

How the media has fared in telling SA's story

Transformation, reinvention, shaping narratives — this is how journalism has shaped the country's democracy

GILL GIFFORD

In South Africa's 30 years of democracy, the media has done much to shape the conversation and public opinion, but there is still much to do.

In an effort to explore the role of the media, what progress has been made and what improvements need to be made, the University of Johannesburg this week hosted a seminar titled "Framing tough conversations about SA Democracy: the role of the media".

Broadcast journalist Nolwazi Tusini of *The Big Debate* — a news show focused on pertinent contemporary political topics conducted in a town hall debate style — noted that in recent years there had been a shift in focus on public intellectuals as the sole preserve of academia, towards an acknowledgment of forms of indigenous knowledge and lived experience as part of the story.

"We saw a rise of anti-intellectualism in the Zuma era, beginning with the idea of 'clever blacks' used as a retort to the raising of allegations of corruption and uncomfortable questions of where money was being spent," Tusini said.

She said research by Gender Links in 2019 found that women were not platformed as experts in the media on issues other than women's rights and this remained a challenge, along



TRANSFORMATION: Prof Ylva Rodny-Gumede, head of the University of Johannesburg's school of journalism, says SA's media has come a long way since the days of zero press freedom in the 90s. Picture: SUPPLIED

organisations and NGOs providing help portrayed as pesky groups getting in the way of government efforts to regularise the city and take back control.

Media academic and head of UJ's journalism school Ylva Rodny-Gumede said viewing the media through the lens of transformation, she felt much has been achieved.

"We come from a history of zero media freedom. We only began to transform in the 90s with efforts to ground ourselves in freedom of speech and the public service ethos of including all voices," she said.

"We have come a long way in achieving transformation in ownership and content, but we remain fragmented in digitalisation, with social media opening up news spaces.

"We have found new voices, but we've closed down some old ones, and intellectualism is being drowned out by political noise."

Social justice activist Hassan Lorgat pointed out that news liberalism spread by government was being challenged by white civil society, with organisations like AfriForum and Solidarity often shaping narratives.

The consensus was that the looming electoral season will be the most tumultuous ever, with more parties and noise than ever before. The challenge remains in finding balance and being fair, with journalists refraining from parroting the ideas of politicians and instead interrogating the information and checking facts.

with other issues such as media houses having to bow to corporate objectives, the push of new media against traditional media houses resulting in job cuts and the resulting juniorisation of newsrooms.

Adding his voice to the discussion, *Big Debate* executive producer Ben Cashdan said his show, as one of the forerunners in media transformation, had taken to actively seeking out voices that confronted mainstream thinking.

By interviewing people like

the "poo protesters" who had taken to the streets of Cape Town in 2013 to throw faeces around as a form of activism, this was the start of the publication of stories that contradicted the norms of race and class and introduced more human rights-based solutions.

Commenting on the recent news coverage of the Johannesburg building fires that led to the death of vulnerable people, he said the story had been framed as the victims being unwanted people, with aid or

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<p style="text-align: center; background-color: #FFD700; padding: 5px;">NELSON MANDELA ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION</p> <p>DATE: 15th FEBRUARY 2024</p> <p>TIME: 15h00 - 18h00</p> <p>VENUE: RAYMOND MHLABA MUNICIPALITY CHAMBERS, DIKENI</p>	<p style="text-align: center; background-color: #FFD700; padding: 5px;">NELSON MANDELA RELEASE RALLY</p> <p>DATE: 16th FEBRUARY 2024</p> <p>TIME: 11h00</p> <p>VENUE: NTSELAMANZI SPORTS GROUND, DIKENI</p>



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