

# Cronin's views on journalism confusing, ignorant - Raymond Louw

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SACP deputy secretary-general Jeremy Cronin's letter, in which he expressed this week his views on the state of the media in South Africa, is confusing and reveals his ignorance about how newspapers operate, media rights campaigner and veteran editor Raymond Louw told Bizcommunity.com last night, Thursday, 17 March 2011.



In the letter (see below), Cronin discusses, among others, a journalism survey conducted by the National Press Club, whose findings he claims were ignored in the media.

"Perhaps the media bosses didn't like what they saw in the mirror that was being held up in front of their noses? Personally, I came across one brief news story on the survey tucked away obscurely in a single publication - but it is possible I missed more extensive reporting somewhere else," he

wrote.

## By no means a scientific survey

However, Louw said while Cronin relies on a survey which he himself dismisses as being inaccurately phrased, the answers to the survey give an indication of the views of journalists who answered, but which is by no means a scientific survey.

"There also seems to be a preoccupation by outside observers of the press with a requirement that journalists should be constantly consumed by ethical principles," he said.

Louw, who said he was replying to Cronin in his personal capacity as SANEF has not discussed the letter, pointed out: "As with doctors and lawyers discussing ethical principles when such issues arise, journalists discuss ethical principles when an ethical issue is posed by the writing of a story or how the information was obtained or whatever other factor may impinge on ethics.

"And this may happen frequently but not all the time."

## Lashed out at Cronin

Louw lashed out at Cronin for failing to realise that tension between politicians and journalists is part of the healthy workings of democracy.

Cronin's 'confusing' and 'ignorant' letter will no doubt add fuel to the already-burning conflict opposing the ANC-led government against the media - a conflict critics believe could last forever as long as politicians still do not understand how the media works in a democracy.

Furthermore, Cronin wrote: "However that means on both sides lazy paradigms need to be abandoned. For politicians it means moving away from the blanket assumption that 'journalists are the enemy'.

"But equally, journalists need to move away from the simplistic presumption that ruling party politicians are, by definition, the enemy of press and every other kind of freedom."

## Correct about lazy paradigms

Louw said Cronin is correct about lazy paradigms but errs when he describes journalists as regarding politicians as the enemy of the press. "No doubt some journalists do but the majority would express themselves as being wary of the conduct of politicians in regard to the media.

"One has not got to go very far to find why journalists are wary. There's the Protection of Information Bill, the Protection of Personal Information Bill, the Protection of Harassment Bill, the National Key Points Act and the Films and Publications Act, all of which have provisions which will inhibit the gathering and publication of public interest information.

"When ANC spokesman Jackson Mthembu talks of imprisoning journalists for making an error, journalists are naturally somewhat more than wary," Louw said, as the state's vocal threats to 'punish' journalists who 'distort' the truth gain momentum.

### **Cronin's letter in full**

#### ***Red Alert: What journalists think***

*Jeremy Cronin, SACP deputy general secretary*

In the course of last year the SACP along with its Alliance partners attempted to open up a debate about the state of the media, particularly the print media, in our country. The debate quickly became ill-tempered and acrimonious. Because much of the debate was conducted on the terrain of the print media itself, we (that is, us Alliance politicians) found ourselves perpetually having "an away game disadvantage" - as I remember writing at the time.

For better or worse, the print media contrived to focus the debate largely on the ANC's Polokwane conference proposal of a Media APPEALS Tribunal. I am emphasizing the critical word "appeals", because in the media reporting on the matter that word was usually dropped. But the word "appeals" tells you that what the ANC had in mind was a POST-publication appeals mechanism, not pre-publication censorship.

Unfortunately, the possibility of having a constructive dialogue between colleagues in the media and us Alliance politicians was further frustrated by ill-considered rough handling of individual journalists and mixed messages emanating from certain quarters of our Alliance.

The debate, or at least the way in which it was framed in the media, gave the impression that South Africa was heading away from media freedom towards some dark age of intolerance. International opinion was mobilized against this "threat" to our Constitution and to our hard-won democracy.

Despite all of this, there have been some encouraging, if often concealed, positives emerging from last year's debate. One among these was a survey conducted for the National Press Club. The survey interviewed 68 journalists countrywide last year and its results were released a few weeks ago. Although the survey was of journalists commissioned by journalists and it was about journalism - surprisingly (or perhaps not surprisingly) it was almost entirely ignored in the media. Perhaps the media bosses didn't like what they saw in the mirror that was being held up in front of their noses? Personally, I came across one brief news story on the survey tucked away obscurely in a single publication - but it is possible I missed more extensive reporting somewhere else.

In the survey, the representative sample of journalists was asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements. In reply, for instance, to the statement "I never experience undue pressure to publish/broadcast a story if I don't consider it ready" - only 55% could agree. But at least that was a majority.

Only 47% agreed that "there is a culture in our editorial team to discuss ethical issues in stories." Only 41% agreed that "the work environment of my company will ensure that I never have any media tribunal issue". Only 40% agreed with the statement that "I am satisfied with the level of seniority of colleagues who have the authority to change my copy." Only 29% agreed that "If changes are made to my story, I am usually informed about these changes before publication/broadcast". And only 21% agreed that "I have control over the use of my copy on all platforms where my company chooses to publish it."

As any Marxist will tell you, the response to this last statement confirms the class power relations at play in our newsrooms. An individual journalist, like any other worker, produces something (in this case a story, supposedly "my" copy), but ownership of the story is immediately expropriated by a corporate entity and turned into a commodity that is packaged and transformed according to what are market-driven assumptions. This is why the SACP has always insisted that any appeals process, whether it is self-regulated or external, should be directed primarily at the corporate entity and not the individual journalist-worker.

There are many other interesting findings from the National Press Club survey. When asked whether their editorial team had its own code of ethics, a relatively impressive 63% answered yes. But when asked whether this code of ethics was frequently referred to in the newsroom, a massive 72% answered no. The interviewees typically identified as obstacles to ethical reporting the pressure of deadlines and the corporate drive for what was described as "quantity rather than quality". Shortages of staff and impossible work-loads were issues that were also emphasized.

Interestingly, on average journalists with one to four years of experience in the media tended to rate statements about the health of their newsrooms somewhat more positively than those with five to eight years of experience. What this tells us is that our newsrooms are frustrating early professional hopes and ideals. There is clearly a sense of considerable alienation amongst journalists and especially amongst more senior journalists.

So where do we go from here? Hopefully greater sensitivity on the part of us politicians to findings of this kind should encourage us to be better focused in our engagement with the media. The problems are largely systemic - they relate to the corporate culture of the management of the major media houses (not excluding the SABC). It is a culture that places a premium on profits. The downsizing and juniorisation of newsrooms, unbearable work-loads on senior journalists, and shoddy work are the frequent results. This is not, of course, to excuse individual journalists from the responsibility of professional ethical conduct, but it does help to place in context where the real challenges lie. And this, in turn, should lay the basis for a different and more collegial discussion between professional practising journalists and us, Alliance politicians.

However, that means that on both sides lazy paradigms need to be abandoned. For politicians it means moving away from the blanket assumption that "journalists are the enemy". But equally, journalists need to move away from the simplistic presumption that ruling party politicians are, by definition, the enemy of press and every other kind of freedom.

And this means, in turn, interrogating the way in which the media has the power to frame the story through, amongst other things, the choice of words that are used (and the choice of words that are simply made to disappear). In the otherwise fascinating and inherently self-critical National Press Club survey, journalists were asked to respond to the statement "The planned media tribunal of government will not limit my freedom as a journalist/writer". No prizes for guessing how the majority of respondents reacted to that red rag. Only 14% (I am surprised it was as many as that) thought that the tribunal would not limit their freedom.

But hang on. Let's run that by you slowly once again. "The planned media tribunal of government will not limit my freedom as a journalist/writer". Notice how an ANC PROPOSAL for DISCUSSION becomes a fully-fledged GOVERNMENT PLAN, and notice how that all important word "APPEALS" has vanished into thin air...and so, abracadabra, government has been turned into the enemy of "my freedom as a journalist/writer".

Come on, let's get out of these trenches.

## **Asikhulume!!**

Cronin's letter was first published on the SACP website ([Umsebenzi Online section - 'What journalists think'](#)).

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## ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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