

## **SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER**

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Rhodes University and its School of Journalism and Media Studies are honoured to host the 11<sup>th</sup> *Highway Africa* Conference. Over the years, the conference has become a key event of Rhodes University. Today, with editors, journalists and media specialists from 41 countries in Africa, and officials of the South African National Editor's Forum and the African Editor's Forum in attendance, the Pan-African nature of the event gels well with the aspiration of Rhodes University to be an outstanding university 'which proudly affirms its African identity', and is rooted in the struggles, challenges and aspirations of the continent.

Currently in South Africa there is an extensive debate on the character, role, and ethical and public responsibilities of the media. As tempting as it is to comment on the quality and significance of this debate, permit me to simply observe that it fills me with great pride that such a robust and vibrant debate is taking place.

For the fact is that only in democracies underpinned by constitution's of the kind that we have in South Africa can

such debate occur – without some of the contenders being detained without trial, poisoned, shot at, or disappearing from the face of society.

Thus, whatever may be our views on the positions of the various participants in this debate, and whatever concerns we may harbour about some of the expressed views from the perspective of media freedom, we should welcome and celebrate the debate as manifestations of a vibrant public intellectual culture and democratic discourse.

Universities and the media share a number of important features in common.

First, we are both vital and indispensable institutions of democratic societies that should seek to affirm, protect, and advance human and social rights and be committed to the development and participation of citizens in the intellectual, political and cultural life of societies.

Second, it is a fundamental requirement of our purpose, roles, and functioning that we possess the institutional independence and autonomy and academic or media freedom to pursue knowledge and information wherever they may lead.

Third, we must both be able to freely disseminate this knowledge and information. It is our public responsibilities to

- Hold a mirror to our people of the actual natures, states, conditions and challenges of our countries in relation to our declared aspirations, and the diverse intentions, views and opinions in these regards of a variety of social actors, organisations and citizens
- To consider, interrogate, and if necessary critique the thinking, policies and priorities of government, political parties and other social actors; and
- To, without fear and with courage, speak truth to power.

Of course, we are both also all too frequently under-resourced to undertake our roles as effectively as we would like and to make the contributions that we wish to.

The deliberations at the Highway Africa Conference are part of the challenge of re-constructing a future Africa of hope and promise that is characterised by economic and social development and a culture of human rights.

Academic freedom and press freedom are not pre-ordained or God-given but are the outcomes of social struggles and wonderful gifts of the collective citizenry to

universities and the media. They must be used wisely, ethically and responsibly.

In this regard, this year's Highway Africa theme of "Quality and Professionalism in the Journalism and the Media" is apt. In as much as the media must inform, educate, and entertain, it must also self-critically reflect on the extent to which it adheres to impeccable quality and standards, is characterised by intellectual independence and dispassionate objectivity, and indeed contributes to the formation of an informed and critical citizenry.

Neither universities nor the media must self-righteously assume that their quality and standards are self-evident and beyond challenge. Both must ensure that there are robust internal quality mechanisms and also communal modes of self-regulation that inspire public confidence and protect and enhance our integrity and our value to society. Universities and the media must also be ever-alert to the kinds of commercialisation that can erode our social purposes and undermine our contributions to the public and social good.

We should not forget that speaking truth to power is an obligation to speak truth not only to governments and political parties. It is also a responsibility to render power

visible in all its different locations and diverse forms, and to speak truth to these myriad sources of power, including those which may finance us and pay our salaries.

Hopefully, in your deliberations you will honestly, critically, and productively interrogate the issues of quality and professionalism in journalism and media in the specific conditions and context of Africa, the challenges in these regards, and also the possible means and strategies through which these challenges may be effectively addressed.

**Welcome Address of the Vice Chancellor Of Rhodes University, Dr Saleem Badat, at the 11<sup>th</sup> Highway Africa Conference**