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Oops, they did it again

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Several heads rolled this year and some even collided as the media reported on one public relations blunder after another starring journalists, government spin doctors and politicians. Matebello Motloung takes a closer look.

Presidential spokesman Murphy Morobe perhaps jinxed the year in January with the disastrous handling of Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka's controversial R700,000 holiday trip, on tax payers' money, to the United Arab Emirates.

While it seems the public was willing to forgive Morobe for reluctantly releasing details about the trip, doing so in dribs and drabs, many believed he had committed career suicide when he likened the deputy president's costly trip in December 2005 to "a drop in the ocean."

Front pages were then devoted to calculating how many houses and schools could have been built for that amount of money. What else did he expect?

While his statements failed to endear him to the media, Morobe - like many government officials - is living proof that when one door shuts, another more lucrative door opens.

Morobe has since resigned from his post in the presidency and is now chief executive officer of Kagiso Media. Indeed, if you can't beat them, join them.

The following month, on the eve of the local government elections on March 1, Public Enterprises Minister Alec Erwin joined his comrade, African National Congress deputy president Jacob Zuma, in accusing the media when all else fails.

Erwin blamed media spin for his blunder when he said sabotage was responsible for the shut-down of a generator at the Koeberg nuclear power station in the Western Cape which caused massive power cuts in the province.

He later backtracked and insisted he never made the allegations. This, despite video footage by e.tv proving otherwise.

"The facts are that a bolt substance was in a generator. It should not have been in that generator," Erwin said at one stage.

Bolt substance? Eish...

But topping the list, a position he is likely to hold for some time given the continuing drama at the public broadcaster, is Dali Mpfu, chief executive of the SABC.

Having promised that heads will roll at the SABC and that he will make public the findings of the commission tasked with investigating allegations into the blacklisting of certain political commentators, Mpfu backtracked on his pledge. He said he never made the promise and that the matter was of internal concern, and would therefore be treated as such.

But it is the SABC's action against a fellow media group, the *Mail & Guardian*, that has undoubtedly tainted its image.

In a bid to prevent the commission's report being made public, the SABC tried to get a court interdict preventing the *Mail & Guardian* from publishing the document on its website. The case was thrown out of court with costs to the public broadcaster.

Talk about advocating press freedom, while trying to curtail another media owner's freedom. It will be interesting to see how the SABC will redeem itself.

In his *Business Day* column, Wits University Professor Anton Harber wrote that the SABC's court attempts placed the broadcaster in the same category as those intent on suppressing information.

"Dali Mpfu's handling of the (former SABC boss and commissioner Zwelakhe) Sisulu Report must be a case study for how not to handle crisis management," wrote Harber.

The SABC's handling of the report is reminiscent of how it managed last year's debacle involving the censoring of video footage showing Mlambo-Ngcuka being booed at a youth rally in KwaZulu-Natal in June.

The media was subjected to conflicting statements explaining why the SABC's footage differed to that of its competitor, e.tv, which broadcast the booing incident.

Former spokesman Paul Setsetse gave one version and head of news Snuki Zikalala offered another - similar to what happened this year with the blacklisting saga. When confronted with the allegations, current SABC spin doctor Kaizer Kganyago denied the existence of the blacklist.

The battle between the media and the country's former deputy president Jacob Zuma continued this year with the politician suing various media house for a ridiculous sum of money for alleged defamation during his rape trial.

Prone to putting his foot in it, Zuma then incited the ire of gays and lesbians in September when he told a crowd at Heritage Day celebrations in KwaDukuza, KwaZulu-Natal, that when he was growing up, an *ungqingil* (gay person) would not have dared to stand in front of him.

"I would knock him out," he said at a time when the country and the international community were still reeling from his statement during the rape trial that a shower reduces the risk of HIV infection.

The Sowetan quoted Zuma as saying, at the same gathering, that same-sex marriages were "a disgrace to the nation and to God."

Reacting to fierce criticism, Zuma offered a feeble explanation saying his remarks were made in the context of the traditional way of raising children.

"I commented in particular about the manner in which communities tend to neglect the boy children and over-emphasise the traditional upbringing of girl children as evidenced in ceremonies such as the reed dance.

"I said the communal upbringing of children in the past was able to assist parents to notice children with a different social orientation. I, however, did not intend to have this interpreted as a condemnation of gays and lesbians." Right...

Sticking with politicians, Media Tenor's managing director Wadim Schreiner says his favourite public relations blunder was Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula's outburst in parliament when he said those who moan

about crime can "carry on whinging or leave the country."

Needless to say, the statement made international headlines with the global community questioning how a man trusted with the wellbeing of over 40-million people in a crime-ridden country could utter such a statement. It is easy to turn a blind eye to the reality of crime when taxpayers pay for your personal army of security officers.

Then at an international conference on HIV/Aids in Toronto, Canada, Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang did herself no favours when she told journalists that she does not mind being called "Dr Beetroot".

Tshabalala-Msimang was lashing out at journalists for what she perceived as distorted reporting on South Africa's exhibition of garlic, lemon and beetroot at the international gathering.

Interesting that her spin doctor hastily added some pill bottles to the exhibition table, giving in after the flood of questions from journalists.

Not to be left out of the action was the Democratic Alliance (DA), which embarrassed itself in September when chief whip Douglas Gibson led an entourage of journalists to "investigate" - a new synonym for trespassing - corruption involving President Thabo Mbeki's alleged R22-million taxpayer-funded retirement home in Houghton, Johannesburg.

Not only were the allegations false - it later transpired that the house was worth R8-million and was being bankrolled by the Mbekis themselves, but Gibson also refused to apologise claiming he was doing his job.

Wag commends the DA's dedication to uprooting corruption within government, but thinks it would be more meaningful if the opposition party - which says it aspires to be the next government (but Wag is sure not even they themselves believe that) - would double-check its information before inviting journalists to join Gibson on his cheap publicity stunt.

This DA stunt could not top their best PR blunder yet - the panty saga. Last December, the party hung more than 20,000 pairs of panties in the streets of Bishop Lavis in the Cape flat to show support for the 16-day activism campaign against women and child abuse. All the underwear was stolen before DA leader Tony Leon could address the crowds, leaving the party red-faced and panty-less.

The proposed Films and Publications Act is another public relations blunder that makes a joke of our Constitution, says Stellenbosch University's head of the journalism department, professor Lizette Rabe.

"The Films and Publications Act is seriously bad PR for our country as a whole. It made a joke of our Constitution, clearly went against the Bill of Rights, and were the implications not so tragic for the news media, it could be the joke of the year," she says.

"As a matter of fact, many thought this could not be taken seriously - what did the writers of the bill think when they formulated it or how it would impact on the news media?"

As we round up media events that dominated discussions in boardrooms and dinner parties, it is with great anticipation that we wait to see what the coming year brings us. Will Zuma win his defamation case against the media? Which other politician will join the band and blame the industry for misinformation and misrepresentation? We can't say we don't live in exciting times.

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