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Zondo Commission – ANN7 train wreck run by Number 9

The biggest regret of Rajesh Sundaram's career as a journalist was helping to set up in 2013 what he called a television station for the "mafia" who just wanted to spew out propaganda to South Africans. He was hired in May of that year as the inaugural editor of ANN7, the news station that fell under Infinity Media, owned in part by the Gupta family.

Sundaram started testifying before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Monday, giving details of his high-pressure four-month stint at ANN7, three months of which was spent in the company's Midrand office. Much of this time, he said, was spent with Ajay Gupta breathing down his neck "like a dragon" in the lead up to the launch of the station, which ended up being sooner than should have been the case, despite his advice to the owners to give staff ample time to prepare.

Along with the Guptas, Duduzane Zuma was among those who held directorships in Infinity at one point or another, but Sundaram would learn soon after arriving in South Africa to take up his post that it was Duduzane's father, former president Jacob Zuma, who was more involved and took a hands-on approach in the running of the new station.

The first time he was introduced to the older Zuma, just days after his arrival from India in June 2013, Sundaram told the inquiry, he had expected that the meeting would just be a formality to introduce the head of state to the latest entrants into broadcast mass media. To his surprise, however, the former president had a lot of knowledge about the station, and keenly participated in the meeting, asking questions in response to a presentation Sundaram had been instructed by the Guptas to prepare for him.

"President Zuma was very much involved in the running of the station," said Sundaram. "Confidential information, which you won't give out so early in the project, was disclosed to the president. He had a much bigger interest in the station."

The inquiry heard how Zuma would take part in editorial strategy meetings, and give input on editorial and design elements presented to him by Sundaram's team. Ajay would frequently tell Sundaram that it was important to let Zuma think his input was vital and being taken into consideration, even if it would later be altered to suit what the Gupta brothers wanted. Atul Gupta told Sundaram that under no circumstances was Zuma to be referred to in their engagements by name. He would always be referred to as "Number 9" – the code used to identify him during the struggle days as leader of the ANC's intelligence team.

The delegation from Infinity was on time for the meeting with Zuma at his official residence in Pretoria, but found on their arrival that he was in another meeting with several ministers. Because of this, they had to wait for some time, and when he eventually stepped out of his other meeting, he gave an hour of his time to them, adding to Sundaram's surprise.

Once the meeting was over, Sundaram and Ashu Chawla, then CEO of Sahara computers – also owned by the Guptas – left the rest of the group behind. When the others caught up with them back at the station, he got the sense from the small talk exchanged among them that they had remained behind to talk with Zuma about the *New Age* newspaper and the advertising and marketing challenges the newspaper faced from uncooperative ministers in Zuma’s cabinet. The former president seemed to have promised to address the ministers in question and get them to support ventures of the *New Age* such as the business breakfasts broadcast on SABC at the time. The presentation Sundaram had prepared for Zuma had been left with him for review, and he had promised to get back to the group with inputs.

A second meeting a month later also took place at Mahlamba Ndlopfu, and again Zuma was keen to hear the ideas that the team was working on for the station. He was also shown the draft opening sequence for ANN7’s news bulletins, which he seemed to like. Sundaram told the inquiry that it was like attending a shareholders’ review meeting, as the former president again gave input on several elements of the presentation he had kept with him. He told the group that the station should not be seen to have a pro-ANC stance, and should accommodate the views of other political parties. Despite this, said Sundaram, the Guptas and Infinity CEO Nazeem Howa made an effort to block out any views on the political landscape that were different from that of the ANC.

By the time the station launched, it had long become clear to Sundaram that ANN7 was not the kind of working environment he would want to stay in, he said. He carried another burden in that he had recruited many credible professionals from India, who had now settled their families in South Africa, and he felt indebted to them to work through the launch phase.

It was a chaotic time. When the station finally launched, several elements of their systems were not yet working properly. “The studio cameras arrived on launch day,” he explained, while communication challenges were laid bare for viewers to see. Many of the technicians hired from India were not proficient in English, and because the channel failed to attract the attention of experienced broadcast journalists after the infamous Waterkloof airbase incident involving the Gupta family, models were hired for anchoring and presenting jobs. Between the models in front of the cameras and the technicians behind the scenes, there was major chaos, and because everything was live, social media was abuzz with people pointing out mistakes.

“This was the most depressing time of my life,” said Sundaram.

None of this mattered to the Guptas, however, he added, because instead of credibility and authenticity, they were chasing revenue and wanted their shareholders to cash in on dividends sooner than was practically reasonable.

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