

Zambian academic wins MISA's 2008 Press Freedom Award

Facskon Banda, a journalism professor from Zambia who has campaigned extensively on the digital divide and other media freedom issues is this year's winner of the Media Institute of Southern Africa's (MISA) Press Freedom Award.

Professor Banda, professor of Journalism and Media Studies, has been described by MISA as one of the most outstanding academics of his time, having carried out extensive research, written numerous reports, made presentations on the media in Southern Africa specifically and Africa generally. He has contributed immensely to knowledge on media sustainability, media policy, and new media as well as the production of manpower that is now serving various media organisations in Southern Africa.

Under his leadership as regional director of Panos Institute Southern Africa, he spearheaded the development of the Zambia Community Media Forum (ZaCoMeF) and facilitated the production of a book that looked at the use of Information Communication Technology (ICTs) called "Into or out of the Digital Divide" that looked at the use of the internet within the SADC region. His interest in the use of modern technology has enabled him to write and publish on media-related issues on the internet and some of the latest facilities on the internet.

Between 2000 and 2001, acting as executive director of the Panos Institute Southern Africa, Banda obtained an interdict from the High Court of Zambia to stop the ZNBC from curtailing the televising of paid-for presidential candidates debates. The ZNBC director-general at the time was to confirm the presence of political interference in the corporation's decision. Despite obtaining a court order, the corporation refused to broadcast the remaining live programme scheduled for transmission on the eve of the 2001 local, parliamentary and presidential elections. The state deployed the Zambian paramilitary police to enforce this impunity, defying the rule of law. Even though the programme was not broadcast, the very act of obtaining the interdict was contributory towards asserting media freedom.

In his insatiable interest for media responsibility and ethics within the context of media freedom among media houses, Banda became a founding Board member of the Media Council of Zambia (MECOZ). He was secretary to the council between 2003 and 2005.

In view of his distinguished career, Banda was in September 2006, awarded the UNESCO chair in Communication (media and democracy), the first such academic honour to be given to a Rhodes University staff member. Since then, he has also been sitting on the Editorial Board of the Canadian Journal of Communication, Editorial Board of Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies and Board of Directors of ORBICOM - the network of UNESCO Chairs in Communication, among others.

In 2007, he was commissioned by UNESCO to research and produce a training manual on civic education for media professionals. The manual, soon to be published, will be used in tertiary media educational institutions that are interested in raising the skills profile of civic journalists. There is a strong element of media freedom as a human right in the document.

Between 2006 - 2008, he led efforts under the auspices of the BBC World Service Trust and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to developing a comprehensive African media development framework. This work has resulted in a coherent and comprehensive framework within which to argue for African media development. It has also become a recognised framework by many journalists, largely through his appearances and presentations at high-profile gatherings, including the May 3, 2008 celebrations in Maputo, Mozambique, where he formally tabled the framework for media development. Encapsulated in this framework is a strong component on media freedom and independence.

In 2008, he was inducted into honorary membership of the Golden Key International Honour Society at Rhodes University, South Africa in recognition of excellence in teaching and other contributions to media. Other notable honorary members of this student-led society, whose membership is drawn from the top 15% high-achieving students, include such distinguished figures as Roberta Bondar, Canada's first female astronaut; Bill Cosby, world-renowned entertainer; Reverend Desmond M. Tutu, Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town; and the late Ronald W. Reagan, former US President.

Prof. Banda has written several books including, "Newspapers and magazines in Zambia: A question of sustainability" Lusaka: MISA-Zambia (2005), "Elections and the press in Zambia: the case of the 1996 polls" Lusaka: Zambia Independent Media Association (1997).

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