

Role of media in politics



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Media is a means on which people of today rely to be informed of social, economic and political aspects in their country and other countries around the world. It is therefore critical for media, in any form, to be as accurate and edifying as possible in order for the people of a nation to use the information given to make educated choices. In South Africa, specifically, media is to a great extent an essential tenet in safeguarding our democracy because it allows accurate political, social and economic information to be brought to the masses. The media has great freedom in being able to verify this information and convey the truth to the public through newspapers, radio and television due to the freedom and rights that the South African Constitution allows the media. These freedoms and rights include its protection, the ability to criticize the government and access to state-held information, as long as no rights are violated in the process.

There is great interaction between media and politics. This is evident as it is way in which citizens are made of aware of the decisions and policies the government is making and implementing, and are reflection of events that occur as a result of these decisions and policies. Prior to 1994 mass media was largely controlled by the government and held no legitimacy to the majority of the population. The media during Apartheid was not free to inform the people of inefficiencies in the government and would depict black revolutionaries as an enormous threat to the state. It is evident how important the media is and how it ensures that our democracy is never destroyed because it reflects our constitution.

During that time what was considered to be the truth according to a newspaper report was not necessarily an accurate account of what

happened. “ If you wanted to tell the truth, things such as banning, security police visits in the middle of the night, detention without trial and censorship could become you occupational hazards. ” “ access to government was impossible.”[1]The media is greatly influenced by the system of governance over a country therefore a totalitarian system fully recognizes the power over the media and ensures that information published would not cause social and political unrest or a contest to the governing body.

Post-1994 the media has transformed from being biased and limited to receiving new freedoms and rights that ensure that the public, especially those whom are underprivileged, receive access to a media that promotes equality, truthful information and alerts to threats in opposition to our democracy. A democracy requires this transition as the people hold the power in a democracy. The individuals are unable to select people to run the government properly if they are unaware of the circumstances in the country. This would lead to people making uneducated votes about who should be in the government and who has the best leadership qualities to be our president.

The media has the ability to uncover corruption and errors made in the government, according to the rights set out in the Bill of Rights, which can be discovered through state-held information and any information that one requires from another person for the protection of the state.[2]In this way the public can make informed decisions when electing a new government. These decisions would be based on being informed about current affairs such as xenophobic attacks, strikes, inefficiency in government, corruption,

human rights issues (Zapiro cases), the Information Bill and the way in which our leaders resolve these issues.

The Information Bill has caused much debate within South Africa and is a current challenge facing South African media. Many view the bill as "clear and present danger to open democracy in general"- Nic Dawes. The Information Bill is essentially a movement to be able to classify information that is considered to be in the national interest (a democratic and appropriate way to deal with sensitive issues). This is a laudable intention, and the ANC's point of view is that the media has too much freedom, more than anyone else. "...our impressions are that the media has more freedom than all the freedoms that all of us enjoy. Media freedom supersedes all other freedoms." [3]

However, the rest of the proposed intentions have claimed to be too vague and that it "...effectively criminalises investigative journalism..." [4] In this way the government can withhold information that has the potential to end corruption and prosecute people such as Jacki Selebi and Schabir Shaik, in turn opening the ability to abuse the law. The media will therefore not be able to inform the people as they intend, because of their lack of substantial evidence supplied by the state. The media can no longer be an essential precept in the safeguarding of our democracy and power would be in the hands of government, as they will have the ability to classify files.

In the event that the information Bill is passed, the South African constitution will lose credibility as the two documents have contradictory elements. It restricts everyone to access of information and the ability to make decisions

based upon all information concerning the government as a citizen. Furthermore parliamentarians and elected officials will be undermined in their ability to hold the state liable. As a result the democracy will be threatened, as free media is a key aspect of a true democracy.

A concern linked to the Information Bill is that surrounding the Broadcasting Amendment Bill 2008 which looked to amend the Broadcasting Act 1999 so as to include the removal and resignation of board members. The SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) attracts 40% of South Africa's radio listeners and 70% of its television watchers. Jacob Zuma won the majority in Parliament and the Broadcasting Amendment Bill successfully passed. He therefore had the power to replace the entire SABC board and replace them with new people some being Zuma appointees. This was the first move in Jacob Zuma's plan to co-opt the SABC. " Phil Molefe was unilaterally appointed Head of News by the Chairperson of the new SABC Board, Dr. Ben Ngubane (a Zuma appointee), instead of by the chairperson of the SABC Board as a whole. Again, this was a violation of the law." [5] The media is yet again under threat, as power in media by the government is not constituted in democracy. Power of the government in the media is not constituted in a democracy. It is important to keep the media power and the power of the government separate in order to have fair media that is unbiased. One can deduce from this that media does play a great role in protecting democracy as it allows the people to keep the power, instead of government.

Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro), a well-known satirist in South Africa, could be argued as someone within the media whom does not, to a minor extent, protect our democracy. Zapiro has been in two major legal cases in the past

two years. In both these cases Zapiro's freedom of expression has been contested against the rights of others. It is on these grounds that one may argue that Zapiro is perhaps being un-democratic in his drawings because he has offended many people in the cartoons he draws. One could argue that he is aware that his cartoons are not keeping the peace in society as they call for character judgements (Jacob Zuma vs. Zapiro) and religious divide (Zapiro's depiction of the prophet Muhammed) which ultimately go against democratic principles in that it unintentionally segregates people.

There are Muslim people who were deeply offended about the cartoon Zapiro drew of Muhammed. As a media driving force, Zapiro should be concentrating on bigger powers that threaten democracy rather than depicting Muhammed in response to South Park being restricted to do so, which is against Muslim faith. The Muslim society's right to demand that Zapiro refrain from drawing Muhammed is set against Zapiro's right to convey his own ideas. However, those who have a problem with the cartoon do not necessarily want Zapiro's freedom of expression to be taken away, " For I as a South African Muslim, I regard freedom of speech as sacrosanct, even if it means I have to defend the right of Zapiro to depict the Prophet"[6]

" Lady Justice" is seen to be lying on the floor about to be raped by Jacob Zuma with the help of his political allies. (Addendum A) Zuma launched a lawsuit against Zapiro on the account that his individual rights are being violated. One could view the cartoon as a misjudgement of character or slander as it suggests that our president is morally corrupt. It further insulted women as they saw it as gender inequality.

Conversely Zapiro has not offended the rights of the people he depicts in his cartoons according to the constitution. He has merely used his freedom of expression to be able to satirise current events. The “ Lady Justice” satire was widely misconceived. It was neither referring to women’s injustices nor was it implying that Zuma raped someone. It was satirical in that Zuma was presently being accused of rape but the case was dismissed and Zapiro created the metaphor of the actual justice system being in a sense ‘ raped’. Essentially it is a metaphor as the “ Lady Justice” is a symbolic figure. It can therefore not be said that Zapiro is accusing Zuma of rape. Zapiro aims to encourage public debate and knocking politicians off their pedestals. This is important as it brings reality to the fact that the people have power over the government and not the other way around.

The media are not always perfect however enforcing stricter self-regulatory systems are the best way in which to make sure human rights and freedoms are never violated. The media needed to be watched by independent “ watch dogs”, but giving power over the media to the government does not assist in media being protectors of our democracy. People within the media such as Jonathon Shapiro, although sometimes causing uproar, contribute to our democracy in initiating debates, opinions and free thinkers. “ No single person, no body of opinion, no political or religious doctrine, no political party or government can claim to have monopoly on truth... it has therefore always been our contention that laws, mores, practices and prejudices that place constraint on freedom of expression are a disservice to society”[7]

The role of the media today is to inform the people, especially the under-privileged. From this people can make informed choices that concern the

running of our country. The different media sectors each provide information that is accurate and does not violate the Constitution of South Africa in order for us to make such choices. There are many challenges that face different media figures and the media in general, but the media's freedom is what drives our democratic system. With media not being monopolised or restricted, the people can ultimately hold the power over the government – which is the concept of democracy. It can therefore be said that the media in South Africa post-1994 have an enormous role to play in society and is to a great extent safeguarding our democracy.

Addendum A:

“ Lady Justice” cartoon by Zapiro:

Cartoon in response to draw Muhammad day by Zapiro: