

**Speech by the Minister of Communications of the Republic of South Africa,
H. E., the Honourable Faith Muthambi**

On the occasion of

**The Sixth World Communication Forum in Davos,
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Theme: Public media service and challenges of the digital area

Panel Moderator,
Minister of Communications and Spokesperson of the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco, Mr. Mustapha Khalfi,
Dr. Hassan Falha, the General Manager of the Ministry of Information in Lebanon,
Dr. Refat Alfaouri, Director General of the Arab Administrative Development Organisation,

Delegates to the World Communication Forum,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I consider it a very special honour to be invited to address this august gathering of trend-makers and influencers from the global communications family. This is indeed an unrivalled platform to discuss and hone in on the future development of communications and their role in business, society and politics.

Back home in South Africa I recently announced that our nation would begin the march to digital migration in June this year. This is a ground breaking step in the history of our nation and will open the world of communication to millions.

Our Digital Migration Policy will see a roll out of public services channels for youth, women, education and eGovernment services. We are most excited about the potential of eGovernment services which will unlock access to basic internet services and digital information for millions of our people.

I know that for many here digital and all its benefits are old hat. I look forward to engaging with many of you later to share experiences and best practice in this realm.

For South Africa the significance of this major milestone cannot be overstated. Just 21 years ago this would not have been possible. In 1994 the new democratic government inherited the communication apparatus of the apartheid government which was totally out of touch with the needs of the democratic dispensation and only catered for one section of the population.

Before 1994, government was characterised by a culture of secrecy, disinformation and restrictions on press freedom. The birth of our democracy in 1994 changed all this, and ushered in an era where government could no longer hide behind media restrictions and was for the first time fully accountable to the public.

The democratic government recognised that freedom of expression had to be an integral part of our new democratic society. At the same time the free and open flow of communication was central in our goal of achieving the vision of a non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous society.

In 1994 our nation was for the first time exposed to the wider world and the looming technological revolution. Twenty years ago the Internet, referred to then as the Information

Superhighway, was gathering momentum as more and more users came online. Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook were still only a dream in the mind of developers.

Two decades later we are in a vastly different country and world. Things that were impossible under apartheid are now part and parcel of our social fabric. Media freedom is guaranteed, there is increasing media diversity; more community radio stations are on air and journalists are able to work without intimidation or fear.

With the revolution in technology we now also live in a world that is unrecognizable from that of 20 years ago. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – has turned everyone into a reporter. Citizens are taking to social media sites to report, inform, debate, and discuss issues. Journalists are adapting to the new media and media houses are diversifying their print media platforms and entering the realm of cyberspace. Government is also actively engaging with these platforms to introduce policy and programmes and engage with citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today government communication is characterised by the free flow of information. We live by the values of transparency and accountability. We utilise the power of communication to serve the community, by informing, educating and providing open access to information.

Our public media service is one of the major pillars in this endeavour. The South African Broadcasting Corporation or SABC has a mandate to ensure that all South Africans are informed about government activities.

The SABC has a strong radio and television presence in South Africa and has become the voice for millions. It also has begun to develop digital platforms to meet the changing needs of how audiences consume media today.

Given its history as an apartheid mouthpiece prior to 1994 the SABC has placed trust at the centre of its relationship with audiences. It continually strives to be the most credible and diverse national media broadcaster.

Communication and more especially public service media must be transparent and must work towards the common good. The content the SABC generates must do more than just entertain. It must inform and educate the public and just adhere to the highest standards of moral integrity.

Programme Director,

It is often said that if you fail to learn from history you are doomed to repeat it. Therefore we dare not repeat the mistakes of our tragic past. Public service media must be the voice for the voiceless. Its reach must be universal; for the greatest divide in modern society is not between the rich and the poor. It's between those with access to information and those who are denied this basic right.

However, access is only but one pillar. For information to be meaningful it must be driven by independence, excellence and diversity. This is indeed a global challenge for public service media. The question is how to remain relevant in a fast evolving world. How to be a trusted voice that acts with integrity and professionalism at all times and is diverse and pluralist in its approach.

Another challenge is how public service media remains relevant amidst a digital revolution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our smart phones, tablets, laptops and notebooks have become ubiquitous. The information and communication dividend they provide is unparalleled but so too is their impact on our privacy, society and the economy.

This sea change is being driven by social media and the power of the internet. Information sharing has become all pervasive; be it on Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Skype or numerous other platforms.

The world has never been more connected. Social media has truly served to make us all part of the global community. When one sits down to take this all in its both liberating and frightening.

The incomparable advances in communication, access to knowledge and information sharing lives alongside new forms of abuse and crime.

It would be naïve to think that any government or regulating agency has the answers to these complex problems. If we are honest we would admit to government policy is struggling to keep up with the pace of change.

Digital technology and the communication dividend it brings will no doubt change the world. It is however, our task to ensure that this sea change is for the good of mankind.

Throughout history whenever mankind has made progress it has come with challenges. The anonymity and overwhelming reach of the internet has fuelled online crime and abuse. Extremists, terror networks and criminals use the online world to further their aims.

It is our task as governments and regulators to find a workable medium between the crucial need to ensure freedom of speech and expression, but also to safeguard society.

Governments, regulators, police, intelligence and security agencies need to be able to operate more effectively against online threats and abuse.

How to do this in a world where information can be spread at the click of a button is the challenge. At the same time we must tread carefully as we dare not trample over our liberties and rights to privacy.

Programme Director,

No doubt this challenge will require a careful balancing act between our freedoms and the greater good of society. Like the proverbial walker on a high wire, one false step is likely to end in tragedy unless we have a safety net.

Many countries have implemented legislation that regulates the use of online and social media in the workplace. There are countries that have implemented legislation that applies to online and social media issues between employers and employees in the workplace.

In the United States of America several states have enacted legislation to prohibit employers from requesting that employees or applicants for employment disclose their usernames, passwords or other personal account information used for online and social networking sites.

The United Kingdom has the Data Protection Act 1998 in place which requires an employer to obtain consent before they can collect an employee's online data.

In China regulations are in place to prevent anyone endangering the 'legitimate interests of citizens' through the use of computer information systems.

In South Africa there is currently no legislation that deals specifically with online and social media. However there are Acts such as RICA, the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act and the Protection of Personal Information Bill which will apply to online and social media.

In the absence of specific online and social media laws, employers must consider our common law and other statutes in order to determine their online and social media policy, and to balance and protect the rights of both the employer and its employees.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Perhaps the greatest challenge will be in ensuring social media control measures that encourage free speech yet protect society from various ills. A great chunk of our lives is spent at our places of work. Employers therefore need to implement workable social media strategies and policies. There must also be enforcement mechanisms, coupled with staff training and in the best case scenario having an online and social media manager.

In a fast changing world employers are scrambling to protect their business from the theft of trade secrets, theft of client records for client solicitation and defamation. On the other hand their employee's right to privacy and dignity must be maintained.

In closing there are no easy answers. Truth be told there are many more questions than answers. However, certain truths remain constant. The information and digital revolution is gaining pace.

Change is literally happening from day to day and we are all scrambling to keep up. We are all therefore uniquely privileged to be part of the 2015 World Communication Forum.

Within this room are many of the champions who will shape the digital revolution in years to come. I have no doubt that the World Communication Forum is assured of its place in history as a platform where new solutions for an exciting new world are shaped.

I thank you.

Faith Muthambi