



World Journalism Education Council

September 13, 2010

His Excellency Jacob Zuma
President of the Republic of South Africa
Union Buildings,
Private Bag X1000, Pretoria, 0001
South Africa

Your Excellency,

I am writing as a journalism dean in the United States and as the convener of the World Journalism Education Council, an alliance of 29 organizations that represents educators and trainers of journalism worldwide.

My reason for writing to you flows from the WJEC statement of principles which notes: "Journalism educators have an obligation to collaborate with colleagues worldwide to provide assistance and support so that journalism education can gain strength as an academic discipline and play a more effective role in helping journalism to reach its full potential."

The point of this letter is to support the concern of South African journalism teachers about media-relevant proposals in your country which could severely reduce journalism's potential and, accordingly, the role of journalism education in South Africa.

During July 2010, we had the pleasure of visiting South Africa when your country hosted the 2nd World Journalism Education Congress at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. This event involved 293 delegates from 54 countries visiting South Africa. The South African International Marketing Council, SA Tourism, ABSA, Telkom and MTN were all significant partners in putting forward funds to make the Congress a great success.

In the course of our proceedings, we had the privilege of hearing the views of eminent South Africans. One was Archbishop Desmond Tutu who culminated his speech by signing the Table Mountain Declaration on press freedom in Africa. Another was Advocate Pansy Tlakula, the CEO of your respected electoral commission and also the African Union's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression. They helped us understand South Africa as a beacon of press freedom on the continent. During our time in your country, we were also impressed by the unity of South Africans, and also the pride of all African delegates, over the hosting of the World Cup event.

As a whole, therefore, the Congress experience highlighted the disjunction between many international stereotypes and the reality that we encountered. Our delegates took away from the event a sense that South Africa was far from corresponding to the negative imagery that often colors the continent. Supplementing this sense was documentation that we also received in the form of a UNESCO-sponsored model syllabus which journalism educators anywhere in the world can use for courses in Reporting Africa.

It is therefore with surprise and regret that I now take note of two measures that run counter to my impressions of South Africa:

One is the Protection of Information Bill which would seriously diminish the general right of Access to Information as laid down in your constitution. The bill also contrasts with our Statement of Principles that that the kind of journalism for which we educate students should serve the public and contribute to an informed society.

The second measure is the proposal for a statutory Media Appeals Tribunal which appears to transgress South Africa's constitutional right to media freedom. It further goes against the values of journalism educators. Our principles advise that journalism educators "should critically reflect on industry practices and offer advice to industry based on this reflection". This points to the values of the press regulating itself, rather than having a statutory tribunal to do so.

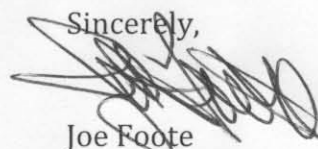
As professionals who are responsible for shaping the skills of many journalists worldwide, journalism educators are concerned to convey an accurate understanding of South Africa to those whom we teach.

I would therefore like to add my voice to those of other international formations like the Committee to Protect Journalists, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum. In particular, I and many of my colleagues would urge you to take the lead in reconsidering such initiatives.

These measure's seriously risk overshadowing the general experience that our journalism educators gained of South Africa. Taken to their logical conclusion, the steps will put obstacles in the way of the efforts by South African journalism educators to make the fullest contribution that they can to the wellbeing of South Africa and its status in the world.

I would appreciate receiving acknowledgement of receipt this letter and any response you have to these concerns.

Sincerely,



Joe Foote
Convener

World Journalism Education Council