

14TH PERCY QOBOZA MEMORIAL LECTURE - 2024

“It was at 2 o’clock in the morning, I was phoned in my house to tell me that the Minister of Justice has banned The World and Weekend World, and that therefore as the editor I had the responsibility of waking up, even as they were speaking to me, and go and get the copies we had printed already, at 2am, and make sure that they don’t appear in the streets, because that would be a violation of the Internal Security Act, under which they were banned. I said to the police officer who carried the good tidings that, with all the good intensions under the sun, there is no way I am going to have to retrieve 176 copies of the newspaper, that started going out all over the country at 7 o’clock the night before, with very fast vans. So, even if you give me the helicopters, I would not be able to do it, and I do not have a helicopter, and the fastest thing I have in my house at the moment is a bicycle and I have no intention of doing it on my bike”He goes on to say “At 12h30 they came for me”. and so, Percy Qoboza was arrested on October 19, 1977.

This is how Qoboza narrated his arrest to a gathering at the Cleveland City Club while he was in the United States in 1981. In his thesis on the intellectual biography of Percy Qoboza, Duncan Lotter traces the cause of Qoboza’s arrest in 1977 to The World’s coverage of both the Soweto student Uprisings and Steve Biko’s death. This follows warnings from Kruger to tone down his reportage which exposed the apartheid evils, something which Qoboza refused. He was not one be intimidated.

Qoboza’s arrest happened during what William Hachten in his 1979 article on Black Journalists under apartheid, describes as “the toughest crackdown on the press in South African history”, following the tragic death of the Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steve Biko, while in police custody.

Programme Director, Acting Registrar - Professor Moloko Sepota, Chairperson of the National Press Club, Mr Kenney Mudzuli, the broader community of UNISA, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and those who are following the proceedings virtually, a very good evening.

It is a great honour and privilege to be invited to deliver the 14th Percy Qoboza Memorial Lecture, to honour a restless profound thinker and a fierce critic of apartheid, who earned international recognition for his bold writings against the apartheid regime. He was not a mere journalist, but a South African who fought against dehumanising apartheid evils and was deeply committed to justice. He recognised the potency of the gifts he possessed - his brilliant mind and his inimitable courage - and he used these effectively to expose the atrocities of apartheid. But one thing that stands out and makes him quite extraordinary to be defined narrowly in terms of journalism, was his knack for action. He didn’t just write about what gave him discomfort, he was also an active participant in the politics of that time, from meeting with ministers to calling for commissions of inquiry into various issues that bothered him.

Today, we gather to memorialise the legacy of a man whose life and work stand as a beacon of courage, integrity, defiance, and resistance in the face of oppression. He pursued the truth in an era when truth itself was a dangerous weapon. Qoboza's life, his work, and his convictions, are emblematic of the power of the media in the pursuit of justice and freedom.

As the editor of the World and The Weekend World, his journalism was a crusade for the liberation of South Africa, and in particular the recognition of Black people - first - as human beings, and second - as full citizens of South Africa, worthy of respect and dignity and every right that was due to them. His work, and in fact, his entire legacy is a master class on moral clarity, fierce, transformative and courageous journalism.

QOBOZA – THE LIFE

Born in 1938 in Sophiatown, Johannesburg –exactly 7 years after my father's birth, Qoboza grew up in a country where one's destiny was predetermined by the colour of one's skin - from where one could live, one's social standing, and to how one was treated in society. Yet, early in his journalism career, Qoboza displayed a deep yearning for justice and equality.

As the editor of The World, a white-owned daily newspaper meant for blacks, he used it as a platform to highlight the injustices of apartheid. Under his leadership, The World became one of the most notable voices of black resistance. It is worth noting that black owned media hardly existed in South Africa during that time. In 1979, William Hachten writing on Black journalists under apartheid, estimated that over 200 black journalists worked for newspapers that were owned and controlled by white publishers. However, the white ownership of the press did not deter Qoboza from pursuing justice for black people. His work earned him international recognition. And he was also instrumental in bringing attention to the plight of black South Africans during a time when the apartheid regime sought to suppress dissenting voices.

At a time when apartheid was enforced with brutal efficiency, and when many voices were silenced through fear, intimidation, or violence, Qoboza's commitment to fearless journalism never faltered. He believed that journalism was not just about relaying information, but a crucial transformative force for society. He used his writings to expose the harsh realities of apartheid, bringing to light the abuses, the inequalities, and the daily degrading experiences suffered by millions of black South Africans.

He was a man of deep moral conviction, always driven by his sense of what was right. Qoboza viewed the freedom of the press as indispensable to the broader fight for human rights. His work shows that he viewed apartheid as not just a system of racial segregation, but that it was a war on human dignity. He regarded apartheid as not merely unjust, but primarily evil. He viewed apartheid as an affront to the very principle of humanity. Through his editorials, Qoboza continuously wrote about the dehumanizing effects of apartheid, particularly the racial and social divisions, poverty and violence it created. He exposed the brutal conditions in which black South Africans were forced to live and the lack of basic human rights.

Based on the evaluation of his extensive work, Qoboza's life philosophy was grounded in the belief that truth is a form of resistance. He believed that by speaking out, and by sharing the stories of those who could not speak for themselves, one could challenge even the most repressive system. He was not naive—he knew the risks. His writings earned him the wrath of the apartheid regime, which saw him as a threat to its authority. Yet, despite imprisonment and the threats to his life, Qoboza remained steadfast in his belief that truth was more powerful than fear.

He also believed in the interconnectedness of all human struggles for freedom. Qoboza's editorial work often linked the oppression in South Africa to broader global movements against colonialism and racial inequality. His worldview was one of solidarity with all oppressed people.

One of Qoboza's most significant contributions was his role in covering the 1976 Soweto Uprising, where students protested against the enforcement of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. His editorial coverage helped bring international attention to the massacre of schoolchildren by the apartheid police, showing the world the cruelty of the regime.

He also believed that apartheid's end could not come through violence alone. Qoboza was an advocate of peaceful resistance and dialogue, although he understood the frustrations that led many to take up arms. He hoped for a South Africa where black and white could live together in equality and peace, a vision that made him both a target of the apartheid government and a hero to the oppressed.

QOBOZA AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In relation to Qoboza's views on the freedom of expression, let us consider its basic meaning- being the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of your choice without interference and irrespective of hindrances.

For him, the right to speak freely and to report the truth without fear of retribution was fundamental in the fight against apartheid and other forms of oppression. Even today freedom of expression and media freedom are inseparable from the broader struggle for human dignity and civil rights.

Notwithstanding apartheid-imposed censorship and the violence used to suppress dissent, Qoboza fiercely defended the right of journalists to report on government abuses and societal inequalities. He believed that silencing the press was one of the most dangerous forms of oppression, as it hindered the free flow of information, and prevented the public from knowing the truth.

This is where today's challenges lie. Try and do just 2 percent of what Qoboza did as a journalist in South Africa today, you will be toast. I have had the fortune and misfortune of dealing directly with attempts to intimidate journalists into silence, like the time

SABC journalists were held hostage for two hours in Mpumalanga, with threats to burn their vehicle and destroy cameras, after being accused of speaking to community members without getting permission from the ward councillor in the area. This was the period leading up to local government elections in 2021.

In the same period, similar incidents with rape and death threats were made against journalists in Bloemfontein, who were accused of negative coverage that led to electoral losses for the former governing party. Just days after Christmas in December 2022, I went to the local police stations in my area to report what I considered to be a death threat, and it was not the first. The two female officers on duty told me that the pictures of firearms that were sent to me on WhatsApp were just harmless pictures, nothing said I was going to be harmed or killed, and so I left without recording the incident, and had to arrange my own protection. In fact, one of the challenges the media faces is that these incidents are reported to the police, but nothing happens afterwards.

I had my own share of attacks - which I still think were ridiculous if not hilarious - they ranged from being seen as hostile to the ANC and hating its president, being confronted at the IEC results centre by party officials in 2021, for hating the ANC, to being publicly shamed and accused of decampaigning the ANC through programming that led to its loss of key metros in 2021. But that is a story for another day. As an undercover student of Qoboza's journalism, every time I reflect on his work, I cannot get over the fact that if he lived in today's environment a number of politicians would have long lost their marbles.

Qoboza's refusal to be silenced even in the face of immense personal risk is worth emulating. In fact, the kind of risk that journalists face today is nothing compared to his crop of journalists, who had to stare apartheid brutality in the face. Today's self-induced threat to media freedom is job security. While Qoboza and his peers endured the evil deeds of apartheid, today we choose to not exercise our freedom of expression, because preserving our livelihood and our social networks takes precedence.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Examining freedom of expression in the digital era presents a complex challenge, but also a hopeful view of its capacity to strengthen democracy. It is crucial to appreciate the enormous potential of digital technologies and platforms, to amplify marginalised voices, expose injustices, and spread truth far beyond the reach of traditional media.

At the same time, we should be mindful of the challenges to this freedom, posed by digital censorship, disinformation, and the corporate control of the media. For Qoboza, journalistic due diligence was at the heart of the quality of his work. In their book, *Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel's postulate that journalism's first obligation is to the truth (the verifiable state of reality), and that its first loyalty is to the citizen, and stress the need to maintain independence and distance from those we cover, and speak of the indispensable role of verification. These are pillars that should continue to guide journalism in the digital era to preserve the integrity of journalism.

Increased access and amplification of messages is one opportunity that the digital era presents, for freedom of expression. Digital platforms like social media allow anyone to share their experiences and reach a global audience. This means that journalists can now bypass traditional gatekeepers to expose injustices and spark social change.

Another opportunity is global solidarity. Digital platforms have a way of fostering international solidarity, where movements for racial justice, gender equality, or anti-authoritarianism can be supported, and shared across borders instantly as we have seen with the Israel-Palestine genocide and many similar issues.

However, there are problems too, such as digital censorship and surveillance. We have seen a number of governments - both undemocratic and democratic - censoring online speech, shutting down the internet and surveillance dissenting voices. The threat of state actors or tech companies using these tools to limit freedom of expression, is a serious concern. One can draw parallels between the detention of journalists in Qoboza's era and the harassment of journalists, detention or suppression of activists and whistleblowers in the digital age.

Another troubling issue that is proving difficult to contain is information disorders such as misinformation and disinformation: The rise of this disease undermines public trust in journalism, and creates confusion about what is true and real. It is a perilous distortion of freedom of expression, as truth becomes obscured by manipulation, creating new challenges for democracy and justice.

A more insidious risk to freedom of expression in the digital age is the corporate control of digital platforms. The concentration of digital power in the hands of a few tech companies poses an immense risk to democracies. These tech giants are driven by profit motives and have the power to allow harmful content to flourish, while silencing others for financial gain or political pressure. There is a need to press hard for stronger protections for journalists online, demands for accountability from tech platforms, and a push for regulations that protect both the integrity of information and the rights of individuals to speak freely.

There is a clear need to democratise the power of digital expression while remaining vigilant about the ways in which freedom can still be restricted or distorted.

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY & FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

With regard to freedom of expression and media sustainability, the impact of sustainability challenges facing the media on freedom of expression cannot be underestimated. While the search for viable revenue models continues, solutions remain elusive. But the impact on news provisioning is a serious one, as we are increasingly observing news deserts as a result of limited resources to provide news coverage adequately. In addition to the search for new revenue models, donor funding has come in handy as a good intervention. However, that poses its own risks to freedom

of expression.

Even though there are claims to the extent that there is no consideration of donor interests in news coverage, suspicion and concerns will remain. These are driven by the fact that some donors do set parameters for the scope of coverage, and that in itself already defines their interests. They may not prescribe the stories that must be covered and how they must be told, but they determine the scope of the work to be done. Impact reporting is one indicator of how they monitor adherence to their requirements.

To address this mechanisms are being explored to prevent direct interaction between media outlets and donors. The de-risking of donor funding is one way of solving this, by pooling the funds into a central pot such that media outlets deal with fund managers instead of dealing directly with donors. But overall, even though the proliferation of media outlets through donor funding is good for media diversity and democracy, the fragmentation of the media is weakening its collective power, and solidarity in the sector. This is a risk that should not be underestimated.

Similarly, the fact that business is assumed to be more ethical in its dealings than governments is negated by the lived experiences of those affected by its decisions. The State Capture Inquiry revealed how business has made fraudulent and corrupt decisions, a transnational phenomenon. But here is the problem, media freedom and freedom of expression where business is concerned, is curtailed by the media's dependence on advertising and sponsorship revenues. News entities find themselves in a predicament that is forcing them to choose between their freedom and their sustainability. Then we have to ask ourselves the vexing question - if sustainability is to be attained through commercially driven self-censorship whose purpose does it really serve?

MEDIA, ELECTIONS & FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

If one looks at the media and elections, Qoboza, as a fierce advocate for truth and freedom, would have a clear and powerful stance on the role of the media in democracy and elections. He had a deep understanding of how oppressive regimes used misinformation and censorship to manipulate public opinion. This should inform our views regarding the importance of a free, independent, and responsible media, especially during elections. Primary to these is the media watchdog role in safeguarding democracy.

In a democracy, the media's job is not merely to report facts, but to scrutinize political leaders, parties, and related institutions. This is a character that is worryingly diminishing in our journalism, as observed in the recent election. An assessment by bodies that monitor media coverage of elections, showed that the media agenda was set by politicians and predetermined political narratives, leading to less attention being given to mainstream issues, among others, a less than usual underrepresentation of women and issues affecting them. Straight up and down coverage focusing on he says she says - does nothing to enlighten audiences about the state of affairs in the country.

Even more dangerous to the integrity of journalism, is the idea of journalists placing politicians in categories of saints and sinners. How did we get to this point? What informs our distinction as to who is worth adulating and who is worth demonising? The media scrutiny for politicians should be applied right from the president down to the lowest ranking official.

Just looking at the recent elections, in exercising freedom of expression and ensuring that the electorate has access to information that's essential for voting decisions, there are issues I believe should have been central to the media's 2024 elections coverage.

First, it is the persistent failure to address inequality and poverty, land reform, economic transformation and wealth redistribution, and the enduring socio-economic divide between black and white South Africans, particularly the poor who remain trapped in cycles of poverty, as well as the growing inequality between a politically connected elite and the rest of the population. This failure betrays the ideals of the liberation struggle. For liberation to be sensible to the still disadvantaged majority of South Africans, it must include economic justice.

Secondly, it is the government's failure to provide moral and ethical leadership, the mismanagement of the economy, collapse of institutions and betrayal of citizen's trust.

Thirdly, it is the lack of accountability and governance failures which have led to a decline of public trust in government.

Lastly, it is the high levels of crime, inadequate infrastructure and poor living conditions for millions of South Africans.

It is a fact that without socio-economic empowerment, liberation is incomplete. South Africa cannot be boasting about the unsustainable number of people it has on the social relief and grant system. Having almost half of the population surviving on social transfers is not a sign of a healthy democracy. Any idea that the health of a democracy is determined by the integrity of its political processes is deeply flawed and needs to be challenged. A nation whose majority of its population is economically deprived can never produce and sustain a healthy democracy. It is impossible.

Qoboza would argue that a free and independent media is the cornerstone of any democracy and that during elections, this role becomes even more critical to safeguarding the future of that democracy. One thing we must always bear in mind as journalists as we strive to maintain the integrity of our craft is that - it is not the task of journalists to put politicians and their parties in power, it is not the job of journalists to keep politicians and their parties in power, and it certainly is not the responsibility of journalists to remove politicians and their parties from power. That's the exclusive responsibility of the electorate. Ours is to hold the feet of those in power to the fire.

Overall, it is deeply disturbing that instances of intimidation, bullying, interference on editorial matters, journalists being held hostage for doing their work, and brazen attempts of censorship have been observed under the democratic dispensation in

South Africa, and despite constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression and media freedom. Since when has journalism become a sin and a crime in a democracy?

MARGINALISED VOICES & FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

On amplifying marginalised voices, Qoboza would insist that the media must serve all citizens, not just the powerful. He spent much of his career giving a voice to black South Africans who were oppressed and silenced by apartheid. In the context of elections, he would argue that the media has a duty to highlight the concerns and aspirations of the downtrodden and underrepresented communities.

Rather than spending already limited resources focusing only on elites or dominant narratives, the media should ensure that the voices of the poor, minority groups and those in the periphery of society are heard in the democratic process. This is essential to creating a more equitable society, where elections genuinely reflect the will of all people, not just those with influence or wealth. By amplifying these voices, the media could promote a more inclusive and representative democracy.

With protests being a tool that citizens rely on to express their discontent with governance in various spheres of government - sometimes these protests affect how journalists do their work in the communities they cover. This is usually a symptom of a misunderstanding or trust deficit between the communities and journalists who seek to provide platforms for communities raise their voices. However, amplifying those voices does not translate to journalists being the voice of the voiceless as it is often said. I always defer to Arundhati Roy's conception of the voiceless. She says, I quote "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (close quotes) The key words here are 'deliberately silenced' and 'preferably unheard'.

I have two reasons for my preference for this framing; firstly, the fact that stories of certain parts of the population are not being told does not mean that they are voiceless or having nothing to say. They are not being given access to platforms where they can express their views. Secondly, selective coverage based on market segmentation, and the search for profitable audiences, excludes the voices in the periphery of society. This is due to journalism being considered costly and economically inefficient by media owners. So, if we consider all this, our most prized freedom of expression becomes a luxury reserved for those who are considered less costly to cover in terms resource deployment.

Similarly, media sustainability challenges that have impelled newsrooms to introduce paywalls have perilous consequences for free flow of information, inclusion and access to information that are all critical to freedom of expression. The reservation of what is deemed exclusive content for those who can afford subscriptions, means that those who have to choose between buying a loaf of bread and paying for news content are left out.

MEDIA, NEW GOVERNMENT & FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

If I put on Qoboza's cap and think what his view would be on the new government arrangement, the first thing that comes to mind is the existence or non-existence of checks and balances for the current government structure. Who is holding it accountable? Should we rely on the ideological diversity that assumed to characterise the government structure for self-checks?

How do we trust such self-monitoring after the tactical coordination and trade-offs that we saw between the ANC and the DA when the government was constituted? What about the compromises made that put into question some of the political posturing that we saw in the manifestos, such as parties positioning themselves as custodians of good governance? Where do the consequences of that tactical coordination leave the citizens?

Where is the internal coherence of this new government structure going to come from without a defined coordinating mechanism? Is this not a case of pouring fresh milk into a dirty calabash. The old dirty calabash could give us a sense of familiarity. However, aren't we missing out on the opportunity to think anew about robust and effective approaches to provide effective government?

It is pretty obvious that the media's job in covering the recent election is far from being done. The media should make it its business to keep interrogating the contested political and moral legitimacy of the new government structure. And this should include questions about what it stands for, the strategic political posturing by individual parties, and the continuing campaigning by political parties within the government structure. If one looks at the level of performative politics at play, one is left wondering as to where public trust and confidence in the government structure are going to come from? There is a lot of noise.

While it is good to have a healthy optimism about the government structure in place as it was formed out of necessity, such an arrangement needs to be more than just a political convenience. It should genuinely attend to the plight of millions of South Africans by addressing the pressing issue of land reform and socioeconomic challenges like poverty, unemployment, inequality, crime and corruption—issues that persist despite the promises made since the dawn of democracy.

The current government arrangement can be a crucial opportunity for South Africa to live up to its democratic ideals, provided it focuses on serving the people instead of party-political ambitions. And the media must play its role in holding the government accountable, advocating for transparency and a continued commitment to the freedoms that are vital to democracy.

The celebration of 100-days in office (whoever came up with that must be found, we will decide later what to do with him or her). The media is swallowing wholly, the narratives of the different parties within government and not the government itself. Who is asking the citizens about their views on the claims being made regarding what has been done

in the 100 days? With all the freedom of expression that the media enjoys in this country, politicians continue to set the agenda for media. Where are the Percy Qoboza's of today? Who is courageous enough to take over his itchy pitch?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, if our freedom expression and media freedom are to generate any value for South Africa as a nation, perhaps, an area that we need to revisit and reflect on is journalism education and its related praxis. If there is any hope of restoring the cultural authority of journalism, and its ability to provide warning signals, it is necessary to situate it in African thought and contextualise its practice within African life.

The intellectual installation of Western or Eurocentric notions of what represents good practice and storytelling in journalism needs to be reviewed. We have seen on several occasions how journalistic practices that are deemed universal, prove to be at variance with the African way of life, particularly in covering issues such as death, grief, observation of privacy for cultural practices and rituals. We need to think about what journalistic transparency means and its implications for those affected in such cases. However, this does not and should not be understood to displace and negate the power of critical watchdog journalism, that is about holding the feet of those in power to the fire.

There is a need for journalism theoretical frameworks that take into account nuances of the African context, and that set parameters for the observation of what is considered dignity and respect in the African sense. It is disheartening to see how decades later, that English remains the base medium for journalism education and training, and the continuing complete disregard for the potential of political and economic power of indigenous languages, even in news provisioning.

Also, it is disturbing that today's journalism remains insensitive to the portrayal and representation of black bodies in news - as the face of distress, poverty, disease, social ills and everything wrong that you can think of. While it may be true to some extent that the media is a product of its environment and holds a mirror to society, perhaps, it is time that it turns the mirror to itself and questions its commitment to promoting social justice and observance of human rights and dignity.

Qoboza's crusading approach to journalism is what South Africa desperately needs today.

May his legacy live on and inspire us to produce journalism that serves humanity, and that rehumanises those who continue to be dehumanised.

Thank you.