CITATION: JOSEPH NONG THLOLOE

Nong Joseph “Bra Thloloe” Thloloe’s career in journalism spans six decades in which he has played an important role as a leader, an activist for free speech and an exemplar of the values of independent professionalism. At all times, he has shown an unrivaled consistency, courage and commitment.

Thloloe’s political life began while a pupil at Orlando High School, where he joined the Pan Africanist Congress, when they broke away from the ANC in 1959. As part of the anti-pass campaign, he was arrested on Sharpeville Day, March 21, 1960, and sentenced - at the age of 17 - to three years’ imprisonment. In prison, he studied at the feet of leaders like Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and Zeph Mothopeng, and it was here that he received his first lessons in journalism.

Released on Christmas Eve 1960, he wrote his Matric the following year and immediately began his illustrious career at the Bantu World as a reporter. Bantu World became The World, and Thloloe was there when it was banned in 1977 and also worked at its successor papers, the Post and the Sowetan. He was the first black journalist on the Rand Daily Mail when it started its township edition in 1962 and wrote for the Golden City Post, Drum Magazine and Transvaal Post as a general reporter, sports writer, jazz critic, features’ writer, labour correspondent and columnist. He covered the emergence of the modern trade union movement in the 1970’s and the rise of Cosatu, and monitored the implementation of the employment codes of foreign companies in apartheid South Africa.

Thloloe was a founding member of the Union of Black Journalists and was its president when it was banned on October 19, 1977, still remembered as South African Media Freedom Day. He took part in the launch of the Writers’ Association of SA, which later became the Media Workers’ Association, and was elected president. He was a founding member of the Black Editors’ Forum.

A sometimes forgotten bit of history is that while he was president of the UBJ and the 1976 uprising began, he and his colleagues bought a small printing press and - frustrated by their inability to get their first-hand accounts of the violence into the public domain - published a single edition of the Bulletin. It was immediately banned and confiscated and Thloloe and his colleagues were detained - to be released again on Christmas Eve, 1976.

He was again detained in March 1977, under the Terrorism Act, and kept in solitary confinement for 18 months. He emerged to find that the UBJ and other organisations had been banned.

In 1980, he played a key role in the first ever strikes by black journalists demanding racial parity in salaries, after which he was banned and house arrested. In June 1982 he was detained again, this time tried for possession of arms, recruiting people for military training, and furthering the aims of banned organisations. Most of these charges fell away when State witnesses said they had been tortured to make confessions, though he was sentenced to 30 months for possession of banned literature. He was released from Robben Island in January 1984.

At the Sowetan, he was made Managing Editor, and then Deputy Editor to Aggrey Klaaste, with responsibility for the day-to-day running of the paper.
He later joined the SABC as Head of News and Current Affairs, and played an important role in the transformation from a State to a public broadcaster. He joined e-TV as Editor-in-Chief and worked there from 2000 to 2006.

Thloloe was appointed to the new post of Press Ombudsman in 2008, where he adjudicated on complaints against newspapers and magazines, and was last year made Director of the Press Council. In this period, he has been a leading defender of media self-regulation and a fierce opponent of Government interference in this process. It is safe to say that the self-regulatory system would have been far less likely to have survived the pressures of the last few years without his moral and political leadership.

He is currently Chair of the Board of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and a director in the Press Council of South Africa.

Thloloe has been a recipient of various awards and has been recognized by institutions across the globe. He is known among his colleagues for his soft-spoken determination, his unwavering principles, his moral leadership and his seemingly endless courage.

Given Mr Thloloe’s valuable contributions to the field of journalism we believe he is worthy of an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.