

Mbalula vs the media: privacy, dignity vs public interest

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31 Oct 2011

Sports minister Fikile Mbalula's sex scandal, comprehensively exposed by Sunday newspapers [City Press](#), [Sunday World](#) and [Sunday Sun](#), has once again fuelled the debate about the burning issue facing South Africa: privacy and dignity versus the public's right to know where public figures - who many people look up to for inspiration and guidance - are concerned.

Mbalula (40), who newspapers said cheated on his wife with a woman named by [Sunday World](#) and [Sunday Sun](#) as Joyce Omphemetse Molamu (27), has asked for his privacy to be respected in the aftermath of the scandal, according to a [SAPA news report](#) carried last night by News24.com.

Not practicing what he preaches

While [City Press](#) seemed to rebuke Mbalula for not practicing what he preaches - he urged the youth to be faithful to their partners at an HIV/Aids event last year - the other newspapers, however, focused strongly on the minister's juicy affair, which is believed to have culminated to an episode of deceit and blackmail.

"In terms of the [City Press](#) piece, the emphasis is on the minister saying all should practice safe sex, yet his actions suggest otherwise," said Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) head William Bird, amid [reports](#) that the minister has apologised to his family, to the nation and to the ruling ANC.

"Certainly, there's a fine line in this case between fulfilling a public interest and the minister's privacy and dignity. In general terms, his relationship with his wife and/or girlfriends should be his own business."

Bird, whose organisation has been monitoring media content since 1993, deplored the other media's approaches, which he said, unlike [City Press](#), have placed an emphasis on the affair with little regard to any public interest, which suggests that the reports were not reasonable.

"Difficult to justify"

"Here the concern is that he says people should act one way, and he then goes and does the opposite. Had the story in [City Press](#) not emphasised this aspect, it would have been difficult to justify," he noted.

Mbalula, a former ANC Youth League president, [unsuccessfully sought a court interdict](#) on Saturday to stop [City Press](#) for publishing the sex scandal story.

An ANC source in Johannesburg slammed the abovementioned newspapers, telling Bizcommunity.com on condition of anonymity that these reports were a compelling reason why the country needed a [media appeals tribunal](#) (MAT).

"It's someone's dignity and reputation that are at stake here, and we are talking about the minister here," the source said, wondering why the media are obsessed with poking their noses in people's private affairs.

Lodge a complaint with Press Council?

Asked how the MAT, if it existed, would have reacted to these news reports, Bird replied: "In terms of the MAT issue, clearly the result would have depended on what would have emerged from the Press Council. It will be interesting to see if the minister does in fact lodge a complaint."

As the reports on Mbalula's sex scandal became this week's talking point at street corners, taverns, office blocks and taxi ranks, it remains unclear whether the newspapers have violated the [newly revamped press code](#).

"That's the call to be made by the Press Council," Bird said. "The press code does talk about minimising harm and respecting privacy, expect where there is public interest. Where the papers haven't made that link, clearly I do think there's a case to answer."

Several attempts to get comment from the Press Council drew a blank.

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