

Media development is aimed at redressing the exclusion and marginalisation of a vast range of groups and interests from access to media, not only as readers, listeners and viewers but also as owners, managers and producers of media. It is an integral part of freedom of expression and of creating a country based on democratic rights, social equality and respect for human dignity.

In the first instance it requires developing the media environment and infrastructure. South Africa's democracy needs an enabling environment for the media industry to grow in an accessible manner, and for its growth to be sustainable. This includes expanding the media infrastructure as a means of developing an informed citizenry in an information age, as well as encouraging South Africans to take advantage of new technology that will lower the threshold of entry into media.

The MDDA will contribute to media development by providing support, in the first instance, to community media, and secondly to small commercial media through, amongst other things:

- ▶ Providing direct financial support to community media projects;
- ▶ Providing or facilitating indirect support, including access to low-interest loans, discounts and subsidies;
- ▶ Building capacity, including training in journalistic, management, strategic, business and financial skills;
- ▶ Supporting networking amongst community media practitioners at local, national, regional and international levels;
- ▶ Commissioning media research to assess needs, and funding research projects that address issues relating to media development and diversity.

1.4 Defining media diversity

Media diversity, a consequence of media development, has two dimensions:

- a) it means, ultimately, affordable access by all to the widest range of opinion and information sources, and

b) equitable representation within the media regarding, amongst others, ownership, staffing, audience, language and format of media.

The MDDA will not have the resources or mandate to directly impact on all aspects of diversity. However, through its funding, facilitation and research activities, it will make a contribution to changes in the media environment that are conducive to broader changes.

The MDDA will regard the following as priority groups amongst the disadvantaged and marginalised:

- ▶ Working class and poor people
- ▶ People living in rural areas
- ▶ People living in cities and towns having limited media resources
- ▶ Women
- ▶ Youth and children
- ▶ Marginalised language groups
- ▶ Illiterate people
- ▶ Senior citizens
- ▶ People with disabilities.

The MDDA will support projects that enable media to promote democratic, human and socio-economic rights, such that the public and communities are empowered to actively participate in development. This would include, for example, promoting race and gender equality, education, health care, improved basic services, job creation and environmental awareness.

In sum: The MDDA will contribute to media development and diversity in South Africa by, in the main:

- ▶ providing or facilitating financial and other support to community media and small commercial media projects; and
- ▶ providing resources for media research.