

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND THE BATTLE OF IDEAS:

PLACING THE YOUTH IN THE SUNSHINE!!

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

- 1.1 The 23rd ANC Youth League National Congress takes place at a time of heightened dominance of information and communication technology in the social and economic lives of people, although the benefits remain skewed in favour of the developed world.
- 1.2 This imbalance in the distribution and use of ICTs continues to manifest itself in the form of rising social and economic inequalities within and between nation states.
- 1.3 From this reality, we can conclude that the information society has a potential to exclude as much as it has a potential to include the majority in the economic mainstream.
- 1.4 It is not guaranteed that all countries will reap the same benefits of the information society at the same time. Outputs and outcomes of the information society depend on the choices made by countries, that is, it depends on the nature of policies and strategies adopted and implemented by individual countries and regions.
- 1.5 It follows therefore that this Congress should address itself to the policy challenges facing our country, with a view to propose policy alternatives that should be implemented by all tiers of government, industry and the rest of society.
- 1.6 We must engage on key issues facing the ICT and media sectors being mindful that the ANC 51st conference in Stellenbosch in 2002 took a myriad of decisions on ICT and the media, some of which were not implemented;
- 1.7 Conference resolution on the establishment of a national youth radio is such resolution taken at Stellenbosch which is yet to see the light of the day, despite receiving unanimous endorsement at the 22nd National Congress of the ANC Youth League in 2004.
- 1.8 Similarly, conference resolutions to accelerate the rollout of broadband across the country to catch up with other developing countries such as India, Brazil, Malaysia and South Korea, have not moved with full speed.
- 1.9 Broadband access, both wireless and fixed, remains confined to metropolitan areas, accessible largely to business users. There is certainly no evidence of broadband access and applications in most parts of the country.
- 1.10 Notwithstanding these limitations, this Congress should seek to shape a new media and communications landscape guided by the belief that the current leadership of the ANC is committed to implementing the decisions of the ANC, as the strategic centre of power.

2. The Battle Of Ideas, The Media And Society And Press Freedom

- 2.1 Today's raging battle of ideas in society can be traced back to the early days of European colonialism, marked by a systematic destruction of Africa's indigenous knowledge systems, and the denial of Africa's role as the cradle of human kind, and its contribution to human civilisation

- in both ancient and in recent times prior to colonialism.
- 2.2 The victory of the European powers against the unsuspecting people of the world, especially in Africa, commenced the ascendancy of a homogenised world view, first dominated by France and Britain and, most recently, by the United States of America.
- 2.3 Besides its unfettered lust for raw material and cheap labour, European colonialism was also based on the colonisation of the mind, through the creation of new images and identities to prevent any form of social organisation against colonialism.
- 2.4 Although largely driven by the external imperial forces, this system has continued to thrive under the close watch of the resident white monopoly capital and its various subsidiaries.
- 2.5 In South Africa the assault on local knowledge systems was consolidated first under the mining industrial complex and later the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, both representing the different phases of the colonialism of a special type (CST).
- 2.6 Although the post apartheid conjuncture ushered in new political realities, represented by the ANC's legitimate domination of the political space, it did not completely alter the broader power structure, built over many years of white supremacists rule.
- 2.8 The contest for the hegemony of ideas continues and will be there as long as human kind remains on earth; what will change are the forms and character of the contests. In South Africa, the contests for the hegemony of ideas have always taken different shades owing to prevailing conditions at different conjunctures, yet the antagonists and the protagonists have largely been the same, organised along racial and class lines.
- 2.9 Although the battle of ideas manifests itself on various platforms, such as education and religion, the media has been the foremost terrain in which the raging battles of ideas are being fought most vociferously.
- 2.10 By exploiting genuine provisions in the Constitution around press freedom, the media has operated in a manner that denies equal rights to all citizens; and members of the ANC have been at the receiving end of this rampant practice.
- 2.11 Furthermore, the media has calculatively closed space for criticism, brandishing any rejoinder against the media, as an attempt to muzzle press freedom. In the process, the ANC and the broader democratic movement have been branded as the foremost enemies of media freedom, beside the fact that the current media landscape is based on the decisions of the Jabulani Freedom of the Airwaves hosted by then ANC's Radio Freedom and Dutch Radio OomRoep in the Netherlands in 1991.
- 2.12 The current media's claim of being the champion of free media is an afterthought, after the role the same media played in propping up the apartheid state. It is a matter of a great irony that the alternative press which fought gallantly for democratic media landscape closed with the advent of this democracy, because it could attract advertising from white capital, in the face of drying donor support.
- 2.13 As we seek to create a new space for popular discourse, this Congress is asked to pay tribute to the gallant publications which brought us freedom, yet they could not live to see this day. Amongst many other publications, we wish to note the following publications: New Nation,

- Grassroots, Saamstaan, South, Learn and Teach, New Era, New Ground, Work in Progress, Speak and Labour Bulletin.
- 2.14 It is important that in our efforts to characterise the historical evolution of the media, we make a clear distinction between these publications and the liberal establishment which include the Rand Daily Mail and Weekly Mail, and the white owned black consciousness oriented publications like the World and the Weekend World, the predecessor to the Sowetan.
- 2.15 This categorisation is relevant to this date, because it informs the modus operandi of most people who worked in these publications in their current relationship to the national democratic revolution. The fact that the liberal press and the black consciousness publications opposed apartheid does not necessarily make them the friends of the NDR, and they are certainly not. In the last few years, we have witnessed interesting developments in the operation of journalists trained in the post apartheid epoch. The traditional liberal has build its arsenal around the Constitution, arguing that freedom of the press, as the bastion of white monopoly capital, is the most important right within the existing constitutional regime which promotes other rights which the citizens are entitled to. Meanwhile, the black consciousness traditional journalists draw their strategic influence from certain periodic, tactical relationships with certain influential comrades within the democratic movement, yet they remain very contemptuous of the ANC alliance.
- 2.17 But, as much as the power of the media in society is evident, it must be exaggerated. The outcome of the Polokwane Conference should teach us that stronger organisational machinery is far much better than the media machinations.
- 2.18 The fact that the membership of the democratic movement read some of the reactionary publications should not be seen as an endorsement of the tendencies they espouse. It is true that far from the ranting and pompous political editorials of such publications, our members are more interested in other stories that relate to their daily experiences in their endeavour to find the means of survival.
- 2.19 It must be said nonetheless that our disdain of the behaviour of some people in the publication and indeed other media, including the SABC should not close avenues for further engagements with the media – tendencies come and go, and over time, new people committed to a responsible discourse with society will come to serve and save society from intellectual expediency.
- 2.20 Congress should demand of the new SABC Board to focus the resources of the public broadcaster towards building democracy and development as opposed to political adventurism.
- 2.21 The ANC Youth League should advance this as a fundamental principle, underpinned by a belief that it is never in the interest of the ANC to have a politically opportunistic public broadcaster. Such a broadcaster can only serve short term gains at the expense of the long term needs of our people and the country.
- 2.22 It should follow therefore that no matter how deep and vast the differences are between the ANC and the media, we must never long for a lap dog media, yet we must insist on responsible and accountable journalism. It is generally desirable that the media plays a leading role in regulating some of its excesses, as its failure to do so can force society to demand other innovative, yet constitutionally permissible means to ensure the compliance of the

- media with the spirit and the letter of the South African Constitution.
- 2.23 It is in fact within this context that the ANC's 52nd National Conference took a decision to explore avenues to strengthen the print media's compliance with the country's constitutional culture, which requires an effective balance between the rights of the media and those of society.
- 3. Media Ownership And Diversity**
- 3.1 The Youth League's approach to the discourse on media ownership and diversity is based on our appreciation of the potential role of media in deepening democracy and facilitating social transformation.
- 3.2 It is important therefore that our perspective regarding existing negative tendencies in the mainstream media, as noted above, should not blind us to the strategic role of the media in advancing societal development.
- 3.3 Within this construct the Youth League should contribute actively towards efforts aimed at diversifying the media landscape, especially with more emphasis on local and community media.
- 3.4 Our specific bias towards community media should be seen within its proper context. First, it is our observation that the empowerment schemes of the last decade have not contributed to diversity, except the short term deracialisation efforts which saw some of the country's strategic print media resources moving from the hands of one black middle class to the other.
- 3.5 In principle, the ANC Youth League is not opposed to the deracialisation of the economy, including the media environment, but we are concerned about the absence of effective control of the media assets by the emerging black middle class.
- 3.6 In the short term it may make sense to just cash on these assets, yet the future consequences will be daunting, particularly when we consider the principle of once empowered always empowered, which means that some of the big houses are destined to be white owned forever.
- 3.7 But, nevertheless, black economic empowerment in the media should be encouraged as part of the overall effort to deracialise the economy, yet the democratic movement should solely rely on these schemes to bring about fundamental changes in the media, at least in the long term.
- 3.8 Understandably, the current and continued dominance of white monopoly capital in advertising and general media sales means that even willing, progressive black economic empowerment players have no chance, but to tow the line, lest they lose their investments.
- 3.9 In other words, our understanding of the ability of BEE to play a significant role in the media should be located within an overall economic context of the country, which for a long period to come, will continue to be dominated by the white monopoly capital.
- 3.10 It is clearly out of this understanding that the progressive movement should place more emphasis on community broadcasting, community print and small alternative publications, which should receive more support from the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), which is a state created institution to advance media development and diversity. The MDDA receives money from government and the mainstream print media and broadcasters to support the development of pluralistic media in under-served areas of the country.

- 3.11 Similarly, the introduction of new technologies, known as digitisation, should increase the capacity of the SABC to offer increased and relevant services to society.
- 3.12 Digital technologies are new forms of broadcasting technology which allows broadcasters to increase channels and the quality of the services that they offer. In South Africa, this means that the use of these technologies will allow the country to increase its public and commercial television channels, in addition to what we currently have, which is SABC 1, SABC 2, SABC 3, E-TV, M-Net and other pay television channels like DSTV, soon to be launched Telkom Media.
- 3.13 The Department of Communications in its public consultation document released in 2007 on the use of the new technologies has already proposed an idea to increase the services offered by the SABC, E-TV and M-Net which means that by around 2011, we will have many fully fledged new broadcasting channels.
- 3.14 Government has also shown commitment to establish new channels/services aimed at women, youth and SMMEs, as well as community television which will focus more on localised programming. Since young people are the main consumers of television content, the ANC Youth League should be at the forefront of shaping these developments.
- 3.15 In particular, the Youth League should welcome the decision to increase youth, women and SMME based programming, and initiatives which we believe should be implemented without delay, given their potential to fast track development. These processes and initiatives are undoubtedly important, yet their actual development could be limited by the lack of vigorous youth activism around media policy.
- 3.16 They youth must not only be media consumers, but should take active leadership in shaping new communications and media frontiers.
- 4. Information And Communications Technology**
- 4.1 While the media is generally punted as the strategic centre in the battle of society, recent technological advancements provide a bigger space for an inclusive communications environment.
- 4.2 As we noted in the introduction and overview to this paper, South Africa and indeed the rest of Africa and the developing world at large need to take advantage of information and communications technology to create a new society based on universal access and utilisation of communications technologies to advance human development.
- 4.3 We have already stated our concern about the absence of a comprehensive broadband strategy and consequently the slow deployment of broadband across the country, especially in rural areas. Existing statistics point to over concentration of strategic communications resources in the metropolitan areas, along the lines of the apartheid architecture, which the NDR always sought to defeat, destroy and replace.
- 4.4 Going forward, the ANC Youth League can no longer sit and only make resolutions; we need to actively campaign for an inclusive information society within a specified period of time. It should be the case of now or never!
- 4.5 Our interventions should be based on clear and carefully articulated policy positions, to ensure periodic monitoring and evaluation.

- Congress should therefore emerge with a well thought of approach to building an inclusive broadband society, including the mechanisms to monitor and advocate for speedy implementation of such resolutions.
- 4.6 Government's deliberate movement towards e-government aimed at improving the quality of interaction with government at all levels must be harnessed such that it provides meaningful opportunities for young people to become champions of technological innovations that seek to bring government closer to the people. In rolling out e-government, the state must specifically target young people both as enablers and beneficiaries of this innovation.
- 4.7 In order for the country to break the logjam of scarcity of skills particularly in the technology sector, massive investments must be made towards skilling our youth in science and high technology sectors through increased bursary allocations and targeted interventions aimed at accelerating such skilling.
- 4.8 Our youth must be at the forefront of the open source revolution and must be empowered with the relevant instruments and know-how to enable them to take advantage of the evolving software market.
- 5. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**
- 5.1 Notwithstanding an overemphasis on the external environment, the ANC Youth League has spent considerable time and effort revamping its own internal communications machinery. Everything possible should be done to ensure that all levels of the organisation have the necessary capacity and resources to engage in the battle of ideas and societal development.
- 5.2 While the 22nd National Congress resolved that we revive Horizon as an official Journal of the ANCYL, serious financial constraints made it difficult to execute this resolution resulting in the creation of an online newsletter which did not require any significant printing costs.
- 5.3 Since its inception in 2005, the ANC Youth League's official online newsletter, Hlomelang has proven to be an effective instrument in setting the agenda and as a platform for our cadres and structures to participate in popular debates. Most notable is the debate on the two centres of power where we not only advocated our viewpoint, but also allowed publication of those who held contrary viewpoints and engaged in debate. Hlomelang remains a powerful vehicle in guiding and informing debates and engagements by our branches. Through this publication, we have effectively established our own platform to articulate and advance our views without a need to compete for space in popular media. The net result has been increased interest shown by print media in particular, and ordinary people both in the country and abroad in what we publish.
- 5.4 The overhaul of the ANCYL website into a dynamic information repository has proven successful and needs to be built on. Using the website as a platform for publication of Hlomelang has ensured this dynamism and substantially increased the traffic on the site.
- 5.5 In asserting our role as opinion-makers, we introduced the popular Mind Beat as a forum where young South Africans gathered to share perspectives on contemporary issues. Our reach extended beyond our membership base and the success of this initiative underpinned our belief that our youth are keen to be active participants in South Africa's public discourse and indeed its political live and require

appropriate platforms to ensure their effective participation.

- 5.6 Within the overall campaign around digital inclusion, the Youth League should focus on maximising the emerging opportunities to become a model user of information and communications technologies at all levels of the organisation.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Advances in information and communications technologies present both challenges and opportunities for South Africa and other developing countries to close the media and digital gap. There is a possibility that the development of technologies can increase inequalities between and within nations. Yet the reverse is possible. With good policy and progressive investments in modern technologies, the developing world, including South Africa can speedily close the gap, and reap the benefits of technology. This is particularly important for the battle of ideas, as it will allow a level play field for all societal interest groups to engage in the battle of ideas. For the reason, the ANC Youth League should position itself as a leading player in shaping the communications environment. The fact that young people are the main users of technology, means that the leadership of the youth league in shaping a new communications environment is more than urgent.

Points For Further Engagement

- What specific interventions should young people make to assume the role of opinion-makers and set the agenda of the country's public discourse?
- How do we propel the media establishment towards responsible and objective journalism that advances South Africa's constitutional democracy?
- Regulation of the media remains a pervasive issue. Do the current instruments of self-regulation provide sufficient protection to the public against excesses by the media and undermining of individual rights? Do we believe the establishment of a Media Tribunal mooted by the ANC's 52nd National Congress can be an effective instrument to mitigate against such excesses?
- How do we transform the newsrooms such that the media establishment becomes a critical player in advancing the objectives of the National Democratic Revolution?
- How do we lower the barriers to entry into the media industry for young people, with particular reference to ownership of media?
- What are the fundamental constraints that limit the youth participation in public discourse?
- What are the critical building blocks that must be in place to ensure that a youth talk radio with a national footprint becomes a reality?
- How should young people influence media content?
- What interventions need to be effected to accelerate empowerment of our youth in science and high technologies?
- How should we maximise value from internal communication instruments such as Hlomelang, the ANCYL website, NEC Bulletins?
- How should we further advance the use of MindBeat as an effective platform to influence public discourse and forum of engagement with the broad spectrum of our youth, and how do we ensure branch, regional and provincial participation?